



*For Better
or*

For Worse

Anna Perlini



Anna PERLINI is from Verona, but a citizen of the world. For decades, she has been involved in volunteering; after spending the eighties in India and Nepal, she returned to Italy in time to witness the break-up of Yugoslavia. In this book, she recounts how the adventure of For a Better World, the association she founded with others in January 1996, began, and the impact that the activities carried out by those volunteers are still having.



For Better or For Worse, the account of For a Better World's twenty years of history, was published on the twentieth anniversary of the association.

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THE HISTORY OF FOR A BETTER WORLD

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The photos are taken from the author's personal archives and those of the association. Many of the photos are not from one single photographer, but were taken by various volunteers involved in the activities.

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These pages are dedicated to all the people who had the good will to participate in the activities described in this book; to those who helped us lay the “foundation stones”; and to those who still accompany us in the fulfillment of what started out simply as a desire and has transformed into our lifelong mission: the dream of a better world, where there are no more wars and no more destruction, where the power of love is stronger than the love of power.

To Angia, Nikolay, Bruno Fumaneri, Luciano Finetto, Lia Magro, Attilio Rizzi, Fiorenza and Michela Bacilieri, Paolo Mariotti, Marco Raffaelli, Antonio and Rosetta Farina, Patrick Castro, and to all the others who have “moved on.”

“

You will find as you look back upon your life that the moments when you have truly lived are the moments when you have done things in the spirit of love.

—Henry Drummond

”

PREFACE

I don't really consider myself a writer, although perhaps my favourite school activity, while attending grammar school, was to write a classical essay. I confess that the several years I spent abroad in Yugoslavia, Austria, India, Nepal, and Croatia have taken away some of my capacity for wordplay.

However, I've been steadily writing for a couple of years now—in fact, scattered throughout this book you'll find short articles I've written that have been previously published in a monthly periodical. Despite originally being intended as stand-alone articles, I feel that they still help to tell the story.

It wasn't easy to condense twenty years of our association's history in such a small book—there are too many stories to recount, too many people whose tales will go unsaid. But we've done our best.

And it's been our great pleasure, because working on this book has taken us on a trip back in time. We've felt the emotions of moments long thought forgotten, fished out from the past the memories most precious—the ideals, the dreams, the adventures, the defeats and the victories, the good done, the joy and the love shared.

“For better or for worse,” or “in good times and bad,” we have lived, loved, and made many mistakes; but above all else, we've continued to move forward.

The purpose of this book is to return to our origins and make them known to those who joined us in our “pilgrimage” further down its path, bearing in mind that in the beginning years media resources were much more limited compared to nowadays.

While leafing through photo albums of the earliest years of our association, looking for the right pictures to be digitized and placed in this book, my first impression was, “What fun times those were!” The second one was, “Yeah...but just how many mines were still in those areas, and what other risks were we ignoring the existence of?”

But in reality, it had to be this way. Sure, there was a risk factor, but if we'd been too cautious, we might have been too...well, scared. Hooray for blissful ignorance!

“

*Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those
who dared believe that something inside of them was
superior to circumstances.*

—*B. Berton*

”

CHAPTER I



THE BEGINNING

1994-1996



NEGRAR HOSPITAL (VERONA), CHRISTMAS 1994

Officially, it all began on January 16, 1996, when some of us found the courage to draft and sign our association's charter. In reality, during March 1994 a group of us, both friends and family, had already started laying the foundations for what would become the association For a Better World.

Since we had a good number of children (and parents) proficient in singing, they became a group of singers known as "The Family Singers - For a Better World." Christmas of 1994 was quite the adventure for all of us—there were four adults and twelve children/adolescents performing shows in nearly all the retirement homes around Lake Garda, including one on Vannetti Street in Rovereto (a city in the province of Trentino), with whom we eventually established a strong relationship; and Negrar Hospital, where we would return every Christmas for the following twenty years.



CHRISTMAS, 1994

Among us there were those who had years of experience volunteering in India, Nepal, Russia, and some Eastern European countries (how many more books could be written...). At that point in time, we shared a common desire to bring aid to the neighboring peoples of the former Yugoslavia, who had suffered the most horrendous atrocities committed on European

soil since the Second World War.

The Internet didn't exist back then, and computers and cell phones weren't exactly widespread either. However, we received many a scare over what the television would broadcast every day, seeing as how there wasn't much distance between what was going on and the peaceful village near Lake Garda in which we resided. And that was enough to convince us that it was time to move and do something about it.



SHOW AT THE OLD FOLKS' HOME IN PESCHIERA DEL GARDA (VERONA)

In the spring of 1996, one of the families who had founded the association with us decided to return to Ukraine, more specifically the Donetsk region, to bring to life a series of interventions in local orphanages which, at the time, were in very poor condition.

A few years later in 2001, thanks to the legal support, consultation, and “push” from Ermanno and Federica—dear friends and collaborators from Bardolino (Verona)—our association was finally registered in the Regional Registry of Volunteers.

I will now hand the pen over to Michael, who organized the first humanitarian trips to refugee camps in northern Italy, Slovenia, and ultimately in Croatia and Bosnia.

SPETTACOLI E AIUTI PER UCRAINA, CROAZIA E BOSNIA

PER I BIMBI POVERI LA LORO ARTE È GRATIS

La veronese Anna Perlini e il marito Michael Brown, canadese, dopo anni di volontariato in India e altri paesi sottosviluppati, durante la guerra nell'ex Jugoslavia hanno cominciato a portare aiuti nei campi profughi, facendo tre anni fa a Verona il gruppo Per un mondo migliore.

L'associazione, che non ha fini di lucro, reca aiuti materiali e morali ai bisognosi, analisti e profughi con viaggi umanitari e pacifiche di pace, compie anche un'opera educativa e musicale tra bambini e giovani con spettacoli musicali, teatrali e di arti marziali.

Il gruppo, che sta cercando una sede a Verona, ha aperto nell'estate del '96 un centro in Ucraina, per bambini orfani e handicappati, e uno in Croazia, per soccorrere le popolazioni colpite dalla guerra. Ogni mese Anna e Michael fanno la spola fra Italia e Croazia, portando giocattoli, vestimenta e medicinali. Per le feste di Natale sono impegnati in una serie di spettacoli in scuole e case di riposo agli ucraini e del trentino.

"Nelle scuole materne ed elementari allestiamo spettacoli e lì noi vogliamo spaventarli un po' con storie di guerra, ma aiutarli ad aiutare i piccoli meno fortunati con letterine, disegni e risparmi", dice Anna Perlini. "Vogliamo che sviluppiamo valori umanitari e mettiamo a disposizione di loro, per loro, tutto ciò che possiamo. Auto al prossimo e lo facciamo in modo divertente con canzoni, clown, scenette, musical. Agli adolescenti preferiamo di agire gli occhi, di scuoterli, perché vedano le conseguenze di una guerra e che può succedere ovunque e a tutti gli esseri umani. Nelle case di riposo per loro allegria e sollievo agli anziani, che ci sentono soli e vogliono essere utili. A Ruvereto per esperti abbiamo messo in mostra tutti gli esiti di una casa di rifugio, che hanno vissuto la guerra, con quadri in centro per profughi di Biheka in



IN ALTO A DESTRA ANNA PERLINI E IL MARITO MICHAEL BROWN DELL'ASSOCIAZIONE PER UN MONDO MIGLIORE. QUI SOPRA ALCUNI RAGAZZI DEL PUBBLICO, PIÙ SOPRA DEI MOMENTI DELLO SPETTACOLO IN ZONA DELL'EX JUGOSLAVIA

Croazia. Da lì esce il risultato: un foto e belle lettere da tradurre. Gli anziani collaborano con noi con entusiasmo, come per la raccolta di materiale del gruppo Costante di Borgo Roma, inviato a novembre a Donetsk in Ucraina 1 e distribuzione di saponi, di scambio di ricambio, di scambio e arricchimento spirituale".

"Per un mondo migliore è composta da 30 volontari a tempo pieno di varie nazionalità", spiega Michael Brown, "e da collaboratori part-time. Esistono 9 figli e li seguono ovunque:

sono tutti musicisti. La più grande ha 20 anni, è canadese e coreografa, il più piccolo ha 3 anni, canta ed è la musicista. Hanno formato il gruppo Another Dimension (Altra Dimensione) e il ricavato dei concerti va in beneficenza. Si sono procurati gli strumenti lavorando in famiglia o rivendendo le loro da ragazzi e aziende. Chi ha regalato una chitarra, chi la batteria, chi i strumenti".

"È una vita di sacrifici - spiega Brown - ma non sono nulla in confronto alle sofferenze. Come diceva Madre Teresa

quella che ho fatto e solo una peccata nell'occasione. Ma, se non la facciano (forse avrebbe una peccata in meno, la cosa più importante è aiutare moralmente la gente colpita dalla guerra e dimenticare il passato e ad avere speranza per il futuro".

"Come veronese mi sto a cuore Verona e confido Anna Perlini non creante il bisogno perché qui ci sono molte piccole organizzazioni. Le soluzioni per aiutare la stessa"

Per chi volesse contribuire...

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ROSANCELA LUPINACCI

"FOR POOR CHILDREN THEIR ART IS FOR FREE"
- AN ARTICLE IN THE VERONA CHRONICLE

CHAPTER II



IT WAS ONCE CALLED YUGOSLAVIA

by Michael Brown



REFUGEE CAMP IN MARIBOR (SLOVENIA), SUMMER 1996

My love affair with the former Yugoslavia began a long time ago. On January 24, 1981, I moved with my family to Belgrade and started work as a native English teacher. Tito had died the year before, but his picture still hung everywhere, and the memory of him was still at its peak. I had the opportunity to know and appreciate the many positive aspects of the land, especially the hospitality. Our third child, Lara, was born in the largest hospital in Belgrade on September 25, 1981; this beautiful souvenir accompanied us when, a year later, we moved to do volunteer work in India.

Several years passed, but in the early nineties, riding the wave of the new freedom of expression reclaimed by Eastern European countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall, I was able to return several times to Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Ljubljana for a series of seminars. To be honest, there was tension in the air and even mention of war, but it all seemed just talk and speculation until, on June 25, 1991, Slovenia declared its independence, and so began the famous Ten-Day War. Unfortunately, I, along with three other volunteers, was in Ljubljana when it started! All foreigners were informed that the borders were closed and they had to wait in the airports until further notice. Thank God, we finally found a small border into Austria that was still open, and so escaped the terrible war that was about to disrupt the lives of many youths and people I'd met during the seminars.

In the following years, the terrible news of the war reached us, even in the school near Rome where I taught. I remember vividly the immense joy in receiving a letter from a group of young people I'd met in Sarajevo, recounting that they'd managed to escape to Hungary!

At the beginning of 1994, I decided to move with my family near Verona, in order to be closer to the situation and available to give a helping hand.

It was from there that we began to visit various refugee camps located in northern Italy: Strigno, near Trento, (one time Gardaland gave us free admission for fifty children living in that camp); Zelarino, near Venice, where our van was "assaulted" by a desperate and frustrated crowd of refugees; Jesolo; and Cervignano del Friuli.

It was only the beginning, and I personally felt that we could do much more.

In late August of 1995, I was with a group of volunteers in a refugee camp in Maribor, Slovenia, to perform an animation for children. One

teary-eyed mother began to recount a horrible story that the Italian media would only be made aware of in September: she had escaped from Srebrenica.



REFUGEE CAMP IN ZELARINO (VERONA)

It was an experience so traumatic that she could hardly speak. She told me that all the women had been loaded on different buses and sent away, while the men were taken elsewhere. Her father and teenage son had miraculously managed to escape through the woods, but they witnessed her



REFUGEE CAMP IN MARIBOR (SLOVENIA)

husband and other men being massacred and thrown into mass graves, the bulldozers covering it all up with fresh earth. The mother at least knew that they were safe, but she was hysterical, and I wasn't sure I understood her well because I didn't remember much Bosnian. When, a month later, I saw the news on TV, I realized that unfortunately I'd understood all too well.

In November 1995, the Dayton agreement marked the official end of this absurd war, although the conflicts continued in various areas of the war zone even as far as 2001.

In April of 1996, I traveled with my teenage children and another group of volunteers to Slovenia, and from there proceeded to Cazin and Bihać (Bosnia), bringing humanitarian aid and performing a series of shows for many orphans, both children and adolescents. It was a tragic situation: utter devastation permeated everything, and everywhere we went, there was always a silent, desperate plea for help of any kind.

“

It was not the noise of the guns that killed Yugoslavia. It was the silence. The silence on the language of violence before violence. The silence on racist theories before the ethnic cleansing. The silence on violations of human rights before the massacres.

— Paolo Rumiz (*Masks for a Massacre*)

”

This experience made me realize that we could take more trips and be more efficient if we moved closer to our destination. Was it finally time to return to the now former Yugoslavia? We eventually decided on Rijeka.

In June 1996, I, along with my three oldest children—Jennie, Chris and Lara—their friend Andrea, who played in our band; and sister and brother Renata and Bernard, who had previously escaped from Sarajevo, pitched our tents in the Medveja campground near Rijeka.

While searching for better living quarters, we started to perform clown



BIHAĆ (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA), 1996

and music shows in the various refugee camps in the Rijeka area. At the time, the city and the surrounding areas were full of refugees—almost all the hotels were used as collection centers, since there was no longer any tourism.

A quite poorly-placed refugee camp was the one in Učka, just before the tunnel; its barracks had once housed the workers involved in the tunnel's construction. At the beginning their families, having escaped the massacre in Bosnia, came pouring into the camp; in some cases, several families were forced to cram together into a small room. The living conditions were difficult, and many unfortunate children were born during that period, but life went on regardless. Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks), though there was often some tension, coexisted quite peacefully.

At first, the camp housed 450 people, and was surrounded by the Croatian army. It was there that I got to know the Bosnian culture; it took me a while to get used to certain rituals. Every time we visited, bringing aid, they always insisted on offering us food, along with the inevitable Bosnian coffee. The various families practically quarreled amongst themselves, because they all wanted us to eat in their respective barracks. It was difficult for me to get used to the idea that, even though we were the ones bringing aid to them, the most precious thing to them and what gave them the greatest joy was to be able to offer us their hospitality. They



THE TEAM—THE FIRST VOLUNTEERS IN CROATIA: LARA, ANDREA, CHRIS, BERNIE, JENNIE, RENATA, AND MICHAEL; MAY 1996

explained to us that they had lost everything—their houses, their land, even their family members—but for them, having guests over helped them recover their dignity. And so, even when we had nothing to bring to them, we nonetheless went to drink coffee together, to talk, to sing a few songs—giving them a sense of normality, that all wasn't lost, and that there still was



REFUGEE CAMP IN UČKA (CROATIA)



SHOW FOR THE CHILDREN FROM THE REFUGEE CAMP IN UČKA (CROATIA)

hope for the future.

In August of the same year, we found a small apartment in which to spend the winter. Meanwhile, the number of refugees in Croatia rose to over 600,000. The youth in Rijeka during this period were rather disoriented, and thus we spent several evenings in their usual meeting places (and even on the street) just talking, playing, and singing.

In September, my wife and our younger children came up from Italy and joined us in a more spacious apartment that we had rented in the Drenova district, just outside the town.

“

The Research and Documentation Centre in Sarajevo has released figures (still not finalized to this day) on the casualties of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 93,837 deceased confirmed (last tallied in December 2005), of whom 63,687 were Bosniaks (67.87%), 24,216 were Serbs (25.8%), 5,057 were Croats (5.39%), and 877 others, who had declared themselves Yugoslavs in the 1991 census, or foreigners (0.93%). The international troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina also suffered significant losses; about 320 soldiers of UNPROFOR were killed during the conflict in Bosnia. UNHCR stated that the conflict in Bosnia forced more than 2.2 million people to flee their homes, making it the largest movement by people in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

”



BIHAĆ (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA), 1996



SHOW IN A GYM IN BIHAĆ (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA), MAY 1996



SHOW FOR REFUGEES HOUSED AT THE PALMA HOTEL (NOW HOTEL BRISTOL) IN OPATIJA (CROATIA)



MICHAEL WITH WOUNDED SOLDIERS



THE FIRST SHOWS



WITH THE CHILDREN OF THE REFUGEE CAMP IN UČKA (CROATIA)

CHAPTER III



THE FIRST BIG STEP

1996-1998



SHOW IN THE ORPHANAGE IN SELCE (CROATIA)

From September 1996 to August 1998, Michael and I, along with our six children (aged 4 to 19), lived together with a dozen other young volunteers, in two adjacent apartments in Drenova, a high and windy Rijeka district. From drafty windows we could see the sea, but also often felt the cold and impetuous wind they call “Bura.”

In those days, Rijeka was very different: there were only a few small shops, with the majority of goods imported and, apart from the bread, more expensive than those in Italy. The cars were all over twenty or thirty years of age, and many were abandoned on the side of the road. Since most were used as refugee camps, very few hotels retained their original function. A dismal and resigned atmosphere hung in the air.

Our first typed newsletter was photocopied using one of the few copy machines in Rijeka; and soon afterwards we availed ourselves of a secondhand mimeograph.

There were only a couple of gas stations around Rijeka; one of them, located just outside the city, became the meeting point for volunteers and friends who came to find us.

The word volunteer was virtually unknown in Rijeka, generally being applied solely to foreign aid workers.

As well as having to adapt to a new culture, we also had to cope with the emotional and economic turmoil of the immediate post-war period. The effects were especially prevalent in our colorful neighborhood, where unfortunately people looked askance at us, thanks to the evil concept of ethnic cleansing that had penetrated the minds of Croats everywhere. I found that out right away when I asked a baker for a loaf of hlijeb (Bosnian or Serbian for bread) instead of kruh (the Croatian term), and was admonished severely for the unwitting mistake. I had some difficulty relearning a language I'd known years earlier as “Serbian-Croatian” that had now morphed into something similar and yet dangerously different.

With the situation in Bosnia threatening resumption of the previous conflict, we, in a sense, lived in the moment, knowing that any lifelong plans made might never come to fruition.

To finance our activities, in July of that year we began picking cherries in Valpolicella (Verona). The so-called “tradition” would continue until 2010.

LOVE OR FEAR?

The Choice

It was 1996, and our family had just moved from peaceful Italy to post-war Croatia, thoroughly unstable and troubled. Our neighbors were all survivors of traumatic experiences as a result of the tragic conflict that had only recently officially ended. There were refugees, widows, elderly people who looked after the children whose parents had traveled abroad looking for work—or were dead.

Ivica lived in the apartment below ours. He'd fought in the war from September 1991 until October 1993, when he was seriously wounded by a grenade explosion in Bosnia. He'd lost an eye (covered with an eyepatch in typical pirate fashion), his hearing, and his desire to live. He suffered severe headaches caused by shrapnel from the explosion lodged firmly in his brain, which the doctors had been unable to remove.

He had a wife and two daughters, but it was easy to tell that he had difficulty adjusting to family life. No longer was he the strong man in an officer's uniform portrayed in the pictures hung in the hall, but a poor soldier suffering from PTSD, who passed the time his wife was at work taking care of their youngest daughter and peering morosely at the horizon.

Jeffrey, my youngest son, was five years old at the time, and in consequence a bit afraid of this strange neighbor that even I still couldn't understand. I soon realized that I'd never taken the initiative to talk to Ivica, partly because I didn't speak the language too well and partly because I wasn't sure I could stand strong in the face of his obvious suffering.

At the same time, I knew I couldn't continue to live in a country where my son felt afraid or where I myself didn't feel safe and fully convinced of the choice we'd made as a family.

One day, I decided to explain to Jeffrey what our neighbor had gone through and why he was wearing an eyepatch, pirate-style. Then, I taught him his first words in Croatian—"Molim za vas," meaning "I'm praying for you"—and proposed that he tell Ivica the next time we encountered him on the stairs.

I will never forget the thrill of that moment, when this grim-faced man bent down to listen to what a little boy was whispering in his ear. With tears in his eyes, he thanked us both.

It was the beginning of a great friendship! Jeffrey often sought out Ivica's company and played with his daughter; and we all spent hours talking with and encouraging this tormented man who slowly, despite his painful physical and psychological limitations, regained peace before leaving this mortal life shortly afterwards.

Jeffrey is now grown up and a young father, but he's never forgotten the day he made the important decision to choose love instead of fear.



JEFFREY AND ANA, IVICA'S DAUGHTER

Our young people brought with them from Italy their band “Another Dimension,” which had started out by performing in refugee camps and other youth centers, including the city’s reform school. And even before officially opening the chapter of our “Clown Therapy” program, our accompanying clown performances brought joy and happiness to many refugee camps and orphanages in Rijeka and its surrounding areas.

Every so often we would make some trips to either the Croatian or Bosnian interior. Once, Michael went on a show tour in Bosnia with Jonathan, a young American volunteer, and Lara, our fifteen-year-old daughter. They came back with the incredible story of having had to perform for an audience of hundreds of children without any sound amplification! The hunger for something new, positive, and happy was immense, as was the gratitude.



MICHAEL, JONATHAN, AND LARA WITH A LARGE AUDIENCE IN BOSNIA

One day, we received an invitation.

Three Italian volunteers in Mostar contacted us, asking if we were interested in collaborating with them and, since we had a band and many young volunteers, performing some concerts in Mostar and Sarajevo. They also required our help for a summer camp organized by a group of local

young people.

It was the summer of 1997.

Things would never be the same, because that summer we first met Stefano, Marco, and Paolo—yes, the very same “Paolo Alleluia,” who will now tell us his story.

But first, here is an excerpt of an article Jennie wrote after this life-changing trip:

It's a cool August morning; the sun has just risen on the other side of the mountains. Suddenly, the stillness and silence is interrupted by the piercing cry of the village muezzin. For Muslims, it's the call to the first prayer of the day and, although most of us don't understand the words, we feel an inexplicable thrill just the same: it's an echo of the mountains, a rousing call...it's the Cry of Bosnia!

It's difficult to explain with words the feeling one gets from Bosnia; simply put, it's life-changing.

The first two days were dedicated to outdoor concerts in both parts of the city. (Mostar is divided into two parts—the Bosniak Muslims and the Croatian Catholics—and it's very dangerous for inhabitants from either side to cross to the other).

After we finished, we were interviewed by two radio stations and a newspaper.

The third day, we traveled to the Muslim part of Mostar, volunteering as staff in a summer camp organized for about forty teenagers.

The first night of the camp, we all sat around the fire, and each of us shared his goals in life. The act of gathering around the fire was repeated every night—also because it was far more preferable to sleep near its warmth than in the cold of the tents. We sang and talked into the wee hours of the morning, with simultaneous ongoing translations in Italian, English, and Bosnian.

During the camp, we staff and some of the attendees drove to Sarajevo to do shows in two orphanages.

On our last night there, we decided to perform a concert for all the attendees, since many hadn't been present for the ones we'd done in the city. Apart from some technical difficulties due to the intense heat of the day and the rain at night, which wreaked slight havoc on our equipment,

the music was thoroughly enjoyed by all—we sang and danced for hours, with no barriers between us.

The next morning, while waiting for the rain to stop, we took refuge near the kitchen, under a tarp attached to four trees. Naturally, we, as well as most of our things in the tents, were soaked; but nobody cared. Hand in hand, we began to sing and see who would outlast the other—us, or the rain. Obviously, we won. These were our last moments together.

A little later, some of us went for a last show at a school for the blind while some of the others dismantled the tents, or performed an animation in the Croatian part of Mostar.

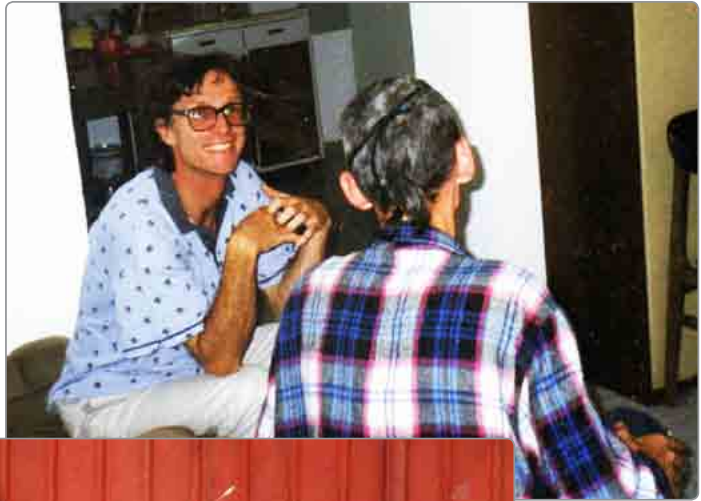
Many of these young people, hardened by the events of the war, were in tears when we said goodbye. “Please, come back!” they begged us.

Please, pray with us for lasting peace in this country. The Cry of Bosnia has without a doubt touched the depths of our hearts, and I’m sure it’ll touch yours, too, but obviously you’ll have to experience it for yourself. We can’t wait to go back there!



SINGING THEIR HEARTS OUT DESPITE THE POURING RAIN

IN DRENOVA
WITH IVICA



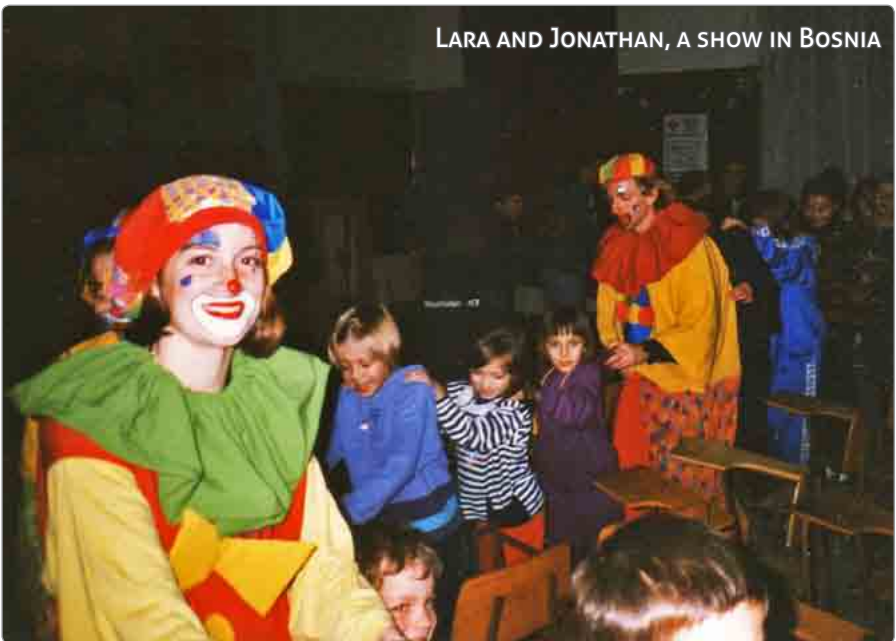
JEFFREY, SVEN
AND ANA

WITH IVICA





THE CLOWN THERAPY BEGINS



LARA AND JONATHAN, A SHOW IN BOSNIA



DISTRIBUTION OF GIFTS IN KORENICA (CROATIA), CHRISTMAS 1997



OUR PUPPET THEATER IN BOSNIA

CHAPTER IV



PAOLO RECOUNTS TO PAOLO

Paolo Perlini Interviews Paolo Corno



TRAVELING TO MOSTAR FOR THE FIRST TIME, 31/12/94

The first time I saw Paolo was in December of 1997, during a Christmas show at the Gardesana Tourist Center. Unlike with all the other shows, for the first time he was leading the group—someone new, who'd never done it before. His cadence while speaking practically screamed Brescia, with that way of formulating a sentence first as a question, then a statement, and eventually one cannot describe what it was originally intended to be, for the modulation varies with each word before the sentence finally ends with an almost imperceptible aspiration.

I saw him again a month later, when I met up with the whole group in Drenova, Rijeka, and stayed with them for a few days. One of my nights there, we all paid a visit to Mira, a refugee from Sarajevo who lived near my hosts. I won't elaborate too much on the visit, but suffice it to say we received a warm welcome, wonderful food, and a beautiful performance on the piano courtesy of Mira's daughter. But the truly amazing point of the evening came when the family started singing in Croatian and Paolo simultaneously translated the song for me word-for-word, a feat I can't accomplish even with the most famous English songs. And not only that, he was able to translate while also laughing and singing along with the others!

Oh, yes, he was very good with words, and during my stay was busily organizing details and obtaining permits for the transportation of humanitarian aid from Italy to Croatia.

A few days later, I offered him and Anna a ride to Italy with me, as the two of them needed to go to Verona to make the final preparations for this project. I was traveling with an old car that consumed more oil than gasoline. He told me he knew a short cut to circumvent the traffic and thus acted as navigator. Impressed with his knowledge of the roads, I asked him, "How did you end up here?"

"Here, in Croatia?" he asked.

"Yes, in Croatia, and here with the group."

"Me? Eh ... it's a long story. "

"Well, we have time, don't we? Tell me a bit about your situation. What made you leave the mountains?"

"I'd have to begin with my parents."

"Sure, start there."

"I was born in Milan on September 29, 1975. I was very little when my parents left the city. At that time my father worked at Enel (Italy's national

electrical company) while my mother worked as a nurse. They were still fairly young, he 30 and she 28, when they left behind good jobs with decent salaries and entered a drastically different lifestyle, becoming managers of a campsite in Edolo. I grew up surrounded by nature, away from the city smog and traffic. “

“Wow.”

“Yes, I must say that at that time they had a lot of courage.”

“And were you always in Edolo?”

“Yes, I spent my childhood attending the town’s elementary and middle schools. I participated in a lot of sports; they were a passion of mine, and were my outlet and stimuli.”

“And high school? Did you go there, or...?”

“That’s the beauty of it. In Edolo, there was only an Institute of Accounting, and the kids had two possibilities: stay in Edolo, or leave for the valley to pursue other studies. I didn’t care much for studying, and remaining in Edolo was also more convenient—I wouldn’t have to move out of the town and commute to school daily. That year, unintentionally helping me in my decision, an experimental school for surveyors was opened right there, in Edolo.”

“How fortunate!”

“Yes, though surveying wasn’t a field of study that really called to me; but the important thing was staying there. So, I remained in the town, and the first two years of studying were quite productive; it didn’t take much effort to climb to the top of my class.”

“Then what?”

“My third year in school, I hit my first crisis, felt the first symptoms of personal discomfort. In addition to my current field of study, which didn’t really interest me all that much, I began to ask myself a lot of questions I’d previously buried, avoided, and underestimated.”

“Questions? What kinds of questions?”

Meanwhile, I was wondering where exactly we were heading, because we seemed to be going far out of our way and into the mountains! I hoped dearly that my old R4 would be able to make the trip. But Paolo’s story went on regardless.

“I started to wonder: does happiness really exist? If so, what exactly is it? And is it something I can have? I felt greatly disturbed, because I’m not a person who does things by half measures. This was something that manifested while I was playing sports; I either played my best, or didn’t play at all. I either do something with my whole heart, or I don’t do it at all—but I never do something halfway. “

We are going farther and farther by the hour, I thought, and if this continues, we’ll end up in the middle of nowhere. But I didn’t despair, my car had seen way worse. As Paolo spoke on, we passed through some remote villages, where there were still corncoobs hanging on the racks. It was a beautiful place, one I wouldn’t have minded visiting from spring till summer.

“At this point in my life, I went through various phases, and I decided to put my all into the most trivial things. New trend? I was the best testimonial. But even that wasn’t enough to satisfy my longing for something more, so if there was an opportunity to do something crazy or be different, I threw myself into it. I didn’t just participate in some college prank or little act of vandalism; I was always overdoing it, going to the maximum, because the everyday monotony was killing me.”

Now I began to understand what was going on: if we’d gone the regular way, we might have already arrived at the border; but Paolo never went for monotony if he could help it. Oh, well, it was nice to have done something different. But when I saw the signs for snow on the side of the road I realized that we were up very high and probably also lost. But no one said anything; not even the old car, which was already used to getting lost on her own.

“We may have gotten a little sidetracked,” Paolo said in slight embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it; we got to see some nice places. But please, go on. Did you graduate in the end?”

“Yes! In the end, I received my diploma without much ceremony—when one has finished high school, there’s no more time for fooling around. The

decision about what university to go to didn't inspire me at all, as I had other, more sports-related aspirations. However, a football injury put me out of commission for a couple of months and forced me to reconsider my options. In the end, the only thing left was to join the army."

"The army?"

"Yes, but obviously not as a foot soldier or a tank driver, no; that was too commonplace. I already saw myself as a paratrooper or part of an assault team, or even a rifleman."

"A Rambo-type, maybe?"

"Eh, not quite, but almost. Basically, just someone a little more prestigious than your average soldier. But I had to wait, because at that time there was a surplus of new recruits, and my enlistment was postponed. Meanwhile, I occupied myself as best I could.

"One evening, I returned from a party completely destroyed, demoralized, and ready to fall back into a deep crisis, so much so that I gave an ultimatum to the One who I, despite not having much faith, called the Big Boss. I don't know if it was a prayer or a supplication; all I basically said was: 'If You're there, knock back.'"

Turning my attention to my car's dashboard, I couldn't hear any alarming sounds, apart from some strange little noises I couldn't make out. At the moment, many of the dashboard's lights were off but everything seemed to be fine. Slowly progressing onward, we reached the top of the mountain and had no other choice except to go down the other side. All downhill.

"Oh, yeah, no worries, I know where we are now; it's pretty much smooth sailing from here on down."

Well, I for one wasn't afraid, because honestly, down was the only way to go. The only thing that really worried me was the oil, which, as I'd said, the car consumed in copious amounts. But how could I be afraid with someone like Paolo, who wanted to be a Marine, a paratrooper? Changing gears, I took my foot off the accelerator and let the car glide effortlessly downhill. Meanwhile Anna, seated behind us, indulged in a nap.

"One day in the fall of '94, I went to see Franco, an old friend already in

retirement, but he wasn't home. I was told he was in Bosnia.”

Having had a taste of his sense of direction, I threw out:

“I bet you didn't even know where Bosnia was...”

“Bosnia? Well, I knew it had to be somewhere; exactly where, I wasn't sure, but I knew it existed. And I had heard vaguely of the war and the atrocities committed there, but it'd all slipped my mind from one adventure to the next. So when Franco returned, I asked him to tell me what the hell he was doing down there. It was then that the Big Boss first nudged me. In November of '94, I got to know two groups—Obiettivo Missioni and i Beati i Costruttori di Pace (Objective Missions and Blessed Peacemakers)—who spoke of their need of volunteers for the camps in Split.



THE FIRST DAYS IN SPLIT'S REFUGEE CAMPS (CROATIA), DECEMBER 1994

“I left with enthusiasm, knowing wonderful people like Stefano and Sandro, who above all stood out with how they acted and the way they enthusiastically spread the Gospel.

“There, I started to change my life.”

I changed gears again; the road was steep now and I didn't want to put too much strain on the brakes.

“And what were you doing there?”

“I delivered parcels of food, becoming a sort of postal service for refugees, as well as aiding in many other ways. During this time, I also began my spiritual journey. After a couple of months, I realized that this would be my work, as I still hadn’t received the call to join the army. In December that same year I returned to spend my first new year in Mostar, and I was there until early April of ‘95 when I returned to Italy, because the army had finally called me in.”

“Really! So you had to go? “

“Yes, I showed up at the barracks, but that day I had no hesitation: I refused to wear the uniform. How could I, after seeing the devastating effects of a war? How could I join the military after seeing just how bad war makes things, even when it’s over?”

“And then what? They sent you to prison?”

“No. The general asked me three times if I was sure of what I was doing. I explained my reasons and asked him if it were possible for me to be able to perform the alternative civil service. I wasn’t completely against service: I could not in all good conscience bear arms, but I still wanted to make myself useful to my country. Unfortunately, the time for filing a request for alternative civil service had already long passed, and the general could do nothing but his duty, which was to file a complaint against me.

“The next day, without much hope, I presented my case about doing civil service. However, still being in possession of my documents, I left again for Mostar and stayed there until October, when my request was accepted and with it the general’s complaint declined. For a year, I was to perform service in a nursing home.”

“Very different from your previous work.”

“Yes, but it was a very beautiful and important experience because I’d already started to ask myself questions about my future. I began to wonder: when the emergency was over, when there was peace again, where was I going to offer my services? In Kuwait, maybe Uganda?”

“The months spent in a nursing home made me realize that one could be a volunteer also in times of peace, away from the guns.

“When the year was up, I returned to Mostar and remained there until the autumn of ‘97.”

“I’ve been to Mostar, and with this car, too!”

“Really? Beautiful, no? We opened a youth center in a basement, where many people came to play and have fun. We organized courses of Italian, English, and guitar. In addition to continuing to distribute humanitarian aid from house to house, there was a postal service that put refugees in Split in touch with their relatives in Bosnia. I remember very well that time: the need was great, and it was easily visible why. Mostar was completely destroyed; in the houses there was neither water nor electricity—we filled jerry cans from the water taps scattered around the city, and at night we saw only by candlelight. Though themselves refugees, a Muslim family graciously shared their living quarters with us; over time, the children all became my little brothers and Ramiza—their mother—my adoptive mother.

“Sadly, the war was not yet over, and many times I found myself experiencing less-than-happy situations.”



MOSTAR (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA): DOORS AND WINDOWS OF HOMES FORTIFIED AGAINST THE EXPLOSIONS OF SHELLS, JANUARY 1995

“You were bombed?”

“Yes. The bombings weren’t continuous, but at least five or six shells fell every three, four days or so, and it was this alternation that endangered the lives of so many children playing in the courtyards and many elderly strolling on city sidewalks.”

“And what did you feel?”

“What did I feel? Fear! Tremendous fear. There I realized just how little

courage I had—a far cry from the confident swagger I’d always pretended to possess.”

“And then what?”

“And then...in ‘97, despite the Dayton Accord of December ‘95, the war was about to break out again in Mostar. All the signs were present; a palpable feeling hung in the air. People rearmed themselves, and we even had to move because our house was on the front lines. And to our friends in Italy we said, ‘Look, it’s going to be a mess here again!’



MOSTAR (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA): SIGN "BEWARE OF SNIPERS," JANUARY 1995

“Then, suddenly, everything changed, and I realized that war is always decided upon by a few people, never the general public. When war broke out in ‘91 there was no reason for it other than economic and political gain; a few people were able to convince thousands that it was right and just to take up arms and commit atrocities. But in ‘95, when it seemed ‘only natural’ to do it, if only to make right the grievances and the wrongs, other people covered up everything.

“In Mostar, Marco, Stefano, and I organized some summer camps, and in attendance (from Rijeka) were some volunteers of the group For a Better World. Here I was made aware of this association, and found it surprisingly natural to ask Anna if I could join the group, since the projects we had initiated in Mostar were coming to an end.

“And so began my journey in this association, with different people, different houses.”

“But, how did your friends, your fellow adventurers, take the news of your new life?”

“Eh...My change didn't go unnoticed and probably brought great mirth to old friends who remembered my adventures, my intentions to tear the world apart. But some were also impressed and intrigued—so much so, they wanted to learn more and get involved firsthand in the ‘Stinice’ project, a very simple activity: some families of this refugee camp in Split were adopted by many from Edolo, and the latter sent off basic necessities every two months via van.”



WITH DAD IN THE REFUGEE CAMP PIS BARAKE IN SPLIT
(CROATIA), FEBRUARY 1995

“And your parents were happy?”

“At first they were scared because I lived in a very dangerous area, and at that time communication was difficult. They were still surprised by my change, but with time have understood that my choice was not dictated by an impulse, or a trend. It wasn't one of the excesses that had characterized my youth. No, it'd become my life, the one that I'm still living now.

“Perhaps they'd expected me to do something else; maybe they expected me to take over the reins of the camp, or become a ski instructor

and mountain guide...

“Even my sister, at 14, was worried when I left; maybe I hadn’t spent much time with her then, but now we see each other pretty often.”

“And second thoughts, regrets...never had any?”

“Uh, yes, I now regret that I made you take this road,” he laughed and resumed the conversation.

“Despite the ups and the downs of life, in these twenty years there’s been one constant: the feelings of joy, true happiness, achievement, and satisfaction in what I do every day. To me, there is no Sunday Syndrome or Monday Blues; it’s everyday life that gives me the adrenaline I was looking for.

“Then, in 2005 I met Irena at a volunteer seminar in Timisoara. Truth be told, we’d already met some years before in Hungary. She also had volunteer experience and it seemed natural to work together.”



IRENA AND PAOLO, JANUARY 2012

Eventually, in the late evening we arrived in Verona. Perhaps without that deviation we would have arrived earlier. But I think, just as it was for Paolo, in order to discover the beauty and the true meaning of life, sometimes one has to change courses, to shun the traditional, the easiest, and the most traveled. Sometimes, it’s necessary to get lost.

With time I also learned how he picks up languages so quickly; and I

believe this method should be taught in all schools, even before the alphabet and multiplication tables.

When he asks you something, after receiving the answer he repeats what you just said.

For example:

“How long before you arrive in Rome?”

“About five hours.”

“Ah. You’re saying you’ll arrive in five hours?”

“Yes.”

“But how will you get there? Will you arrive in five hours by car?”

“Yes, by car.”

“Then you’re going to Rome by car and arriving in five hours,” he says with the Brescia cadence and that final aspiration, in order to store what he’s heard. An effective method on picking up other languages; even so, after twenty years, a Czech wife, a multilingual company of people, and many trips, his Brescia accent is still very much in evidence.

But it’s a good sign—it’s important that he never forgets who he is and who he was.



MOSTAR (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA): IN THE YOUTH CENTER, JANUARY 1995

(*Anna:*) So, in late summer 1997, the first to arrive in Rijeka was Marco, one of the three Mostar Musketeers (as we called them), followed by Paolo, Stefano, and others—the house was filled with Italian volunteers! Before that, I was the only one, but I soon found myself surrounded by Italians who spoke only a few words of English but understood Bosnian well enough. They were all idealistic, motivated by a great love for their neighbor, which led them to leave their comfortable and spacious homes in Italy and face the dangers and sacrifices in this torn land. I could never describe the fresh waves of joy, life, and healthy madness they brought to our home. They greatly benefited our activities, and new projects took off.

Boredom certainly didn't exist in our house—there was a constant stream of music, show and band practice, visitors, the occasional neighborly visit, and so on. I confess that for most of the time the state of the house was not flawless, but the energy, life, love, and passion fully compensated for it. My three youngest children found themselves with fantastic babysitters full of creative ideas and sometimes a little crazy in how they spent their free time, but who were still great role models. To this day, Marco is head of a school in Zambia; Stefano, after he married Daniela (a Chilean volunteering in our house during that time), continued to volunteer for several years in Turkey and Ukraine—the happy couple is now living in Tuscany with their five children.

As for Paolo...he's never left us.





MOSTAR (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA), A FORMER PLAYGROUND, JANUARY 1995



MOSTAR (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA): OUR ROOM, HALF-DORMITORY
AND HALF-HUMANITARIAN AID, FEBRUARY 1995



WITH ALDIN, ONE OF THE CHILDREN OF MOSTAR TO WHOM I FELT THE CLOSEST, FEBRUARY 1995



SPLIT (CROATIA), A VISIT FROM FRIENDS FROM EDOLO (BRESCIA), FEBRUARY 1995

MOSTAR
(BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA),
A MEMORIAL
FOR THREE
JOURNALISTS
FROM RAI,
JANUARY 28, 1995



MOSTAR
(BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA),
WITH STEFANO
AND MARCO IN THE
"WHITE HOUSE",
FEBRUARY 1997

CHAPTER V



IN THE HOUSE WITH A SEA VIEW

1998-2013



ANDREA, PAOLO, FRANCESCO, ANNA, AND GIULIANO

Around May of 1998, we received the sudden news that the landlord had sold our apartments and we had a month to move out. On the one hand, we didn't mind the prospect of moving to a more spacious and quiet house (our neighborhood was prone to various scuffles and incidents, including the explosion of a bomb that had fortunately only shattered the house's windowpanes). But where to go?

A few nights before, we were invited to a farewell dinner of a non-governmental Japanese organization (JEN) that was closing its doors, as a friend of ours, Lidija, was one of their employees.

In short, their headquarters and warehouse became our home, and it would remain so for the next 15 years! It was a house with a wonderful view of the sea; everyone that came over to visit went directly to the balcony to admire it. Just before the move, however, there was a period of uncertainty, summarized in the following article:

RIVERSIDE WALK

Long discussions regarding possible changes made the future seem foggier by the day. Several years earlier, my husband and I, together with a few friends, had founded a humanitarian organization to try to help in the difficult aftermath of civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

From day one, it hadn't been an easy task, but we were encouraged by positive results, the volunteers working with us, and the numerous occasions when we were able to deliver aid and cheer up the children in refugee camps. Now most of our personnel were moving on, and other NGOs were also relocating; thanks to these events, we started thinking about closing down our work. The thought of it made me feel somewhat sad and defeated.

"Why don't we go for a walk by the river?" my husband suggested one day; I was glad for the opportunity to take a break, and quickly agreed. It wasn't exactly a river—more like a lively stream running through the hills near home. It had been raining heavily and there was no sunshine, only a soft, damp mist shrouding the bushes and trees.

I thought the weather conditions closely resembled my own feelings as we strolled down the gloomy, muddy path. This wouldn't be the first time

we'd close a chapter in our life's book and move on, but on this occasion, something didn't feel right. A little flicker in my heart was telling me we should persevere, in spite of logical reasoning and circumstances.

We started going over the pros and cons once again, but there was no obvious right decision, and the more we talked, the more confused we felt. Then we stopped, sat on some rocks, and opened up our hearts to our loving Creator to hear what He had to say about the situation. We felt His encouragement that great things were still to come, along with more volunteers than we would have room for.

Fourteen years later, we are still here, and just last month we officially inaugurated a new, larger training center, as more and more volunteers were arriving, eager to help out. The promise had come to pass.

How differently things could have turned out if we had not taken the time that day long ago to take a peaceful walk away from the pressing details of the situation, to look upward and get a clear vision from way above the clouds, where the sun is always shining.

The new house looked like a palace! After an initial period of departures and settling, which involved a staff turnover, we found ourselves with a new team. Maggie, a Bulgarian volunteer who had recently transferred to our home after a period of time spent volunteering in Split, would eventually become a pillar of the organization for many years.

In the summer of 1998, we began to receive our first visitors from Italy, who were for the most part children of friends. One of these was Francesco, a boy of 15 years who, as he confessed to us later, came just to try something new; but when he came into contact with the needy during his first trip to Bosnia, he had the opportunity to experience true happiness—the kind that comes from making others happy. His main concern was his family—especially Andrea, his older brother, who at the time was involved in drugs. It would be a few months before I finally met Andrea—and that will be a story all on its own...

In the fall of 1998, we witnessed the most spectacular sunset we have ever seen in all these years! We were all on the balcony for hours, amazed, dumbfounded, and at the same time encouraged by this “show” that we felt had been put together just for us, as a gift. In that house “with a view” were



WITH THE LEGENDARY GRAY IVECO

laid the foundations of most of our projects that are still running, to some of which I will dedicate specific chapters.

In 2003, we officially founded the local association Udruga za bolji svijet, which also served as the headquarters of For a Better World, accordingly with similar objectives.



ORIGINAL PHOTO, NO PHOTOSHOP INVOLVED

In the summer of 1999, other Italian youths came to visit us, including Andrea, the brother for whom Francesco had prayed so much, and whom we'd had the opportunity to meet personally in Vobarno (Brescia), the town where he lived with his large family. Andrea's story was published in one of our magazines, and is here below:

DO MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN TODAY?

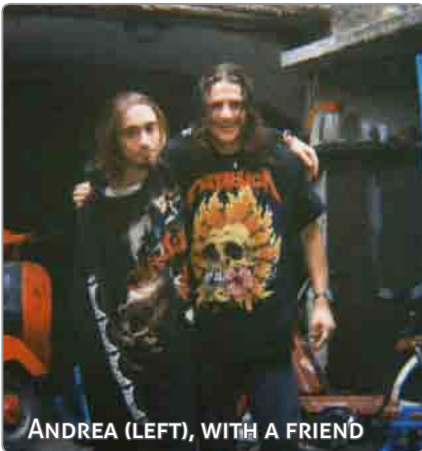
Hello, everyone! My name is Andrea, and I want to give you a brief summary of how my life has completely turned around.

My parents had always tried to set me on the right path; but around the age of 14, like many boys at that age who want to assert their independence, I began experimenting and going with the flow. I started smoking, going to discos, drinking, and smoking pot. Then, slowly, tiring of clubbing, I changed my genre of music, going from being a punk to a heavy metal fan. Meanwhile, I was constantly changing jobs, always searching for something I wasn't sure even existed. I wanted to feel free, so I tried being a street bum. I begged, slept on the sidewalks, and ate from the trash.

My physical appearance was impressive: chains and studs everywhere, tattered clothes, long, painted nails, earrings, etc. I remember I'd also begun petty theft and vandalism (once, I even overturned a car), and I was steadily making my way towards a life of crime.

I started to take harder drugs such as cocaine, pills, and the like. After changing jobs yet again, I started getting involved in witchcraft.

During this time, my brother Francesco, who had already been in Croatia for some months, prayed every day for me, and often wrote me. Within two months, the Lord completely changed my life. What I'd been looking for in witchcraft was



ANDREA (LEFT), WITH A FRIEND

power and, after reading the words of Jesus, I discovered that the power of His love was stronger.

After visiting the community in Rijeka, I decided to cut ties with my past and dedicate my life to bringing His love to others.



A NEW LIFE

In late July of that same year, Andrea, inspired to help many youths who like him had fallen into the trap of drugs, took us for the first time (this time only being a pit stop) to the Moon Festival, an outdoor festival held for many years on the last weekend of July in the small town of Colere, near Bergamo. Perhaps because it was night, perhaps due to the beat of the drums, perhaps in part because drugs and young people were intertwined everywhere, perhaps because we were setting foot in a reality hitherto unknown to us, but we'd never been so wide-eyed before!

From that point on, the Moon Festival became one of our annual projects. Our setup at the very beginning of the encampment, with music, theater, and free food, would become an important event for many young volunteers who helped us year after year, until its closure in 2006.

Meeting Francesco and Andrea opened a new chapter in our history; we often found ourselves welcoming in and providing a friendly atmosphere for various youths with similar experiences—more than



ANDREA, JONATHAN, ANNA, AND VIRGINIA AT THE MOON FESTIVAL IN 2000

once, we were mistaken for a drug rehabilitation center! The common denominator in these youths was certainly a discontentment with life and a search for excitement, which they often obtained through illegal substances. The answer we offered them was to think of others, to make someone happy and find in turn that they would feel better themselves. In fact, many were looking for a purpose in life, and we're certain that the time they devoted to community life and volunteering will always be an unforgettable experience for them. Paolo became a counselor and older brother to several of these young people who have since gone on to start families, but who often come back to visit us or who write us from afar.

“

Life is an exciting business, and most exciting when it is lived for others.

—Helen Keller

”

THE VIEW

Fourteen years ago, our group was invited to a farewell party a friend of mine was hosting. The NGO she had been working for was moving its headquarters to another location and that evening they were saying farewell to quite a large number of friends and acquaintances.

It was evening and, along with others, we headed down a steep driveway leading to a large house surrounded by trees and green vegetation. As we entered the door we were kindly escorted to the large terrace where drinks and snacks were served.

“

*The only thing of importance, when we depart,
will be the traces of love we have left behind.*

—Albert Schweitzer

”

I still remember the feeling I experienced looking for the first time at the breathtaking view from that terrace: a deep blue sea surrounded by green hills, forming something of a bay, islands in the distance, a gorgeous sky.

I think I remained still, almost paralyzed for a few minutes, just looking and admiring such beauty that seemed to appear almost out of nowhere. I wasn't the only one. Most of the guests also took their time leaning on the banister and commenting on the view.

The party went well, and it was an enjoyable evening for all. The day after, I remember talking to a few people about the view. At the time, we were living in an apartment on the other side of town. You could still see the sea, but nothing like what we saw the night before.

Shortly afterwards, the house with the amazing view became my home, and I still live in it (along with family and coworkers). Due to an amazing series of events, we actually happened to rent that very house just a couple of months after that memorable “first encounter” at the farewell party!

Over the course of these 14 years, besides living there, we have also

hosted seminars, organized summer camps, and received streams of visitors from all four corners of the earth in that house.

And guess what? The first place they all go is the terrace, and there they stand for a while in unmoving, unblinking awe at that same breathtaking view. Before going to bed at night and first thing in the morning, you can see them quietly sitting out there, just enjoying the view.



GREETINGS FROM THE BALCONY, APRIL 2001

I wish I could say that I also still do the same, but I must confess that I grew too familiar with the view. I guess it's just part of human nature—it happens in relationships, in our perspective of the material comforts we enjoy, and even in our spiritual lives. We eventually start taking things for granted and get used to their beauty or their usefulness, thus growing indifferent to them.

Sometimes, your initial appreciation can be renewed when you see this same situation happening with others, or when you help others discover that appreciation for the first time; however it happens, it just might make you treasure that fresh sense of wonder as long as you can.

Soon, we'll be moving to another house—and guess what? I find myself spending more time on the balcony, admiring the view.



THE FIRST TRIPS WITH FRIENDS IN WHEELCHAIRS



WITH MAI SARRO, "THE ADJUSTER" OF WHEELCHAIRS IN VERONA



MEETINGS IN SCHOOLS IN RIJEKA (CROATIA), MARCH 2003



RIJEKA: PEACE DEMONSTRATIONS, MARCH 2003



CINI, ANNAROSA, LINO, ANNA, AND CHILDREN VISITING ANGIA IN VOJNIĆ



PATRIZIO, BRINGING US THE NEW STOVE



JEFFREY AND "GRANDMA" GINA



PAOLO AND MUHA





WEEKLY MEETING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE KORACI CENTER
(RIJEKA, CROATIA), 1999

CHAPTER VI



LADY NATASHA



On July 26, 1998, during a show at Dom Sveta Ana (a family home that housed women who had been victims of rape during the war, as well as their children), we met Natasha, the President of CRIED, a Canadian foundation that helped children from various areas of Croatia affected by the war. Natasha, originally Croatian, had spent her childhood in an Italian refugee camp after World War II and still had vivid memories of her time there, and as such was coming to Croatia to bring what comfort she knew was much appreciated.

“

Operation Storm (or Oluja, in Croatian) was the last major battle of the Croatian War of Independence. It was coordinated by the Croatian Army, with military support from the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and from NATO, against the Serbian Army of Krajina and Bosnian rebel militias from the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia.

This action, taken on August 4, 1995, was intended to restore Croatian control over the areas inhabited by Serbs from Dalmatia and Slavonia (the so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina) and end the siege of Bihać, a Muslim town surrounded by the militia of the Bosnian Serbs and some Muslim rebels, allies of the Serbs.

More than 2,000 Serbs (soldiers and civilians alike) were either killed or went missing, and more than 250,000 fled, leaving their homes in the hands of the Croats, which were subsequently occupied or partially destroyed.

— Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

”

It was a meeting marking the beginning of a fruitful collaboration that lasted for almost a decade. Two or three times a year, Natasha visited Rijeka bearing generous donations collected in Canada, and big suitcases filled with every goodness from God. She remained for a few weeks to

distribute everything and visit the families and children that her foundation had “adopted.” Michael was her driver, and several of us were involved in her various projects, one of which took place in Vojnić and Krnjak, municipalities in the south of Karlovac, an area near the Bosnian border where the war had long raged, culminating in Operation Storm.



FIRST SHOW IN VOJNIĆ, NOVEMBER 1998

In November 1998, our band Another Dimension and a group of our volunteers, accompanied by Natasha, introduced themselves to the citizens of Vojnić in the city’s cultural center with an unforgettable show comprised of a live band, puppets, clowns, and games. The entire show was taped and preserved for future views.

It was there we first met Barbara, an orphan girl of 11 years (see her story later on), who is now the mother of three wonderful children, and



FIRST MEETING WITH BARBARA, AFTER THE SHOW

whose home is open to many during our summer camps.

Since then, a lot of time and energy has been spent in that area—even when going there required several hours of travel (there were no highways at the time)—and much of it was devoted to distribution of humanitarian aid on a large scale to 120 families, English classes in the elementary schools of Vojnić and the nearby village of Krnjak, as well as regular shows and animations.



ENGLISH LESSONS IN VOJNIĆ



FIRST MAJOR DISTRIBUTION TO 120 FAMILIES

There, we met several families that even now we visit and whose various struggles for survival we have followed. One of the people hardest to forget was Andja.

ODE TO A BUTTERFLY

Andja was born in 1962 in the former Yugoslavian republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. When war broke out in the 1990s, Andja's family fled as refugees to Vojnić, a small town in Croatia. Her husband was mentally scarred from the atrocities of ethnic cleansing and had to be permanently hospitalized, and she found herself struggling to raise their three sons alone while struggling with diabetes and psoriasis. She survived by working the land around her hut and through the aid of humanitarian organizations. And that's how we first met in May 2000.



IRENE, ANDJA AND CHICCA, SUMMER 2004

We became friends and continued to visit for years. In spite of all her difficulties, Andja always received us with a smile. Her enthusiasm for life was so contagious that we eventually started bringing others suffering from depression to her home as therapy. As soon as they'd meet her, they'd feel much better!

In time, Andja decided there must be a way she could help in return, so although we were bringing her aid, she would gather a bag of zucchinis, potatoes, and other vegetables from her garden to "give back to the community."

In 2005, the government gave her family a house and a new plot of land; although unfinished, it was a big step up from the shack they'd lived in for years. She was enthusiastic about what seemed like the beginning of

a better life, but her disease progressed until she lost her sight in one eye. The next year, she also lost sight in the other.

Andja was taken to the hospital on a number of occasions between 2005 and 2012. Her prospects of survival were slim, but her joy and zest for life won the battle, and although she eventually lost both legs, she would still eagerly join in songs and discussions. As one 17-year-old boy put it, “She has the ability to see her cup as half-full, even when it’s practically empty!”

A few months ago, Andja passed on quietly in her sleep; “like a butterfly,” we were told. It was impressive to see the number of people who gathered together for her funeral. After all, she was “only” a simple refugee woman who had lived in that town for a few years, yet obviously she had touched many people’s lives.

Anyone who has had the privilege of meeting Andja cries upon remembering her, but smiles at the same time, because Andja has now become a legend.



BARBARA'S FAMILY, HAPPILY OPENING THE GIFTS
SENT BY FABIO AND SERENA FROM TRENTO

THE ODYSSEY OF A REFUGEE CHILD

We met Barbara in 1998, shortly after the death of her mother, the sole parent she had left. Eleven-year-old Barbara was born in a Bosnian town a few years before the outbreak of the war. When the conflict began, she, together with her father, her mother, and her younger sister were driven out of their home and fled to Vojnić. There, they found an abandoned house where they could live as refugees. After some time, Barbara's father died, shortly followed by her mother, leaving the two daughters to fend for themselves. Barbara eventually moved in with a relative who treated her like his personal little Cinderella.

After a few years of living in Vojnić, where life was so rough that laundry was done by boiling a large pot of water and spinning the clothes with a wooden stick, Barbara was sent to an orphanage in Karlovac. In the following years, the poor girl was tossed about various orphanages, sometimes with and sometimes without her sister.

Thusly she lived her childhood and adolescence, those important years in which a person's character is formed. Barbara has since married and now has three beautiful children. Life always has been and still is difficult for Barbara, but as a mother she is doing her best to give her children the childhood she never had. She still remembers the songs that she first heard during our shows in Vojnić and, reliving the happy and positive emotions that they gave her, she now teaches them to her own kids. Barbara, her three children, her husband, and her mother-in-law live in a house they don't own and which is located in a very isolated area.

The neighboring house has been completely destroyed due to bombardments during the war, and is still a very dangerous place to be around. Although Barbara's husband constantly searches for a steady job, he, like many who live in Croatia's interior, is unemployed other than finding the occasional odd job. Our association often brings their family food, toys, and educational materials; and, through many visits, they have had the opportunity to forge new friendships with various Italian volunteers.



INTERVIEW AFTER THE FIRST SHOW IN VOJNIĆ, NOVEMBER 1998



VISITING ANDJA WITH THE TORELLI FAMILY, JULY 2003



EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR THE SCHOOL IN KRNJAK



AT MARIJAN AND GIURGIA'S HOME, EATING SARMA, A TYPICAL CROATIAN DISH



ANNA AND THE "GRANDPA WITH THE RAKES"



GRANDMA ANKA WAITING FOR OUR ARRIVAL



GREETINGS FROM MILIĆ AND DANICA, THE "MOUNTAIN GRANDPARENTS"

CHAPTER VII



A BRIEF BUT LASTING IMPRESSION OF LOVE

2003 – 2005



NIKOLAY

On May 8, 2005, our small community in Rijeka bore witness to an event that affected us all very deeply—the sudden death of Nikolay, one of our colleagues, right in the middle of a Mother’s Day party at our home in Rubeši.

Erika, one of our journalist friends, wrote the following:

Nikolay was the younger of two brothers. When he was 13 years old, he lost his mother. He loved music, and at 15 years old had already built a drum set from scratch (money was scarce in his family). Not long afterwards, in a school’s storage room he started playing music with a group he had founded with his brother Vesko.

When he was 11, he discovered he was suffering from Marfan’s disease, and was declared an invalid from its effects. Despite that, he studied precision engineering and optics. Upon receiving his degree, he found work as a janitor at Sofia University, and was later employed for a period in an advertising agency.

In 2002, he had a serious crisis and made a vow: he asked the Lord to improve his health so that he could devote his life to helping others. A few months later, Maggie went to see her family in Sofia; on this occasion they met, and she proposed a short visit to Croatia. His “short visit” quickly turned into a permanent stay, and this proved to be a real blessing, due to his experience working in an office, excellent computer knowledge, an innate talent for playing drums, guitar, and bass, and, among other things, master sewing skills. He himself created and put together his clown costume, in which he went to cheer up children, whom he loved dearly.

He knew he was suffering from a serious illness, that death could take him at any moment. But he couldn’t stay in Bulgaria and do nothing; he wanted to give all of himself to the Lord by helping others. During his two-year stay in our home, he went back for a visit to his family, who found him finally fulfilled, content with what he was doing, and happy in the truest sense of the word.

At the moment of his passing, the atmosphere was joyful, and he simply slumped over silently, quietly, in the same way he lived his life: in humility, with no desire to be a burden on anyone, always ready to assist others with a smile on his lips.

He will remain forever in our hearts, with a smile and arms ready to accommodate those who need them.

Thank you for having been with us, Nikolay!



NIKOLAY WAS ALWAYS READY TO DO MUSIC THERAPY





DOING AN ELVIS PRESLEY IMPRESSION

“

*One life that
soon will pass,
only what's
done for love
will last.*

”



A SPECIAL CAKE FOR HIS BIRTHDAY

CHAPTER VIII



BAND, MUSIC, AND DANCE

1994-1996



THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BAND ANOTHER DIMENSION, 1995

As you can imagine, bands and music groups are a dynamic and emotional reality, yet at the same time quite mercurial, in that all it takes is one member leaving for the whole thing to fall apart.

Being part of a band still remains the dream of almost every teenager, and even if the career is short, it's still magical. Our first band, Another Dimension, was formed in 1995 in Prada Alta (Verona), performing with instruments donated by friends. With slight changes in performers, it accompanied us until 1999.



AN EXPANDED ANOTHER DIMENSION, BUSSOLENGO (VERONA), CHRISTMAS 1997

A new group, Hole Truth, was born shortly before dear Nikolay suddenly passed away on May 8, 2005. There were moments of discouragement, understandable sadness, and even hesitation, but the band resumed performing with renewed enthusiasm, starting with a moving performance during Nikolay's memorial service the Sunday following his passing. Jeffrey, only 13 years old, whom Nikolay had taught the first rudiments of the drums, played and sang his "maestro's" favorite song in his honor.

The band performed together with other local and foreign bands on various occasions, some of which included youth gatherings, hospitals, prisons, schools, and clubs.

Hole Truth lasted about four years, and certainly left a mark in the lives of many young people whom we occasionally meet up with and who remember it with nostalgia.



THE BAND HOLE TRUTH

Music has always played an important role in our activities. As soon as one enters our living room he cannot help but notice the row of guitars and various other musical instruments. Even the simple song “Tu puoi essere felice—Svatko može biti sretan—Everybody can be happy” has remained in the heart of anyone who’s visited our house or attended one of our activities. With guitars on our backs, we go to refugee camps, to visit the needy, to make the kids laugh, to bring hope to the prisoners. There’s a saying here in Croatia: “Tko pjeva zlo ne misli—He who sings does not think evil.” In other words, as long as you’re singing you can’t feel bad or do bad things.

Music definitely has a healing power for the soul—we’ve seen it with our own eyes.



THE BAND HOLE TRUTH



PAOLO, WITH THE EVER-PRESENT GUITAR ON HIS SHOULDERS, 1998



CHRISTMAS SHOW ON THE MAIN WALKING STREET OF RIJEKA, 1999



SOMETIMES ONLY A TRIO—ANNA, LAURA, AND MICHAEL



SINGING A CAPPELLA, SUMMER 2016



ONE OF THE MANY GUITARS IN OUR LIVING ROOM

CHAPTER IX



THE GAZA OF KARLOVAC



GAZA REFUGEE CAMP, DISTRIBUTING AID, SUMMER 2003

The first refugee camp we visited in May of 1995 at Zelarino, near Venice, was a disturbing experience, to say the least. There was a palpable feeling of trauma, pain, uneasiness, insecurity, and above all else, anger and fear. In their continual struggle for survival, some refugees were desperate for any aid and tried to take as much as they could from us. Others simply stood shyly on the sidelines. Some kept their pitiful huts in as pristine condition as they could manage, while others didn't care enough for cleanliness and wallowed in filth. We later visited other refugee camps near Ljubljana, Rijeka, and in Bosnia. It was, however, the Karlovac refugee camp that created a lasting impression, even if the dynamics were pretty much the same as in the other places. In existence since 1993, the conglomeration of shacks, curiously called Gaza (named after the neighborhood it was located in), was a frequent destination for our volunteers during various camps, either under the torrid heat of Croatian summers or immersed in the winter snow, until 2008 when it was finally closed down.



REFUGEE CAMP IN WINTER

During the war, it housed up to 2,500 people and was also bombed several times, forcing people to temporarily take shelter in the cellars of neighboring buildings. In the year 2000, the number of inhabitants dropped to about 800, and included a numerous amount of children whom we entertained with games, clown therapy, and more.



ALWAYS WITH CHILDREN IN TOW, SUMMER 2003

We distributed there several tons of food, clothing, and other basic necessities several times, but the most valuable contribution we were asked to bring was encouragement and true friendship. We're still in touch with some of the families, such as Josip and Marija, Pero and Maja, Ivica and Ankica, Marko and Verica, and "Grandpa" Franjo, who now live nearby, and for the most part have managed to rebuild their lives.

The sight of those greenish shacks and their broken, humble inhabitants will forever remain in the hearts of all who have witnessed it.



THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF MUSIC



VISITING "GRANDMA" RUŽA



WITH THE SCOUT GROUP FROM TRAVAGLIATO (BRESCIA), SUMMER 2006



COMFORTING ONE OF THE MANY ELDERLY IN THE REFUGEE CAMP, SUMMER 2005



ART WORKSHOPS WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS



ANDREA AND THE GAZA CHILDREN, SUMMER 2004



WITH MAJA, WHO WHEN SHE WAS SMALL WAS OUR GUIDE AND MASCOT



THE CAMP MAY BE NO MORE, BUT WE ARE FRIENDS FOR LIFE
—AT PERO AND MAJA'S HOUSE



VISITING FRANJO

CHAPTER X



FRIENDSHIP BEYOND BORDERS

Rovereto-JEN-Koraci



MARILENA, LIDIJA, ANNA, AND FERRUCCIO

Let's go back to the Christmas of 1994. One of our many Christmas shows, then performed with a large group of teenagers and children (including mine), took place in the historic retirement home on Vannetti Street, in Rovereto (Trento). For whatever reason, but I would say especially for the seriousness and enthusiasm with which Ferruccio and Marilena carried out their work as entertainment coordinators, this began a partnership made up of further visits and meetings.



FIRST SHOW IN 1994

At the end of 1997, when Paolo moved to Rijeka, out came the wonderful idea of putting some of Rovereto's elderly in communication with refugee women who frequented Lidija's Center JEN. What could they possibly have in common? Having lived through the tragedies of war—not the same one, but with similar dynamics nonetheless. With Paolo serving as translator, a regular correspondence began which resulted in a three-day event during May of 2001, when we visited Rovereto with two vans loaded with refugee women, some elderly, who frequented Center JEN.

It was an initiative that received a lot of attention from the local media, with the participation of the mayor and other authorities, all sponsored by the municipality and local bank. There were many emotional moments, such as when we brought our group to visit the Maria Dolens, also known as the Bell of the Fallen. (Located in Rovereto, the bell is rung in remembrance

of the fallen soldiers of every war. Cast with bronze from cannons donated by the nations involved in World War I, it is the largest bell in the world to sound at full peal. Every evening at nightfall, its 100 tolls are a call to world peace.)

It was dark when the bell started to toll, and one could see tears streaming down the faces of these women refugees who had recently experienced the drama of war. Then, there was a meeting where all those present signed a petition for peace that was sent to Amnesty International. After that...there were great dinners with Alpini friends!



SISTER FERNANDA AND MICHAEL, ALPINI FOR A DAY

Another trip was made in May 2003, and yet another in 2007. A noteworthy “counter-visit” occurred in 2008, when Ferruccio, Marilena, Father Samuel, and Sister Giuseppina attended the Domosong, a kind of singing competition in which all the homes for the mentally ill in Croatia participate, and that year was being held at Dom Turnić in Rijeka.

A special mention goes also to Romolo, one of the many residents of the retirement home in Rovereto. With an operation on his vocal cords having taken away his ability to speak, you would think that the only way we communicated with each other was by means of pen and paper. And you would be wrong! Romolo communicated mainly with a smile and the

universal language of love. His interest in children and those who suffered pushed him many times to collect toys and other useful things that he so lovingly sent to us, which we then distributed.



JEFFREY AND ROMOLO, BEST FRIENDS

Memorable also were the “Wednesday meetings,” many of which we attended while in Italy, bringing greetings and gifts from Lidija and her women. These meetings were made up of about twenty seniors, with whom Ferruccio, who was leading these events, would select a particular topic of discussion. They discussed issues such as peace and injustice, and Ferruccio knew how to pull out—as if by magic—the thoughts and feelings of those attending, which he would then write out on the whiteboard. Finally, there was the customary letter which everyone signed and that we would then bring back to friends in Rijeka.

For four consecutive years, there were also handcrafts and ceramics workshops organized by Lidija (I was the translator) for guests and personnel of Rovereto’s Day Center.

Ferruccio has finally retired; Romolo, Father Samuel, and many of the elderly have passed on to the “Great Beyond,” but the experiment and the experience remains in the hearts of us all. The friendship continues, though in a different way, and every Christmas we go back to cheer up the senior citizens with a new show.

TESTIMONY OF A JOURNEY

Ferruccio Andreatta

I've often wondered why the meeting between the entertainment department of the retirement home in Rovereto and the association For a Better World has led to a cooperation that lasted all these years and is still important.

- Firstly, because what started out as an occasional entertainment activity swiftly developed into a project of connecting people. It, in fact, created an atmosphere wherein the senior citizens were eager to get involved with and make possible the meeting between them and women refugees from Bosnia, living in Rijeka, who frequented the Koraci center. These groups met up and exchanged their personal experiences, which helped our group to:
 - ▶ relive the memories and tragedies of their war and, simultaneously, to see that there are people who were worse off than them.
 - ▶ allow them to help, not with donations, but with a note, a photo, a video, a letter, or a testimony. As such, our senior citizens have felt important because they can still be useful and simultaneously offer an opportunity for hope and friendship.
- This chance encounter has become consolidated over time, because it brought into play feelings of emotion. Our seniors have cried, smiled, rejoiced, and suffered while listening to the refugees' life stories; they were compassionate when they heard about Marica's son's accident; they looked forward to reports of visits to Rijeka in which Father Samuel and other volunteers were involved. Neither language, nor distance, nor religion was any obstacle they didn't overcome. Significant were the prolonged and interminable conversations between Lidija's English and the dialect of our seniors.
- The history of these twenty years of experience coincides with the growth of the entertainment service in the retirement home.

No individual activities and initiatives, but rather social promotion projects. As experiences and friendships increased, so grew in us the consciousness of having to build solidarity networks which would outlast the passing years and unfortunately fragile memories of our senior citizens. For this reason, we have mutually tried to manage the social dynamics that events of this type were engendering. The once-simple meetings between our seniors and the Bosnian women have transformed into meetings among

- ▶ the retirement home, the Day Center, the municipality of Rovereto, the Roveretan associations (Alpine ANA, the Rural banks, parishes, etc.), the entertainment services of other retirement homes from Trentino
- ▶ the association For a Better World, the Koraci center, Dom Turnić, and in time even the elderly from Mataruska Banja in Kraljevo (Serbia).

A project is valid if it has clear objectives, and if it operates with traceable methodology; but especially if it continues to grow, to develop dynamics and produce constant changes in people and a concern for the social environment. Perhaps the experience of the association For a Better World and the retirement home's entertainment service are similar because they developed similarly, grew together, and over time were completely structured. They are two parallel stories of development and maturing, composed of reflection, hard work, and suffering combined with courageous decisions, enthusiasm, and, why not, a healthy dash of madness.

These two groups, the entertainment service and the association, will be still united in the future because both still have

- ▶ the need to reflect and focus on new challenges,
- ▶ the need to refine objectives,
- ▶ the need to explore the elements that form cohesiveness between the groups in the belief that a lot more work is required in the construction of a bridge between different worlds where everyone gives and everyone receives, combining the needs and the responses, providing new and significant opportunities in the construction of a truly better world..



FIRST SOLIDARITY TRIP TO ROVERETO, MAY 2001



ITALIAN LESSONS IN KORACI CENTER IN PREPARATION FOR THE SECOND TRIP,
IN 2003



SECOND SOLIDARITY TRIP, MAY 2003



THIRD SOLIDARITY TRIP, MAY 2007



THE MEMORABLE WEDNESDAY MEETINGS



WORKSHOPS AT THE DAY CENTER, SEPTEMBER 2008



ANOTHER WORKSHOP IN 2011



CHRISTMAS 2015, PERFORMING EVERY YEAR SINCE 1994 ON THE SAME STAGE

CHAPTER XI



BEGINNING OF PROJECT 8 DAYS



FIRST CAMP WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MOLINA DI FUMANE (VERONA), SUMMER 2001

A question people often ask us is, how did the first summer camps (hereinafter becoming part of Project 8 Days) come to be? Since 1998, when we moved into the house in Rubeši, during the summer we offered to the children of friends the opportunity to spend a few days with us, to do volunteer work, and to get away from the usual routine of Italian holidays. However, no official system really existed until the spring of 2001, when our friends in Molina of Fumane (Verona), led by Michela Bacilieri, enthusiastically suggested the idea of organizing a weeklong summer camp for the village's youth.

Thus, very naively and with a good dose of reckless enthusiasm, in July we drove our van to pick up the village "youngsters," whose ages we discovered to range from 12 to 15. They were joined by Paolo, another fifteen-year-old from Mori (Trento).



FIRST CAMP: WORKSHOP HELD BY LIDIJA, SUMMER 2001

This time, we had the week organized down to the last detail, including a trip and an overnight stay in the Gaza refugee camp in Karlovac.

Other activities included the following: visits to needy families in Rijeka, art workshops in Koraci under Lidija's watchful eye, murals, clown therapy,

and some swimming in the beautiful Kvarner Bay. The night swim was a rousing success!

At the end of the experience, we handed each of the kids a videotape to remember it by; though honestly, despite the efforts made, they hadn't seemed to enjoy the experience much—perhaps because of their young age, perhaps because of our inexperience; either way, we had no intention of repeating the initiative the following year! But Michela and the other parents begged us to offer them another chance; consequently, there was a second camp, with a similar structure to the first, but generally less demanding.

In 2003 came the big breakthrough: in May, Michela invited us to participate in a television program on Telepace, leading us to the epic encounter with Father Raffa—a Stigmatine Veronese songwriter with whom we felt an immediately affinity—while he was there waiting to be interviewed. Before leaving us, Father Raffa asked if he could visit us that summer with "a few" of his young people. We thought, Why not?

In the end, in August 2003, with numbers oscillating between 25 and 29 (thanks to organization "a la Raffa"), we all experienced the unforgettable wonders a true summer camp can produce. These young people were all older, highly motivated, musically talented, and people-oriented, and the days spent together were nothing short of an explosion of love and joy that made a lasting impression on all who came, many of whom are still in touch



and who participated in the following camps and other initiatives.

The “Molina Camp” went on for 10 years in a row with increasing participation, because yes, the “little women” grew up and constantly amazed us by inviting friends, going to volunteer in Africa and Argentina, and overcoming life’s challenges. The last occurred a few weeks ago when Michela, who is also the mother of four of these young people, suddenly passed away. In her memory I wrote the following:

“I remember well my first meeting with Michela. It was in Fumane (Verona), in the summer of 1997, when a friend introduced us. After introductions were made, she said, ‘I have four children, but I also want to volunteer.’ She had, in essence, found the right person who could understand her desire, as I was also a mother of several children, but nonetheless completely immersed in volunteering for many years. Thus began our friendship/partnership with Michela and the magical village of Molina di Fumane, punctuated by many meetings, visits, regular shows every Christmas in the legendary theater, and, for many years, cherry collecting.

“In 2001, Michela first proposed the idea that some of her children, and other kids of Molina, could spend a week volunteering with us in Croatia. Accordingly began Project 8 Days, in which hundreds of young people have since participated, and still participate, in our volunteer camps in Croatia and Bosnia.



“Michela was always proposing new ideas—the last, a year ago, was to paint our What Everybody Needs Is Love Mural in Molina, with the young people and children of the village. Every so often she would phone me, bringing me up to date on the conditions of various inevitable sicknesses in her village, or to propose some new ideas for the young people. Despite the many

challenges and disappointments, her heart was always open to others, interested in giving and cultivating contacts and friendships with all the volunteers from our association she’d met over the years, as well as with

the various needy situations in which our projects are involved.

“Now that Michela has passed on, in addition to missing her and praying for her loved ones, I think we are called to follow her example of faith and love, as well as continuing to realize at least some of her dreams.

“Thank you, Michela, for everything you have brought into our lives, and for always putting first the needs of others and the eternal values.”

For some years, we’ve had an average of six summer camps, as well as one in winter and one in spring, in addition to a large number of people that come during the rest of the year to visit for a few days, to see firsthand what it means to be a volunteer, to experience communal living, and to comprehend invaluable life lessons. There have been Scout Groups, clown groups, different church groups, and people who were simply interested in what we do. For three years now, we have also organized international camps with participants coming from various European countries; we also host an annual camp for the volunteers of Srce puno osmjeha, the association in Sarajevo with whom we’ve worked for years.

“

*Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch
which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to
make
it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on
to future generations.*

—G. B. Shaw

”

“Many other associations may achieve greater things, or at least they tell you they do (whether by videos or photos or other means), but you give us young people the opportunity to experience it for ourselves, to personally make contact with those in need, through the simple language of love. You make volunteering accessible to everyone, even to us teenagers, who hardly ever have a chance to experience such things.” (Samuele)

“I’m so sorry, but this summer my going to Croatia was just impossible, and I won’t be able to make it in September either because I’m leaving on October 1. I’ll be staying three months in Brazil and another six in Peru, always in a volunteer capacity. For this I wanted to thank you, for I am sure that in a large part I owe my decision to do so to my wonderful experiences in Croatia, and I hope to carry on your example and pass on to others, at least in part, all that you have given me. I hope to see you in person at the Volunteer Festival in Verona! See you soon, a big hug to everyone.” (Laura)

“The people I met, the words exchanged, the cringe-worthy moments, the fatigue, and the small sacrifices that I have made have all rewarded me with a huge gift: they revealed to me one of the most important aspects of happiness, that ‘secret ingredient’ which, after it’s been revealed, you finally understand why it tasted so good.

“Thank you, because in giving of myself I didn’t return home half spent, but rather full to overflowing.

“Thank you, because beauty and love are things you can’t explain in words, and yet you showed them to me with your every gesture.

“Gestures that I, certainly, will not easily forget.” (Anna)

An SMS from Italy: “We’ve arrived home safe and sound, but as of yet I haven’t returned. I left behind a piece of my heart. If you find it, keep it well, and give it to those in need. A big hug. Thanks again.” (Luca)

“Although you’re so different from me...thank you so much for welcoming us in your family, and for letting us get to know an aspect of

this country that we never would have seen if we had been on holiday.” (Stefania, Clown Tibi)

“Hello, brothers and sisters, it was a wonderful holiday—one of the most beautiful I’ve ever experienced. You have left an indelible mark on me. You are amazing people, and you have introduced us to so many special people. Keep up the good work, and the harmony that you give to everyone who passes through.” (Francesca, Clown Frana)

“This is our eighth year coming here, and as always, when it’s time to leave, the tears never stop.” (Elena and Chiara)

“Hello, and congratulations to all of you for what you’re doing in this world. Thank you that every day you respond to the needs of the poor, and give a sense of purpose and meaning to your—and a bit even to our—existence. In a not-so-famous film, it was stated that ‘evil triumphs when good men do nothing.’ Don’t ever change! Best wishes and good luck. Safe travels, the Scouts from Edolo.” (Lorenzo)

“We’re all good here, though it’s been difficult to return to a normal routine after having such an intense experience! Thank you again for everything you’ve given me—I hope to convey to others here the emotions and enthusiasm that you passed on to me, and to return soon to work and smile with you! A big hug to you all!” (Gloria)

“This experience, as well as others that I’ve had, will forever remain in my heart. I was happy to come back and participate for a week during the summer, in particular in Eastern Europe, a land that I love very much, but one which is often forgotten, despised, and unknown. Difficulty thrives there; but at the same time, it is rich in resources, and its people are so welcoming, generous, living through their grief with great dignity, offering everything they have without murmur or complaint.

“The people I have known, their stoic faces, and the great strength of will they transmitted to me are what will help me face the new year, when I will have to make important choices in my personal and professional life.” (Giovanni)

“Years ago, we came to Croatia as young newlyweds; this year, we accepted the challenge to return with our kids.

“Who are we? Two families, one from Verona: Federico, myself, and our two children Lorenzo and Jacopo; and one from Varese: Michele, Patrizia, and their two daughters Matilde and Agata.

“We are a family of clowns. For me, wearing the red nose is my life; and my mission, to varying extents, is the same as that short time we spent in Croatia.

“I was very excited to be back in that house, and this time with the kids! It’s like a breath of fresh air: refreshing, pure, relaxing—and you feel as if you’ve arrived home.

“It was a short stay, but nonetheless full of the feelings we wanted to experience; that sense of oneness, of gratitude, of the joy of being together. We called it a Family Clown Camp; it was a wonderful opportunity to pull out our magic wand, soap bubbles, and magic. But the most beautiful magic was experiencing people’s lives, eating, sharing, smiling, admiring the sea, and admiring the hearts of people—Andja’s courage and wonderful smile, Lidija’s enthusiasm, Marina’s energy, Maggie’s kindness, Elvis’s refreshing youth. Also Maria and Giuseppe, Barbara and her mother-in-law, the children, the granny who brought us eggs...how can you not get excited in the face of all this?

“We were able to be with these people and make tangible to our children their stories with few words. We got to be clowns in the best sense of the word without needing to put on a big show; indeed, I was the spectator when I looked into my children’s eyes and saw how much they were enjoying themselves.

“I recommend this experience to any family. Don’t even think twice about it. Sometimes, we adults make an unnecessary fuss about everything, while our children are masters at and ready, at any age, to have a heartfelt experience seeing life through love.” (Silvia, Clown Pistacchio)

“In Vojnić, I was shocked by the conditions in which the people we visited were living. No running water, little food, and houses that were falling apart, all because of the war. I’ve always hated what war does to innocent people, but I hated it even more after seeing its consequences in person. However, despite everything, the people smiled and were content,

and I wondered why I ever thought I had cause to complain...

“The many things that we take for granted are non-existent for them, but simply visiting them and listening to their stories always brighten their day.” (Alexis)

“Visiting the homes in Vojnić opens your eyes to a different reality from the beaches and luxury hotels—the other side of the coin—but they are also an opportunity to bring help and joy to families in difficulty because of the war.

“Many families and many elderly people living alone in poverty receive from us essentials such as flour and sugar, with which they can prepare a multitude of dishes; sometimes we even provide them with financial assistance, such as money to pay for wood for the winter. But what the locals truly need is human kindness, to not feel forgotten, to know that they have someone they can count on. And this they convey to you with answering smiles, food, and homemade gifts. No one ever returns empty-handed!” (Eli)



THE CLOWN SUMMER CAMP IN 2005, IN KARLOVAC'S REFUGEE CAMP



CAMP FOR SCOUTS FROM GARDONE VAL TROMPIA, 2004



THE WAR MUSEUM, 2004

CLOWN SUMMER CAMP, 2005



IN THE GAZA REFUGEE CAMP, 2005











WHAT GOOD CORN FROM SISAK! SUMMER 2009



A PRAYER FOR PEACE WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM CLOZ (TRENTO),
SUMMER 2010









PRACTICING FOR THE FLASH MOB DANCE, SUMMER 2013



INTERNATIONAL CAMP YOUTH COMPASS, APRIL 2014



CHAPTER XII



COLORING THE WORLD



In 1996, the first What Everybody Needs Is Love Mural was painted on a wall in East Mostar. In 1997, Paolo, Stefano, Marco, and other volunteers also tried to paint it on the former front lines, but the initiative ended badly; the police interrupted the work and, after retaining their documents for one night, forcibly escorted the volunteers out of the country. Obviously it was still a too dangerous message for those times.

There was no more talk of murals until 2000, when we had a visit from Don Flavio who, having seen the mural in Mostar, invited us to paint it again in his youth center in Violino Village in Brescia. So, the first week of September 2001, under the leadership of the only artist around at that time—my son Mark—we painted our first mural in Italy.



MARK AND JONATHAN, PAINTING OUR FIRST MURAL IN ITALY
(VIOLINO VILLAGE, BRESCIA, SEPTEMBER 2001)

The event cemented an ongoing collaboration with many friends from Violino Village, especially Massimiliano, who has since graciously hosted so many of our volunteers and opened his house and his life to many initiatives.

That first mural was so much more than a brush stroke on the wall, in that it was a harbinger of meetings with young people and local families.

We soon realized just how valuable a mural could be, as something created together which lasts and binds us beyond time and distance, a souvenir and a visible testimony to all. Following the murals, there were other initiatives of solidarity, such as the handicraft workshops from 2 - 6 September 2002, conducted by Danijela and Irena, volunteers of Koraci Center who, with our help and translation skills, worked with about forty children from the neighborhood, and also shared their stories during the evening meetings. Irena told the dramatic tale of the years she lived during the war, including the siege of Sarajevo and the daring escape through a tunnel under the airport runway.



THE FIRST MURAL PAINTED IN MOSTAR IN 1996, PHOTO TAKEN IN 2000

Even today, this mural is our favorite one to do; it's our personal symbol, nicknamed "The heart that travels the globe," and it conveys a message of peace, tolerance, and love for humanity. To date, we've painted over sixty of these in Italy, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Ukraine, and South Africa, as well as in other youth centers to which we were invited: in 2004, the youth center in Forette di Vigasio (Verona); in 2005, the youth center in Gardone Val Trompia (Brescia); in 2008, the S. Antonio youth centers of Trento, Cloz,

and Val di Non; and in 2013, the youth center in Mezzolombardo (Trento). These murals almost always inevitably occurred during the summer camps, and were attended not just by the camp participants, but also by other volunteers.

In addition to the What Everybody Needs Is Love Mural, for a long time now we've also painted other themes in hospitals, orphanages, and centers for the disabled, bringing a touch of color and life to them. It encouraged us when a patient, confined to a room where we had painted a picture with happy children, told the nurse that he no longer felt alone because those children were smiling at him!

For some years, we've also committed ourselves to renovating the Rijeka kindergartens which have unfortunately to this day been covered in obscene graffiti and racist writings dating back even to the war years.

At the initiative of the Center for Volunteer Service, since 2011 there has been an ongoing project with students from Verona, through which we've had meetings, workshops, and murals in over twenty schools, ranging from nurseries to high schools. The novelty of this initiative is that the school children paint the mural with us. Class after class, they come to paint with us and feel accomplishment in their participation. "I painted that ray!" we hear them exclaim to their parents with pride.



LIDIJA AND HER GROUP VISITING WITH FRIENDS FROM VIOLINO VILLAGE (BRESCIA)

OUR TALLEST MURAL, JUNE 2005, IN GARDONE VAL TROMPIA (BRESCIA)



A DAY IN A BETTER WORLD

The other day we painted a mural which united us with more than forty schools, making us one big family. We met Paolo, Serena, and Anna. At nineteen, Paolo went to the former Yugoslavia after the war to help the needy. Anna, who has six children, spent her life volunteering and passed on her passion to her children. They showed us the video where one can see the young people who participated in the Project 8 Days, during which they did smile therapy and free hugs. I hope that when I'm older I can do it too. There is no age limit to volunteering and giving smiles. Children, teenagers, and adults alike can all participate. Even though people were poor or sick, they were able to smile thanks to you; you gifted them with a smile that will never fade away. For me, doing the mural, watching those videos, and talking with you made me want to be like you. Thank you for all that you do with a simple smile. YOU ARE THE BEST!

Cristina



SECOND MURAL IN ITALY, IN FORETTE DI VIGASIO (VERONA), MARCH 2004

FIRST MURAL IN ITALY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2001, VIOLINO VILLAGE (BRESCIA)



“On Monday, my classmates had the opportunity to paint an amazing mural with the volunteers of For a Better World. The mural is a heart encircling the globe and surrounded by children of all nations—a world full of generosity, meaning also that we should help those in need, regardless of race or color. Thus, we are a big family where there is love.” (Giada)

THE OFFICIAL PLAQUE

UN DISEGNO DI PACE
DA MOSTAR AL VIOLINO
30/08/2001 02/09/2001

COPIA DI UN MURALE
REALIZZATO A MOSTAR DA
ALCUNI VOLONTARI COME
SEGNO DI AMORE IN UNA
CITTÀ FORTEMENTE SEGHIATA
DALLA GUERRA





APRIL 2010, RENOVATING THE FIRST MURAL IN MOSTAR



DANTE ALIGHIERI SCHOOL IN VILLAFRANCA (VERONA)



SARAJEVO, SUMMER 2012



FOR THE CHILDREN IN KANTRIDA HOSPITAL IN RIJEKA, JANUARY 2005





DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES—WET PAINT DRIED WITH A HAIRDRYER! SARAJEVO, OCTOBER 2015

REDISCOVERING A PASSION FOR PAINTING

One of the first gifts I remember receiving was a box of watercolors. After came the oil paints, easel, and canvas. I remember my first “masterpiece”—I painted it at eleven years old during summer holiday in the mountains. It took me a few days and the result was nothing impressive, but the feeling of satisfaction was immense.

My subsequent teen years were a tumult of hobbies, art, music, politics, and the like. Then, I got married and started traveling. It was inconvenient to bring along a box of oil paints, and anyway, who had time to paint? The last canvas I painted was of a sunset in Sicily, when I was pregnant with my first child.

Then nothing for many years.

When my children were small, I encouraged them to draw; my son Mark showed a special inclination towards art and became a graphics illustrator. He often asked me, “Mom, why don’t you start drawing and painting again?”

Once, during one of his visits, he asked me if I could paint something for him, and I ended up agreeing. Mind you, it was as if centuries had passed since that last sunset in Sicily—I was very rusty! I could barely use the brush, and it took me a while to remember the simplest shading techniques.

I finished the painting, mainly to please my son, and thought I would retire my paints, but only a couple of months later some friends asked me to help them paint a large mural six meters by eight. It was a real undertaking, and in addition, I had to work standing on an arm lift! The reaction, however, was encouraging, and that proved to be the beginning of a new hobby: painting murals in schools, hospitals, youth centers, and private homes.

I now enjoy transforming any gray place into a blaze of colors and playful designs. One time in a hospital, an elderly patient told me that since those happy children on the wall in front of his bed “continued to smile at him,” he no longer felt so alone! Those “happy children” were creations of our brushes.

I believe everyone has some hidden passion buried deep within them, waiting to be awakened. Seeing people’s reactions when their surroundings are transformed has awakened my old passion for art, and now my paints are always ready for that next gray wall.

CHAPTER XIII



CLOWNS, SMILES, AND VENTRILOQUISTS



ANNA FROM TRAVAGLIATO (BRESCIA), SUMMER 2006

As early as 1995, Michael and volunteers, while in the various refugee camps in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, experimented with the power of a smile, dressing up as clowns to entertain children and adults traumatized by the horrors of war. At the time the term “clown therapy” hadn’t been coined yet, but the concept was. It was born in a situation of extreme need—and it worked! The joy, the merriment, and the lightheartedness that our clown volunteers brought to these places of chaos and pain can never be quantified, but they certainly performed a vital task.

One day, in 2000, Rijeka’s only cinema showed the movie *Patch Adams*, and we decided to go see it. We were moved to tears, and not only for the moving story, but also for the protagonist, an exceptional person who has not ceased to carry on his message, and especially for the validation and the push it gave us to better organize clown therapy projects with our volunteers.

Here are some of our first milestones, along with many others we don’t have enough space to list:



ONE OF OUR EARLIER CLOWN GROUPS, 2002

- **October 2003:** The project officially begins
- **March 1, 2004:** Conference “You Can Give More” in the theater of the Italian community in Rijeka
- **March 31, 2006:** Seminar on clown therapy for the Italian community in Rijeka
- **20 - 21 February 2007:** Two-day Clown Therapy seminar, sponsored by and with the participation of the clown group “Risvegliati” from Brescia, at Koraci Center in Rijeka.

Since then, we organize an official Clown Therapy seminar almost every year, in addition to countless courses and meetings



CLOWN THERAPY SEMINAR IN COLLABORATION
WITH THE CLOWN GROUP FROM BRESCIA

in both Italian and Croatian schools, where clown therapy services are a regular occurrence involving local volunteers, some of whom, such as Mama Marina and Rudi Clown (Elvis), have become real professionals. Clown therapy has become an integral part of all our camps, summer or no, and continues to provide physical and moral well-being for children, patients, elderly, disabled, and the volunteers who do it!

In recent years, we have broadened the term, and the project is now known as Smile Therapy; it also includes such initiatives as Free Hugs, Tony & Friends shows—involving ventriloquism, magic tricks, songs, and skits—and simple visits to various places full of hardship.

Currently, Michael and Mama Marina perform regular clown therapy services with a good number of local young volunteers.





HAPPY CLOWNS, 1999



MALI LOŠINJ, OCTOBER 2002

ALEXIS, WITH ANDREA,
STARTING CLOWN THERAPY
EARLY, CHRISTMAS 2003



THE FOURTH WISEMAN,
CHRISTMAS 2004





VILLA SERENA, BARDOLINO, CHRISTMAS 2008



CLOWN THERAPY AT AGAPE CENTER IN CAPRIOLO (BRESCIA), SUMMER 2008

SERGIO, MAMA MARINA, AND GIANNI IN DOM TURNIĆ



FREE HUGS



DOM TURNIĆ, SUMMER 2014



CHRISTMAS 2015

Elda: “The clown therapy surprised me a lot; I didn’t believe it could be so beautiful. You realize how with what little you have, you can still make a person happy. When we arrived at the retirement home, we started singing and making people laugh. They told us their stories, and it was very emotional, especially the story of a man who after an accident went into a coma and lost the use of his right hand.

Those people were very excited to have us there, and it’s nice to know that even with so little, you can still do so much good for others.”

Veronica: “This experience made me realize that, as the Famiglia Cuore (Heart Family) told us, when you go to spend time with these elderly people, you think you’re the one who brings something to them; but at the end of the day, you realize that it is they who have given you something special and a beautiful memory to keep in your heart.”

“

*If you, in the journey of life, have lit a single
candle in someone else’s darkest hour,
you have not lived in vain.*

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta

”

Alexis: “During my first experience, I was so nervous and not very keen on the idea of doing a clown show. I wondered if I would end up being more of a hindrance than a help. My fears soon vanished, however. I greatly enjoyed seeing the old people smile. I always forget it’s the little things that make people happy. In bringing them joy, I brought joy to myself also.”

Simone: “Another activity we participate in is the clown therapy, founded by Patch Adams, a doctor from West Virginia. It’s a therapy that brightens the mood of all those people who are suffering from serious diseases, and thus prevents them from thinking about the pain they’re feeling. Joy is an inexhaustible source of good health.”

CHAPTER XIV



THE BOSNIAN FEVER



CAFFÈ TURCO, TIPICO IN BOSNIA

There is an “African fever” and there is also a “Bosnian fever.” Simply put, if you’ve been to Bosnia even once, you’ll find remaining inside yourself something indelible of the land and its welcoming, humble, suffering people. This something grows into a nostalgia that, sooner or later, forces you to come back.

It happened to us and to many other Italian volunteers during the humanitarian crisis of the nineties. Even now, they return to find the families they met during that time; or they just travel there to enjoy Bosnia’s natural beauty, a good Turkish coffee, *ćevapčići*, *baklava*, *pita* in all its variety, and maybe even a *hurmašica* if the stomach can handle it.

In these parts, Italians have an excellent reputation. They brought not only humanitarian aid but also happiness, humanness, and affection, important ingredients for the recovery of soul and spirit.

Even we, after some years of separation spent focusing our efforts on providing help in the Krajina region around Vojnić and Krnjak, were once more drawn to Bosnia’s call.

In February 2005, I began helping out as a consultant for Srce puno



GRUDE'S REFUGEE CAMP, SEPTEMBER 2000

osmjeha, an NGO in Sarajevo. I'll never forget that first long bus ride from Rijeka to Sarajevo. Apart from the huge amount of snow that had covered sections of road, endless rows of burned-down houses and villages still in ruins provided me with a clear picture of a Bosnia still wounded and in need of help. While I was visiting the volunteers from Srce puno osmjeha, Paolo and Stefano went to visit the families in Mostar with whom they lived during the war—Alija and Fatima first, then the legendary Safet (blinded in a mine explosion), Muha, Nermin and family, and many others.



ONE OF OUR MANY VISITS WITH SAFET, APRIL 2009

Also legendary was the meeting with Semir, whom no one remembered, but when he learned that Stefano and Paolo were in town, he invited us to his house for an incredible dinner. “I know you brought packages of food to my family while I was fighting in the front lines, so I’m in debt to you, and this is a small way of thanking you.” We would later return to his home many times—once even with eighteen people!

In 2010, we decided to renovate that famous first mural in Mostar, which was a bit faded and ruined. A man who lived right in front of it told

us that he had protected the mural all these years because it was a symbol that encouraged reconciliation of the city.

It was in this manner, bringing groups of youths who attended our summer camps, or accompanying groups of adults interested in knowing Bosnia more deeply, that in the last ten years we've made several trips to Bihać, Bosanska Krupa, Mostar, Sarajevo, and Srebrenica.



SEMIR'S HOUSE, SUMMER 2013

This is my third experience here that has once again filled my heart with joy! Thank you for helping us discover Bosnia, a country that still bears the visible wounds of war but is trying so hard to get back on its feet. The welcoming warmth of the Bosnian people will remain forever in our hearts—those who would quite literally enlarge their walls in order to make room for all their guests, who wear gleaming smiles despite their difficulties. And then there is Safet's precious testimony, a real-life example of not carrying grudges, to always look ahead with courage. (Mary)



PAOLO IN SOME FRIENDS' "LOUNGE" NEAR MOSTAR



CLOWN SHOW AT RETIREMENT HOME NAHOREVO IN SARAJEVO, MAY 2014



AFTER SREBRENICA

Ferruccio (Rovereto, Italy): Social changes take place over time, provided that concrete actions are made that produce them—actions which are tangible and shared with as many as possible.

The reasons why it made sense for us to go to Srebrenica and paint a series of murals were:

- People stopped and asked questions out of curiosity;
- The children and students surrounded us, wanting to paint with us and have their photos taken;
- The moms, teachers, and professors supported us;
- The school administrators were enthusiastic and invited us to return;
- Three local newspapers interviewed us and reported on our initiative;
- A local radio station reported live on the event;
- The municipal government leaders vied for setting up scaffolding and gave us technical support;
- The head of the local union joined us and made himself at our disposal;
- Other young people engaged in reconstruction efforts spoke and dined with us.

– In a few days, we painted about 200 square meters of murals. Even after twenty years, Srebrenica still bears the marks of a war that has left homes gutted by the impact of bullets and mortar still fresh in the houses; rubble is still visible; Srebrenica's center is still destroyed—everything points to its tragic past. However, the new colors and messages of peace are certainly visible signs that it could change for the better. The walls of a newly painted school bring hope in an environment still too gray and sad.

Having met Senad, a survivor of the July 1995 massacre, who hosted us for free:

- The fact that he has returned to Potočari to rebuild his home
- and start an agricultural activity with both Serb and Muslim manpower is a confirmation that things are changing.

In talking with people, you discover that they do not want war, that

they can rise to the occasion and overcome conflicts even before the institutions do. They just need to not feel alone and to have the support of other like-minded people regardless of nationality, in order to resurrect hope and give rise to the changes they all long for, are waiting for, and that it's about time for.

For this reason, a mural is an indicator of change.



Stefano (Saronno, Italy): The importance of doing murals in Srebrenica and Potočari—as well as having sparked the enthusiasm of people, children, parents, and who knows whom else—was a sign to locals that together we can rebuild, regardless of religion, race, and ethnicity. (Obviously without forgetting what has happened; because the memory must remain fresh in our minds in order that other massacres may not occur.)



SREBRENICA GENOCIDE MEMORIAL, OCTOBER 2015

Anna (Rijeka, Croatia): I've been painting murals for many years now, and I am aware of the magic they bring to even the most squalid places. We passed through Srebrenica and Potočari last October, and ate a sandwich in a pekara (bakery) right in front of Potočari's school. Seeing those children who, after twenty years, still play amid buildings pockmarked by shrapnel gave me a sudden urge to depict one of our murals there and bring some color and hope to the dreary school. After five months, my dream came true, with a good 200 square meters of murals between Potočari and Srebrenica completed in only three days! I

will never forget the joy of the children who continued to bring me flowers and more; the teachers who complimented our work each day; the school employee who shyly asked me if I could paint a butterfly and a rose; the deputy director who started to paint with us; the older boys who, in the way of awkward teenagers, approached us, wanting to know about our activities; and the passersby, who were simultaneously intrigued and pleased with our initiative...

That and more has personally more than repaid me, along with the magical encounters with Senad, Radenko, and Irvin, the “returnees” to this place of immense suffering that they too have experienced firsthand, but now have gladly forgotten so they can rebuild the future of their country.

I believe it was just the beginning.

Veronica (Trento, Italy): Putting it in words is difficult.

I have never experienced war firsthand, but I have seen it in the eyes of many, and that was enough.

Resignation.

Fear.

Change.

Observation.

I grew up.

I cannot express it in words, so I’m sending you a booklet of some of my thoughts/phrases that I compiled during the trip.

I hope I can somehow make you understand my experience in Bosnia.

Thank you again for allowing me to have this kind of experience, and double thanks for making me understand that change is always possible.

Fabio and Serena (Trento, Italy): This was our second trip to Srebrenica, after the first had created a black hole within us, filled with a deep sense of grief and anguish. Because of this, we returned, with the desire to bring a little color and a bit of hope.

We brought with us a nice group of young people because awareness is important; testimony is important. Before leaving, we read a few books to be more informed on past events and the current situation.

This time was different; we met people who already have hope in their hearts—people who returned after fleeing abroad to revive this city and

give it a better future. We saw the friendship and cooperation between Serbs and Bosniaks, the strong desire to rebuild the peaceful coexistence they had before the war, before the powerful had decided that it was not to be.

We were afraid that they would not take kindly to our message of peace and universal love, that someone would try to stop us, and maybe even prevent us from completing our project. Instead, we were welcomed with open arms. We enjoyed the hospitality and friendship of all the people we met, from Senad (a Bosniak “Muslim”) who opened his home to 14 Christians (“Infidels”), to the municipal officials who in record time built us a scaffolding for our murals in Srebrenica, to the Serbian director and Muslim deputy director who allowed us to make a huge mural on the wall of Potočari’s school, to the journalists that interviewed and hosted us on the local radio—not to mention, the Potočari children and teens who helped us paint, and who shared with us the joy of colors that transform the world.

The first time around, we met Haira, president of the “Women of Srebrenica,” who told us of her strong commitment not to forget or ignore what happened; this time, we met Senad and Irvin, returned from abroad to restore life and hope. These are the two souls of Srebrenica: the agony of the past, and the hope for the future.

We carry this in our hearts and recount of it to other people, expressing our strong desire to come back, if only just to help Senad and his friend and collaborator Radenko (from Serbia) in the harvesting of their raspberries. We carry seeds of hope.

Irena (Rijeka, Croatia): There’s still much of the post-war spirit of racial hatred that lingers in the air, caused by the cruelties and injustices committed. It’s as if the air hasn’t cleared since the time of war, although some attempts have been made. I think any initiative that brings new inspiration is very important for people living in Srebrenica, Potočari, and the surrounding areas; it gives them new vision and a new hope, helping them connect with the “outside” world and giving them courage anew to face the future.

That’s why bringing the positive message of the heart that circles the globe is fundamental in this perspective—it gives something bright and positive that will remain for years to come as a silent but effective

reminder of the need for equity and love for one's neighbor, whoever he may be.

Paolo (Rijeka, Croatia): Although various situations around us are very dark and seem devoid of all hope, I think it's of the utmost importance to continue to let our "little light" shine.

Therefore, after the brief visit to Srebrenica and Potočari in October 2015, we didn't hesitate in arranging to return there as soon as possible to do something for the local people.

I don't believe that major changes will be brought about from "on high" (governments, United Nations, European Community, etc.). But I am convinced that something wonderful can happen if each of us decides to change and improve his part of the world, beginning with oneself...



BEWARE OF MINES! SREBRENICA, OCTOBER 2015

CHAPTER XV



BUILDING THE DREAM



THE CENTER "HOME"

“

*Anything I've ever done that ultimately was worthwhile...
initially scared me to death.*

—Betty Bender

”

As I said before, it began to get crowded in the beautiful house with the sea view. It was Cristina, a friend just passing through, who threw out the idea of finding our own place, which would save on rent and give us more space. Afterwards in June 2007, we hosted an out-of-the-norm camp, composed entirely of adults who committed themselves to help us buy a house or a plot of land on which to build it. With our total lack of experience, in the beginning all our attempts failed until, in February 2010, we were able to buy a plot of land at a location just twenty minutes from where we lived. I have pasted here part of our presentation flyer (with which we were looking for sponsors); it describes our project objectives:



OUR FUTURE HOME AT THE TIME OF PURCHASE, MARCH 2010

PROJECT VOLUNTEER CENTER

Objectives:

1. To comfortably host the growing number of participants in our volunteer camps.
2. To give the opportunity to individual families to experience an “alternative holiday.”
3. To provide a base for other types of initiatives (seminars, educational courses, entertainment activities, etc.)
4. To have a more suitable place for our humanitarian aid storage facilities.
5. To offer space for recreational games and fun activities, and to host educational opportunities for children, teens, and adults from various institutions (Dom za Odgoj, Dom Turnić, and so on) in the Rijeka area and its surroundings, as well as the war-torn areas near the Bosnian border that we’ve aided for years and that many of you have gotten to know personally.

The idea would be to create a structure for an overnight stay, a kitchen area, a dining room, and a meeting room. We would even like to have an additional outside space for the placement of tents, always ready to host young volunteers (such as Scout camps).

We have recently managed, with the help of many of you, to buy a buildable plot of land of 1000 square meters in an area well suited to this project. There is also an option to buy two more small neighboring plots (for a total of about 2400 square meters).

We know it will be a project that will require a big effort on all our parts, but we are confident that once implemented it will benefit so many people in need, and will also provide motivational opportunities and moments of reflection for young volunteers that we will continue to host here.

Thank you very much for your support.

Rereading it now, it almost seems surreal that, even though we are still missing a floor, ultimately we achieved many of our previously thought-to-be-impossible objectives.

But things haven't always gone smoothly. It started out well enough, and by June 2010 we'd successfully cleared and leveled the terrain. Then in August, our friends from Cloz, along with Stefano Canestrini, who worked out the project, brought a log house, dismantled and transported by our friends Carlo and Valter of the Trento Red Cross.



EXCAVATIONS AND LAND DEVELOPMENT, SUMMER 2010



SEATED ON WHAT WOULD BECOME THE NEW CENTER, SUMMER 2010



CONSTRUCTION OF THE LOG HOUSE, SUMMER 2010



THE INAUGURATION, SUMMER 2010



THE FOUNDATION, NOVEMBER 2010

In November, the foundations were laid; we only had to start building the house.

At this point, the bureaucratic system and other technical complications slowed down our work's progress.

Encouragement came in the form of our friends from Bolognano d'Arco (Trento) who, in July 2011, with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears—and a good dose of enthusiasm—built the famous pizza oven. They finished the job on the very same day my grandson Liam was born; in fact, they engraved on the oven “In the time of Liam” as well as “Jako dobro” (Croatian for “very good”), the phrase which kept their spirits up during the hard work.

Before leaving, Ivan wrote the following “prophetic” phrase in our guest book:

“I retain in my heart the hope and the certainty that all the toil, all the sweat, the laughter, the work we did, and the completed project are necessary ingredients; because in the near future there will be in Veprinac a place where many people gather together in friendship and joy to build a better world. Jako dobro!”



CONSTRUCTION OF THE PIZZA OVEN, JULY 2011

Aside from the pizza oven and the little log house, autumn arrived with a sense of discouragement and defeat. The previous warm months when one could work and build had slipped through our grasp. We were often asked the question, “So, when will you start to build?” Eventually, we could take it no more, because the delay was unnerving. Among other things was an ongoing debate on which construction technique to use: classical brick, or a house that would help us save energy? It would be the first of its kind in the area; we liked the idea but...but, and many other but. We sought counsel from whomever we could talk to and got back so much diverse feedback. In the end, the most innovative idea won out.

In September, the panels arrived.

In October, we built the retaining wall.

In November, we continued the preparation of the panels, with the help of Danci, who traveled all the way from Hungary to help us out—the first of several times, until April of 2015 when he moved here with his family.

In January and February of 2012, we continued work on panel construction.

In March, we finally began to build, and finished in June.

In July, Danci came with Pál, his brother-in-law, to place drywall on the inside walls and room partitions. Also in July, the plumbing was finished.

Then came our magnificent team of electricians: Adriano, Ezio, Fabio, Sergio, and Silvano.

In August, the heating was installed.

In October, the electricians came back to complete the electrical system.

Afterwards, Danci returned to finish the interior.

In January 2013, in a record time of less than a week, these people tiled the ground floor and the first floor: Natalino, Alessandro, and Vero—a veritable jack-of-all-trades—with help from our volunteers.

In February, Danci came back once more to complete the ceilings and the walls.

And then the endless finishing touches, those little important things that seem to take up more time than a big construction.

In June: The move!



CONSTRUCTION OF THE RETAINING WALL, SUMMER 2011



ARRIVAL OF THE PANELS, SEPTEMBER 2011



PANEL CONSTRUCTION, WINTER 2011/2012



WITH MAX AND STEFY, THE ARCHITECT AND THE ENGINEER, IN THE PLANNING STAGE



CONSTRUCTION BEGINS, MARCH 2012



THE FUTURE LIVING ROOM, APRIL 2012



THE FIRST FLOOR, MAY 2012





THE ELECTRICIANS, AUGUST 2012



THE TILERS, JANUARY 2013



THE ELECTRICIANS RETURN, OCTOBER 2012



PIZZA FOR OUR NEW NEIGHBORS, JULY 2013



THE CENTER'S INAUGURATION, SEPTEMBER 28, 2013

“

Your home has become to all of us guests a little corner of the world where you get to interact with people of all ages, social backgrounds, and nationalities.

—Sara



There is a beautiful place where dreams and hopes have been realized; where commitment, friendship, prayer, solidarity, and joy have taken root; where a group of men and women have chosen to try every day to make the world a better place.

It gives me joy to think this has been possible thanks to the help of many people...and it gives me peace to know that no matter my state of mind, whether I'm sad or happy, I will find a place where I will be greeted with warmth and love, making me feel right at home.

—Ivan



“HOME,” because when I come to you I feel more at home than I do in my own house...

—Serena

”

CHAPTER XVI



PAOLO CON NOI ASSOCIATION



PAOLO MARIOTTI

In September 2009, Paolo was in Edolo for the usual visit to his parents when a tragedy shocked the town. Another Paolo, eighteen years old and the only child of Vero and Ornella, died tragically in a car accident. From the providential meeting between our Paolo and the parents and relatives of the deceased stemmed a miracle of love and comfort, as well as the beginning of a brotherly friendship between all of us.

At the behest of Vero and Ornella, admirable and courageous parents, and with the help of friends of the Cai Skiing Association of Edolo (Brescia), on March 21, 2010, the first ski race was held in memory of Paolo Mariotti. His parents' idea was to arrange a day in memory of their son, as a sign of solidarity and volunteering. In fact, the entire collected income of that day was donated to our association, and became the basis for future collaboration.

On the day of the race, Vero stated this into the microphones of a local television: "For me, this day is very difficult and full of emotions; I am very happy for everyone's great participation, that showed us how much they loved our son. We initially started this as a charity event to help our friend Paolo and his fellow volunteers from For a Better World who volunteer in former Yugoslavia; however, we would like if this race would become an annual event. In the future, we would also like to personally go and help these volunteer friends. I thank all those who helped us to make this event happen."



VERO AND ORNELLA WITH PAOLO VISITING THE "MOUNTAIN GRANDPARENTS"

Since then, every March the race is repeated, and always with lively participation.

Vero and Ornella kept their promise and have come to visit several times, as often as not accompanied by some friends. Every time, they've brought aid to many needy families and situations in Croatia and Bosnia. In the short film *Halfway There* made by our association, Vero and Ornella tell their story and that of the association Paolo con Noi, founded on September 19, 2010.



THE BOARD OF THE ASSOCIATION PAOLO CON NOI

From the association's website:

When a fatal accident befalls an only child of only eighteen years old, one who was full of life, always cheerful, well-liked by everyone, and with many plans for the future, we ask how can such a thing happen, without ever understanding the "why..." Thanks to the solidarity, friendship, and respect shown towards us and towards Paolo, we thought the best way to remember him would be to establish this charity together with some friends. This decision was inspired by the fact that as a child

Paolo had always shown a predisposition towards helping others, in part by following a group of volunteers collaborating in the occurrence of various local events. The birth of this association, which officially took place on September 19, 2010, is one way to honor him right, and for us parents, it's also an incentive to keep on going, because it makes us happy to know that our little help can bring some relief to all those who need it.

Ornella and Vero

Every year they organize food collections, conferences and interventions in schools on road safety, and, on the day of St. Lucia, give games and teaching materials to Edolo kindergartens.

The pain remains, and there were other dark moments in these years, as well as many periods of strong discouragement, especially for Ornella. Vero, like a good mountaineer, stood strong. Both have shown the fortitude and ability to start over and simply continue the journey.



WITH LIDIJA AT DOM ZA ODGOJ IN RIJEKA



FIRST SKI RACE FOR PAOLO CON NOI, MARCH 21, 2010



WORK ON DOM ZA ODGOJ, SEPTEMBER 2010



DISTRIBUTION OF TOYS TO THE CHILDREN FROM KRNJAK SCHOOL, SEPTEMBER 2011



A LATHE FOR
LIDDY'S CENTER,
SEPTEMBER 2011



ONE OF THE ANNUAL FOOD COLLECTIONS



VERO, SPEAKING AT THE CONFERENCE ON ROAD SAFETY, EDOLO, SEPTEMBER 2012



IN HOME'S KITCHEN,
JANUARY 2016

“

Just as you cannot dry up water with water, nor can you put out fire with fire, so you cannot destroy evil with evil. To eliminate evil, you must use an opposing force: love.

—L. Tolstoy



The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen; they are made.

—Elisabeth Kübler Ross

”

CHAPTER XVII



DO NOT LET YOUR LEFT HAND KNOW WHAT YOUR RIGHT HAND IS DOING



DURING THE FIRST VISIT; MURALS PROJECT, JUNE 2007

In June 2007, after an exchange of information and a brief orientation through email, Marinella and a dozen friends came to our center in Rijeka to volunteer with us for a week. So far, this was nothing new, although the group members were quite diverse and seemed to be experiencing varied, but intense, emotions.

In fact, in August, they came back for another visit, full of ideas. That's when we started talking about a new center for volunteers.

And it didn't stop there. They gave life to a kind of committee/group that immediately began doing shows in schools, presenting songs and skits they learned from us, but also ones of their own creation.

With great courage and initiative, they knock on many doors, organize banquets and charity events, gather materials, and overall promote our association in a thousand different ways.

I write in the present tense not so much as a choice of literary style, but because these friends to this day continue to do all this, since that long ago June of 2007. Hats off to them!

We all know that the economic crisis is weighing heavily in Italy; admittedly, in 2007 the outlook was rosier, and it seemed to be a shorter-lasting project. And yet, every month or two without fail, we receive an envelope containing the proceeds they collected. It's not always the same amount, but in any case, it's the result of much effort and fatigue (hot chocolate sold outside in the cold, recycling of people's castoffs, lotteries, tithes, personal offerings, and so much more).

Another common denominator is the anonymity. Or rather, the principle that "the right hand does not know what the left is doing"; in other words, that the objective obtained is the result of a joint effort, not of a particular individual who wants to show off.

In times like these, where everything is so publicized, where even charities more or less must become "flashy" or eye-catching, cooperating with people who want to remain virtually anonymous is a breath of fresh air!

In the last years, this group of friends have had to overcome several obstacles and challenges on the economic front (some have lost work), the personal front (family crises), and the health front (one of them fought a tough battle with cancer).

And still this hasn't stopped them. Maybe there were some delays,

perhaps some members had to take a break or two, or someone else chose a different path, but the core remained and continued on.

And like the concentric circles that form when one throws a stone into a pond, their initiatives have inspired many others: musicians, cooks, traders, the hundreds of people who in recent years have stopped by their stand and participated in charity dinners and parties. Many lives were touched by their example!

“

*There is one elementary truth, the ignorance of
which kills countless ideas and splendid plans:
the moment one definitely commits oneself, then
Providence moves too.*

*All sorts of things occur to help one that never
otherwise would have occurred...*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

◆ ◆ ◆

*A small body of determined spirits fired by
an unquenchable faith in their mission can
alter the course of history.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

◆ ◆ ◆

*Great works are performed not by strength
but by perseverance.*

—Samuel Johnson

”



CAPS FOR ALL THE CHILDREN IN THE GAZA REFUGEE CAMP, KARLOVAC



THE FIRST CLOWN EXPERIENCE



MARINELLA AND FRANJO, A MAGICAL ENCOUNTER



CLOWN THERAPY SERVICE



MARINELLA, ROBERTO, AND LUCA, VISITING US AT OUR NEW CENTER,
SUMMER 2013

“

Three people were at work on a construction site. All were doing the same job, but when each was asked what the job was, the answers varied. Breaking rocks, the first replied. Earning my living, the second said. Helping to build a cathedral, said the third.

—Peter Schultz

”

CHAPTER XVIII



IN THE "HOME" OF VEPRINAC

June 2013 – 2016



PIZZA PARTY WITH FRIENDS FROM DOM TURNIĆ AND DOM MOTOVUN, SUMMER 2014

The move was no small feat. Over 15 years, we'd accumulated a lot of stuff that had been left by the various volunteers who'd lived with us in those years and had then moved elsewhere. Among other things, there was a race against time to ensure that the new center was equipped with water and electricity and that the necessary preparations were completed.

The joy, the relief, and the satisfaction of our first evening with everyone in Veprinac repaid all our efforts and then some.

Our first guests arrived a few days after the move, and it was not by chance that they were Vero, Ornella, and a friend from Edolo, Marina, who wrote:

Sunday, June 16, 2013: leaving with Vero and Ornella for Croatia.

The destination is Rijeka; the goal to greet our friends and bring to them the contribution that the association Paolo con Noi has managed to set aside. It is with great pride that we are bringing 1,000 euros to be donated to Koraci Center, and 5,000 euros to the association For a Better World, designated towards the purchasing of a water heater to be installed in the new volunteer center in Veprinac.

The center is now finished and livable; we are the first guests sleeping there, and it makes us very proud. The next steps now are the installation of the boiler in preparation for winter, and the completion of the outside. Later on this year, they have various visits planned over the summer camps.



It was my first time visiting our friends, and after only two days, I returned to Edolo impressed by what I experienced. Their way of life—sharing everything and being able to

MARINA, VERO, ORNELLA
AND LIDIJA

organize work, breaks, meals, and rest—seems very positive. It's not easy to live communally, but they succeed very well.

In the various visits we made, what also impressed me is the relationship they have with other associations and with the locals, who are very much in need; they can give a lot not only economically, but also morally. Well done indeed; I hope I can come back again to better relive this experience and learn to be less selfish and more altruistic.

Tuesday, June 18: returning to Edolo with a touch of nostalgia in our hearts and hoping to be reunited with each other soon.

Thanks, guys, for your hospitality, and for the example of life you've given me.

See you soon,
Marina

There was still a lot of work to be done, but summer camps were just around the corner, and all these bright and enthusiastic young people test-drove the new building. At the beginning, we had some reservations, but everything went very well.

The inauguration was postponed to late summer on September 28, 2013,





MANUELA, LAURA, IVAN, FRANCESCA, AND CLAUDIO, SEPTEMBER 2013

and many of our local friends participated with joy. There was also a great surprise—for who else should show up at the last minute but Ivan, Francesca, Claudio, Manuela, and Laura from Bolognano (Trento), who came to help out with the preparations, and who brought a basket of huge heart-shaped loaves of bread to hang in the corner of the room. Every heart had attached to it a card with a different phrase, and each guest was invited to take one. They must have been baked with a special type of flour, because many friends still have them hanging in their house somewhere!

The center was officially christened Home, following a survey done among all our friends. The explanation?

“Home is just my home. Here I recharge my batteries, and immerse myself in all the wonderful humanity I encounter. Every moment is special and always richly filled. Thank you for being in my life. Thank you, Jesus, for having us meet each other.” (Serena)

"HOME...

that's how we feel about this magical place. And it's a home, because it's made up of people, of friends, of lives, and of stories that burrow their way into the experiences of those who enter this HOME!

Places are special because they are made of special people. Your wealth and your love invade and plant their seeds in us. The blessing of God upon you is manifested in the good that you bestow on those you help (and not only materially). For us, this is HOME; for us, this is you—what you mean to us!!" (Tiziana and Gianni)

"...Here, one can intake a vision of the world and of life that is contagious—and we need to be infected. This, perhaps, is the basis of this continuous need to see you again." (Ferruccio)



And so began a new phase. In addition to our regular projects, others were added, such as those described in the next chapters.

In order to make friends with and introduce ourselves to our neighbors, someone put out the idea to make pizzas and deliver them around—for free, of course. Even today, people still talk about it; so it was without a doubt an awesome idea.

But there was soon to come an important meeting with a neighbor which marked the beginning of not only a beautiful friendship, but also the fulfillment of a dream.



EASTER PARTY FOR OUR FRIENDS FROM DOM TURNIĆ, MARCH 2016



WITH STEFANO FROM CLOZ (TRENTO), ONE OF THE FIRST PROMOTERS OF THE CENTER, SUMMER 2013

CHAPTER XIX



SPORT WITH A HEART



THE FIRST HALF-MARATHON IN RIJEKA, APRIL 2014

A few years ago, a story circulated on the Internet of a heroic dad who had begun to involve his severely disabled son in various sports, pushing his wheelchair in strenuous marathons, and even competing in that most grueling of disciplines, the Ironman (a high-level triathlon). The courage and determination of this man managed to transform the negativity in his life into a blaze of positive energy.

Also on the Internet was Nick Vujicic, a young man born without limbs who, with his motivational meetings, was giving hope to millions both young and old.

Paolo, always a keen sportsman, had a deep desire to one day push a disabled person in a wheelchair and help him experience the excitement of a race.

It would be a few years before the opportunity finally arose. And it was in none other than the village of Veprinac.

Rolly, 25, was going around with his wheelchair in the neighborhood. A wrongly parked car prevented him from continuing on his way; Paolo and Irene, out walking, offered to help him. Impressed by his winning smile, they quickly became friends.

Suffering from spinal dystrophy since birth, Rolly has been in a wheelchair since the age of five. His illness is progressive, but he's full of life, energy, and enthusiasm. He loves to cook, go for a round in his electric wheelchair, look after the vegetable garden, and hang out with friends. One of his dreams is to invent technical equipment for people with disabilities similar to his so they might experience thrills otherwise impossible, such as scuba diving and mountain climbing. Rolly not only dreams, but he also gets personally involved in things, such as closely working with an engineer to improve the quality of the batteries of his wheelchair.

In April of 2014, Rolly participated in the local half-marathon with Paolo, who pushed him—a first in Rijeka's history. The duo certainly didn't have the glory of coming in first place, but they gained much, much more: they won a close friendship, the respect, the admiration, and the hearts of all who witnessed the event.

Afterwards, Rolly and Paolo scaled the peaks of various mountains, involving more friends who took turns carrying Rolly on their backs in a specially modified backpack.

The following year, three wheelchair/runner duos participated in the

Rijeka half-marathon! A clear case of contagious positivity. A close friend, Andrea, who we met several years before in Violino Village in Brescia, pushed Giorgio, and thereafter began to put into practice Sport with a Heart in Italy.

In June, there was the triathlon, with the help of Paolo's sister Chiara, her boyfriend Benny, and Danci.

In November, we ran the Verona half-marathon (four wheelchairs, six "runners") after Rolly had experienced the thrill of flying, for a short distance, in a microlight.

In April 2016 came the now-traditional Rijeka half-marathon, with four wheelchairs and a large group of friends who enthusiastically pushed them, including Vero and other friends from Edolo (Brescia).

In late May, the big challenge: the Ultrabalaton in Hungary! Rolly, pushed by 12 relay runners, traveled 220 kilometers in 25 hours.

“

Call us crazy or foolish, but it's for times like these that we've worked, struggled, and sweated so much...And the result is priceless, exciting, incredible in many ways, and makes us proud to have been part of this adventure.

—Andrea Brunelli (Trento)



You are fantastic for having made it, and for demonstrating values such as solidarity and working in harmony as "one."

—Ferruccio Andreatta (Rovereto, TN)

”

Apart from the sport aspect, if you're having a bad day, spending a few minutes in Rolly's company can be therapeutic. Ever since we met, he has often frequented our center during meetings and volunteer camps, giving hope to many of a life without limits.



AT THE FINISH LINE, APRIL 2014



THE FIRST MOUNTAIN CLIMB WITH ROLLY AND RADE, ORJAK, OCTOBER 2014



SECOND PEAK, PEČNIK, NOVEMBER 2014



THE CIRCLE IS ENLARGED: THE SECOND HALF-MARATHON IN RIJEKA, APRIL 2015



THREE PEAKS WITH ROLLY—MAJKOVAC, ZVONČEV VRH, AND BUDIŠINAC, MAY 2015



TRIATHLON ON THE ISLAND OF RAB, JUNE 2015



VERONA HALF-MARATHON: NUMBERS STEADILY GROWING, NOVEMBER 2015



ROLLY, IMMEDIATELY AFTER PARAGLIDING, OCTOBER 2016



THIRD RIJEKA HALF-MARATHON, APRIL 2016



ULTRABALATON, MAY 2016



PEAK ALMANA, JUNE 2016



PRELUK TRIATHLON, JULY 2016

“

The human being was created to keep moving. Sport provides a platform for physical exercise, and many people practice various types of sports in order to do so. Our goal is to foster a community among sports fans where people work together as a team. It could mean doing sports with a disabled person; helping someone less experienced, like a beginner; giving advice and sharing experience; and joining up with others to do some type of sport. The key concept is to be involved in a sport while having someone else's needs in mind. And as you help another to fulfill a dream, you soon discover how much happiness will fill your heart.

You will comprehend that there exists a new and deeper dimension to any sport you practice which conveys richness and meaning, and will give you a joy and satisfaction that comes from helping others to succeed. When you do something for someone else, you undoubtedly enrich his life, but you also radically change yours for the better.

—From our blog <https://sportwithaheart.wordpress.com/>

”

CHAPTER XX



THE PILGRIMAGE FOR A BETTER WORLD

In search of peace and solidarity



ON THE ROAD, JUNE 2015

The idea was born during one of our many trips to Vojnić. The desire had been there for some time, come about while listening to stories of friends who had completed the Santiago Camino or other such pilgrimages, which were unfortunately either too long or too far away. Then, one day I looked around at the people to whom I dedicated twenty years of my life, at the land where I had lived since the early eighties—back then a single, united country, the legendary Yugoslavia, mourning the disappearance of Tito, whom many considered “father.”

For this reason, we embarked on a pilgrimage, or camino, as it is also known, that would take us through a variety of lands, peoples, and ethnic groups, helping us to reconstruct the heart of the Balkans that the awful war of the nineties had torn apart. A camino that could be repeated with different groups, on foot or by bike. A journey that would serve as a reminder of the tragedy to those who didn't know about it, bring a breath of peace, and teach us some valuable lessons—a pilgrimage for peace and solidarity.

On April 29, 2014, our little group of four convened at the Turanj War Museum, near Karlovac, the starting point of a four-day walk with the final



DEPARTURE, JUNE 2014

destination as the city of Bihać in northern Bosnia, about 150-kilometers' distance.

We finished tired, but ultimately happy and satisfied with our undertaking, our hearts still brimming with the beautiful landscapes, the melodious songs of the birds, and the sweet faces of people battered and beleaguered, yet still so welcoming and hospitable. We reflected on the three individual nights we spent at the homes of people of three differing ethnicities, who during the war had fought against each other with a murderous fury. Three families with three different stories, yet so much in common—especially their sense of hospitality that still floors us after so many years in these lands.



ENCOUNTERS

During 2015, we were able to “test-drive” the camino three times:

- In April, with Benny, Chiara, Franco, and Alice, in three days we completed the entire distance (from Karlovac, Croatia up to Martin Brod, Bosnia) by mountain bike, for a total of about 215 kilometers.

- In June, with Anna, Giovanni (Anna’s brother), Paolo, and Irene, in seven days we traveled the route from Karlovac to Bihać on foot, which amounted to about 150 kilometers.

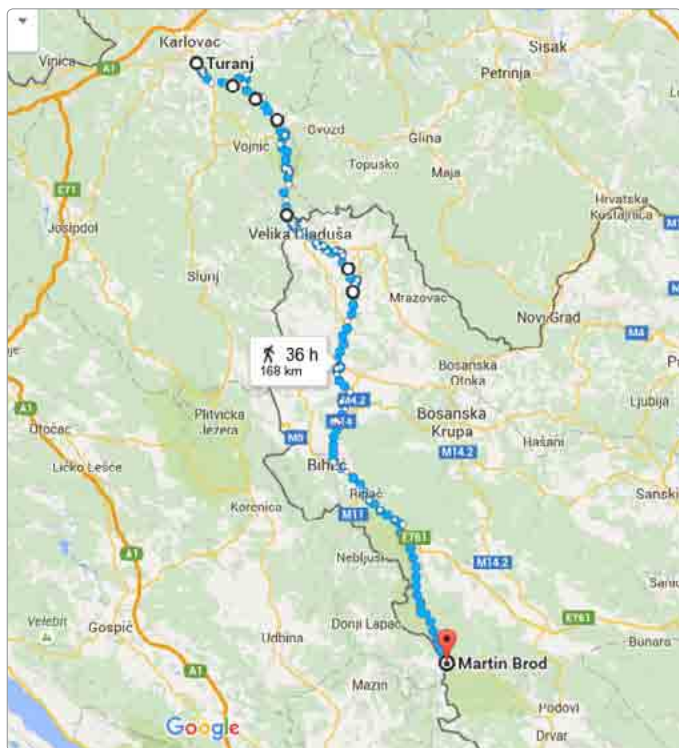
- In October with Anna, Toni, Paolo, and Irene, in three days we trekked

from Cazin (just before Bihać) to Martin Brod, for a distance of roughly 70 kilometers.

- And in April 2016, Paolo did it once again by bike with old friends from Bicolando (a group of cyclists from Verona).

The route is completed and feasible; all GPS routes and various technical information have been uploaded to our blog, and anyone interested may download the data and start their pilgrimage.

P.S.: During the last exploration in October, Toni (to whom we owe a lot for the achievement of this project) launched the idea of extending the trail from Martin Brod to Stari Most (the old bridge) in Mostar, another 300 kilometers away. He tried it out once alone with his Land Rover and once more with Paolo: it was gorgeous.



THE TRAIL OF THE FIRST PART OF THE CAMINO



FIRST TIME BY BIKE, APRIL 2015



SOMEONE OFFERED US COFFEE



ARRIVING AT THE MURAL IN BIHAĆ, JUNE 2015



OUR PILGRIMAGE'S SYMBOL



EARLY MORNING IN CAZIN, BOSNIA, OCTOBER 2015



WITH OUR FRIENDS FROM THE BICIVOLANDO CYCLING GROUP (VERONA),
APRIL 2016



The PILGRIMAGE

"For a BETTER WORLD"



Since 1996, our association has worked in Karlovac and the surrounding areas (Croatia) and around Bihać (Bosnia). They are lands that suffered terrible atrocities in the nineties and still bear the sad signs of that infamous war; but they are also areas rich in natural beauty and human kindness.

A few years ago, almost jokingly, we threw out the idea of "creating" a pilgrimage or camino that would promote the beauty of this land, serve as a reminder of the tragedy to those who didn't know about it, bring a breath of peace, and teach us some valuable lessons—a pilgrimage for peace and solidarity.

The camino can be done on foot or by bicycle; it includes overnight stays with families of diverse ethnic groups and religions, and various tourist attractions.

The starting point is at the Turanj War Museum in Karlovac, and the finish line in Martin Brod, for a total of about 215 kilometers.

Like all pilgrimages, you can also do it in sections.

Some accounts, diaries, and impressions of those who have already completed this journey can be found on our blog at www.perunmondomigliore.wordpress.com.

Happy pilgrimage!



CHAPTER XXI



TRAVEL COMPANIONS



SERENA, LIDIJA, AND ORNELLA

A CHAT WITH LIDIJA

(Lidija worked as a volunteer in the 1990s during the humanitarian emergency created by the civil war in former Yugoslavia.

In 1998, she founded the association Koraci, and since 2002 has been “Mom” to hundreds of children aged 8 to 18, attendees of the reform school Dom za odgoj in Rijeka, where she now works as an educator.

For several years, Lidija has organized handicraft workshops and courses for the elderly and the employees of the retirement homes in Via Vannetti, Rovereto (Trento) and Casa Serena in Verona.

Since 2001, she has collaborated with us during the summer camps in Croatia and in Bosnia organized by our association.)



WORKSHOP FOR SUMMER CAMP PARTICIPANTS IN 2004

Lidija, can you tell us something about your life?

I was born on July 7, 1955, in a small town in northern Croatia. After finishing high school there, I moved to Belgrade, where I graduated in political science at 24. I was an only child, and I would say that I was fairly spoiled in my youth, and not exactly prepared to face the various challenges that life had in store for me. At 27 years old, I married; my first son, Dragan, was born a year later.

We moved to Slovenia and then to other places, where I encountered people of various societies and cultures. Despite all of this, I felt quite empty inside, but was unsure of what exactly I was missing.

After many quarrels and misunderstandings, our marriage failed, and we divorced. However, I longed for a family and a warm home so much that I immediately remarried and had another son, Ivan. Unfortunately, I realized I'd made yet another mistake. I found myself without work, another failed marriage, so my two children and I moved back in with my parents. This was a very long and difficult period of my life. It was November 1988, and Ivan was only a few months old. I wasn't lacking in material things, but inside I felt so lonely. Every day I was out looking for work, but found nothing. It was the months of tension that preceded the outbreak of the war.

How did you live during the years of war?

At first, I felt lost. For the first time in my life, nobody in my home had either salary or work. It lasted for months—months in which we went hungry and had no money to buy even just a little milk for the kids. Because of this, I went to Germany for four months to work as a housekeeper to provide for my family. I missed my children so much. When I started to become ill, my friend Lily called me from Croatia, telling me I had to go back right away because there was a job for me!

What was your reaction when you were told what kind of job you received?

I discovered my life's purpose! I started working for UNHCR. It was intense work, upward of 10 hours a day spent distributing food and aid to

refugees. That same year, I met one of the first groups of your volunteers. With their joy and contagious enthusiasm, they proposed performing clown therapies and musical shows for the refugee camps, and I helped them get the necessary permits.

So you witnessed the atrocities of the war in person...

Yes, I traveled to various parts of Bosnia and saw so much destruction. I heard horrible stories of concentration camps and other barbarisms. I really wanted to help these people, but soon I started having nightmares because I didn't know how to "detach." I wasn't a believer at the time; my parents, being Communists, were also atheists, and they never taught me any Christian values. But I still felt something was there, some force that had created the world.



LIDIJA AT THE JEN REFUGEE ASSISTANCE CENTER, WITH PAOLO, JENNIE, AND OTHERS,
WINTER 1997

(Lidjia worked for UNHCR and JEN until 1998; in March of the same year, she founded her association Koraci [Steps], whose work areas offer recreational and educational activities for children, teenagers, and elderly refugees. Its purpose is to promote an improvement of life and harmonious relations between different people in a post-war reality like that of Croatia, and consequently to help improve society in general. Art and ceramics workshops are organized at the association's headquarters for people of all ages, with special attention to children who are mentally disabled. The association also cooperates with other groups. Anyone visiting the association's work areas has the opportunity to make new friends, exchange ideas, and learn about new situations and realities. The Koraci workshops have also given birth to original and varied objects, greeting cards, and other works of art for any occasion of the year and/or souvenirs.

In 2002, Lidija also began to work part time at Dom za odgoj [correctional institute for minors]. She had already been volunteering there for some time, organizing handicraft workshops for the young people; but she was so well-liked that when the first opportunity arose, they offered her the position. In fact, when it's her shift, Aunt Lidija, as her children affectionately call her, brings a special touch of love, interest, and...ideas! Indeed, Lidija is just full of ideas: rooms to be improved, murals to be painted, meetings and plans for a gymnasium, music classes, monthly birthday parties, and so on. She brought about a real hurricane of much needed positive changes—proof that even one person, animated by the love of God, can in a relatively short amount of time improve things that are found in the worst situations.)

Lidija, how did you come to work in this center?

Five years ago, Ivana, one of the workers at the institution, came to Koraci to ask me if I could organize artistic workshops for her kids; this was an answer to my prayer for new goals in my life. For a few years, I went there every week as a volunteer; then, they offered me to work there part-time, which would give me the chance to be a more influential help.

Tell us about the children and how the institution works.

Dom za odgoj is a state institution for minors, most of them with

behavioral problems and guilty of small offenses, coming from either broken families or with no family at all to speak of. In other words, potentially future criminals.

However, I want them to know they can count on me, and that I love them unconditionally and without bias; that the world can be wonderful if you have faith. I want to teach them how important it is to make the right choices, and if they learn to do so, they can have a better life. Their world vision is so limited, and no one has taught them life's values. With various improvements in the rooms, I'm also trying to make the environment less "institution" and more "family."

How do they react to your innovations?

Generally very well. Sometimes, they don't believe there is someone who wants to do something for them and with them, but they slowly begin to trust more and more and be less suspicious. They often offer to help me. They follow me everywhere...I never imagined just how much satisfaction I would find in working with these "troubled young people."

When I think of my first days at Dom, especially the time spent with some particularly aggressive and destructive children, it doesn't seem real how much change for the better has been done since then. Sometimes I ask myself: "Am I overdoing it? Will I be able to bear this great load? And, above all, will I be able to make lasting changes?" Enthusiastically and together with some colleagues from work, we started improving the conditions of the bedrooms, living room, workshop room, corridors, stairs, and garden. Often, what was accomplished one day was found destroyed or burned the next. It happened more than once that I went to work in the morning and found ripped books, burnt decorations, ruined frames, and broken pieces of vases and plants scattered on the ground...I was often discouraged, but with the help of my fellow educators, the cleaning women, and above all, the development of a special and affectionate relationship with the young people, things have started to change.

Nowadays, the living room shelves are full of books, with magazines of various kinds, and even with ceramic ornaments created by the children themselves. In each bedroom, there are flower pots that the kids don't destroy anymore. Not only that, but many of them also come to my lab

(which has become a botanical garden) to ask for new seedlings for their rooms. The empty and cold walls of the long corridors are filled with colorful drawings and murals painted by volunteers from For a Better World and their friends. Everything practically vibrates with a new joy and freshness. The stairwell is also decorated with educational posters, vases, and more that make the environment less like an institution and more like a home. All summer we worked in the outdoor garden, where many Italian volunteers labored to give a new look to what had before seemed like a jungle.

The changes have been felt in not just the institution's new look, but in its homey atmosphere and, more importantly, in the behavior of the children. They always have their "five minutes (moments of panic)," but acts of vandalism are now rare. Unity and respect between the young people and their caretakers have increased. Now, there's a lot more warmth in our conversations; there is respect, trust, and friendship.



LIDIJA DIRECTS VOLUNTEERS IN CLEANING THE GARDEN

NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE

Fabio and Serena

In recounting our experience with our friends from For a Better World, let's start by saying we've learned that **NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE!** We continue to experience this on many occasions in our lives: nothing happens by chance, because there is a greater design from above—as they say in Bosnia, “ako Bog da” (whatever God wills).



FABIO AND SERENA AT THE VOLUNTEER FESTIVAL IN VERONA

In 2008, “by chance” we met Andrea and Maggie in a shop near our home while they were looking for someone from the church oratory to whom to propose the idea of painting murals with the young people. Thus began our adventure in Croatia and Bosnia.

Since 2010, we've attended some camps with the young people from our church's oratory. Enthusiastic about the experience, we returned several times with our family and various friends, to whom we could not help but recount what we experienced only a few hours' drive from where we live.

To date, we have made 21 trips to the former Yugoslavia.

For some years, we have spent our holidays in Veprinac, enjoying the hospitality of the volunteer center "Home"—called such because that's exactly what it is: HOME—and at their disposal to help during summer camps with people from various origins.

To those who ask us in amazement, "But how can you spend your holidays working?" we reply in this manner:

We meet so many people of varying ages, backgrounds, and cultures, and have the opportunity to create wonderful friendships that endure despite time and distance.

We are made aware of situations of poverty and pain that we didn't expect to find so close to our western world, where too many realities are ignored, in part because our lifestyle makes us look elsewhere. Our experiences in Veprinac caused us to want to better inform ourselves, broaden our horizons, and make us spokespersons for what really occurred in the Balkan War, and the grueling lives of its inhabitants today. Because information is necessary and our now-firsthand testimony is indispensable.

But what is it that makes us continually come back and feel great? What is it that "recharges our batteries"?

It's meeting with people—the elderly, the children, and the families—who tell us their stories and always welcome us with open arms, as though we were old friends, even when they're seeing us for the first time.

It's the joy we see in children's eyes when we paint a mural to make their school more cheerful.

It's the smiles of the elderly, singing with us when we go to depressing retirement homes to perform clown therapy.

It's the happiness in revisiting families when we return to bring humanitarian aid or even just to stay with them for a couple of hours. Because for them it's the greatest joy, knowing that we didn't forget them. They always tell us, "This house is your home. Don't forget about us."

That's why we always count down the days separating us from the next trip; that's why we spend New Year's in Veprinac: because there is no better way for us to start the new year.

That's why we never tire of recounting all of our experiences in Croatia and Bosnia; that's why when we are there our spirits are truly at peace and free.



FABIO, SLAVKA, AND SERENA, JANUARY 2013

GRATEFUL TO BE ALIVE!

Slavka Brtan lived happily with her husband and six children on her farm in a village in Bosnia until 1991, when war broke out.

That terrible day, soldiers burst into their home, their heads covered in black tight, and ordered Slavka and her children to leave in five minutes if they didn't want to be incinerated, right before setting fire to their home. With her husband at that time working in Russia, Slavka, all alone,

grabbed her kids and escaped into the nearby forest, trying to survive without food or change of clothes.

A few weeks passed before they met another human being, and finally they arrived at a United Nations sorting center where busloads of refugees were being transported to Croatia. But Slavka didn't have money for the trip! So she and her family waited a long while and, after all those who paid had gotten on the bus, they were finally able to board. Thus began a long, pitfall-ridden journey to safety.

At various roadblocks, the buses were stopped and, depending on the guards' mood, allowed to pass or boarded to see if there were any men to kill. At night, the children woke up crying from hunger, but Slavka and the other mothers had nothing to feed them.

After surviving this long and dangerous journey, they arrived in Split, Croatia, where a stranger, whom Slavka calls "an angel," passed out bread and milk to the children.

From Split, they continued onward until they came to Rijeka, and they settled in the barracks owned by the firm where Slavka's husband worked,



EARLIER VISITS WITH SLAVKA IN THE ROOM WHERE SHE LIVED WITH HER HUSBAND AND SIX CHILDREN IN THE UČKA REFUGEE CAMP, MAY 1997

and with whom she was later reunited.

After a hard winter, a refugee camp was officially opened on top of Učka (a mountain overlooking Rijeka), and Slavka's family, along with many others, moved there.

The years spent in the refugee camp (it was there we met her in 1996) were another struggle for survival, spent rebuilding a life that had been hit on every side. In 1997, the refugee camp closed, and Slavka's family was forced to find new accommodations. New challenges emerged: integration into a different society from theirs, and a lack of work and therefore also their means of livelihood, partly due to the fact that no more aid was forthcoming as it had been during the years of war, when the need had been far more urgent.

After many years, Slavka took a trip to Bosnia and could only see her farm from afar, burned to the ground and surrounded by minefields. "Not even the birds fly around it," she told us with tears in her eyes. "But I saw even more misery than that, so I should not complain," she concluded.

Slavka was never angry at God for what she'd gone through. In truth, she was grateful that her whole family survived. "God exists," she told us, "and I thank him because today we're alive, and because He has given us peace in our most difficult moments."

She doesn't hate the people that put her family through such misery. "It doesn't help to keep hatred in our hearts. We must forgive to be able to get on with our lives."

These are the conclusions of a simple woman who has suffered great pains and immeasurable losses at the hands of other human beings during the war.

(Slavka Brtan is a dear friend of ours who lives in Čavle, a small village near Rijeka, with her family. It's a story similar to many that we've heard in these years, but with a fundamental difference. Every time we bring her some help, she in turn shares with her neighbors and other people in distress. It's likely that some of you remember her and her humble smile. She looks forward to our visits, whether we bring her something or not—what is most precious to her is our friendship. Lately, life has dealt her another blow, as she is fighting a tough battle with cancer.)

OTHER FRIENDS



ERMANN0 AND FEDERICA, BARDOLINO (VERONA)



EMANUELA WITH PAOLO AND THE "MOUNTAIN GRANDPARENTS"

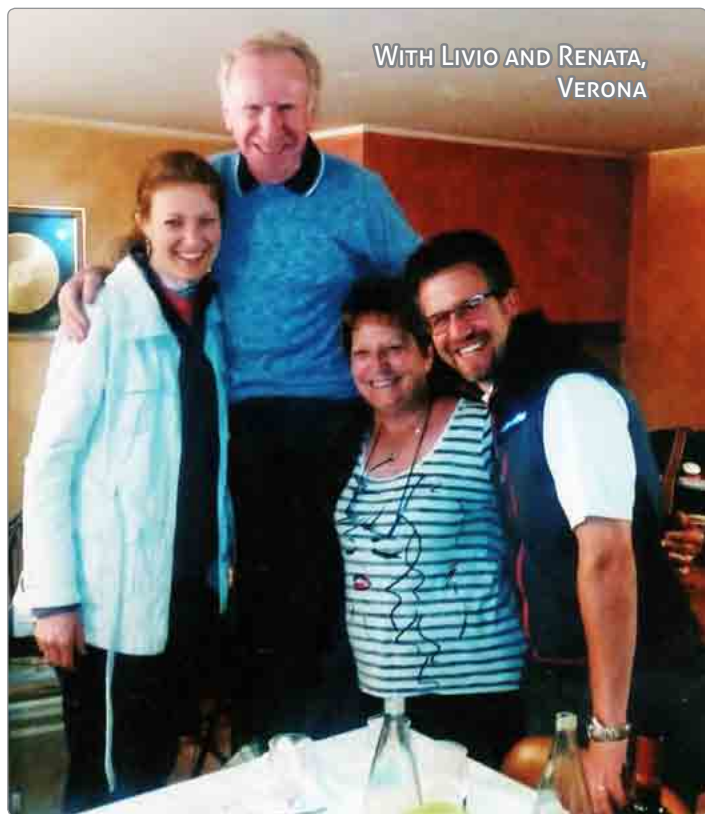
WITH DESIO AND
MARIA GRAZIA,
BELLUNO



WITH MR. MARTINELLI,
VILLAFRANCA (VERONA)

ROMULO AND CHRISTIANE





WITH LIVIO AND RENATA,
VERONA



WITH LIDIA FROM TRENTO, DURING A VISIT TO
BARBARA



CHAPTER XXII



CONCLUSION



From the beginning, we've never been a very large organization, though we've worked alongside many that are, some even on an international level. We've learned so much from all of them.

Our mission statement is this:

We firmly believe:

- we can improve the world by starting with ourselves.
- everyone has something to give.
- true happiness is found in making others happy.
- in the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance, and solidarity.

This is the message we hope to impart. One has to either change or at least improve the world, starting with oneself and that part of the world in which one lives.

We can and should be that change we wish to see in others, in as many ways as possible according to our individual talents and possibilities.

A small number of us decided to manage "Home" (an accommodation center in Croatia for volunteers) and therefore dedicate ourselves full-time to various volunteering activities.

But it's definitely not everyone's calling in life. As such, the thing that makes us happiest is when someone, after spending a few days with us, returns home with renewed purpose and begins to start something of his own.

Yes, Home is a physical place that many have helped us build and that will continue to keep its doors open to dreamers and peacemakers, as well as those who are tired and need to recharge their batteries.

But Home is also so much more and surpasses temporal barriers. It's a "Home of Hearts," a spiritual reality that stretches from heart to heart, from hand to hand, from soul to soul.

“

Every day I grow more convinced that the waste of our existence lies in the love we did not give. The love we give is the only wealth we will retain for all eternity.

—Gustavo Rol

”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Irena, who took care of all the graphics with such patience and diligence.

A big thank you to my son Mark, who gave us precious advice and designed the cover, as well as being our artistic director. The logo is his creation, as are the three short films *Experience Life*, *8 Days*, and *Halfway There*, circulating on the Internet inspiring and encouraging many both young and old.

Thanks also to my brother Paolo, who is actually a published author with many years of experience, and who has left his mark in this book as well.

I thank my granddaughter Alexis, who, with so much patience and diligence, has helped me by scanning old photos and other archive material.

Thank you to all the people who have contributed to these twenty years of activities, in particular:

- our family members, who have had to endure the often distance between us, but who nevertheless are still often involved in our projects.
- the various companies in Verona, Brescia, and Trentino, who donated materials or offered several important services.
- the many mechanics who have repaired our vehicles for free.
- all the friends who participated, with either donations or manpower, in the construction of the Home volunteer center in Croatia.
- those who for years have been regularly helping us with donations and devoting “five per thousand” of their annual income tax returns.
- the many friends who open the doors of their homes to us, who host us and assist us in our travels.
- our coworkers in Croatia.

We apologize if, due to space, we didn't succeed in naming everyone or telling every story—we are immensely grateful to you and carry you in our hearts!

APPENDIX

AN EXAMPLE OF LIFE

Laura Bertagnolli

I had many ideas in mind for an article; some were serious, others less so. Every time I started writing on the decided topic, something in my head blocked me. I felt as if there were a voice in my head telling me I had a debt to repay. Now I understand why; I wanted to honor, at least on paper, a very important person who has just left us.

The woman I'm talking about was not a celebrity—she didn't enjoy international fame, and was neither rich nor powerful—but to me and many others she will forever remain an example to follow and someone to remember.

Allow me to better explain: every summer for three years, I, along with a group of young people, spend a week in Rijeka, Croatia, collaborating with an Italian volunteer association named For a Better World. For those who don't know, it's only been a few years since the conclusion of a war ('91 – '95) that involved the countries of the former Yugoslavia, including Croatia. Although this country is a highly sought-after tourist destination, especially by us Italians, concealed deep within lie much desolation and poverty, particularly in the interior.

The association works through Smile Therapy; that is, meeting both physical needs (hunger, cold, sickness) and psychological and emotional needs (loneliness, sadness, resignation) by way of clown therapy, free hugs, and murals on orphanage walls, prisons, or retirement homes.

Every year, we make an obligatory stop in Vojnić, a town in the interior where we met Andja. Her story is no more or no less dramatic than those of many other people who have survived the war, but it still had a deep impact on all of us.

Of Bosnian origin, she was forced to leave her home and move to Croatia during the conflict. Her husband was a soldier in the war, and he

was ordered to do an ethnic cleansing in a Bosnian town where his sister lived. With his refusal to execute the order, he became a deserter; and, as such, waited in terror for his imminent execution, unable to sleep at night, until the war ended. They never came for him, but it nevertheless left its mark—he now lives in a psychiatric hospital.

Andja suffered from diabetes to such a high extent that a few years ago it claimed her sight; as a result, she couldn't work, and her two children were unable to be of economical help, as they were unemployed like most of the Croatian population. Despite all these problems, she had incredible strength: the smile never left her face, and she constantly thanked God for what little she had.

When this summer, just before leaving for Croatia, we discovered that both her legs were amputated because of her illnesses, we were shocked and upset—we couldn't picture this amazing woman doomed to remain in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. After the operation, social services helped her move to a private nursing home, managed by a family, and located on the border of Bosnia, her beloved homeland. Seeing her without legs, I couldn't help but grieve; but that soon vanished at the contagiousness of her incredible smile. Paradoxically, she seemed happier and more serene than she had the other times; seemed to have fewer concerns. Once again, she taught me something—she doesn't grieve for what she lacks, but smiles for what she has.

It was one of the best afternoons of my life.

The news of her death arrived about two weeks ago, unexpectedly, like a sharp blow. I've reflected on it long enough, and I know she would never have wanted to hear us crying for any reason in the world; all she left behind her is what she put in the hearts of those fortunate enough to have known her. Just one question has been bothering me all this time: was she an amazing person in spite of her problems or because of them?

I think I've found my answer.

Thank you.

WHERE WAR CRIMINALS ARE BORN

Paolo Perlini

To Dana and her husband, who inspired this story.

I hear shouts, scuffles, some kicks, and a slap.

Men with their faces covered yank us from the table and push us up against the wall.

“Where are you hiding your weapons? Where are they?” their boss asks.

“We don’t bear arms,” my husband replies, “we are peaceful people!”

“We’ll see about that!”

They tear open drawers, scour the cabinets, slash the armchairs, and rip apart the backs of the paintings.

I see the coffee machine that belonged to my mother shatter to pieces on the floor.

The cat flees, frightened, as the dog takes a kick to the stomach that makes him vomit.

My husband and I have our cheeks shoved against the rough wall. Two of the men hold pistols close to our heads. Their shouts grow increasingly harsh and threatening.

“Where are the weapons? We know you have them; you’re good at hiding them!”

One of them shoots at the dog, grazing him; the man shoots again, but Lefty manages to escape to the garden. The man gives chase, and we hear more shots.

“Where are the weapons? Speak up!”

I feel the barrel of the gun ever closer to my temple until it touches my skin. It’s cold, frozen, like the hate that has hardened the heart of my country.

Prijedor was a quiet city, populated predominantly by Muslims. The rest were mostly Serbs, while Croats, my people, were a minority. No one would have ever imagined that in a short time each would become the

enemy of the other.

Mere contention over possession of a tree rapidly turned to threats, beatings, and eventual ejection from one's house. Croats were forced to abandon the city, and I reflected on my name: Ksenija (foreigner). I truly was a foreigner in my own home: a stranger in the country where I was born, and where my parents had been born.

For many years, the restaurant at the border of the village had been run by our family. Rudnicki ("Miners") Restaurant, said the sign. There, truck drivers sought refreshments, their rigs resting in the parking lot; and there would also pass through mineworkers, some tourists, or a couple of cyclists who in the spring loved to pedal through the streets lush with vegetation.

To all, I offered the same courtesies and respect. I extended credit to whoever needed it, without distinction.

My husband often reproached me when someone would leave, saying he would pay, but then didn't return.

When war broke out, the restaurant closed. We grew ever more fearful as it dragged on.

Instinctively, the first thing that we did when we woke was to pinch ourselves to see if we weren't still dreaming, as it was amazing that we were still alive.

"Well, we're still here!" we said, after we confirmed that all of our limbs were attached in their proper places and our brains continued to function.

We had survived another night of bombings, another night of reprisals.

But we knew that Serbs, cops, and even ordinary citizens still searched many houses to see if there were any hidden weapons. They did everything possible to frighten the Croat population and persuade them to abandon their homes, abandon their city.

That night we heard them coming. My husband and I sat there at the table, holding hands. I had left the door ajar, but they kicked it open regardless, sending it flying off its hinges.

"The next bullet goes in your head! Where are the weapons?" asks the man who just chased the dog.

I have to do something, quickly, so I instinctively turn around, saying, “Guys, calm down. Do you want us to prepare you something to eat, or maybe something to drink?”

Their leader is checking the inside of a wood stove; upon hearing my words, he draws close.

This is it, I think. I look at my husband; I feel as if he is standing at the ready, prepared to act in an instant.

“Are you Ksenija, the one with the restaurant?” the ringleader asks.

“Yes, I ran the place.”

“You were good to me. You gifted me with cigarettes, and more than once you gave me lunch, even when I had no money.”

He looks at me again, then says, “Guys, let’s go. These are good people; there’s nothing here.”

They all leave, without the cockiness they had when they first entered. Their boss exits last and whispers:

“I’m sorry.”

My husband and I embrace each other, and Lefty appears soon afterwards. He’s only grazed: the Serbian who wanted to kill him was too drunk to aim properly.

“Did you see that? You complained about customers that I let leave without paying. We may have lost some money, but it saved our lives.”

My husband smiles, giving me a kiss before he responds with, “Come on; we should clean up the place. Your friends left a big mess.”

We fled from Prijedor, now ruled by Serbs. In that city, only they remained. I live with my husband in Vojnić, a village that before the war was exclusively Serbian, and is now occupied by us Croatian refugees. We live in a house belonging to Serbs that left for Prijedor, the town that, according to the Hague tribunal, produced the highest number of war criminals.

But the fear hasn’t left us; we’re always afraid that the old owners will come back and reclaim the house. Neither of us is working, and who knows if anyone has reopened Rudnicki Restaurant!

Now, I’ve learned to cultivate the garden, to raise hens, to survive. But once again, I feel like a Ksenija—a foreigner in my own home.

THAT BOMB AND ITS SHRAPNEL

Claudio (Cini)

Reflections after a visit to Croatia on 25-27 April 2003

You come down with violence and sink into the earth; that same earth that God has given us and thanks to you is now laden with violent death and destruction.

In soft soil YOU HIDE, waiting for the man who is ignorant of your presence to stumble onto you; and you, wretched thing, betray him and envelop him in death.

When you encounter resistance, you EXPAND your hurt all around you and once more man is engulfed in suffering. Why are you death, horror, and destruction?

TRANSFORM YOURSELF INTO LOVE, PEACE, AND FREEDOM.

Instead, let yourself fall from a sky of goodness; let yourself sink into this land and fertilize it so that in it will grow harvests to feed man with sharing and brotherhood.

Where you find resistance, fling your shrapnel of human understanding and tolerance.

Strike the hardest of hearts and render them sensitive to the needs of humankind.

Sound out a clamor of joy, infecting those who are in solitude, and let your blaze elicit astonishment and hope in those who can't find peace.

But you cannot do all this on your own, you must first be transported and then let go.

I could be the one to transport you...or you could...or we all can do so...

We truly can build arsenals of love by endlessly hiring workers and rewarding them with the happy faces of people.

Let us begin to have love explode in our families, in our countries, in our daily lives; always reminding ourselves that our Lord, through His suffering and death, made known to us the LOVE OF THE FATHER.

THE ECCENTRIC COUPLE

I first met Danica and Milić over 13 years ago. They were already affectionately known as “the grandparents on the mountain.”

To reach their village called Suhodol, you have to drive on a steep forest road, and during harsh winters, there’s no way to get there by vehicle. They don’t have running water or indoor plumbing, and like many people in the area of Croatia bordering Bosnia, they have a sad story of fleeing from war and destruction, living in refugee camps, and finally returning home to their village and their burned-down house and having to start building a life again at an age when people usually retire.

In spite of hardships, their spirits are always high; and, of course, they look forward to our visits, as these days very few people live in this isolated village. Once, we came across them washing their clothes in a freezing stream and gave them a ride back home. When they entered our van, we jokingly asked: “Where would you like to go? We can take you anywhere.”

“To Suhodol,” they proudly answered, “the best place in the world!”

Danica is feisty, Milić is meek, and together they are a funny, entertaining, eccentric, and lively couple. Despite being in their eighties, whether there be rain, sunshine, or snow, they’re busy tending to their land and sheep. I visited them countless times with other friends and volunteers, bringing them food and other necessities, but always leaving with more than what we brought in terms of priceless lessons and values.

A young girl was profoundly impressed by them and shared, “I hope that one day I can build something as valuable as they have.” At first, I was a bit puzzled at this comment, as Danica and Milić have hardly anything of any value, as much of what they owned was irredeemably lost. I wondered if she really understood their condition, and if so, what she meant.

She explained that what mostly impressed her was the love she saw in their eyes after so many years of being married and facing all kinds of hardships and difficulties together.

In a world where relationships are so volatile and commitments are easily broken, she considered that a most valuable accomplishment, and how could I not agree?

LEARNING FROM THE HURT

It's my 20th year living and working in the former Yugoslavia. I also lived here earlier, right after President Tito died in 1980. His pictures were still hanging everywhere, and though the country was going through a challenging economic crisis, it seemed as if nobody questioned Yugoslav unity. Having lived here both "before" and "after," it's still a puzzle how a succession of particularly brutal and bloody civil wars eventually led to the formation of seven different countries.

But I've found out that many of the people who lived through it also have a hard time making sense of it. It's as if they lived through a bad dream, a nightmare of hatred and pain.

I've often heard comments along the lines of "We can't figure out what happened and how we often found ourselves the worst enemies with people who were once our neighbors, or even relatives."

Thankfully, although not everyone has forgiven and forgotten, I believe they would think at least twice or more before getting into another war. They paid the price, and in many ways, are still paying it.

Over the years, For a Better World has helped to build bridges of reconciliation, and through this process, I was also helped. I have been privileged to have a peek into the complex matter of war versus peace.

I saw the insanity of war and the hurt and scars it leaves for decades. I touched the pain of division.

I was convinced once more of the necessity and beauty of unity: what a priceless thing it is, how much power it gives, and what a sad state we fall into when we don't appreciate it and eventually lose it.

I learned how small things, if not addressed, can become big issues.

I realized the danger of getting too familiar with our blessings and all the good things we have, taking them for granted, and eventually being all too willing to trade them for some fake promise.

I witnessed the healing forgiveness can bring and the importance of faith and trust versus despair.

I was amazed at the courage, bravery, and unselfishness some people can show in extreme circumstances.

I was reminded of the quote attributed to Mother Teresa: "What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family." If there is no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to one another.

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