



FRAGMENTS OF ART AT WORK: ART THERAPY IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

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Introduction

That which is not expressed
Will be forgotten
That which has been forgotten
Will happen again

—Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1978)

The words of this poem resonate with our work in the former Yugoslavia where war spanned 4 years, and are particularly pertinent in a war described by Ed Vulliamy (1994) as “dominated by history,” where the past eclipses the present struggle and history dominates every interview. In presenting fragments of art at work, it has become essential to consider this backdrop.

The years 1992 to 1995 saw the destruction of Yugoslavia as a European country. The war arose out of the process of change in modern Europe: a change in the balance of power and a move from communism to democratization.

The central conflict which destabilized Yugoslavia was between, on the one hand, the desire to create and consolidate (in the case of Serbia) a state in which one national group was dominant, and on the other, the perceived or demonstrable vulnerability of minority populations in these projected states. (Glenny, 1993, p. 235)

Glenny’s words describe a complex and multifaceted conflict and provide a clue as to why there has been a general confusion in people’s minds as to what was *actually* happening in this European country. Understanding this war as *either* a civil conflict characterized by chronic strife, high personal involvement, poor definition of the threat and political, social and economic oppression *or* as conventional warfare where the enemy (threat) is clearly defined (conflict between nations carried out by force) is important in attempting to decipher the external elements that have psychologically influenced the individuals (both children and adults) with whom we worked.

The overlapping of the collective and the individual where the political becomes the personal is pertinent from whichever angle this war is considered. Derek Summerfield (1995) has attempted to understand trauma in the context of political conflict generally. His thoughts are relevant to this particular context: that it is the social fabric itself which is the central target “and in its damaged state remains the context in which large numbers of people must manage their distress and cope with their fractured lives” (Summerfield, 1995, p. 356). The process of arrest, torture, release, flight and exile involves trauma at many levels. In so far as humans are social beings, this trauma can be understood, not only as an assault on the individual person, but as an assault on the links and communications between people and the patterns

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of relationships through which people define themselves and give meaning to their lives.

Psychologists have tried to understand the psychological effects of the war on children in Bosnia. Those working for UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), for example, collected the following data by sampling 1,505 school-aged children in Sarajevo in June and July 1993 as part of UNICEF's War Trauma Screening programme:

- 23% of children have been forced to leave their own town or village during the war
- 7% of children reported that family members have been wounded or killed during the war
- 46% have seen dead bodies
- 79% have been in a situation during the war in which they thought they would be killed
- 97% have experienced shelling very near by
- 96% have had their homes attacked or shelled
- 55% have been shot at by snipers
- 11% have experienced serious food and water shortage.

Out of the same sample taken in Sarajevo, "trauma reactions" showed that "23% of children thought that life was not worth living; 29% felt unbearable sorrow; 21% felt alone; 20% had terrifying dreams and 34% had stomach aches; this may be evidence of extreme hunger, or may be psycho-somatically conditioned" (UNICEF, 1994). Whether such methods of categorization are useful in testing children's "psychological trauma" is a subject on its own, although the categories do provide shocking detail of these children's lives in war.

Little could have contributed more to our understanding of the situation than actually working in the former Yugoslavia, listening to individuals' stories and witnessing a reality of their lives. During three visits, the impressions we gained were of Yugoslavia as a country in which Serbs, Croats and Muslims once shared their lives: lived side by side as neighbors and friends and inter-married. These same people had now become enemies with families and cities divided (such as Mostar) and whole communities displaced. The 4 years of the war forced individuals to define themselves as Serb, Croat or Muslim—thus forging identities often never considered on a personal level as of foremost importance before the war. The lives of the people we met and stayed with in Sarajevo and East Mostar were characterized by loss of home, loss of family, at times living without electricity and running water, shortage of food, living in the home of friends who fled the area as they were the "wrong" ethnic group (our hosts in East

Mostar had moved into an apartment formerly owned by their Servian friends), living with a large influx of refugees who changed the character of the town bringing a change of life, not necessarily chosen.

As art therapists and care professionals, we needed to consider our position within an overall context of care. It seems that care specialists in this field have not yet developed a structure for defining the plight of the individual who lives through war.

In other words, as yet we have not developed a model comparable to that of divorce, which would enable us to normalise the suffering due to war (which includes the refugee experience) without diminishing its disruptive effects as well as its abhorrent nature. Thus, it appears as an unavoidable consequence that the stories that are told about refugees by themselves and by professionals tend to be formulated within the context of a pathology and deficit paradigm. (Papadopoulos & Hilderbrand, 1997, p. 209)

Terms such as *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) and *trauma* are frequently used to pathologize individuals' experience. Can they be useful when explanations which imply external events have little to do with the way the individual perceives these events, digests them and makes meaning out them? In a context in which there is an ongoing debate as to how to make sense of this, specialists have proposed other concepts, such as "cultural bereavement" (Eisenbruch, 1990, 1991), "nostalgic disorientation" (Papadopoulos & Hilderbrand, 1997, p. 213) in which nostalgia is taken from the classical Greek, meaning "the pain experienced in the yearning to return home" and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) in which there is an effort to create a general description taking the emphasis away from the "disorder" (Marsella, 1994, p. 215).

In this context, war and political conflict will have different meanings for different individuals and remembering the centrality of the individual becomes of vital importance. In consideration of the above, what remains is to listen to individual stories and the ways in which each person consequently imagines the world around them.

The Origins of Our Work

In response to the scope of personal suffering witnessed, a British charity called *War Child*, working in the former Yugoslavia, began investigations into es-

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