

WHAT'S UP

In war, all races suffer



A BOSNIAN family at a funeral in 1992.
[Photo: Mikhail Evstafiev]

Bosnia in the 1990s was a war-torn place. One special group tried to spread the message of peace, reports RICHARD PHILIP.

About 20 years ago, a fierce war erupted between people of different ethnicities living in a place called Bosnia. They were Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims, also known as Bosniaks.

A Jewish man named Jakob Finci and his friends started a group to help the people affected by the war. This **humanitarian** group was called La Benevolencija (say "buh-nev-uhlen-seeya").

At first, it consisted of mainly Jewish people living in Bosnia. Later, many Serbs, Croats and Muslims joined in. Although Serbs, Croats and Muslims were fighting each other in much of Bosnia, they were friends within La Benevolencija's small community of helpers.

While some politicians said that it was impossible for Serbs, Croats and Muslims to co-exist peacefully, Mr Finci's group proved them wrong.

Mr Finci spoke at a recent conference on racial and religious harmony in Singapore. He described the suffering brought by the civil war. Many helpless people came to Mr Finci's group, La Benevolencija, for shelter and supplies such as medicine, food and clothes.

Being Jewish, Mr Finci and his group knew many people who had been tortured and starved to death by Adolf Hitler's soldiers during World War II (WWII). That was in the 1940s. The Bosnian war took place in Yugoslavia about 50 years later.

This time, the Jews were not victims of war. But, they had strong memories of what it was like to be attacked because of their religion and ethnicity. That is why they decided they had to help their Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters survive the Bosnian war.

They helped anyone who turned up at their doorstep regardless of their ethnicity, religion or nationality. Mr Finci's group brought hope even as the villages and streets of Bosnia were being bombed and hundreds died.

The group also started a school for children. Children of various backgrounds attended the school. There, they heard stories based on Jewish history. "Since Jewish history is almost like a fairy tale, it was very interesting for the children," Mr Finci said.

The children got to watch television during their free time. "We used our generators to produce electricity and so we were able to show them some movies. And, we gave them cookies and drinks from our reserves." By living together, the children learnt that religious and ethnic differences did not matter because they were all members of one race, the human race.

The war eventually ended in 1995 after NATO forces intervened in Bosnia. NATO is the North American Treaty Organisation (NATO), a political and military group made up of North American and European countries.

Before the war, Bosnia was one of six states that made up Yugoslavia. As a result of the fighting, Yugoslavia broke up into separate countries, one of which is Bosnia. Its official name is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Today, Bosnia is still recovering from the war. People are deeply divided by their ethnic and religious differences and find it difficult to trust one another again. Mr Finci learnt that war does not solve any problem. "There is no good war," he said, "Even the worst peace is much better than any kind of war because once war erupts it is very difficult to establish peace after that," he concluded.

WHAT CAUSED THE BOSNIAN WAR?



A government building burning during the war in Bosnia in 1992.
[Credit: Mikhail Evstafiev]

It was not easy for La Benevolencija to spread peace. The different communities in Yugoslavia had gotten used to hating one another. Yet, it wasn't always this way.

People had lived together happily for many years. Whether they were Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Christians or Jews, they saw themselves mainly as Yugoslavs.

Things changed in the 1980s. People were struggling to make ends meet. Food and other daily needs were getting more and more expensive. Many people were losing their jobs and started to grow desperate.

People started blaming one another for their problems. Many felt that it would be better for Yugoslavia to break up, so that each ethnic group could have a separate country.

One of the Yugoslav states was Serbia. It was ruled by a power-crazy leader named Slobodan Milošević. Mr Milošević persuaded many of the Serbs to believe that they were better than the other ethnic groups.

His government told stories about the Serb people's glorious past and how they were now victims of other ethnic groups. Constantly fed with these tales, Serbs began to believe that they had to protect themselves by taking revenge against other communities.

Thus, Mr Milošević convinced the Serbs in Bosnia to turn against the Bosniaks and Croats, even though they had been living side by side for generations.

After the war, he was captured and sent to prison, where he died of a heart attack.

VOCABULARY

humanitarian (say “hew-man-i-tair-yan”; adjective) = to do with helping people who are suffering, due to war or disaster, for example.

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