

Bringing Peace Home:
Experiences of Graduates of the Peace Camps Run by the Center for
Peacebuilding in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Abstract

Becca Asaki

This paper focus on the experiences of participants in a program called Peace Camp conducted by the Center for Peacebuilding in Sanki Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It, then, analyzes the camps within the context of the field of conflict resolution. The Peace Camps are week-long workshops which analyze the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the personal experiences of the participants. The camps invite Serbs, Bosniaks, Croat, Roma, and others to collectively share their experiences and be trained in conflict resolution. This paper's analysis looks at who attends the Peace Camps and why and their experiences meeting 'the other' and talking about the war. It also looks at how the participants connect their experiences in the Peace Camp with their lives at home. The researcher also looks at critiques of certain conflict resolution and interpersonal contact theories and applies them to the Peace Camps approach along with analyzing the importance and influence of the facilitator of the Peace Camps. This paper aims to raise questions about the approaches used in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina and to explore one manifestation of conflict resolution theories as implemented by a local peacebuilder.

Introduction

During the wars of the 1990s, Bosnia was a hotspot for conflict resolution junkies, well-intending internationals seeking to test out their skills in the field. It was, and in many ways still is, *the* place to set up workshops dedicated to peace. It was a place to study the interactions of enemies coming together after fighting a bitter war; a war that had brought back to surface the discussion of genocide and had created the catch phrase of the decade: “ethnic cleansing.” Internationals flooded into Bosnia and Herzegovina with fervor, especially after the fighting stopped, to help the people reconcile their differences, face their former enemies, and learn how to live side by side with them again. They set up seminars, workshops, international war crimes tribunals, and other conflict resolution mechanisms and then, as quickly as they came, many left leaving the unresolved issues to locals¹.

After they left, the people of BiH² were not any closer to reconciling their differences nor were they ready to live side by side with their neighbors as they had before the war. Some of the efforts made by international NGOs were good and some of them were not. Regardless, far too few still continue today, though the conflicts here are anything but resolved. However, there are a few initiatives being carried out by locals here in a consistent effort to create peace in the country. Those were the people who I was interested in and who I wanted to be the focus of this study.

¹ Most conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts are being carried out by local NGOs rather than international groups or initiatives as was the case previously. However, there are still international organizations working in Bosnia and Herzegovina and there is still a large international presence especially in the form of the Office of High Representatives and European troops.

² BiH is an abbreviation of Bosnia i Hercegovina which is Bosnia and Herzegovina in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian. For the sake of brevity, I will use this abbreviation when referring to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

When I came to BiH for the first time, I was struck by the work being done in Sanski Most by the Center for Peacebuilding. They had one particular program that sparked my curiosity: the Peace Camps. I wanted to know how they got people together after so many well-intending foreigners had exhausted the words “conflict resolution” and “reconciliation.” I wanted to know how they worked and what the methodology was behind it. I wanted to know what the participants brought back to their home communities after their time in the camps. And most of all, I wanted to know how the people who attended them felt about them. When the concept of the Peace Camps was first explained to me, I was told that most participants felt that the experience was life changing and I wanted to further explore that to see what about the Peace Camps evokes such response.

There are people who see BiH as stuck; stuck with a thirteen year old peace treaty as their constitution, stuck with frozen front lines for their boundaries, and stuck facing the daunting task of living together with former enemies without the international assistance that was far too easy to come by ten years ago. Maja Catic discusses the difficulty of reconciliation between the former enemies in Bosnia in her article “A Tale of Two Reconciliations: Germans and Jews after WWII and Bosnia after Dayton.” She talks about how the situation in Bosnia is much more difficult than that between Germans and Jews after World War II saying, “Reconciliation between victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of genocide is very difficult when victims and perpetrators must construct a shared, self-sustainable state³.” Some of those I interviewed said that people are tired of fighting and that many people feel that it is not worth participating in society, much less

³ Catic, Maja, “A Tale of Two Reconciliations: Germans and Jews After WWII and Bosnia after Dayton,” 2007.

peacbuilding, because it will not result in any real change. I was, therefore, interested in the actions taken by local people to move forward. I wished to learn more about what people were interested in attending a camp that was dedicated to this mission and to analyzing the causes of Bosnia's troubled past. I hoped to see a Bosnia that is not stationary but moving right along, consciously and comprehensively.

Methodology

The focus of this research is on the Peace Camps run by the Center for Peacebuilding in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the experiences of those who participated in them. I focused on these participants and on the organization that runs the camps. I volunteered in the Center for Peacebuilding to learn more about the inner working of the organization that runs the Peace Camps but also to give back from the people who were to give me so much. This research was conducted from April 7- April 27, 2008 mainly in the town of Sanski Most in northwestern BiH, where I lived during the time of the research, and included a trip to Sarajevo and one to Banja Luka.

Sarajevo is the capital of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) while Banja Luka is the capital of the Republika Srpska (RS). The Federation and Republika Srpska are the two sub-state entities created after the war⁴, the RS controlled by Serbs and the FBiH controlled by Bosniaks⁵ and Croats. These two locations were chosen mainly because of the interviewees located there, but they also served as a way for me to

⁴ The entities were created as a part of the peace agreement that ultimately stopped the fighting on the ground. The Republika Srpska was created by the Bosnian Serb paramilitaries with the intention of separating from Bosnia and eventually joining Serbia as a part of the idea of "Greater Serbia." The two entities were etched out along the former front lines allocating approximately 49% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's land to the Republika Srpska. There is much controversy over whether the Republika Srpska should exist as it is seen as a reward for acts of genocide and ethnic-cleansing carried out by Serbs during the war.

⁵ Bosniak is a term used for Muslims in Bosnia.

observe life in capitals of the two entities. There is a more nationalistic feeling in RS as displayed in stands selling the entity's flag, shirts with the pictures of war criminals being praised as heroes, and the lack of mosques, while Sarajevo celebrates its diversity by maintaining the religious institutions of all major religions in the area. However, besides these examples, it is difficult to see vast visible differences between the two sub-states; the lines of division are more within each person.

I wanted to speak with people who had a wide range of connection to the Peace Camps, from seasoned trainers to new participants. I also wanted to talk with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, ages, and residences. I wanted to know who came to the Peace Camps and what motivated different people to come to them. The people I interviewed had been to six, four, and three Peace Camps and one had only participated last year. Some had attended Peace Camps before the Center for Peacebuilding ran them and others had only been to those run by that organization. I spoke with people from Sanski Most, Sarajevo, Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad⁶, and Banja Luka. I interviewed two people who identified as Muslims, two who identified as Serbs, and one who chose not to identify himself with an ethnic or religious background. The ages of those I interviewed ranged from early twenties to later thirties. The interviews consisted of semi-structured dialogues conducted on a one-to-one basis.

I was interested in what people's experiences had been during their time at the Peace Camps. What was memorable, difficult, frustrating, meaningful? I wanted to know if the Peace Camps made a difference or were more of a seminar on the different

⁶ Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad was originally named Bosanski Novi. The name was changed when the city became a part of the Republika Srpska (one of the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was controlled by Serbs during the war). Many people, mainly non-Serbs, refuse to acknowledge this difference and continue to call it Bosanski Novi.

kinds of conflict resolution theories and, if so, if they still make a difference. I wanted to know if the difference the camps make is personal or if it has political or social implications. When our class visited the Center for Peacebuilding we had been told that people felt that the Peace Camps were a life changing experience. I wanted to know what about the Peace Camps created this kind of a response. I was particularly interested in what people did after their Peace Camp experience and if what they experienced was carried into their daily lives or was left at the camps.

As an advocate for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, I was hopeful for positive experiences from the peace camps. I recognized this lens and attempted to give the space for those I interviewed to express their opinions about the camps and to share their experiences, both good and bad. I also realized that I am a foreigner coming, as so many others had before me, to talk about conflict resolution. However, as a volunteer for Center for Peacebuilding and as a student rather than an implementer of projects, I separated myself from the long tradition of foreigners who come with the aim of fixing of Bosnia's problems. Instead, I wished to learn how Bosnians are attempting to fix Bosnia's problems and by introducing myself as such eased the minds of many of the people I interviewed. Making this distinction made the people I interviewed more willing to meet with me in the first place and then also to share with me their experiences.

Sanski Most sees its share of foreigners during the tourist season but people were often interested in what I was doing here in April when it is cold and rainy. I was often introduced as a volunteer at the Center for Peacebuilding, which brought about various reactions. Other NGOs have had volunteers from Western Europe and they have acquired a reputation for being lazy, disrespectful, and demanding. However, being from

the United States somehow separated me from that expectation, as did assurances by the director of the Center for Peacebuilding that I was a good volunteer. This affirmation by a respected community leader gave me the credibility need in the community to conduct my research.

Historical Background

During the Bosnian wars from 1992-1995, Sanski Most was the front line of the fighting between Serbs and Bosniaks. Today it continues to hold a symbolic position balanced on the line separating Bosnia's two entities, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The story of Sanski Most is very much a microcosm of the story of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While driving to his house in a village, Vahidin Omanović, the director of the Center for Peacebuilding in Sanski Most, pointed to the houses we passed and said that every single house had lost at least one person in the war.

All the houses were new, he told me, except the ones that were never rebuilt, houses of those who never came back or those where the entire family had died. He pointed at a group of houses over the hill and said that that had been the Serb village, godparents and friends of people in his village and Sanski Most. "They were the first to attack us," he said, "We were very disappointed in them."

Many people in the predominately Muslim area had been placed in concentration camps while the rest, fled seeking refuge in Western Europe, predominantly Germany, Slovenia, Croatia; the United States, and other places around the world. According to Vahidin, every non Serb left, was expelled, or was killed before the war ended. After the

signing of the Dayton Agreement⁷ and the creation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's two entities, Sanski Most, again, ended up on the front lines.

Today, in 2008, there is little visible evidence of Sanski Most's sad history. All the buildings in town have been rebuilt as have the bridges that give the town its namesake⁸. There is, however, much emotional impact of the war that goes unnoticed by outside observers. Like many people in BiH, many of the people of Sanski Most have suffered trauma during the war that they must continue with their lives while also dealing with their trauma. According to some estimations, 96% of people in BiH have survived trauma⁹. The Center for Peacebuilding (or CIM¹⁰ as it is referred to by those most familiar with it) is dedicated to helping the people of Sanski Most and the surrounding area deal with these traumatic experiences, but also to keeping conflicts like this from ever occurring again.

The Peace Camps

CIM was founded in 2004 by Vahidin Omanović upon his return from study in the United States. While there, he studied at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont and received his M.A. in Intercultural Communication with a focus on Conflict Resolution. CIM, founded on the principle of conflict resolution, now has quite a few activities in its repertoire. Vahidin is a trained Cranial Sacral therapist and

⁷ The Dayton Agreement was the international Peace Treaty that ultimately stopped the fighting and set up the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this agreement the two entities of BiH, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina were created effectively halting the front lines as they were at that point. Because of this, Sanski Most, which was under control of Bosnian Serbs during much of the war, was placed in the Muslim and Croat controlled Federation.

⁸ In Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, *most* means bridge. Sanski Most is named after the bridge that spans the Sana river.

⁹ Zoe's ISP.

¹⁰ CIM is an abbreviation for Centra za Izgradanju Mira which is Center for Peacebuilding in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian.

offers consultations in CIM for anyone who has suffered through traumatic experience. This is a form of therapy that frees trauma that is stored in the body. He and a few others also offer free counseling, oftentimes in the homes of those receiving counseling as it is culturally believed that mental therapy of any kind is for only the seriously mentally ill. Many are ashamed to be receiving counseling and instead invited Vahidin and his colleagues into their homes for coffee. Because so many of their clients felt more comfortable inviting them over for coffee rather than receiving counseling in a formal setting, Vahidin decided to start a project called Kava/Kafa/Kahva za Mir¹¹ or Coffee for Peace which is an entire afternoon dedicated to coffee and dialogue. Tome Bringa discusses the culture of coffee in her book *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*. Inviting someone for coffee has a special meaning in Bosnia, meaning that you want to get to know someone better¹². Through their Coffee for Peace project, CIM has opened its doors to the community of Sanski Most and expressed a desire to know them and their needs in order to address them better.

Other activities include seminars in nonviolent communication for adults and children, free language lessons in English, German, and Spanish taught by native speakers, tutoring for children with behavioral problems, cultural night, a positive news radio show, community events such as movies, visits to surrounding villages completing

¹¹ The word for coffee is different in Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian. Though the languages are very similar, and previously considered the same language (Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian) some words are pronounced differently or a different word is used in each language. Coffee is one of those words, Kava in Croatian, Kafa in Serbian, and Kahva in Bosnian. In an attempt to appeal to people of all nationalities, CIM decided to use all three forms of the word coffee in the title of their event to celebrate people's differences along with emphasizing their common cultural such as their affinity for coffee.

¹² Bringa, Tome, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995.

a survey of their needs, youth volunteer club, godparents program for connecting local people with children in need, and capacity building for other NGOs¹³.

The main activity of CIM is their annual Peace Camp which is the main focus of this paper. The weeklong camp is held in August every year from a Sunday afternoon to the next Saturday in a hotel with a different location within BiH each year. It was founded by a Swiss group named St. Katarina Werk in 1999 as a means of getting Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats together to reconcile their differences after the bitter fighting during the war. Vahidin attended these first camps before leaving BiH to study in the United States. The Peace Camp in 1999 was a success but the following year the camp was held in the Republika Srpska and, according to Vahidin, was “a disaster.” He described the situation in an interview saying,

Serb participants started to behave like this was their land their country and we should all be silent and especially, the topic for that Peace Camp was men and women and their relationship and, from the Bosniak side, we wanted to present women who were raped during the war and also to present that rape was used as a war tool. And they sat us down and they said that if you do this they will do something to us. And also they let people from the local village know that we were there and they also started to behave nasty to us. They were cursing at us and we were not feeling very free to go out of the hotel and then eventually I wanted to go home in the middle of the Peace Camp¹⁴.

After this experience, the Swiss from St. Katarina Werk decided step back in their participation and control over administration of the camps. After Vahidin returned from the US he was entrusted to carry on the work of the Peace Camps because of his degree, and ran them along with CIM. Because of this history, I was interested in learning if things had changed as a result of Vahidin’s experience. Were people now able to discuss

¹³ For more information on these activities visit CIM’s website is www.unvocim.net.

¹⁴ Interview #1 by author

controversies? Were competing narratives given the space to be expressed and acknowledged in these new Peace Camps?

Each morning of the Peace Camp begins with a morning prayer, each day introducing a different religious tradition usually following the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish traditions. After the prayer are approximately three hours of interactive workshops following the methodology of experiential learning to analyze topics such as stereotypes, prejudice, conflict, causes for conflict, conflict transformation, non violent communication, communication in general, active listening, gender relations, socio-economic relationships, race, and nationality. Fears and hopes are also addressed in these activities along with analyzing violence and conflict theoretically, looking at human needs, cycles of violence, and structural violence as a basis for understanding the Bosnian conflict and looking at possible causes for future conflicts in BiH. The dialogue process and facilitation were added to make the Peace Camps a training of peacebuilders.

This change was added by Vahidin to make sure that the effect of the Peace Camps does not end when the participants leave the hotel, but that they continue their peacebuilding in their own communities. In accordance with this, participants who have come back for their second Peace Camp run the interactive exercises already prepared by the facilitators. This is meant to give the participants practical experience working with the subject while still remaining under the guidance of trained facilitators. Then the participants sit together in small groups and share more intimately with each other for approximately ninety minutes.

In the afternoon, those coming to a Peace Camp for the first time teach a class on nonviolent communication under the supervision and guidance of the facilitators. This

role playing activity again offers new participants practical experience and feedback they will later use when completing their Peace Camp practicum. To complete the training of a Peace Camp, a participant must come to two camps and complete a practicum of twenty hours of nonviolent communication workshops with primary school children in between them. After the role play is an hour of signing and dancing for peace and then, after dinner, are facilitated dialogues on topics chosen by the facilitators and participants.

Experiences of Participants

The Participants Themselves

Every year in May, CIM sends out invitations to Bosnian NGOs, past participants, and friends informing them when and where the Peace Camp will be that August. The recipients of these invitations pass them on to anyone they think would be interested. Those interested then fill out a short application explaining why they want to attend. If the applicant shows ample interest in the Peace Camp and takes it seriously she is accepted.

CIM attempts to keep a balance in their demographics between Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Roma, men, women, etc. and, according to Vahidin, it tends to work out though there are usually slightly more men than women, contrary to other trends in attendance of peacebuilding activities for reasons not yet explored. Most of those who attend are students, NGO employees, and teachers. One explanation given in an interview was that the timing of the camp was ideal for students and teachers and that most people working in the private or civil service sector do not have the time to devote to a week long seminar. Most of the participants' ages range from 22-35. There were

participants who were younger than this who were not mature enough to handle the Peace Camp and left early while those older than this tend to not be as interested.

Motivation depends on how much information about the Peace Camps the person has before applying. Many people hear about the camps through a close friend or relative and they tend to be the most informed. When asked why they chose to come to the Peace Camp, one participant simply stated, “because I want to build peace¹⁵” while another had more specific ambitions saying,

I had expectations of finding people who would be easy to communicate to because at that time we were kind of closed into our little communities and we didn't have much contact with people from the other places so it was nice to see that there are people like that and I just wanted to meet them¹⁶.

Those who were invited by friends or family, as the participant above was, had the Peace Camps described in detail to them and also were able to witness the impact the experience had on their loved one. For many, it is an introduction into the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. One participant admitted that he had had no idea what a Peace Camp entailed saying,

Peace Camp was my first experience of that kind...I work in NGO sector and like all NGOs we are always going to some kind of seminar or something. And one day I got on the net and I found the invitation to the Peace Camp. And I called two of my friends, one is Orthodox and one is Muslim and we go to a Peace Camp. We thought it would be kind of like a summer vacation, at first because we didn't really know where we were going¹⁷.

¹⁵ Interview #2 by author

¹⁶ Interview #4 by author

¹⁷ Interview #5 by author

He then spoke of his sister that he had invited to a Peace Camp saying, “Last year I convinced my sister to come with me and she was so, I don’t know. Whenever we talked about it she was so excited about it and would say, ‘I can’t wait until August!’¹⁸”

Explaining the Unexplainable

The wide range of information about the Peace Camps known to those who applied does not, however, have an impact on the experience of the Peace Camp. As the participant from Sarajevo who was quite informed about the Peace Camp before attending said, “it’s sort of like talking about swimming in theory and in practice; you have to jump into the water, to feel it¹⁹.” As I found out from each participant I interviewed, the Peace Camp is just that, an experience that has to be felt rather than explained. One participant asked Vahidin to explain what they would be doing in the Peace Camp and he declined. She said afterward, “Later I knew why because you can not really explain that. It’s impossible²⁰.”

The inability to explain one’s experience in the Peace Camp was a trend I noticed among those I spoke with. Often people would use general terms to describe their Peace Camp experience like ‘good,’ ‘great,’ or ‘wonderful’ struggling to put into words exactly what it was that they felt about the experience. One participant from Sanski Most said, “It was just beautiful time. It was really beautiful and I really have too little language to explain it.²¹” Another chose to explain the impact it had on his life saying his life,

¹⁸ Interview #5 by author.

¹⁹ Interview # 4 by author.

²⁰ Interview #3 by author

²¹ Ibid.

“turned around 180 degrees²²” after the Peace Camp. Another spent a long time explaining to me the Peace Camp eventually concluding, “You can never explain the feelings and the goings on to anyone who is outside that circle who’s never been there.²³” This sentiment was echoed in many of the written evaluations completed by participants at the end of the Peace Camp last year, “This is one big experience which is meaningful to me and it is difficult to describe in writing because only who has done this knows how much richness and happiness [it has]²⁴.”

This inability to explain themselves, from what I could see, derives from a lack of language to describe being in the environment. Life changing and influential experiences are often difficult to discuss (especially in one’s second or third language). Much talk of energy and gestures were used to no avail. Most people felt frustrated by their inability to convey how they felt and often asked me if I understood that it was perhaps inexplicable. But this clarified, for me, the importance of the experience to them and I even admitted to one interviewee that most people I had talked to about the Peace Camps were not able to express in words their experience and that tends to be a good sign.

From my experience, events that have enough impact on me to challenge the way I perceive the world, are exceptionally emotional, or touch me very deeply are difficult to put into words. When an occurrence is so out of the ordinary, we often lack the vocabulary to describe the impression it has left in our lives. Comparisons are difficult to make because it is like no other event in its effect on your life. When interviewing the participants, it was obvious by their tone and body language that the Peace Camp was a phenomenon that had that kind of influence on their lives.

²² Interview #5 by author.

²³ Interview #4 by author

²⁴ Evaluation by anonymous participant provided by CIM. Translated by the author.

Meeting “the Other”

Perhaps one of the reasons the experience is so influential for them is that the Peace Camp was also a first opportunity to meet someone from the enemy side during the war. For two participants, it was the first time they had been to the other entity since they were created, one to Federation and the other to the Republika Srpska. For one, who attended in 2001, it was the first time he had even heard of the two sides meeting in a non-diplomatic setting. As a participant from Bosanski Novi/ Novi Grad said, “In a homogenous area you are not living in a real reality; you do not have to know how to communicate with different people. You don’t have to talk to the enemy because the enemy lives somewhere else” saying later, “A lot of people I know have not had a conversation more than hello with a Muslim or a Croat²⁵” explaining that people will be cordial to their neighbors but will never engage in conversations with them much less to the extent they do in the Peace Camps.

One Serb participant said that the hardest part of any Peace Camp was hearing stories from his Bosniak friends and their experiences during the war. He said that it affected him very much and it was difficult for him to hear about the suffering of his friends but it was necessary for the peace process. One participant described a meaningful encounter with two Serb participants,

For example I met two Serbs, B. and B. They are brother and sister and their father died two days before and they come to Peace Camp and we spoke about everything and we also spoke about their father. And B. said that their father always said, ‘You are Bosnian. You are not Serbs. It is different between Bosnia and Serbia. You are Bosnian²⁶. That is your

²⁵ Interview #5 by author

²⁶ This is significant because the Republika Srpska’s official rhetoric is that it will become a separate state from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia in the idea of “Greater Serbia” including Republika Spbska,

home.’ And that was the first time I had a wish to [light] a candle for him, for her father²⁷.

The participant was from Sanski Most and described moments like this one as part of her process of “blowing up [her] prejudice” saying that this was a significant step on the way.

Prejudices are discussed in the Peace Camp and many noted the destruction of prejudices as a result of their time there. One participant from Banja Luka said, “I [had] fears, I [had] superstitions but after my first Peace Camp these disappeared.²⁸” A more poignant and also descriptive account of this process was of one Bosniak participant, E., who described her experience realizing that she did in fact have prejudices against Serbs. She told of her time in Srebrenica²⁹ at a conference at which she encountered a Serb woman. E. got upset that the woman was there claiming that she had no right be there. “Then I heard the woman’s story and I realized my own prejudices³⁰” she said.

Small Groups

Most of the people who attend the Peace Camps have already started the process of becoming aware of their prejudices before they arrive. E.’s experience in Srebrenica was before she attended the Peace Camp and laid the groundwork for what she did experience in the Peace Camp. One seasoned participant said, “99% of the composition

the predominantly Serb populated Krajina Region of Croatia, Serbia Proper, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Many blame the idea of “Greater Serbia” for the rise in nationalism and, ultimately, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia though there was a rise in Croatian nationalism at the time as well. However, this ideal was the intention of the Serbian nationalist army when establishing the Republika Srpska. Sanski Most, where she is from, was a part of the Republika Srpska during much of the war.

²⁷ Interview #3 by author.

²⁸ Interview #2 by author.

²⁹ Srebrenica was the site of the greatest mass killing of Muslims by the Bosnian Serb paramilitaries. 8000 Muslim men and boys of ‘fighting age’ were killed and buried in mass graves. It occurred in what was proclaimed UN ‘Safe Area’ near the end of the war. It has become symbolic of the genocide inflicted upon the Muslims in Bosnia. It has been largely denied by Serbs. The two most infamous war criminals, Karadić and Mladić, have been indicted by The Hague for this and other ethnic cleansing campaigns. They are still at large today.

³⁰ Interview #3 by author.

of the Peace Camp is speaking to the converted” later adding that this was part of the appeal of the camps, “You know from the start that people are basically going to agree with you in most of the things you say. And that maybe one or two of them are going to be deeply rooted in the local way of life and it’s going to stir things around then we try to bring them around to our side³¹.” Those deeply entrenched in their positions tend to avoid seminars and camps with the words ‘peace’ or ‘reconciliation’ in the title. But to “convert” those deeply rooted people that attend and to challenge those who believe themselves to be accepting and tolerant is the work of the Peace Camps.

Because the Peace Camps attract people with a certain amount of open-mindedness, it also serves as a meeting place for those like-minded folk who wish to make a change in their communities. One participant suggested this as a motivation for people to continue to return after their two year training has been completed saying, “What they would like to see is they would like to see that there are people open to other people first, to other ideas, and open to what would be anywhere else [other than Bosnia] just a normal communication. Unfortunately this country doesn’t offer that very much.³²” Outside of these encounters Dialogue between ethnicities is not a possibility for many so they are attracted to the like-mindedness of the group. Another participant said in the Peace Camp she didn’t feel judged and that was a very important experience for her because she often feels judged for her non-mainstream ideals in her home community.

This feeling of acceptance is in many ways enhanced by the small groups sessions that allow the participants to know each other more intimately. One participant from Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad said,

³¹ Interview # 4 by author.

³² Ibid.

Peace Camp is, for me, all about the small groups and there is a bond between people which you never see before like in the song ‘last night I told a stranger all about me³³.’ You are with someone you have never seen before. You are in a group of three or four strangers and you tell them everything, everything that I am afraid of, all my fears and desires. That is in small groups everyone shares their fears and wishes³⁴.

This open freedom to discuss one’s most intimate feelings with strangers is what seems to set the Peace Camps apart from other encounters. Each interviewee stressed that this was the heart of their experience. One participant said that this is the important part of the gatherings- that people can speak easily about their feelings with complete strangers after only a day. He continued saying,

In this group they felt they could express themselves freely and they were among friends, real friends and they were not ashamed to say what they really felt because that’s what the Peace Camp does, brings out the best in you and you wear your heart on your sleeve and you are not afraid to show it to everyone because you know that these particular people, these ones with you are not the ones who are going to hurt you, definitely not. Not all of them are going to be your best friends but they are not going to hurt you³⁵.

Safety from being hurt or ridiculed while bearing your soul is a very difficult and essential in creating meaningful relationships between participants. This is especially true for those who have lived through the fear of war and continue to live in fear. One participant from Banja Luka said, “Here fear is always in all life just like coffee or tea, always we have fear.” The security within the groups is a very important and very impressionable aspect of the Peace Camps.

The experience is so important to those who have never experienced this kind of trust but it continues to remain influential to those who return. The trust is important in creating a nurturing environment for the relationship building. Trust was deeply violated

³³ The interviewee quoted the first line of the song “In Spite of Me” by Morphine.

³⁴ Interview #5 by author.

³⁵ Interview #4 by author.

by the war and the circumstances of the war and it must be rebuilt in these small intimate settings. The experience can be freeing as described by one participant,

When we talk about the week that has passed and it's so important to express and to try to convey...the emotions that people have and I was surprised how some people felt, people who were not even for the first time at the Peace Camp, how strongly they felt about it, how important it was to them, how free from all kinds of bounds and shackles they felt³⁶.

To be able to share this way with someone who was previously your enemy is the very crux of the encounter itself. These “two to three days of unconstrained emotion³⁷” are what brings people back year after year and may be what is so inexplicable about the experience.

Talking About the War

Since the camps were created after the war as an attempt to get all sides together to talk, most of the stories that people share are from the war. To be fair, the war and its effects that are still being felt today often occupy much of the space in conversations here. Most people do not share their feelings but rather something similar to a play by play of what happened to them during the war. Emotions are often left out of the story and that is where Vahidin and other trained therapists step in. As he explained to me and two Swiss visitors, once people share their stories he asks them what it felt when they were, humiliated, afraid, betrayed, etc. He said that by naming the emotion, people can then conceptualize their experience and only then can they process it.

People share their experiences during the war which are very personal and sensitive because of the safe environment that has been created. One participant said,

³⁶ Interview #4 by author.

³⁷ Ibid.

“When we talk about the war, we talk about it on a personal level. In the Peace Camp, everything is personal. We never come to the situation where we talk about Serbs must, no, we talk about where *I* was during the war, what happened to *me* because that is the first step is to talk about me and the a war because that is what I know³⁸.” Discussing the war on a personal level helps to create personal bonds along with helping someone cope with their traumatic experience.

Hearing another person’s story can also be difficult because nearly everyone has a personal connection with the war. One trainer from Banja Luka said, “It’s not easy especially for person who lost family in the war and it’s very hard for them to talk about the war but I think it is necessary and only through this story we can go forward.” He later added, “Also, it is not easy for people who are hearing that story but I think it is necessary for success of the peace project, to talk about this story for healing³⁹.”

For others, it may be the first time they have heard about another’s experience during the war and this is an opportunity to do so in a safe environment where people are not blamed. One participant said, “It was the first time for me to actually feel the strength of emotions of other people because I didn’t spend a single second in the war. I was in Serbia throughout⁴⁰.” This sharing of personal experiences can create a greater understanding and open up discussion of the past in a constructive way.

Discussing the past is a very important part of the process of creating peace. Vahidin very much stresses the idea of dealing with the past because it he feels that failing to do this, such as after World War II, created a situation in which people were

³⁸ Interview #5 by author.

³⁹ Interview #2 by author.

⁴⁰ Interview #4 by author.

able to dredge up old wounds and use them to start the wars in the '90s . Therefore, to prevent another war, the past must be dealt with now.

It can also challenge how one understands the past and also one's participation within it. One Serb participant described dealing with his guilt in the Peace Camps saying, "I feel like I am guilty on a very personal level. But with a little bit of Vahidin's guidance I found out a way to live with your trauma and still function with that trauma and it is something that we have to deal with within ourselves."⁴¹ Dealing with feelings of guilt in a safe environment is essential to creating understanding between groups of people and often receives less attention than dealing with other traumas or war. Seeing someone from the enemy side struggling with guilt can offer new insight into the situation for those from the victimized side.

This sharing intimately with strangers can be a very moving experience. This was expressed by one participant who said,

People open up to other people in so many ways and when it's time to split up you see so many tearful eyes and then you realize the impact of the whole group, the energy of the whole group the high hopes of the whole group is just going to go forward and we are going to...Everybody hopes that we are going to be able to carry this over into the next year⁴².

Ultimately, the energy and the relationships that are created by these encounters are what Vahidin banks on to inspire them to go out and make changes within their communities. Analyzing the past has no purpose unless it is used to focus on the future. Because the main goal of CIM is to prevent another war from breaking out in the region, the mission of the Peace Camps is to inspire, train, and support peacebuilders and activists to return to their own communities and enact changes for peace.

⁴¹ Interview #5 by author.

⁴² Interview #2 by author.

Bringing It Home

Many people wish to make personal changes in their daily interactions because they have seen what an important aspect personal relations is to the peace process. One participant said that he tries to “approach people as if they are at a Peace Camp, accord them the same trust⁴³.” He continued to say that the Peace Campers (as he called them) are enacting Mahatma Gandhi’s famous quotation, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” He claimed that the Peace Camp really makes a difference in the way the participants think and that they take this with them when they return. Another participant said, “After the Peace Camp I, kind of reset my priorities. They got all mixed up, not mixed up, I just started reviewing them. It made me realize which are important and which are not so important⁴⁴.” Spreading peace becomes a much higher priority and this is done through a concept of peace multiplying. This is basically creating peace through a ripple effect. The participant above explained that it is seen as the duty of each participant saying, “It is up to me after the Peace Camp in my community to make peace multiplying⁴⁵.”

Part of the change that the Peace Camp encourages is the idea of spreading peace through personal actions. The most common concrete action for participants of the Peace Camps is the practicum of teaching nonviolent communication to children. I joined one participant to her practicum in a local elementary school. On the way there, she admitted to me that she was scared at first to do the project but once she saw that the children needed it, she felt much more comfortable doing it. The children in primary schools are

⁴³ Interview #4 by author.

⁴⁴ Interview #5 by author.

⁴⁵ Interview #5 by author.

indirectly dealing with the trauma of their parents and of the communities as a whole. They have no memory of living in harmony with other nationalities and are often aggressive. When explaining this to me, Vahidin quoted his professor from SIT who said, “If you don’t deal with this, your children will⁴⁶.” Because of this, the practicum, that is meant to give the participants experience in conducting peace projects in their community, is focused on giving children the tools to communicate nonviolently.

Others take their task of creating peace in their communities and interpret it differently. Some volunteer at the CIM in Sanski Most while others have chosen open Centers for Peacebuilding in Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad or Banja Luka. Another has chosen to implement what he has learned in the Peace Camps to his job as an interpreter for an international peacekeeping NGO. He said of his job, “Both sides of the table have their own agenda, both sides of the table are just human beings. I try to understand them, what drives them in their behavior just as I try to understand everybody else at the Peace Camp, why they show these kinds of emotions when they do⁴⁷.” He also took the idea of conflict resolution as a person calling saying, “You have to approach the people and you have to convince them. I believe that’s called soft power these days. I feel like a powerful person even if it is soft power, if I can convince somebody to start doing things with different eyes, to start accepting the concept, then we can start living in harmony⁴⁸.”

One participant took the concept of creating peace as a personal mission. When speaking of the war he said, “I have to act so that it won’t happen again. I have to, it’s mustn’t repeat again. And so that is my personal responsibility now⁴⁹.” He found great

⁴⁶ Paula Green as quoted by Vahidin Omanović in lecture to SIT Study Abroad students.

⁴⁷ Interview #4 by author.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Interview #5 by author.

power in his convictions and inspiration to act in prevention of another war. He explained to me this personal responsibility more in depth saying,

Some people say that there will be a war again, maybe in 50 years when everyone has forgets everything and becomes stupid again. Then I realize that from the conversations that I have with persons at the Peace Camp that there are people who will not let that happen again and they are all over and have attended the Peace Camps. They have looked back and realized what was happening and they will never let it happen again because it can't happen again. The Peace Camp has made us instruments to make sure that it doesn't happen again....Before some conflict, we will not allow it. We will say 'Don't do that' or 'Why you do that?' and such. And I will be backed up by all the people who have been through a Peace Camp. We could stop something bad....Spreading of information, telling people about it to make it a bigger and stronger protest in one local community and say 'Stop, don't do that.' And I realize that there is some power in that. And that for me is peace multiplied and for that I appreciate Peace Camp⁵⁰.

This participant had initially felt guilty for being a Bosnian Serb. He felt personally responsible for the actions of Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia though he was a child during the war. The Peace Camp gave him this new perspective and empowered him to take personal responsibility for preventing another war without feeling guilty for the one he could not prevent. When another participant was questioned as to why he wishes to continue his peace work and make changes he said, "I don't want to let them down" speaking of his fellow Peace Campers. He feels he has a responsibility to those who have been through a Peace Camp with him and is also with their support that the peace projects are implemented.

Web of Support

⁵⁰ Interview #5 by author.

As one participant said of the Peace Camps, “That’s the whole idea to have this web of people who are interested in such things. Then bring your enthusiasm home⁵¹.” The web of people created in the Peace Camps become a support system for people personally and while implementing peace projects in their communities. Since the majority opinion (or at least the loudest and most publicized opinion) is that of intolerance, hate, distrust, and blame, seeing that that is not the only option out there can be freeing, and having others that share your opinion can be empowering. Simply letting the mainstream dominate one’s mind, according to one participant, is “the easiest thing to do. Instead of coming up with new ways to deal with things you just say, ‘These are the guys, at this table over here, who are guilty for you not having jobs or whatever⁵².’”

Having to fight both the mainstream and the apathy and fear that allows this opinion to remain in power can be exhausting work for an individual. This makes the web of support the Peace Camp creates all the more important. The same participant said of this support, “And I also know that I can always draw on the energy of these people who have become my friends. And if there are tough times you can always say, ‘Hey, I need to see you for a weekend to talk with.’” He added later, “These Peace Camps brought new quality to my life, definitely. Because I felt that I can be an anchor to someone and someone can be an anchor for me when I feel that I am on stormy seas⁵³.” The relationships built during the Peace Camps do not remain within the walls of the hotel but continue beyond the week in August.

Vahidin also mentioned that having these friends on “the other side” is also important when things begin to look unstable again. When Kosovo declare independence

⁵¹ Interview #4 by author.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

in March rekindling the Republika Srpska's call for independence in Bosnia, a trainer from Banja Luka called Vahidin to let him know that not everyone in the Republika Srpska agreed with these calls. Vahidin said he was better able to calm people's fears in Sanski Most when he was able to say with certainty that not everyone was thinking like the nationalists.

It is important that these relationships last outside of the Peace Camps because they could easily be left behind in that environment. Most of the participants described the Peace Camps as an alternate reality, one that at is in every way different from the reality they live in normally. One participant said, "Reality is reality and reality is just not like Peace Camp⁵⁴." This difference can be hard to settle. When commenting on returning after a Peace Camp one participant said, "When we come back to our communities the difference is so great like you came from another planet⁵⁵." This difference can cause difficulties in connecting the two worlds. The participant described his experience as "devastating" saying that it took him the entire weekend after to process all of the emotions he had experienced. He compared this situation to culture shock, further accentuating the difference between the Peace Camp and 'reality' expressed by so many. The difference is not always evident until returning home as expressed in a story of a participant returning to her home after a Peace Camp.

When I come home, I had experience that I can see more. I don't know how. And my family said to me, "Mom, you are a little bit strange." And I asked my children, 'Why?' and they say, 'Because you are so, I don't know.' And then I ask them, 'Do you not like me like that?' and they say, 'Yes, but it's only different.' It was really big difference before I went to Peace Camp and when I came back. It was very different. But I didn't realize it in Peace Camp. I realized it first after the Peace Camp⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Interview #2 by author

⁵⁵ Interview #4 by author

⁵⁶ Interview #3 by author

The different space that is created in the Peace Camps is intentional to separate one from their entrenched beliefs for the week while they analyze them. It is held in a different place so that the participants can separate themselves from their prejudices and misconceptions but the point is to bring back their experiences to their lives at home.

This seems to be effective, as all the participants I spoke with are very committed to connecting their experiences in the Peace Camp with their lives despite the differences. Some have even begun to seek out that difference year after year as a way to connect with like-minded people to inspire them to keep up their peacebuilding work. One participant said, “That’s what keeps us going, small groups of energy, or contacts of people visiting each other. We are running on this positive energy and recharging once every year. It’s like that because it keeps us sane, I’d say⁵⁷.” Another compared herself to a car running on reserve oil before the Peace Camp saying that the experience refueled her⁵⁸. This recharging offers continuous support during peace projects and continues the connection between the Peace Camp and the rest of reality.

The Swiss Group

Nearly every experience, no matter how difficult, was seen as very positive. The only part of Peace Camp that was criticized even in the slightest was the focus on religion that begins every day. One participant who had been participating since before Vahidin took over spoke of his job of translating for the Swiss during their time in charge of the Peace Camps.

⁵⁷ Interview #4 by author

⁵⁸ Interview #3 by author

I started communicating with the Swiss and I'm sure I managed to convey people's feelings about what was going on and those feelings were not always good. Because they had to deal with their own emotions first and then they had to deal with the expressions of religion which are somewhat different from here, the morning prayers and all the ritual⁵⁹.

He said that most people were respectful of the ritual but felt that it was not how locals would approach the subject of religion. He felt it was a cultural difference of how religion is perceived in Switzerland and in BiH saying that the Swiss "operate from a different method because they come from a very religious community. We are only ostensibly religious but we are very much down to earth⁶⁰." This sentiment was echoed by another participant who said, "At first I was so afraid with all that spiritual stuff. I grew up in a communistic society, where spiritualism is so bad⁶¹." He went on to say that he felt uncomfortable, not at the display or religious practices of others' traditions but more so when he was expected to present his own tradition. He said that he was raised in a very secular family and that he learned the 'Our Father'⁶² at the Peace Camp.

However, others saw the religiosity of the Peace Camps as something beautiful. One participant said that one the most memorable experiences of the Peace Camp was this display of religious traditions. She said, "It was nice too, for example, Serbs. And it was nice to hear them, how they pray to God, you know? And you realize first hand that they are also people, they have also their own prayer to God but before I didn't. Peace Camp was not my first experience with the Serbs but there it was stronger in Peace Camp⁶³." In this case, the expression of religion was helpful in creating the intimate

⁵⁹ Interview #4 by author

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Interview #5 by author

⁶² The "Our Father" is the main prayer in Christianity. This is often the first prayer a child learns when growing up in the Christian tradition. His unfamiliarity with this prayer suggests that he was not raised in any religious tradition but was more culturally Orthodox than religiously.

⁶³ Interview #3 by author

exchange of culture and dispelling stereotypes. Religion has been used as a way to cultivate nationalist sentiments as a way to accentuate differences. Its inclusion in the Peace Camps can help to separate the religious tradition and the way it is used by extremists.

Almost none of the participants said that they had disappointing or frustrating experiences. One participant admitted that the only frustration he finds is within himself saying “I don’t think there were any frustrating or disappointing experiences except on a personal level. I get frustrated because I didn’t express myself the right way. It is mainly when you are looking back on your life and you realize oh I didn’t react or something⁶⁴.” The lack of frustrations with the experience may have had to do with the limited number of participants I interviewed out of the number who have graduated from or attended the Peace Camps⁶⁵, but it might also have to do with the reforms that were set in place by Vahidin because of his negative experience when he attended the 2000 Peace Camp. The other seasoned participant claimed that “in the beginning [the Swiss] didn’t understand us much⁶⁶.” The different approach of the Swiss was discussed at length with this participant to gain an understanding as to why Vahidin’s experience was so negative.

The Swiss, according to this participant, had their own preconceived notions about the causes of the war in Bosnia and their own ideas about what to do about it. The participant said,

There were certain conflicts there were certain tense situations because you first of all, the Swiss didn’t organize it very well...In their minds, there are clean cut differences between us and we all know that there are

⁶⁴ Interview #5 by author

⁶⁵ I interviewed 5 participants out of 56 that have been trained by the Peace Camps. I also realize that I was given contracts by CIM and that they were all people still in contact with Vahidin regularly giving a certain amount of skew to my results.

⁶⁶ Interview #4 by author

no clean cut differences among people because you have people who have families on both sides of the fence so when they tried to form groups, their approach clashed with people's emotions⁶⁷.

This clash between the approach the Swiss brought and the reality of the situation is unfortunately common among international peacekeeping missions coming into local areas and implementing projects.

Discussion

The Contact Hypothesis Theory and Conflict Resolution

The Swiss, so it seems, were working under the theory of the contact hypothesis. This theory claims that the simple act of bringing people together from opposing sides, possibly for some food or a fun activity, will end a conflict⁶⁸. In short, the contact hypothesis claims that *only* interaction of people from opposing groups is needed create understanding⁶⁹. This flawed approach was used during the first Peace Camps and proved disastrous because there were not proper mechanisms in place to prevent something like the 2000 Peace Camp from happening.

The contact hypothesis theory and its limitations have also been criticized recently by scholars in the field of conflict resolution. It is based on the concept that simply creating contact between groups in conflict will create understanding between people and that both sides will see that we are all human beings. It tends to ignore power relations between the two groups preventing open communication necessary for understanding. It can create situations such as the 2000 Peace Camp because, as during

⁶⁷ Interview #4 by author.

⁶⁸ Fridman, Orli. "In Search of Equality: a Jewish-Palestinian Encounter in the Former Yugoslavia." Currently under review Journal

⁶⁹ Abu-Nimer, Mohammed *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999 pg 7

this camp, minority narratives are ignored, discredited, or simply not allowed by the dominant group creating dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger in the participants.

The Peace Camps, under Vahidin's guidance, do not rely solely on interactions of the participants to create change in the attitudes and perceptions of the participants. The camps combine many aspects of different conflict resolution approaches. Firstly, conflict resolutions skills are developed including nonviolent communication, active listening, reflective listening and others as an introduction to the process. Discussion of what dialogue is and contrasting debate and dialogue is stressed in order to create a safe space for discussion with out the fear of retribution.

The next step is analysis of conflict in general including definitions of terms and an introduction to various theories through which conflict can be analyzed. This includes the Human Needs theory by Burton⁷⁰ that shows conflict as deriving from a failure to meet certain basic human needs. The camps also include analysis of history in an attempt to diagnosis the causes of the war using various theories on the causes of conflict including the "conflict spiral model"⁷¹. This model shows conflict as a vicious cycle of action and reaction and can be used to analyze also the cycle of victimization⁷². In this form, the Peace Camps open the space for dialogue and understanding between the groups in conflict.

Another critique of some conflict resolution theories is that they place high importance on the individual. These theories have acquired a fair amount of criticism that it lacks an ability to address issues on a structural or political level. They ignore

⁷⁰ Trainers' Manual for the Peace Camps- "Gradimo Mir Zajedno" Centar za Izgradnju Mira pg 12

⁷¹ Ibid. pg 15.

⁷² Fisher, Ronald J, "Socio-Psychological Processes in interactive Conflict Analysis and Reconciliation" Mohammed Abu-Nimer ed. *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001, pg 38.

power relations, inter-group relations and any substantial analysis of the conflict as anything more than a failure in communication or lack of education. They have been critiqued as supporting the status quo. One critic said that discrimination “will not change by contact but by collective action⁷³.”

The Peace Camps also invite participants to come on an individual level. This is done to prevent blame and to keep the event nonviolent. Collective responsibility is not something that is discussed as a topic point though it does come up in conversations. The topic is not addressed specifically for practical reasons as people would simply not come to the Peace Camps if they advertised discussing personal and collective responsibilities. The camps can only cover so much. Fears and needs of each ethnic group are brainstormed in small groups and then with the entire group, where common fears and needs are discussed in the context of a common future. Personal responsibility, however, is discussed at length and that is where political action is encouraged. But even when discussing politics it is done as if it were a separate entity from the participants themselves. They discuss what they would do differently and critique the government but not as a representative of a certain group.

However, the idea of collective responsibility does arise despite not explicitly being on the agenda. According to Vahidin, the group in 2005 was particularly difficult because many in the group had been a part of the military. However, he was surprised that year by the change that occurred in the group during the week. On the fourth day, a Serb veteran approached him and asked him if he could address the group. Vahidin, though initially hesitant, allowed this. When the man spoke, he asked for “forgiveness

⁷³ Abu-Nimer, Mohammed, *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel*, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1999. pg 7

from the group for anything that that had been done in is name as a Serb and forgave all who had hurt him in the name of others⁷⁴.” After this, a Bosniak soldier stood up and asked the same forgiveness from the group and forgave those who hurt him as well. Following suit, a Croat civilian similarly forgave and asked for forgiveness for the actions of those who share his nationality. In this case, the concept of collective responsibility was very much a part of the interaction. However, in an interview with a Bosnian Serb participant who was a civilian during the war defended his innocence for the actions of Serbs during the war saying that the guilty should go to jail and that he should not be blamed thus showing the inconsistencies in discussing collective responsibility.

The critique of some conflict resolution approaches, especially those which focuses on the individual rather than intergroup interaction, is that it does not relate directly to political and social change. Similar to the critique of the contact hypothesis, the communication approach to conflict resolution is that “removing misunderstanding and misconceptions will improve individual relationships, but it does not directly aim at achieving social and political changes⁷⁵” as argued by Abu-Nimer in *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel*. Those interactions that base their focus on the individual tend to deal more with the psychological factors. However, critics argue that “psychological factors do not operate separately from political factors⁷⁶” and should, therefore, incorporate both. Through analyzing conflict, the Peace Camps do discuss political factors of conflict but they do so in a way that separates the

⁷⁴ Interview #1 by author.

⁷⁵ Abu-Nimer, Mohammed, *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel*, pg 25

⁷⁶ Ibid. pg 23.

individual from the political which, in my opinion, does not encourage people to be politically active after the Peace Camps.

In analyzing the past, the participants of the Peace Camps also encounter different versions of history according to the different sides. In response to this, one participant said that it makes sense for different groups of people to have different histories but it is important that both sides know them in order to create better understanding. To avoid argument, the concept of dialogue is stressed throughout the camps. In this concept, the participants are instructed to “speak to explain, not to attack, and to listen to understand, not to defend⁷⁷.”

Another participant said that conflicting dialogues as such are an effect of the nature of the end of the conflict in BiH saying, “We had war in the country and both sides are fighting and neither has win...Nobody won, so nobody’s right⁷⁸.” This brings up an interesting point about how imperative analyzing histories is to the process of analyzing the roots of conflict. Since there was no clearly defined winner of this conflict, a growing trend among modern conflicts, there is no “right” version of history as is accepted of past conflicts. This only emphasizes the need to develop the means of analyzing conflict in order to break the cycle of victimization.

In response to the critique of conflict resolution not inspiring political or social change, the Peace Camps very clearly have the goal of creating peacebuilders and activists. The practicum is the most concrete example of what the participants will bring back to their communities but, as we have see from the feelings of the participants, the

⁷⁷ Interview #1 by author

⁷⁸ Interview #5 by author

sentiment does not end there. The participants have become actively involved in their communities as a result of their time in the Peace Camps.

However, though the participants do seem to maintain the changes they incurred during their time in the Peace Camps, it can not be assured that these changes will be infused into the political sphere. Vahidin prefers the grassroots approach⁷⁹ to political action and has even rejected the idea proposed in one Peace Camp that the graduates form a political party. It is then up to the individual how politically active she/he wants to be after the Peace Camp.

Conflict resolution in small groups such as the Peace Camps is meant to be one of many different approaches to resolving conflicts between ethnic groups as it cannot cover all aspects of conflict resolution. The camps are a part of the grassroots, community level peacebuilding process but should also be accompanied by other efforts on other levels. Other groups in Bosnia have similar initiatives as the Peace Camp with interactive group activities such as the Centre for Nonviolent Action⁸⁰, Nansen Dialogue Center in Mostar⁸¹, Banja Luka⁸², and Sarajevo⁸³, and Odisej⁸⁴. These groups have similar missions and work on the same grassroots level reaching people that the Peace Camps cannot.

Also, the Peace Camps cannot address all aspect of the reconciliation as it is “a two-level process – the individual level, comprised of social encounters among individuals citizens, which generates knowledge of the injustice(s) in question, and the

⁷⁹ Lederach, John Paul, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*,

⁸⁰ www.nenasilje.org

⁸¹ www.ndcmostar.org

⁸² www.ndcbanjaluca.org

⁸³ www.ndcsarajevo.org

⁸⁴ www.oodisej.org.ba

societal level, generally associated with the public domain in which public acknowledgment of crimes committed in the name of a group by the institutions representing it can take place⁸⁵.” This work is being done by other groups throughout BiH doing work that CIM and the Peace Camps do not address, usually on the societal level. The Information and Documentation Center⁸⁶ does work documenting war crimes, deaths, and other information needed for the persecution of war criminals, for the informing the victims’ families and for documenting the facts for the future. The OKC media center⁸⁷ works on alternative media in BiH. The ACIPS⁸⁸ is a higher educational organization that offers scholarly research and educational opportunities in BiH along with aiming to improve human rights and democracy in the country. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina are in the process of trying war criminals from the Former Yugoslavia and BiH in an attempt to pursue justice for victims of the war. Other efforts being made by other organizations on different levels and utilizing different means of enacting (or not enacting) change.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The Peace Camps of CIM, like any peace initiative, have certain strengths and weaknesses. The first and most obvious strength is the large impact the camps have on the participants who attend. It is clear in their testimonies that the camps have changed their lives for the better and that they feel better equipped to take on the challenge of

⁸⁵ *A Tale of Two Reconciliations: Germans and Jews after WWII and Bosnia after Dayton.*

⁸⁶ www.idc.org.ba

⁸⁷ www.okcbrasevic.org

⁸⁸ <http://www.acips.ba>

creating peace in their communities. Also, there is a very clear focus on action in one's home community after graduation from the Peace Camp. This is extremely important and seems to be carried out by the participants I spoke with. There is a firm drive to continue peace work after the week is over making the impact of the Peace Camp much larger than it could ever be if the only people felt its influence were those who attended it. It also offers a much needed analysis of the conflict by those who were in it. It also acts as a bridge between the two entities that are still very separated from each other in the minds of Bosnians. This personal connection across the boundaries is very significant especially for the future of BiH as a country.

However, the Peace Camps are very small in comparison with the job they have set out to do. Many of the participants expressed a wish for all of Bosnia to attend the camps which is impossible at the rate they produce graduates. There have been 56 graduates since 2004. Also, the people that come to the camps are already willing to meet people from the other side. Those that are more entrenched in their ideals do not attend the camps and therefore continue to hold their destructive beliefs and remain active in pursuing them. The participants are not political leaders and so there is a limit as to how much they can change the system, no matter how much they object to the political situation as it is or how much they are inspired to make change. Also, the people who attend tend to be highly educated, middle class usually students or teachers who have the time to attend. Because of this, only a certain population can enjoy the benefits of the Peace Camp.

The regularity of the camps and the ability to continue to attend is beneficial to the participants who seek the environment of the Peace Camps as a booster shot of

energy for their peacebuilding activities. However, other peace building groups such as the Nansen Dialogue Centers, work year round and have groups that meet monthly. Should there be more activities of the participants during the rest of the year or once a year sufficient? One participant said, “A year is a very short time. Before you know it you’re there and also it’s not easy to deal with those kind of emotions⁸⁹.” Perhaps the concentration of emotions is such that more than once a year is adequate for its purposes.

When He Talks About Peace, It Means Something

One common positive theme throughout my interviews was that all the participants felt that the success of the Peace Camps was in some way due to the fact that they are run by Vahidin. Under his leadership, the camps seem to flourish and those who attend them find that his energy and positivism infectious. Talking about how influential the Peace Camps are usually went hand in hand with talking about how much meeting Vahidin changed their lives. Therefore, if the Peace Camps are synonymous with Vahidin, how much of the influential experience derives from the actual interactions during the camps and how much is resulting from their leader?

Vahidin seems to be the perfect leader for such an initiative as the Peace Camps. He is energetic and authentically friendly. My first day in Sanski Most, our drive across town took twice as long as it needed because he stopped to greet everyone he knew and ask them how they were doing. In this way he is genuinely concerned for others. One participant spoke about him saying,

Vahidin is... an imam and he is good at understanding people and he can really touch people and because of that he is a good imam. And it’s very rare a high person which is in a very responsible position but still can talk

⁸⁹ Interview # 4 by author

with people, people can talk with him. And when he talks about peace it means something. It's not like other imams or priests who talk only of hate and enemies, some kind of imagined enemies⁹⁰.

People trust him because he is an imam but also because he is so dedicated to the cause of peace. He is easy to approach which makes him a good facilitator. One participant came she was not afraid to attend a Peace Camp even without knowing much about it because she trusts him. She said, "I knew Vahidin and I believe him and I knew it's not going to happen anything bad⁹¹." It is this trust that is essential to his work as a facilitator who is the one person that both sides must trust initially if they are to trust each other later on.

Vahidin is also a trained Cranial Sacral therapist and know a significant amount about trauma which is beneficial to his work both in CIM and in the Peace Camps. As one participant put the situation in BiH, "It's all fucked up. Now everyone here is fucked up. We are a country living with PTSD and fucked up is the normal but no one here is really normal. Everyone looks around and sees each other and they see oh I am normal but they are not. That's a problem⁹²." There are significant amount of people suffering from trauma in BiH and the Peace Camps are also meant to have a personal healing aspect to them. The process of telling and hearing painful stories is eased by having a trained professional on hand at every Peace Camp. He has also dealt with his own trauma and so also knows the difficulties of dealing with such difficult situations.

As a survivor of the situation in BiH, Vahidin also knows the situation very well and know what is culturally appropriate or not. Just as he adjusted the idea of counseling to fit the local culture for his work at CIM, Vahidin also adapted the Swiss model for the

⁹⁰ Interview #5 by author

⁹¹ Interview #3 by author

⁹² Interview #5 by author

Peace Camps to suit the local mindset. One veteran participant of the Peace Camps compared Vahidin and the Swiss saying,

The Peace Camps he did much more to our liking because he knew very well what kind of people he was dealing with and he knew the ways how not to alienate them because when you come for the first time everything is kind of strange, all these rituals and all these ‘seeds of peace’ and things like that so you have to be very careful not so scare people off and he is wonderful at that⁹³.

He added later,

Vahidin was good at taking over, definitely. Because it went so seamlessly, you couldn’t see the big difference. The only difference is that he is leading the project throughout the year and you can see that. You can see that everything is much more organized than when the Swiss parachute into Bosnia for a few days⁹⁴.

This is one of the great advantages that locals have at running peacebuilding activities such as the Peace Camps. Oftentimes it is outsiders who come in with grandiose ideas of how to solve other people problems and it ends up disastrous, not unlike the situation of the 2000 Peace Camp. Though an outsider perspective can be beneficial, often programs are not adapted to local situations. The participant above claimed that the major achievement of his time as the leader to the Peace Camps was bringing, “what feels best for us and what’s most convenient for the mentality of the people here.” His ability to balance the knowledge and methodology from outside with the situation inside the country makes him quite successful at his work.

Vahidin has also been praised with being a natural born leader. He keeps in good contact with people, knows when to be serious and when to joke, and knows how to make people feel comfortable. He is ambitious and has no qualms with setting his goals high. Also, his degree in peacebuilding puts him in a much higher standing for receiving grants

⁹³ Interview #4 by author

⁹⁴ Interview #4 by author.

and also gives him the confidence in his work that is needed when the results of his toils are not always immediately evident.

Vahidin is also very dedicated to his work and those who know him, know his work. Many people in Sanski Most ask me what I am doing in BiH. Often when I tell them, I work with CIM they are often confused. CIM, as an acronym, is not well known, but when I tell them that I am volunteering with Vahidin they understand that I am at the Centar za Izgradnju Mira. Though most people know of CIM, not everyone knows exactly what it does. Because there are so many activities that it has, many people only know of one or two. Even the volunteers usually know of only a few of the activities CIM has. There are over 70 volunteers and most of them are local people from Sanski Most who help out with certain activities but there is only one full time volunteer. Most people are pretty positive in their reaction to CIM

When I asked the participants what their family's and friends' reactions to their decision to go to the Peace Camp and the answers varied greatly. Some people were informed by their siblings or friends so the reaction was positive. One participant said that his family thought it strange for because they had not heard of the two sides meeting after the war and he said that because he was from a village that people were less receptive to understanding why he wanted to go. Another participant's family asked him, "What for?" while another's family was supportive and excited. Vahidin said that most people do not come to events or activities or even if the word reconciliation is involved but peace does not seem to have the same connotation.

Vahidin's importance to the Peace Camps and to the work of CIM also raises questions of sustainability. Can the Camps go on without him? Would CIM continue to

function without his direct involvement? As the only full time employee of CIM and because much of his personal expertise are necessary for the most of the organizations undertakings, it seems very unlikely that the projects would continue they way they do currently. The leadership skills that are now almost exclusively attributed to him need to be passed on to others to serve as leaders for future generations of Peace Camps.

Further Research

During my interview in Sarajevo, the person I was interviewing stopped in his explanation of the Peace Camps and told me that if I was going to understand the Peace Camps I needed to attend one. I agreed with him but told him that, as of now, I could not include my own experience in a Peace Camp into this research because of the limited time constraints. However, I do believe that attending a Peace Camp would deepen my understanding of the goings on in the Peace Camps. I would also like to have talked to more participants and especially those who chose to leave the Peace Camps early, those who only attended one, and other people who might have had a different experience than those I interviewed.

I would also like to know more about people's political views and the connection of their experiences to the way they think politically. Many of the people I interviewed felt that the political system of BiH is fairly incompetent. I would also know if the participants in the Peace Camps feel that they should be more active politically as a result of their time in the Peace Camps and if they would consider themselves activists.

I am also very interested in the idea of personal responsibility vs. collective responsibility and the way that it is discussed in the Peace Camps. This topic came up in

a few of my interviews and the variance in the responses I got was interesting. I was not able to discuss at length these concepts with every participant and I would, therefore, like to go more in depth in this topic. I would also like to compare the responses of those who have participated in the Peace Camps with those who have not to see if they see personal and collective responsibility differently.

Importance of the Research

One question that is often asked of tireless peacebuilders toiling daily with little results is the same as the family member of a Peace Camper asked of him when he told them he would be attending: what for? Why go to a Peace Camp? Why even have one? What's the point? It can easily seem useless. Sometimes when Vahidin speaks of his lofty goals of preventing war from ever happening again I have to hold myself back from telling him to slow down a bit. As idealist as I am, I too am a little skeptical of the idea that a few people meeting once a year for a week is going to solve the worlds problems. The world has a lot of problems. Do they really think they can address them all?

But I realized every time I talked with someone who had gone to a Peace Camp I understood why. I loved watching them think back on a time in their lives that was thoroughly moving, a time that really changed them, and try to tell me about it. Some times they even thanked me for listening to them but I was always so fascinated by their stories and by their conviction that change *has* to happen and it has to start happening *now* even if it is only a personal level. I was particularly moved by my last interviewee who said that a war couldn't happen again because he would be there to stop it. This may seem a naïve think to say and probably wouldn't convince those who were already

skeptical of the whole reconciliation process but I could see that he truly felt it and that inspired me more than I thought anything connected to this project would.

At one point, I asked my roommate for help in attempting to translate the trainer's manual for the Peace Camps. While helping me translate words like 'reconciliation' and 'acknowledgement' that weren't in my dictionary, she eventually turned to me and said, "You know what, Becca? This makes a whole lot of sense." I looked at her and wondered if she was making fun of me again for thinking that talking about conflict resolution theory is really cool, but she really meant it. For someone who generally thought this whole thing was a bunch of baloney and would ask me questions like "So you can really make money for being a trainer in this peacebuilding stuff?" it was a big step. And I began to slowly realize (again) why this whole thing is important. It wasn't just that I think it is interesting but at one point I too thought, *This makes a lot of sense*.

But it is also really important. This was also had to be retaught to me, this time by Vahidin. When describing how important he saw the work of CIM to some Swiss visitors of the full time volunteer, he spoke, for the first time, about his experiences during the war. He had had no problems showing me the large graveyard filled only with victims of the war and pointing to people as we drove by and telling me who in his or her family had died, but he had never shared his story and I had never asked. He told them about his experience in a refugee camp in Slovenia living in, what he thought at the time, were some of the worst conditions a person could live in. He said that after that experience he had had serious hatred of Serbs and had made a promise to himself never to speak to a Serb again in his life. When he said that, I couldn't believe it. Vahidin, maybe the jolliest person I've ever met, hated people? Really, truly hated them? He said

that later the hardest experience for him was telling his story to a Bosnian Serb veteran of the war.

He concluded saying that he realized that they had taken four years of his life during the war, but he had given them four more with his hatred. I just sat there and started at him still not able to understand that he had just told this story. He then lightened his tone a bit and said, “So, that’s why I’m here.” That too made sense.

So when someone asks me why write a paper on a Peace Camp in the middle of nowhere Bosnia I can tell them with certainty that I have to. Just as my last interviewee had said that it was his personal responsibility to make sure that another war doesn’t happen, it is my responsibility to learn about the Peace Camps, learn why they are important and listen to the graduates speak of how influential they are. It is my responsibility to tell their stories. If someone asks me why I had to write this I can simply tell them “because I don’t want to let them down⁹⁵.”

Conclusion

The motto of CIM is “Our way is peace.” It became increasingly clear throughout my research that the methodology had a lot to do with the success of the Peace Camps in the eyes of the participants. Because it is a space that allows people to come together, discuss the past and the future, share intimate feelings, and analyze the Bosnian conflict thoroughly, they participants are not left wanting or frustrated, but energized and fulfilled.

The Peace Camps allow for people to create important relationships with “the other” that break through the barriers created during the war. Through these relationships, the participants are able to examine their prejudices and begin to see the world around

⁹⁵ Interview #4 by author.

them with new eyes. These relationships also serve a network of support for work carried out beyond the borders of the Peace Camp.

Through the examination of the causes of conflict, the participants are also able to understand why the conflict in Bosnia occurred and how it can be prevented in the future. This knowledge empowers the participants to create peace in their own communities and places the responsibility on them to act out against factors contributing to violence. The camps also give the participants tangible work to be done in their communities and the Center for Peacebuilding supports that and other projects carried out by Peace Camp graduates.

Whenever I would ask Vahidin about certain methodological aspects he would explain them to me and then jokingly ask me “Ain’t I smart?” After talking to the participants about their experiences and connecting them to the latest theories in conflict resolution, it became clear that he his joke is very much true. The Peace Camps are very much planned and structured in a way that creates these responses from the participants. In short, very much about the methodology and the way the Peace Camps are, in fact, very smart.

References

Timeline of Interviews

1. Vahidin Omaović Facilitator, Trainer, and director of CIM interviewed in Sanski Most |12.04.08 and 28.04.08
2. Bosnian Serb Trainer from Banja Luka interviewed in Sanski Most |16.04.08
3. Bosniak Participant from Sanski Most interviewed in Sanski Most |18.04.08
4. Trainer from Sarajevo interviewed in Sarajevo |19.04.08
5. Bosnian Serb Participant from Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad interviewed in Banja Luka |25.04.08

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