

November 28, 1999
First Sunday in Advent,
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Dear Friends,

The First Sunday in Advent is when we traditionally sit down to write the annual holiday letter. Heaven knows when it will get sent. We've just come back from the Advent Market in Bratislava's old town square. Christmas music fills the square, decorations hang from lampposts and folks are making the circuit of booths to see what handicrafts are on offer. There's not much buying yet, there is still time for that. Today is for looking, meeting friends and drinking some warm spiced wine, to prepare for the season to come.

It's only by chance that we're in Bratislava this late November Sunday. We closed the IREX mission here on September 30 after successfully completing the program, and have started a new media aid mission in Podgorica, (formally Titograd, if you have an old Atlas) Montenegro, Yugoslavia. Rich has been named "Chief of Party" for the Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo missions and Suzi is "Senior Advisor." We leave Slovakia wishing it well. It's had a rough century, starting as a ward of Hungary and going through occupation or invasion by Nazis and Russians and suffering under fascists and communists. It deserves better with the new century. As the year ends Slovakia is being invited to enter talks with the European Union.

Except for the last three weeks in September when we closed the Bratislava mission, we've not slept in the same bed for more than eleven consecutive nights since April first. We've been dividing our time between Central Europe and the Balkans.

The bombing of Serbia this spring was difficult for both of us. Rich, in effect, took over the Serbian program just as the bombing started and we were in daily contact with Serb friends who gave us running accounts of life in the shelters. We lost contact with most of our Kosovar friends during the bombing as they fled in fear from Serb irregulars. We gradually reconnected as conditions improved. While Rich does not know the fate of many of his former students, the ones who meant the most to us are safe. One Serbian friend's husband was killed on that train NATO bombed on the bridge near NIS.

It is not a pleasant experience, to see a war from both sides.

We were in Kosovo within 10 Days of KFOR's entry, riding in an armored vehicle. We were there to help an independent Albanian radio station get on the air to provide information to people returning home. In rural Kosovo towns were burned and often what you see are chimneys sticking up from the ruins. A Kosovar friend wrote a poem that translates roughly this way.

Home is where the hearth is.
They have left us our hearths
We will find our homes



In June we saw thousands of refugees heading home, on foot, pushing wheelbarrows, riding in every sort of vehicle. Less than two weeks ago, as the first snow covered Kosovo's mountain tops, we still saw the chimneys, many with a green UNHCR tent pitched next to the burned out building, with clothing flapping from the tent lines. While we saw hundreds of new buildings going up there are still over 150,000 facing winter under canvas. We wonder why aid can't be dispatched as quickly and efficiently as missiles, although those homes we saw, with tents pitched in the yard, were NOT destroyed by NATO missiles. The NATO damage that we saw was incredibly tightly targeted.

Our June trip was both disturbing and affirming. Those early summer days were a celebration. People strolling the streets after 77 days of bombardment or hiding hugged, kissed and greeted each other. We even saw a miracle. One reporter from Radio 21 was reported killed, someone said they saw him in a mass grave. As we were sitting in a café in Prishtina (we have to learn to spell it the Albanian way) he walked up to us. He had been hiding in the hills and heard the radio reports of his death but couldn't contact anyone. He had been walking for two days when he appeared at our table. We were crying and laughing. He borrowed a cell phone and started making calls. We wish that every story had that ending but there are few families that have not had to post a black bordered handbill announcing a memorial service.

After the war we could not travel to Serbia proper so we met many of our Serb friends in Budapest. They wondered how we would respond to them, knowing that we had been to Kosovo, and we wondered how they would respond to us, knowing that our planes were the ones that kept them in the shelters or worse. We found that friendship could bridge that and we looked at each other as Rich, Suzi, Dusan, Vesna, Veijla and Ana, not Serb and American.

Aside from work, we have taken some time to explore parts of Europe this year. Rich's Mom came for two weeks and we took a cruise in the Mediterranean with her and also spent time in Barcelona and Venice. The boys came, each staying for about six weeks, overlapping during the solar eclipse. We experienced totality in Austria, which was an indescribable experience. We finally got to Krakow, Poland, a place Rich has wanted to see for years.

Brian has taken a new job as the Production Manager of a dance theater in Minneapolis, and is, of course, now in the midst of the annual "Nutcracker" production. Kevin plans to graduate from St. Olaf College this spring. He's looking forward to singing in the St. Olaf Christmas Festival next weekend.

We continue to find our work interesting and rewarding even though "interesting" continues to be partly defined by the Chinese curse "may you live in interesting times." We gain strength through the love and support of family and friends. We will renew those ties, spending Christmas and the New Year's holidays at home in Alaska. We'll pass the turn of the millennium in Sitka, in one of the last time zones on earth, with candles ready if a rolling power outage sweeps west from Vladivostok.

Take Care, and Happy Holidays
Suzi and Rich McClear