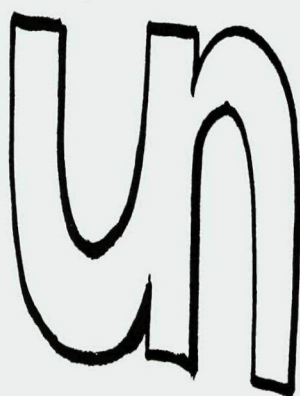


A Trail to Bosnia, War Trauma, and Qualitative Research

This narrative describes the author's experience conducting interviews in Nevada with refugees from the former Yugoslavia as part of an ongoing research project on the emotional and social responses to war and dislocation.

by Margaret Oakes

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History of My Interest in War Trauma

My interest and passion for studying war trauma and perhaps even Yugoslavians had deep roots. Although there are probably seeds of my interest in war in the sixties and seventies political movements, and of my interest in the Balkans in my hitchhiking trip in Yugoslavia in 1968, I think it popped up in my life in the early 1980s, working for Los Angeles County Mental Health, where I heard stories of war told by Central Americans.

In this same time period, I heard a talk by a Nicaraguan playwright. I had been around the solidarity movement, but had been reticent about emotional involvement because of the harsh militant depiction of the struggle I had seen in cultural events. But the playwright showed me another side to revolution; a softer, more creative, intellectual, and emotional one. After the speech ended, a young woman got up and asked if any health workers were interested in working in Nicaragua for a few months.

Soon I found myself in Nicaragua, translating for a New York psychiatrist and seeing the sites of Nicaragua. While the revolution and its intense friendliness and idealism attracted me,

war reared its head in the form of a friend of a friend. He suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder brought on by combat. Such intensely painful emotions affected me enough to bring memories of it back to the United States. I wanted to help young people who, because they defended their ideals and revolution by participating in the horrors of combat, began to suffer terrible stress.

When I returned to Nicaragua to work for three years, a friend referred me to a high school attached to the University in Leon, where they needed help with young men returning from war. I soon traveled to Leon for two days a week to hear their stories and help them deal with their pain. The young men, traumatized by war, were also dedicated revolutionaries from the poor, rural north, who had never, ever encountered the material world that had previously surrounded me. Their stories vibrated with idealism and pain, and often made my own ideals and adventures seem timid and unsure in comparison.

Past Research on War Trauma

I also traveled to El Salvador, after the war ended in 1992, with an organized group of lawyers to write the psychosocial section of a human rights investigation to be presented to the United Nations Peace Commission. The

workers in the human rights agency that hosted me decided that I should talk to all the workers there, in hopes that an interview with each might help their stress from years of war trauma. The stories of their losses, incarcerations, and torture seemed overwhelming. One afternoon, while we sat in the living room of the human rights worker in whose house I stayed, she began describing her experience in jail and the torture she received there. The conversation was interrupted by someone entering, and afterwards, I couldn't remember much of what she had told me. What I recall now, some eight years later, was a vague scene of her being marched around naked, with electric wires attached to her breasts. The vagueness was only in my mind, as it distanced itself from the trauma. The intensity of the story, especially coming from a friend rather than a client, caused me to dissociate slightly.

People seemed to need to talk everywhere. I met a psychologist at a visit to a United Nations site for demobilized soldiers who, when I told him about my work, began to tell me about the specifics of his own torture while incarcerated during war. Then came the field visits to the site of a civilian bombing. My first interview with a fifteen-year-old boy who had lost his leg in a bombing, began by his telling me that he wanted to die.

That summer I traveled to San Salvador and, under the auspices of the Catholic University in San Salvador, I collected data in three rural villages on emotional

effects of war. In El Salvador, I met people who would get tears in their eyes when I would tell them about my work. I was not so much wanting to discover brand new truths, but to illuminate these stories, so that social workers and others could understand the personal and communal experience of war and its aftermath.



Later when I worked in a Red Cross shelter for a fire in Los Angeles, I did not have the same reactions as my coworkers who talked much of such intense emotional reactions to the stories that they had difficulties containing it. This was no longer happening to me. I had become accustomed to trauma.

The Agency

When I talked to the agency caseworkers directly in charge of the refugees, I began to realize that it was going to be very difficult to interview the Kosovans, who had just recently arrived, spoke no English, and refused to speak Serbo-Croatian, the language of their enemy. Finding Albanian interpreters would be a daunting task. Las

Vegas has several thousand Bosnians, many of them having come here as refugees because of an already developed immigrant community. Most had lived here several years and spoke a fair amount of English.

The worker in charge of Bosnians introduced me to both the community at large and individual respondents. Prior to her job with the agency, she had lived in a building filled with Bosnians, and she became immersed not only in their community but in their culture. My first interview was with her friend rather than a client. Then they both began to search for Bosnians, both Serbs and Moslems for me to interview.



The Culture

The worker brought me to my first cultural event, a Slava, a family saints' day feast. A respondent explained their religion, Serbian Orthodox, and the saints' days as being vestiges of pre-Christian times when each family had a personal God. This reminded me of Catholic Churches in sections of Chiapas in Southern Mexico.

A long table filled the small apartment. As I sat down

with others the hostess placed plates of Bosnian food on the table, filo dough pastries filled with meat and vegetables, often topped with yogurt, and dishes decked with fresh pork meat from farms the Bosnians had discovered amidst the harsh southern Nevada desert. The thick Turkish coffee is continuously refilled until you stop the flow by placing your gift, a fresh pack of cigarettes, on top of your cup. The cigarette smoke seemed to be my sacrifice for learning about Bosnian culture and meeting people to obtain interviews. They all seemed to smoke, and after each interview or party, I smelled smoke in my nostrils for two days no matter how I washed.

The next outing to meet the community consisted of a trip to the airport with the agency worker and her sister, to meet the son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter of one of the refugees. A crowd of ex-Yugoslavs waited in the smoking area of the airport. They formed around the gate as the plane took its time landing. Two families traveled on this plane, one sponsored by their family, and another without a sponsor. The young Bosnians, Serb and Moslem, hanging out together at the airport attested to the reconciliation going on far away from their homeland. When they arrived a few years back, there was much animosity. As they get further and further from the strife that enflamed their country, they have become friends with shared experiences and culture. The worker pointed out one of the women. She had been in a rape camp. She didn't

know if she would be willing to be interviewed.

From the airport the crowd moved to the father's apartment where they began another feast, like a Slava with no gifts or offerings of cigarettes. The five-year-old girl received numerous gifts, including two baby dolls. In Yugoslavia, she had only the head of a doll. She ran excitedly around the small apartment, the two dolls in tow. What must it be like for a small child to go from much deprivation of a refugee in her own country, to a place where the first thing she encounters are mounds of new toys?

While they waited in Belgrade, to come to the States, the bombing began. The little girl had to run to the cellar at air raid warnings, dragging her doll's head in tow. All refugee statuses were cancelled. It took the grandfather in the states emailing everyone he knew and didn't know in the former Yugoslavia until he finally got someone in the United Nations and got his son's family's refugee status back. "My son is finally here," he sighed and his English suddenly became much clearer. He had already had a small heart attack a few months ago. He had the girl in his arms since she arrived until he arrived home.

I also met the husband of the woman doctor I had met at the first Slava. I explained my project to him. Then he began to tell me about his experiences in a concentration camp, four years, and how his wife was only a few hundred yards away, working as a doctor, and neither knew it. I had already had an interview

with another man who had been in the camps, and had heard details of the near starvation, the beatings, and the close calls he had encountered with death. This man told me about dreams and nightmares that had diminished now to about twice a month, much better now. I asked him about participating in the study. He did not respond, but kept telling me about his experiences, as we rode on the airport tram. I wished I had had a tape recorder.

The refugees talked much of Sarejevo, a cultured city they mourned. Their tales made me also long for a place that began to form in my mind, built from descriptions and photographs and greatly embellished by my imagination; a place that no longer existed in time. I had somehow missed this marvelous city they described. I knew it quite likely existed, as I had seen Dubrovnik and gone to an open air theatre there. I envied their history in this place with the richness of sophistication, culture, and intellectuality that they portrayed as they and I sat in Las Vegas, many light years away.

The Respondents

My first respondent was quite reluctant to have the interview recorded, so we did not record it. In the second interview he consented after I agreed to return the tape as soon as I transcribed it.

Several Bosnian refugees expressed that the worst thing about their dysphoria is that they long for their life and country as it was, one that no longer exists.

They talk much of how rich, full, and easy life was before the war, especially those from Sarajevo. Bosnian culture differed widely from Salvadoran culture, the culture in which my previous research was based. A more developed country, and formerly politically socialist, education seemed to be an important element in the former Yugoslavian culture. As one woman indicated, class in the former Yugoslavia was based mainly on education rather than on material goods. In El Salvador, although a few of my respondents living in the town closest to the capital had a University education, in the rural area where I conducted my interviews, especially in the high war zone, a high school education was considered fairly well educated. In the war zone, third grade was more the norm.

Two college educated Bosnian respondents brought new insights to my examination of the emotional effects of war, in spite of limited English. One woman's father had published a book in Yugoslavia on his experience in a Bosnian camp. The respondent had edited it extensively to include only those experiences that elicited intense emotions. She talked about how difficult it was to find words to describe the intensity of the terror and sadness felt in war. I remembered Elaine Scary (1985) explaining that pain, particularly the pain produced by torture, often results in the disappearance of verbal expression. One reason that it is so difficult for others to understand such feelings of pain is that there are no words that can

properly describe it. Verbal ability disappears at this instance of such escalated pain, and only a sharp, stabbing emotion, with no description, remains.

The Yugoslavians could provide me with the intellectual insight into their experiences, while the Salvadoran campesinos, with their simple vocabulary and the literalness of their expression, perhaps best expressed this intensity in a word. *Aflijida* best described their emotional trauma from war, and they lengthened the word to *afflijjjjjiiida* to enunciate its intensity (Oakes, 1998). The word took on new timbers as it climbed an octave in a wail, stretching out as it rose up and down another a scale, not so much of music, but of some much deeper, more primitive emotional discharge that related to a howl, a wail, or a melancholy death moan.

Another Bosnian respondent described how his feelings had decreased, so that he could not feel as much any more, and felt less connected to the world. A fairly young man with salt and pepper hair, he indicated that his hair had turned gray from seeing the horrors of war. In El Salvador, in spite of my fluency in Spanish, no one had expressed an awareness of the negative symptoms that trauma caused, the decrease in abilities to feel and connect. That may have been due, in part, to their definition of self as related to their family group rather than individually. Attachment to others was automatic, so that emotional distance did not signify lack of attachment and was not subject to examina-

tion.

I discovered that collateral people in the interview process or around it, helped piece together stories in a more complete form. The son and husband of a woman helped to reconstruct her story, translating when her English failed. In another interview, a girlfriend helped translate and added information about dreams, traumas, and events he had told her. My friend, the worker helping me obtain interviews, encountered a Bosnian who had heard that one of the respondents had talked to me. He indicated that the respondent had been forced to fight in the war and had seen many terrible things and had probably killed people. The respondent had not told me about his military duty, perhaps an indication of his shame and/or fear. With the additional information of those around them, stories grew and changed.

Back to the Agency, Moslems, and Mixed Marriages

Back at the agency I met a worker, a Bosnian Croat married to a Moslem, who had married during the war. She began to tell me the story from another viewpoint. Common before the war, mixed marriages became quite dangerous during the war. She had been here only a couple of years, but she had lived as a refugee in Germany since 1993. Yes, she indicated, each side had killed and imprisoned and done terrible things to the other sides, but the Serbs started it, and when someone hurts you, you hurt

them back. Moslems had the greatest number of deaths in the war. The population in Las Vegas, she said, consisted mainly of Serbs, who had their own view of the war, not that of reality. According to Ignacio Martín Baró (1989), war causes such extremes and the lies become everything, so that everyone's reality is suspect. Most of those I had met had never wanted war, were not nationalists, but still, they had become divided by war.

Then she began to add, if I wanted the real story of war, I should talk to those in mixed marriages. They saw both sides, or stood in the middle, a very dangerous spot in war. In Germany, she told me, ten thousand Yugoslavian refugees in mixed marriages lived.

No, her husband would not be interested in participating in the study, but she could connect me to some former Yugoslavs from mixed marriages. These came in all varieties of the three groups, Roman Catholic Croats, Serbian Orthodox Serbs, and Moslems. When I asked her about the religious level of Moslems, she indicated, well, everyone else talked so much about their church, that Moslems began to come closer to theirs.

Discussion

I have not written much about the contents of my interviews yet, having only interviewed a few respondents, but they included those who had experiences in concentration camps,

fought as soldiers, and been refugees in their own country.

One might ask, why would social workers want to know about this wandering tale of research? Examination of what one brings to one's work, of what drives one's passion, is important in our work as social workers. This is also a glimpse into how one person went about attempting to understand a culture and an experience we know only from brief news clips on television, which show only the horror and nothing else, a distorted view which often makes one withdraw from the subject area. This is an attempt to begin to look for a more complete picture. □

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