

The unknown peaceworker: Vahidin Omanovic

Eulogy by Christine Freitag



Vahidin Omanovic during the award ceremony with Shreen Abdul Saroor.

Mr Vahidin Omanović has been nominated for the international peace prize in the category of the unknown peace worker. I must admit that Mr Omanović was completely unknown to me as well when I first agreed to speak in his honour. We never met until tonight but I now certainly feel to know a lot more about him. This is due to the fact that I have been able to read and study different texts, written by people who have spent time with him and all agree that time spent with him definitely is precious time. There is also a dissertation by Becca Asaki, who conducted a most exciting study of Mr Omanović's peace practice. After having read all these references and testimonials I decided that it is certainly worthwhile to make this unknown peace worker known to you all.

Mr Omanović comes from Bosnia, where he grew up in a village near Sanski Most. During the communist regime, where he had been involved in the communist youth organisation, he decided to continue his school career at the madrasah, and to become an imam. Obviously, this was an unusual decision for a very young man, as it implied a firm decision to lead a religious life underground. After three years of study the war began, and Mr Omanović was not able to return to school. He and his family became victims of the violent removal of Muslims and Croats after the occupation of Sanski Most by the Serb army and

paramilitary groups. The family fled to Croatia and then to Slovenia, where they had to live in a refugee camp for years. When he returned he was traumatised by the violence against his people, and, as he told people later, understandably unwilling to forgive. At that time Mr Omanović was working as a teacher in Sanski Most and was forced by the education authorities to attend a workshop on dialogue and community building. There, he says today, he was confronted with the workshop trainer's position that it would have to be the people then living in Bosnia who must deal with the burden of all the suffering and anger in the hearts of the people. This insight, he says, brought him back to life – and formed the beginning of his work for peace, for which we are honouring him tonight. Today, Mr Omanović is the leader of the Centre for Peacebuilding in Sanski Most. The motto of the centre's work is, 'Our Way is Peace'.

I will now try to describe Mr Omanović's peace building work and how 'peace as a way' is practiced by him and the many people supporting his work as volunteers. In my reading, I think I have been able to make out certain metaphors and catchwords that might stand for what he is doing.



Mr Omanović is *building bridges*. Sanski Most, translating as 'the bridge across the river Sana', seems to be a meaningful place for this. The bridge is a link between two parts of the city that are still visually dominated by their places of worship: one is an Orthodox church, the other one a mosque. The work of the Centre for Peacebuilding is understood as intercultural and interreligious work. As an imam, Mr Omanović knows about the trust people have in religion. He knows about the misuse of this trust by people who still try to segregate ethnic groups in

Bosnia and Herzegovina. He himself stands for those who want to make religion an instrument to unite people and to promote tolerance. It seems very meaningful for the work he is doing, that he does not believe in just bringing people together. After the war there were lots of projects run mainly by foreigners that were designed to just physically bring people together, implying that physical togetherness would change aggression into peace. Prejudices and stereotypes, however, just like trauma and other injuries do not just disappear by putting

enemies into the same room. At least the people who went through such projects as 'target groups' soon realised that it is naïve to believe that attitudes will change significantly through simple encounters. The main problem seems to be that people are not easily willing to forget what they have learned in years of fighting and shaping the picture of their enemies. This holds true in particular for collective conflicts, where power relations between different conflict parties will remain stable even after inter-group encounters. Building bridges therefore implies to make room for new foundations, and that is to *unlearn* before *learning*.

To promote *unlearning* people have to be willing to face the past. It was in the past when violent conflict brought death and suffering and all the sentiments as well as the resulting social and political developments need to be looked at by facing the painful past. This is why Mr Omanović stresses the necessity of encouraging people to tell their memories of the war, but also to speak about their feelings linked to their experience. He says that "by naming the emotion, people can then conceptualise their experience and only then can they process it." Thus, turning to the past and facing it on a very personal level, forms the first step in a truly therapeutic process. As one of the trainers at the peace camp at Mr Omanović's centre put it: "It's not easy, especially for a person who lost family in the war and it's very hard for them to talk about the war but I think it is necessary and only through this story we can go forward."



Mr Omanović is a qualified therapist. He also holds a Master's degree in Conflict Transformation. I understand his main motive to be to transform conflict by transforming suffering into healing. For a religious person like him it also makes a lot of sense to believe that individual healing is an ideal starting point for collective conflict transformation. Once the participants of his peace camps have started to tell their story as well as to actively listen to their stories and to connect them to their emotions, it becomes possible also to look at prejudices and stereotypes that stem from the past and work in the present. Thus, step by step, the process of unlearning individual and inter-group

truths can transform into mutual learning processes on how to create a different future. Peace camp participants obviously leave with a call for social and political activity, knowing that they are not alone with their self set tasks. We hear from former participants that there are active and supportive networks for everybody who needs reassurance in what he or she is doing.

In my understanding of Mr Omanović and his work I was repeatedly struck by a metaphor appearing in various contexts. To me it has become something like *the* catchword for all the changes that people in Sanski Most have experienced in connection with Vahidin Omanović. To summarize what I have learned about this most impressive person and his work, I would now like to talk about *coffee*. Coffee is a liquid brewed from the roasted seeds of the coffee plant. But coffee is a lot more than just a drink. In Bosnia, coffee has its own culture. When you invite a person for coffee, it means that you want to get to know him or her better. Knowing this it seems absolutely reasonable that the work of Mr Omanović in the Centre for Peacebuilding started and still operates with an open invitation for coffee that is called "Coffee for Peace". As it reads on the website of the Centre:

"We facilitate 'kahva, kava, kafa za mir' (coffee for peace) meetings once a month. Coffee is an important part of our local culture, while the name of the gatherings – using three different words for coffee used in the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian dialects of the local language – highlights our diversity. Local citizens are invited to come to CIM and talk about topics that draw their interest. Our staff, trained in strategies of peacebuilding, facilitate delicate conversations about the dynamics of reconciliation and conflict resolution in a post-war society."

Again, the meetings are much more than the facilitation of encounters. Coffee can obviously help to build the bridge from a horrific past to the mutual will to design a peaceful future. Herbert Froehlich, who was a good friend of many Balkan people involved in Peace Work and was a great peace worker himself, is quoted to have said that coffee was the Balkan's predominant ecumenical beverage. Ecumenicism, understood as the support and encouragement of unity, suddenly becomes drinkable and easily digestible. It is no longer a big word in shallow speeches.

I found more and very different allusions to coffee in my texts. One forms part of a quotation of a peace camp participant. He said: "Here [meaning "here in Bosnia"] fear is always in all

life just like coffee or tea, always we have fear." Coffee stands for everything that's normal in Bosnian people's lives. And fear still is normal to many people.

Vahidin Omanović, too, was traumatised during the war in Bosnia. A friend of his reported that for a long time a physical sign of this was his tremor: "As an imam, his job is to sit with people and listen to them, counsel them, but he struggled to hold his coffee cup without spilling, so bad was the shaking of his hands." Mr Omanović underwent cranio-sacral therapy which helped him deal with this – and decided to train as a cranio-sacral therapist himself. He can now have coffee with people and also treat those burdened with the effects of trauma with another kind of therapeutical support. He is just one of them, but one who is determined to work for the better of individuals as well as of society. As another peace camp participant put it: "When he talks about peace it means something."