

Report by Helen Kay from Sarajevo Peace Event 6 -9 June 2014

What do you think of when somebody says 'Sarajevo'? For many, it signifies the place where the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand led the political leaders of nation states of Europe directly into WW1.

Given the carnage that followed the assassination 100 years ago, the people of Sarajevo decided to hold a peace conference to mark the centenary: academics and activists might come together to discuss ways to improve international negotiations, so transforming the need for future wars.

Flying in to Sarajevo, I saw deep green wooded valleys with neat white houses with red roofs, clustered in small settlements. The city is modern, and while I was there, sunny, warm and very pleasant.

Many in Sarajevo speak English and young people have very good command of English language. Initially the young people appear happy and friendly, but many told me that they see no future for themselves in Bosnia - they want to emigrate. Many older people look sad, and some are left embittered by war of the 1990s, and the post-war experience. Some feel marginalised and resent the people now in positions of power who are said to have left to study in Europe during the war whilst others, like themselves, were left to 'fight for their country'.

Over the last few years, I have spent a lot of time living with the activities of the women who met at The Hague in 1915 and trying to follow their experiences during World War One. I had come to feel anger for the politicians who sent men to kill other men, total strangers, to prove their political argument. But the experience of Sarajevo has rattled my understanding of war, its causes and consequences!

There are full reports available of the many workshops and panel presentations [See article by Heidi Meinzolt for a good summary <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heidi-meinzolt/sarajevo-peace-event-addressing-root-causes-of-war-0>]. Three things that stood out from the discussions, for me:

- A trade union leader describing how it took three days to convince trade unionists that:
 - their neighbours were not receiving benefits due to themselves;
 - there were more similarities than differences between workers of different ethnic groups
 - their oppressions were coming from political systems operating downwards from above, and not across from fellow workers and neighbours.
- An academic describing how NGOs have been co-opted into the system by government grants and can no longer offer an alternative voice to government policies.
- Women of Bosnia describing their problems and involvement in public 'plenums' in recent discussions about the future for this post-war country.

The WILPF-Europe workshop led by Heidi Meinzolt was well-attended. I spoke about WILPF early history, Irmgard Hofer and Heidi spoke about current campaigns and Nela Porobić Isaković gave an interesting account of WILPF international work, bringing

together Bosnian and Syrian women to discuss experiences and plan women-friendly political strategies for the future.

My worst experience was looking at an exhibition about the 1910s war when Sarajevo was under siege. It showed the resilience and ingenuity of human beings but it was horrifying to read about how the army on the hilltops deliberately fired on schools and hospitals and find testimony from women and men on how previously friendly neighbours had destroyed their houses or had killed their children.

My best experience at the Sarajevo Peace Event was working with people from Austria to write a song, in the workshop organised by Penny Stone:

Bridges, Brücken

*Written in Sarajevo by Agnes & Franz Josef Zessner,
Helen Kay & Penny Stone, June 2014*

Grentzen, boundaries,
We built them tall,
Grentzen diecht,
Non pasaran.

We can't see the people,
Can't see through the wall,
Du kannst sie nicht sehen,
Can't see them at all.

One stone, another stone,
Bring down the wall,
Now the faces we see
Are not scary at all –

We can build bridges

With every stone we brought down,
Wir bauen bracken
With every stone that we found.

We can build bridges
With every stone we brought down,
Wir bauen bracken
With every stone that we found.