

Podgorica, Montenegro, Yugoslavia.
And Brussels, Belgium

First Sunday in Advent, 2000,

Dear Friends,



This first Sunday in Advent we are taking a break from the Balkans, visiting our friends Dave and Carol Lam in Belgium. We've been attending Christmas Markets in post card towns that straddle the borders of three countries, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. There are borders but no border posts, no men in uniform with rubber stamps, no guys with guns peering suspiciously into the car. Parking lots have cars with license tags from several countries. The sound of hoof beats on cobble stones, the jangle of bells on horse collars and church towers, the smell of fresh licorice from a candy stand and the announcements in four languages give an impression of peace and harmony, even normality. Yet this area has often seen war, including some of the biggest battles of our century. Western Europe may have taken George Santayana at his word when he talked about those who do not learn from history being doomed to repeat it, and done something to prevent repetition. But living in the Balkans I wonder if those who know history are even more doomed.

A year ago on Orthodox Christmas Eve in Podgorica, Orthodox Montenegrin monks wanted to light a Christmas Eve bonfire. The Montenegrin tradition is that a fire of Live Oak kept the Baby Jesus warm that first Christmas. Serbian Monks formed a line to prevent the Montenegrins from lighting the fire, claiming the bonfire was a pagan ritual. Angry crowds formed behind the two lines of monks and the police had to step in. They prevented the bonfire to keep the peace, but the Montenegrins were angry that their tradition was arrested and that night we saw small bonfires all across Podgorica.

The incident had more to do with politics than religion or folk culture. It was political theater, farce really. It did not bode well for the New Year. Who could have guessed that we would end the year moving to Belgrade after the fall of Milosevic?

When tyrants tremble sick with fear and hear their death knells ringing
When friends rejoice from far and near, how can I keep from singing?
19th century Quaker Hymn.



Between the bonfires of Christmas and the October celebrations in the streets of Belgrade we had quite a year. Although we officially live in an apartment on Lenin Boulevard, Podgorica, we spent many more nights away than home. Throughout the year we traveled in a ring around Serbia to Croatia, Bosnia, Hungary, Romania, Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, meeting Serb Journalists, training and consulting, and recruiting local stations to carry programs of independent radio stations banned by Milosevic. Our work has been exciting and heartbreaking both.

One of the ethnic Serb journalists we trained in Kosovo has disappeared and we fear the worst, another (a woman) was shot and a third so threatened that the UN evacuated her. One station owner, who runs Prishtina's only private multi-ethnic station, had his apartment hit with a rocket-propelled grenade and three stations we work with had fires, two suspicious. In one a person was killed. We spent a good part of the winter in Kosovo where 150,000 people still lived under canvas for the coldest winter in years. In July we dropped our Kosovo responsibilities to concentrate on Serbia. Yet, looking back from a December perspective, even that depressing chapter is ending

better than we expected with the defeat of the extreme nationalists in the UN sponsored local elections. For a while, in the weeks before the Yugoslav elections, we were advised not to remain in Montenegro so we also took a flat in Budapest.

We have also taken time to enjoy ourselves. In our circle around Serbia we got to spend Carnival and Good Friday in Dubrovnik, Orthodox Easter and several pleasant August weekends on the Montenegrin Coast, and watch the celebrations of Hungary's thousandth anniversary (picture right) as a nation. Off the ring, we had meetings and some down time in London, Brussels and Berlin, as well as Slovakia, where we met old friends from our former program. It's too bad that airlines like Montenegro Air, Yugoslav Air Transport, and Air Bosna don't give frequent flyer miles for flying on old Russian YAK aircraft.



Despite the travel in Europe, we also spent more time "home" in America than we have in the past 5 years. We ushered in the New Year in Sitka, presented talks on the use of radio to reconcile ethnic strife at the Nobel Peace Prize Forum at St. Olaf College in February and returned there in May for Kevin's college graduation, from Para College, (picture below) which was a family affair, Rich's Mom flying out from New Jersey.



We spent June through July Fourth celebrations in Sitka where we caught up with friends and enjoyed the Music Festival. Rich and Kevin also attended the Sitka Symposium. Brian was also in Sitka to help repair the extensive damage from a flood caused by a ruptured water heater in our home.

Both boys are doing well, Kevin is living in Sitka (but we don't know for how long) and Brian is working theater in Minneapolis.

So another year comes to an end as we try to explain the Electoral College and dimpled chads to our friends in the Balkans. We are setting up a flat in Belgrade, which means that until January when our Budapest lease runs out, we will have four homes, Sitka, Podgorica, Budapest and Belgrade.

Sometimes living in the Balkans is a real test of faith. People who publicly profess a deep faith, equating faith with nation, have perpetrated most of the evil we've seen here and, ironically, some of those who are working hardest for peace profess to be atheists. Sometimes I (Rich speaking here) want to give up on faith. But then we meet someone, a worker for Catholic charities or an Orthodox priest trying to get his people to see what has happened in Kosovo, and we recognize people reclaiming faith, shown to us by their works and I realize that we all have to work actively to reclaim faith from the demagogues. This Christmas season we look, for the first time since we've lived here, with real hope for a future of peace and reconciliation in the Balkans. We wish for you, peace and happiness for the coming year.

Take care,

Suzi and Rich McClear

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Budva, on the Montenegro Coast

