Bosnian War Refugees Still Wait for the Dividends of Peace

A second-year Masters degree student at IU's Russian & East European Institute, Allison Mindel, spent the summer in Hungary, helping people displaced by the war in Bosnia. While she is cautiously optimistic about the recently signed peace agreement, her firsthand experience in a refugee camp tells her that the disruption caused by the war will continue long after the fighting has ended. What follows is Mindel's own account of that experience...

"They told us we'd be staying at a hotel in Hungary with a swimming pool; they told us we'd only have to wait a month before we could start our new lives in Canada; and, they charged us DM 2,500 a person to come here."

They are the Bosnian Serbs and here is a refugee camp in Nagyatad, Hungary. I heard this story frequently during the past summer while working in the camp—a place that certainly couldn't be confused with a hotel. It has no swimming pool and offers few opportunities to easily emigrate to the West. Instead, the camp does offer food and shelter and safety—in its most basic forms—to victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Previously a Russian army barracks outside of a small town near the border between Croatia and Hungary, the camp can hold up to 2,500 people. On my arrival in June, 1,400 people were living there, but the number swelled to 2,000 by August, with the most recent arrivals coming from Banja Luka and Bjelina.

The majority of the camp population consists of Bosnian Muslims, but there are Croats, Serbs, ethnic Albanians, ethnic Hungarians, and Romani living there as well. Few have any desire to make Hungary their new home. They live on the hope that Canada or Sweden will take them in or that the war will soon end and they can return home. This hope is difficult to maintain as their days in the camp turn to months and even years. Some of the people have lived in the camp for over three years now, and there are growing fears that they will not have a home to return to and that soon the camp will cease pretending to be a temporary home and will become just another neighborhood within the Hungarian town.

The new arrivals come with few belongings but many horror stories. All the young Muslim men from Banja Luka told similar tales—of spending the past two years digging trenches on the front lines. Wives recounted how their husbands were taken away in the middle of the night to be beaten. Fathers cried as they showed pictures of sons and daughters from whom they've become separated.

This is not the first time Hungary has had to deal with refugees, but it is the most daunting refugee wave to ever confront that nation. Ethnic Hungarians from Transylvania arriving in the late 1980s made up the first wave of recent refugees. The second wave consisted of East Germans in 1989. Unlike these two groups, who either spoke Hungarian or were "temporary visitors," the Yugoslavs represent an altogether new kind of refugee population in Hungary. They neither speak the language nor know how long they will stay. In fact, they are not considered to be refugees. Instead, their status is defined as "temporarily externally displaced persons." Hungary agreed to grant them this status in 1991 in order to accommodate the flood of people crossing their border. But, the Hungarians did not have the resources to interview each and every new arrival to determine if they met the Geneva Convention's definition of "refugee."

This new status has enabled the Hungarian government to extend protection to more victims of the war, but it has also created a class of people with no legally defined rights. Those with official refugee status basically enjoy the same rights as do Hungarian citizens, including the continued on page 17
**Refugees continued from page 10**

Allison Mindel stands in front of the gates of Nagyatad Refugee Camp.

the same rights as do Hungarian citizens, including the right to work. Displaced persons, however, possess the same rights in Hungary as tourists do, though without the benefit of a passport. Consequently, it is difficult for the newcomers to obtain work permits. For most, the days are spent with little to do but worry about those they left behind.

The Hungarian Office of Refugees and Migration within the Ministry of the Interior operates the camp with funds from Hungarian taxpayers, the UN High Commission for Refugees, and private organizations such as the Sasakawa Organization of Japan. They are able to provide food and shelter, but they are not able to address the problems in the camp stemming from the monotony and inactivity of camp life.

Outside groups, such as the Nagyatad Refugee Support Group, with which I was associated, are therefore allowed to work in the camp and provide social and educational activities to the camp population. With funding from the International Rescue Committee and the United Methodist Committee on Relief, we helped the refugees organize English lessons, children’s activities, emigration, and translation assistance, a handicrafts project, summer day trips, a Serbo-Croatian library; and, a camp newspaper. While these activities have not transformed the camp into the “resort hotel” that the Bosnian Serbs had promised, they do provide a badly needed distraction from the uncertainty and stress that threatens to overwhelm camp residents.