

A Close Encounter

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The sky is bluer than blue, flowering trees are pregnant with new blooms, and the Danube River gleams in the spring sun.

It's an utterly glorious April day in Vukovar, Croatia, which looks out over the sparkling river to Serbia. At one time, Croatia and Serbia were part of one country, Yugoslavia, an unstable amalgam of ethnic backgrounds formulated by the inorganic science of politics and war.

It was only some 20 years ago—the “Homeland War” of 1991–95—that Croatia resumed being Croatia and Serbia resumed being Serbia in a shockingly bloody conflict that was as much ethnic cleansing and terrorism as it was any sort of “traditional” warfare.

Here in Vukovar, the damage remains everywhere you look. Croatia's largest river port, the city was all but annihilated during an 87-day siege in 1991. Though some rebuilding has taken place, there simply isn't the money to sustain a consistent process. City streets are still lined with buildings scarred by

mortar rounds or dilapidated and overgrown by weeds, seemingly being reclaimed by the hungry earth.

Atop a hill in Vukovar sits the Church of Saints Philip and Jacob, a formidable Franciscan church that has been resurrected from the rubble. Inside the church are visible both the original stone walls—hundreds of years old—and the new construction of the late 1990s. The sanctuary features statues of St. Francis and St. Anthony, as well as a memorial of sorts to the destruction that occurred during the war.

It's a beautiful place to sit, think, and pray—to contemplate so very many things about our modern world. But outside the door awaits something more meaningful, something unexpected and yet perfectly timed.

Outside the door is someone rather like Jesus.

One of the Least of These

The little woman is old and wrinkled. She is maybe 5 feet tall but seems smaller by her curved



Photo courtesy Jennifer Scroggins

posture and her slow movement. She has a scarf around her hair, and she carries a rosary in her left hand.

I go to her to help her up the front stairs of the church, when she looks at me and says, “English?”

“Yes,” I say, though she continues to speak to me only in Croatian. I scan her face, her eyes, as if somehow they will reveal to me the meaning of her words. I think back to my college roommate, Vicky, a Chicago native of Croatian heritage. *Why did I not learn more words from her?*

The woman keeps talking, and I begin to feel panic brought on by a sense of helplessness. Through her gestures and her tone, I gather that she is asking—or hoping—for some money, so I grab the only thing I have, a US \$20 bill, and hand it to her.

Now I do understand what her face is telling me, because I see a look of deep gratitude, recognizable in any language or circumstance. Her eyes well with tears as she keeps talking to me, and I feel my eyes begin to fill also. Again, I am humbled by my own inelegance in the moment

and can think to say nothing beyond “God bless you.”

For some reason, I kiss her on her forehead. She then kisses my left hand, still speaking to me in words I can’t decipher.

I’m smiling, nodding, trying to say reassuring things in English. I finally make out two words from her: *Sretan Put*. It means “Happy journey,” and I had seen it earlier in the day on a road sign leading from Vukovar to Osijek.

I try to respond in kind with “*pace e bene*,” St. Francis’ famous “peace and good,” but the words fall away, not understood. At last I remember another sign I had seen—*Sretan Uskrs*, Happy Easter!—and her smile lets me know I’ve found the right words, finally.

We’re both teary-eyed, and the woman kisses my hand again and then walks into the church.

When Did I See You?

This brief meeting has turned my world on its head on this day, and my thoughts are spinning. Was it truly a chance encounter? I feel like I had walked past her earlier in the afternoon as I was exploring the city.



Photo courtesy Jennifer Scroggins

Were we supposed to meet?

Was she put on my path for me to help her because I had been unable to help the sweet, stray dog I’d seen hours ago, his fur covered in ticks and burrs?

Was she, on this day, Jesus? Had I just seen him in need?

My brain keeps up the hypothetical interrogation.

What has that woman seen in her life? How much death, destruction, and sorrow? What has she endured? How much has she lost? Will \$20 do anything to help her?

How many times has she gone into that church to pray? How strong must her faith be for her to trudge up that hill on tired legs, to a building that serves as a symbol of both darkness and light?

I don’t know the answers to so many of these questions! But I do know this meeting was a one-of-a-kind experience, a moment that brings together all the fractured pieces of one’s soul, reconstructing them like the stones of a crumbled building.

A miracle is a miracle in any language. +