



Essay

Letter from Croatia: Language of Love By Jelena Madir

Jelena Madir lives in Split, Croatia, where she studies English, German and Latin in the third grade (eleventh year) of First Grammar School. She is also learning Italian and Spanish at a private school. Favorite pastimes include swimming, running, reading, and writing. She sings in her church choir and plays piano.

I spent the first week of my Christmas holidays in the big German city of Munich, assisting a meeting of the Young Christians of Europe that is held every year and is organized by "Taize." These meetings were started in 1940 by a 25-year-old priest, Frère Roger, who came to the deserted French village of Taize and tried to create community and union among people during the Second World War. His idea had great repercussions among all Christians in Europe and, from 1957 to the present, meetings of this kind have been organized in various towns—each year with more and more young people coming.

I went to this meeting with more than 50 students from my grammar school. We were led by the priest who teaches us catechism at school. As a matter of fact, it has been more than three years since drastic changes took place in Croatia, and students may now take catechism as an optional subject at school. In my country, teenagers now more willingly go to church—almost impossible before, during the period of communism. Every Saturday evening our priest says Mass for the students. We come gladly, for it is also a place where we can meet, talk a little, and for at least an hour completely relax and forget everyday problems and difficulties. Everyone is welcomed into the church community.

Our trip to Munich lasted the whole day, and when we arrived in the luxuri-

ously decorated and illumined city, we were so exhausted that we could barely give a quick look at the richly adorned and ornamented shop windows, the busy passersby hastening home with their Christmas gifts, happy and care-free children playing on the playgrounds and riding their bikes. All we could do at that moment was sigh with yearning for that way of life in a country that is only a day's bus ride away. Such a high standard of living, still so unimaginable and unattainable for us!

Athens on the Tsar. Metropolis with a Kind Heart. Beer-and-Baroque Metropolis. Village with a Million Inhabitants. Germany's Secret Capital.

Everyone came to rediscover meaning in their lives and to find new strength.

Munich has been honored with many attractive names. It lies at the foot of the Alps, and through the middle flows the Tsar, the clear, green mountain river. Munich is a very important industrial center, one of the largest industrial towns in Germany. Cars, beer and electronics are its best-known products.

For us, arrival in Munich meant an invitation to faith through prayer, silence and searching. Everyone came there to rediscover meaning in life, to find new strength, and to prepare to assume responsibility after returning home.

Every morning we had a Mass in the nearby church, together with about 100

young people from different countries who had accommodations in the same part of the town. After reading Bible passages and singing in different European languages, we had conversations in groups of 10 members of different nationalities.

In these groups we were always reading religious texts and discussing all kinds of questions, giving our opinions and own experiences connected with God and church. Our talks also emphasized problems that exist in other countries regarding religion. Some of the questions we were trying to answer were: What can we do to help others realize that, in spite of the burden of the past, new birth through God is always possible? What are responsibilities that I have already assumed or am planning to assume in the life of society? And, finally, what is our duty as people of God and faith in this world of today which is so full of fear and hatred?

It was very interesting to hear opinions of other people, problems and dilemmas that they face on their path to God.

War in our homeland was also a common subject of our talks. Appalled by our troubles, young people from all over the world asked us an immense number of questions. We did our best and tried to explain all the horror and confusion that is, even to us, still incomprehensible. But no matter how hard we tried, I am not sure we entirely succeeded because one has to live and go through all that personally to truly understand it. Still, thanks to this meeting which really restored our hope and faith in God, we realized that God does not want wars, nor earthquakes, nor starvation, nor disasters. God does not want fights in Bosnia-Herzegovina nor anywhere else. God does not cause disease, nor fear nor misery.

In the afternoon there were many programs, prayers, performances, discussions and meditations, but there was also enough time for wandering and walking in the town, shopping and sightseeing. We had many good and even funny moments when we, for example, got lost and, in English and German, asked for directions from people in the street who turned out to be Croats working in Germany.

Culmination of the Christian spirit and union was attained on New Year's Eve. We had a Mass at 11 o'clock, and when New Year's (*continued on page 30*)

curtains, the faded letters of the word EXIT overhead. But Van Sant has no intention of leaving. He just leans back comfortably on his hands, talking with a young woman. When they are finished, I walk over and introduce myself. He immediately recognizes me from the question session. He asks what brings me to Portland, and we talk about Victoria Williams's role in the film. I asked him how she became involved in the project.



TOM ROBBINS BY DAWN STIEF

Williams is a singer/songwriter who has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Because of her illness, she hadn't been able to perform for quite some time. Admirers and friends released a benefit album for her entitled *Sweet Relief*. Bands such as Pearl Jam, Soul Asylum, and Lou Reed donated versions of her songs for the album. As it turns out, Van Sant told me, he and Williams had the same agent and he had known her for years. Since her battle with MS prevented her from touring, Van Sant wanted to use her for one of the cowgirl roles. She accepted.

At 41, Van Sant wears a straw cowboy hat. The hat crowns graying black hair that washes through his sideburns as well as the short hair which curls up beneath his hat in the back. He's wearing a wrinkled, stone-washed black denim jacket that looks as if it was left at the bottom of the dryer too long. The black denim partially hides a white T-shirt with a silkscreen of Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix. It's a *My Own Private Idaho* shirt.

This film must have been difficult for him to make. It went through a half-dozen screenings and was edited in different forms numerous times. The film's opening date was moved back several times. In the midst of all the technical

problems, tragedy struck. The death of River Phoenix was emotionally devastating for both his sister, Rain Phoenix, and Van Sant. Van Sant was suddenly confronted with the loss of a colleague and loved friend. The film begins with a tribute to Phoenix with the words, "For River."

Van Sant was the perfect choice for *Cowgirls'* rebirth on film. His directing credits include *Drugstore Cowboy*, the Red Hot Chili Peppers video *Under the Bridge*, and his modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, *My Own Private Idaho*. Van Sant is a cinematic pioneer, not only in style and film techniques, but also subject matter. His films tend to deal with extreme lifestyles and bizarre situations. Whether dealing with superstitious drug addicts, narcoleptic male prostitutes, or hitchhiking cowgirls, Van Sant always delivers a philosophical message . . . and magic.

Use of cameo roles is one of the signature techniques Van Sant employs within his work. In *Cowgirls*, a cameo role is provided by Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. William S. Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, and Roseanne also appear briefly.

The crowd disperses. Van Sant puts on his sunglasses and Robbins picks up his. We say goodbye again and they walk to the theater's exit. Van Sant is going to work on his next project and Robbins will go back to his publishers. He has a book that is being edited and is due for release this winter. Robbins turns just before he walks through the double doors, and I see his lopsided smile once again. Magic and poetry are never far behind.

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bells rang out, we were all standing in the church, hand in hand, singing and praying for peace in the world. After that, we had a party in the nearby school where we had a great time together with the youth of other countries, learning their songs and traditional dances.

The meeting in Munich was a great experience for me and my friends and has left a deep impression in my memory. Young people are invited to assume responsibility, in accordance with talents that God has put into their hearts and hands, to build a world of more justice and more solidarity.

Thousands of young people found hope. In this community a language of love, the mother tongue of all human beings, is spoken. All are considered to be members of the same family.

These meetings foster links of solidarity that unite members of the human society. They represent the transformed Europe of tomorrow—illuminated by sincere and selfless sharing and peace.

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gumball machines. Gum does get hard, though, if you chew it for a really long time and that important person hasn't landed yet, so maybe I'll be chewing it a lot. Maybe chewing slowly will help. It's hard to see things straight when my mouth is opening and closing really far and wide, especially in the dark through a window, looking at big cocky airplanes that aren't going anywhere. ★



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