

Launch of a Cookery project with the residents of Monopol.

What greater honour is there than to be invited to share a meal with people of a culture other than your own? What greater way to get to know another culture while integrating it with your own? With this wisdom in mind Britta Schmutz of the Red Cross launched the Cookery project with the residents of the Refugee centre at Monopol Gasperich this week.

Monopol is a huge old ware house owned by Giorgetti and donated to the Red Cross for the benefit of accommodating refugees. With the urgency the situation required, its cavernous interior was crudely converted into 6 bed dormitories, and a dining area. Pre fabricated shower, toilet and washing facilities were constructed across the yard from the main building. Food is delivered by Sodexho, there being no cooking facilities in Monopol. Although one section of its barn like interior initially accommodated families in Red Cross tents it was eventually deemed unsuitable for families who were transferred elsewhere. Presently only men reside here and it is home to 180 young men of 22 different nationalities. The majority are asylum seekers from war torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq though other countries also have their asylum seekers, not least the first subjects of this culinary project-the Kosovan Serbs with their Balkan culinary tradition.

Monopol is a bleak place. It is redeemed by the Red Cross team who manage the facility and the many volunteers who help out, either with the serving of meals or teaching of languages. But most impressive of all are the majority of the residents who bear witness to the human capacity to endure and do so with dignity. The population remains fluid with sporadic new arrivals as well as transfers to other locations, or indeed out of the country. As with society everywhere, Monopol too has its 5% criminal element who manage to get in the newspapers from time to time. That statistic remains constant despite transfers and in some cases imprisonment.

The Balkans, our first culinary destination to be explored has a rich culinary tradition and the Balkan Mama is up there with the Italian Mama as the Queen of the Kitchen. However Balkan men are no less adept in the kitchen than their sisters or mothers. It was explained to me that this springs from their "Slava" festival tradition, similar, to a "name day" festival though this is a gross over simplification. Each person has their own particular 'slava' associated with a particular saint entailing family parties for up to 50 people or more lasting up to 3 days, even amongst the poorest of people. It's all hands on deck on these occasions and the men are used to this from a very young age. It entails many beautiful rituals associated with their orthodox faith, which are well worth an internet search but beyond the scope of this article.

With funding secured for such projects from OLAI, the kitchen of Centre Culturelle de la Gare secured as the theatre of operations, and the traditional Balkan "Sarma" as the recipe of choice, we set about shopping. For this, our destination was the Balkan supermarket located not too far from the Centre Culturelle in Rue de Strasbourg. Pickled fermented cabbage, some fatty bacon, rice, and minced pork and beef are the principal ingredients for Sarma with spicy paprika, bay leaves and parsley providing the necessary spicy kick and flavouring. Preparation requires mixing the cooked rice with the raw minced meat which has been spiced with paprika and to which fried onion and garlic has been

added. Then little parcels of meat and rice are made with the fermented cabbage leaves and placed in a large casserole, layered with chunks of lard and bay leaves. A sauce is made with stock and tomato concentrate, béchamel style, and poured into about one third of the casserole. It requires 3-4 hours cooking in a medium oven.

It was a unique experience. The kitchen was tiny and it was clear from the beginning that these men knew what they were doing. Volunteers were allowed to sit and watch and drink a coffee. The afternoon flew by. Soon the casserole was in the oven and the cooking time allowed us to sit together and chat. And thus I learnt of their traditions, about the great barrels of fermented cabbage most houses prepare and store. When work is hard to find it sustains a family through the winter. Leftover cabbage from the preparation of sarma makes a cabbage aperitif sprinkled with paprika and a little vodka. We had to do without the latter ingredient but it was still delicious and it sustained us until the dish was cooked.

In accordance with advice from the Red Cross we avoided talk of their personal situation, or politics. The plight of the Kosovan Serbs has been largely overlooked by the media and the international community but this was not the time for delving into that. But there was no escaping the pain in the eyes of these men, despite the rolled up sleeves, and their insistence on Slavic music throughout the entire operation. Indeed I am grateful for having been introduced to the music of Goran Bregovich and intend to get to his next concert in Luxembourg.

There are many ways of dealing with pain and it seemed to me that these men had chosen the rolled up sleeve way. When Luxembourg suffered badly from flooding recently these Kosovan Serbs were out there as volunteers shovelling sand with their sleeves rolled up as part of the relief effort. When other men, albeit a minority, refuse to pull their weight in the cleaning up after meals rota in Monopol these men are to be seen time and again rowing in to ensure everything is cleaned up and ready for the next meal. One of the participants who has been in Monopol since it opened in December said he was sustained too by his daily French classes with Monica, a volunteer French language teacher. It gave structure to his day he said. It was obvious that he learnt a lot too as we used French to communicate with him.

Soon our Sarma was cooked and we settled down to eat together. The huge casserole meant there was plenty leftover to take back to Monopol to share with others. It was insisted that I too take some home to share with my family. It seemed like the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in operation. The clean up was done almost before we knew it and it was clear that presiding over the kitchen sink was not an unfamiliar experience to these men. What was clear too was how much the experience meant to them. It was as though a light shone through them during the entire event.

I will treasure forever the experience of having shared a meal cooked by these Kosovan Serbs. It opened my eyes to the possibilities a meal shared offers in this situation. The project will continue although the afternoon came with one setback. The Centre Culturelle administration telephoned to say it is quite booked up with courses in the autumn and winter and cannot accommodate us a second time. A search for a new venue is underway and some places have been

approached. The Red Cross assures any willing organisation that it assumes full responsibility for this event and only 6-7 residents of Monopol will be present at any cooking event with Red Cross personnel and volunteers also in attendance. It guarantees that the venue will be cleaned up and left as it was found. If you can help with finding a venue and supporting this valuable project please contact the Red Cross in Gasperich.