



Balkan Heroine by Jeff Fountain

No sooner had I sent the last Weekly Word about Europe's disabled than I received the following report.

Gesina, "a Dutch lady with a huge heart, and a little hunched-over body," has set up a centre for the disabled in Tirana, the capital of Albania. The report, written by Grant van Cleve, a YWAMer seconded to the Albania Encouragement Project, described the "first-class program content, quality of care and sacrificial love shown to these 30 mentally and physically disabled people."

Gesina is surely one of the heroines of the Balkans. Since long before communism and Yugoslavia collapsed, Romkje and I often heard of her exploits, as she itinerated constantly throughout the Balkans. She endured not only her physical disabilities, but also arrest and official blacklisting, in her efforts to bring Bibles and encouragement to disabled and abled alike. An old family friend, Anje, herself physically handicapped, would sometimes disappear for weeks at a time on yet another Balkan adventure with Gesina. Together they formed a most unlikely "apostolic" team!

Grant reports: "Ever since starting her secret trips in to Albania to smuggle literature years ago, Gesina dreamed of using her battle with her own disabilities as a platform to minister to the disabled in Albania.

Since the regime fell and she was allowed into the country, her visions have gradually started to take form. Now things are in place to provide education, therapy, hope, and life skills to disabled in the area; as well as model such care for the rest of the country.

"This is especially noteworthy given that it is in Albania. Why? Well, in the 'state first' system under Communism the disabled were seen as having little value. It's a fairly logical conclusion consistent with their philosophy: Humans don't have any innate dignity, so when caring for them drains state resources, it's better to leave them by the wayside. Families of disabled who saw beyond that callousness were forced to meet all the needs at home, on limited resources - and of course forgot any hope of them getting integrated into society.

"(Gesina) saw things differently. A couple of Tuesdays ago, we sat in awe listening to stories of changed lives. There was Ylli who finally learned to read after 30 years of hearing that he was an imbecile. Suela was one of the top students in Albania before she was paralyzed after taking a stray bullet to the neck in the civil unrest of 1997. After 2 years lying in bed hoping to die, she has found new opportunities to write (via voice recognition software) and has discovered a knack for painting with her mouth.



Good news

"In the audience hearing the stories were a number of secular government officials. I had invited them as part of our quest to increase exposure to, and acceptance of, the Christian community. They were all astonished to hear what was happening through this ministry. One, the number two guy at the Department of Labor, was also a journalist and he resolved to get this kind of info out in the media. "People need some kind of 'good news' to read between the gory daily headlines of revenge killings and confiscated contraband," he said.

"On a personal level, he wanted to dig beyond the 'public interest' story, and find out what motivated people to go out of their way to help fill in gaps that the Albanian society had gladly left wide open. He also wanted to know what it was 'inside' that motivated the disabled ones to give it another try. Was it just new tools and techniques, or was there a spiritual element that catalyzed hope?

"Finally - despite the fact that the care was given from a distinctly Christian foundation - he thought that the quality of the work done for the disabled was so good that he committed to get government funding to help with medical and educational expenses.

"What a great series of breakthroughs!" concludes Grant.

"God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong..." 1 Cor. 1:27

This article is taken from Jeff Fountain's Weekly Word for Europe, Oct. 7, 2002. Jeff is YWAM's Europe-CIS sub-field Director.