

## Serbia, Easter 2003

Our two trucks from the Southampton area started their journeys on Saturday 12th. One truck driven by John Cox departed at 6.00 am to pick up more aid in Rochester and Gerry his co-driver. The second truck was ready around 12.30 pm and we set off for Dover, (Bernie, Don and Susie). We met up with eight 7.5 tonne trucks to board the 8.15 pm ferry to Calais. Five 38 tonners had gone ahead.

After the ferry trip we drove to Aachen where we had a snack and slept the night in our trucks. It was very cold.

Sunday we were up at 7.00 had breakfast and set off for Passau, it was a warm sunny day and we reached Austrian border at 5.50. We then had a three-hour drive to Hamburger Hill for a meal and night stop. It was very cold in the mountains and both nights we slept in two sweaters plus a thick walking jacket in our sleeping bags. There was no heating in our trucks for several days until we discovered how it worked! This was in the Mickledorf area (Rastauf Christauf).

We left at 7.00 am on Monday heading for Slovenia Border passing through superb mountain scenery and warm sunshine. We stopped around noon and later in the afternoon headed for the Croatian Border. We arrived late evening and eventually found a restaurant, which was very good. We got back to our trucks at 2.30 am and were cleared by customs at around 4.30 am in the morning, when we set off for the hotel Jura. It was a magic moment around 6.30 am when we reached the hotel, and were able to have a shower and sleep in a comfortable bed.

Tuesday after breakfast we set off on a long drive to Kraljevo. We had a briefing, grabbed some pizzas and were then taken to Vrnjacka Banja where we were to spend our next few days. We arrived at Dragishas' house where they made us very welcome and prepared a meal. He was the Baptist minister. All the men were accommodated there while women and couples were taken to various hotels (compliments of the mayor). Very impressed, a very pretty town. Our hotel overlooked a lovely park, which was full of trees.

Wednesday we set off to Kraljevo to have a hygiene check on the food in our trucks. There were big delays waiting for the check to be done and we also learnt that the main interpreter's father had died on the previous day and the funeral was to be held today. The main part of Serbia is very flat bordered by mountains in the distance. There were no signs of war as in Kosovo and it appeared a great deal more affluent. However, there are 300,000 displaced people in Serbia who will probably never go back to Kosovo. They are very much resented by the local people who feel they are a drain on their limited resources. We learned that at one centre for displaced people where the municipality had laid on a water supply, the locals had padlocked it so they still had to walk 2 km for water. In the early afternoon we drove to Nova Selo to unload half of our trucks. Later we went back to VB around mid afternoon to the car park where the trucks were parked during our stay. Three of our trucks then visited the Hospital Asta. A very large, four-story building. Here we unloaded two trucks with medical equipment including spa baths to equip a new wing for which the money had run out. We were shown around and it was very impressive. There was well furnished, single rooms, a spar area, and a canteen and lounge with bar on the ground floor. There were many improvements being made to the hospital but the completed areas were very impressive. Eventually back to Dragishas at 10.00 pm where a meal had been prepared for us.

Thursday we were called at 6.15 am and set off to the warehouse to load lorries which took until early pm and then we left for Love Your Neighbour at Kragujevac Baptist Church. Got back to warehouse at 6.30 pm and loaded until 8.30 pm.

When we got back to Vrnjacka Banja, Bernie and I missed the briefing and had a meal on route up to our hotel. Both of us felt pretty exhausted.

Friday it was an early start and we left for Leskovac at 8.00am Don had tummy troubles and stayed at base for the day. We drove down though Nis. Both these towns had prisons notorious for their brutal treatment of Albanians during and after 1999. It was a very long drive around 2.5 - 3 hours. We went to a refugee centre where we were taken around their homes. (A very basic block of flats, with very small rooms and whole families sharing the tiny space). We then gave out our aid to everyone there. This included giving one man a new wheelchair. He had one previously but given it to someone he felt was more in need than himself. He was, however, paralysed from the waist down. His story was very sad. He was Serbian but had married an Albanian girl. While escaping from Kosovo in 1999, they were caught by a group of KLA fighters. They shot his wife dead and placed him in freezing water for 24 hours, causing his paralysis. We were invited in for a drink with one family. The wife had been a professor in Pristina in Kosovo and her husband a schoolteacher. Neither had been able to work since being in Serbia. We were then taken to Dragons house where we had a superb lunch. He was a Baptist minister. He introduced us to his 90 year old grandmother who was one of the first converts in the area and had been persecuted for her religion in the past. We unloaded more aid into the base of Dragon's house for later distribution to needy families and left for the return journey at 5.30 pm. We met up with a truck on route back to Vrnjacka Banja to unload more medical equipment for another hospital and eventually arrived back at 9.30 pm shattered. We had a meal on route up to our hotel.

Saturday I stayed in the hotel, felt exhausted and a great deal of pain in my neck. Bernie left at 8am and they spent a long morning loading the lorries, disappointed that the local Rotary people did not turn up. Don and Bernie went with an interpreter to two refugee centres for Serbs from Croatia. They were very poor people, and it was a very sad situation. Returning to base, we loaded the lorry for a soup kitchen. Went to a briefing at 7.00pm and were taken out for a meal by Rotary. We had an enjoyable evening and Susie met up with Dr Milane who is trying to set up an alternative therapy clinic in the Serbian Hospital Asta. Took details and passed information to Healing Hands Network.

Easter Sunday and we had the whole morning free. Bernie and Susie wandered around the town and then went to the warehouse to work again. We went to Lingva Warehouse and also met a Roma family and took in gifts. Went to a pretty derelict theatre where all the seats had been taken out and 15 families had put up partitions made up of wooden crates and had blankets hanging to separate rooms. They had made their homes in the auditorium for eight years. The theatre was very dilapidated with few windows and only a little light from a few light bulbs. It was a dreadful situation, and they themselves felt there was little hope to change things. We met a man from Karlovac there. His house had been burnt down during the fighting in Croatia in '94. At least, we were able to give them the usual supplies of food, toiletries etc plus a large number of carpet tiles with which to carpet the floors of their tiny "rooms". Back to another warehouse belonging to "Love Your Neighbour" and loaded two more lorries and back at 8.00pm-ish for a meal in the town with the group on route back to hotels.

Easter Monday we went to a soup kitchen store, no room for our aid so we went back to warehouse and then departed for the Lingva centre and onto the Red Cross to unload our aid. Went back to VB and having bought large quantities of local vegetables, made up piles of food and aid for Croatian and Bosnian refugees living opposite the Hospital Asta (which had been our first visit) and then we went on to the theatre to give out all that was left of the aid. We all met up with our interpreters and all the people who had helped us whilst working in VB and went out for a final meal.

Tuesday we started our journey home. We hadn't driven far, when Nibsy's truck had problems with the clutch. We all stayed for an hour or so but when it was obvious it would be a long job, and Mike stayed with him whilst the rest of us left heading for Belgrade.

It turned out to be caused by a leaking seal on the slave cylinder. Slow progress and delays on road but eventually we arrived at our hotel at around 10.35 for a meal and bed. (The hotel showed great consideration by providing an instant meal for us as soon as we walked in the door).

Wednesday we had an early start 7.30 one of our trucks burst a tyre while catching a curb stone and the group split up again and our Southampton group headed for Maribor. We stopped in Austria and had a superb lunch and coffee and then separated from Gerry and John who shot off for Lille. We headed up towards Frankfurt and stopped at a delightful little town on the river Main called Wurtsburg, splendid hotel on the river called Walfisch and found a delightful olde worlde restaurant for a meal. Don slept in truck again but joined us for Breakfast on the Thursday morning.

Thursday lovely weather again and a long drive to Calais, we eventually arrived around 6.10 pm and visited the Cash and Carry to buy duty free drinks before queuing for the ferry. We caught the 9.00 pm ferry and arrived back at home in England around midnight.

A successful trip with huge amounts of aid distributed. However there was a fair amount of warehouse work and not as much time to meet the people as when we were in Kosovo last year.

We are very thankful for the huge amount of support we received from everyone at home including friends and neighbours, local churches, the reporters, photographers and readers of the Southern Daily Echo who made the whole trip possible. Over 130 tonnes of aid was delivered to refugees from Croatia and Bosnia plus those internally displaced from Kosovo.