

**Multi-cultural Forum in Banska Bystrica
Slovakia September 2004
With Jean-Claude and Arlene Audergon**

This piece is adapted from our report on a forum in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia. It was organized by ANNWIN, (Center for Support and Development of Human Potential in Slovakia) in association with EMF (European Multi-cultural foundation) and CFOR (Community Force for Change)

Thanks to the forum participants in Banska Bystrica, for the work they are doing in their communities. Thanks to Peter and Viera Šimkovic of ANNWIN for their organisation of this project and this event. Mr. Tara Mukherjee of EMF gave a lecture as part of this project, and Monica Sala and Femi Hughues gave workshops as part of the project. Thanks to Mr. Mukherjee for making a special trip to participate in our forum. Special thanks to the translators. It is an enormous work to translate in heated dialogue and this event could not have happened without their dedication.

Summary

In this four-day forum people met to discuss issues concerning a multi-cultural society in Slovakia. The premise of a community forum facilitated with a Process Work approach is that communities find wisdom and direction forward when all viewpoints are included. In addition to supporting all points of view, we focus on those 'hot spots' where communication usually breaks down or conflicts escalate. These 'hot spots' when carefully facilitated are also gateways to a deeper understanding. Forums suggest that we are all potentially a part of problems in our community and that each person is important towards finding solutions. A community forum is itself a process of accountability that necessarily includes all points of view.

After welcoming the participants, we invited people to talk in small groups about issues of concern. These were listed, so the group could sift and then go deeper into some of them..

Gathering a diverse group of people for such a dialogue is an important and difficult step. One reason people do not gather readily for such a community dialogue is that there have been few models of facilitated dialogue, in which all viewpoints will be supported and a deeper understanding will emerge. Another reason is that many people believe there are no problems to speak about. Many believe there are no issues to discuss, because they see themselves as a homogenous group of Slovaks, while others are 'foreign'. Those who suffer from discrimination, or want to speak out against it, often feel they will not be heard, will be hurt again, and do not trust such efforts.

ANNWIN made first steps, contacting people in the Roma community, people in education and social work, and students interested in the future of their society. It will be important that this ground work is followed up in a timely way. After the forum, we met a Roma political leader, who spoke about the dire situation in Slovakia and Europe. There are ten million Roma in Europe, with dismal living conditions, and many without heat as winter approaches. He is concerned that we could see large-scale violence, if issues facing Roma are not addressed at social and political levels. We also visited a Roma community, families living in a former prison now serving as temporary housing. We met a group of young children dealing with violence in their community, and we met a group of adults to hear about their situation and concerns. Since our visit, we have received a warm-hearted email from them and photographs.

In the forum, someone immediately stated that there are no problems of discrimination in Slovakia. The discussion revolved around this important stage of dialogue, only just beginning in Slovak society. One view was that (ethnic) Slovaks are peace loving, and do not discriminate against anyone. This view claimed that issues facing minority groups lie solely within those minority groups, particularly Roma, for example, when they do not send their kids to school. Some spoke of Roma misusing laws of positive discrimination. From this view, there was no (negative) discrimination towards Roma and other minorities in Slovakia, and the very idea that such issues need attention in furthering a civil society was considered as an idea imposed from the outside, from the EU, pressurising Slovak society.

Many of the participants did not agree with this view at all, yet felt frozen, unable to react or engage. People said that they could not speak out against discrimination in Slovakia, because they feared they would be ostracised. As we investigated this 'ghost' who silences, it reflected the tyranny of the former Communist regime, but also a fundamentalist Christian attitude in society, also internalised. It was absolute about what was good, what was evil, and wanted no further discussion.

In one session, several people generously shared their experience of cultural identity – ethnic Slovak identity, and as members of minority groups in Slovakia. There were common experiences of both pride in one's distinct culture, and personal and family memories of oppression. For example, Slovaks spoke of the thousand year history of oppression and the history of being forced to give up their language to speak Hungarian. In turn a Hungarian participant told the painful story about how her family was forced to sign a paper, giving up Hungarian identity and language - one family member refused and was cast out of the country and lost contact.

This was part of a central conversation – to understand 'Slovak' as an ethnic/cultural identity and Slovakia as a home to ethnic Slovaks and many ethnic groups. As is true all over the world, we saw how when a group identifies with its oppression, it is essential to hear and witness the story – otherwise it is almost impossible for the group to consider matters of accountability, coming from its social rank in relation to minority groups.

When some people said that the problems facing Roma were solely their own doing, this was inflammatory to others. It was a member of the Roma community who stood up to speak out about her perception of the situation facing Roma, the hate crimes and brutal discrimination against Roma and her own family. At first no one responded. Then it was a Roma participant who stood up on the 'side' of Slovak society, recognising her own responsibility and identity with Slovak society, (as someone who had 'passed' until adulthood). She responded with compassion and stood accountable. This was a moving and tearful moment in the forum – for some. Because the interaction occurred between two members of the Roma community who had not met before, it reflected a leadership process within the Roma community, necessary to bring awareness into the broader society. The Roma woman who had assumed accountability as a 'Slovak' told a moving story about how she grew up not knowing she was Roma. Her parents had hidden it from her to try to protect her. She described the profound psychological crisis and awakening she had, when she learned she was Roma

In addition to touching issues facing Roma, we worked with other issues relevant to a multi-cultural society. We had a group process around the tension between Hungarians and Slovaks; we had a group process around homosexuality and homophobia; a group discussion about the relationship between younger and older generations (those who lived under communism and those who have grown up since the fall of communism); and a group process about the affect of fundamentalist religious attitudes on society.

Reflection

There is a crucial need for Slovak society to discuss its identity as an ethnic./ cultural identity and the meaning of Slovak identity, as a multi-cultural society. Society needs contact with itself, to hold itself accountable to all its members. The forum participants contributed to this discussion of accountability that is barely beginning in Slovak society. (These matters are not only in Slovakia, of course, but in societies everywhere).

Tensions are exasperated and conflicts are stirred when a society refuses to look at issues of accountability. Accountability, however, is not a matter of 'guilt' or 'no guilt'. It requires dialogue and soul searching at an individual, group, and social level as well as political change. Much of Slovak society identifies with their thousand year history of oppression, unable to stand for their won national/ethnic identity. In turn, it is difficult to see the suffering and discrimination of minority members. Processing history of oppression and identity is crucial. If such issues are not included in social dialogue, much of Slovak society will experience the subject of minority rights as imposed from outside, repeating their oppression. Without serious dialogue, there is cynicism and disdain on one side and hopelessness on the other.

Similarly, people cannot witness the economic hardship of Roma because of their own poverty in relation to the West, and most everyone in Slovakia is working extremely hard for economic survival. Another heated rift concerns Hungarians who feel mistreated as a minority in Slovakia, and anger towards Hungarians for past oppression of Slovaks, and their current political power.

Forum participants spoke about how they freeze in reaction to a 'ghost' that doesn't allow reactions, silencing people in the face of human rights violations, hate crimes, rape and murder. Fundamentalist attitudes on one side and silence on the other create an active force to prevent a living democracy

One important learning that is applicable well beyond Slovakia, is that society needs support to thaw out such frozen silence. In Slovakia it is sometimes confused with a quiet cultural style. A cultural style deserves respect, but must be differentiated from this kind of deadly silence. That silence is not just the typical silence accompanying privilege in relation to minority groups, but a reaction to historic and current dynamics of terror. Some people will not agree with this.

Slovak ethnic identity needs to be appreciated in its beauty, along with acknowledgement of the suffering in its history of oppression, in order for people to become aware of other ethnic groups, their stories, and the reality of a Slovak multi-cultural civil society. Other minority groups need to be perceived and respected for their unique characteristics, their own identity and leadership, as well as in their suffering. Increased community dialogue can foster a notion that this is our society and these are our problems, across all groups –a chance to exercise a sense of responsibility and accountability, with the felt realization that every voice counts.

CFOR was founded by Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon to support the development of Community Forums for conflict prevention and multi-cultural community building. www.cfor.info