

*(Publication on reconciliation and dealing with the past)*

We announced this book in our previous report, although it still didn't have a title then. It required lot more work than we had previously planned, but we expect it to be released before the end of the year.

We here publish for the first time two interviews from the book, and an excerpt from the book's preface, translated into English.

## From the Preface

This is the collection of interviews with people from all over former Yugoslavia, people with different profiles: various age, profession, sex, ethnic background ... What they all have in common is that they are willing to talk about the past, to look at the present time and that they have hopes, fears and wishes for the future. Someone may say that they are just "ordinary people". Perhaps they are "ordinary" because they are neither in some positions of power, nor do they belong to the circle of celebrities who we may often hear or see in the media. But I dare to say that they definitely make the majority of the societies in which we live. Whether they're ordinary or "un-ordinary", they carry along many wishes, fears, revulsion with the situation in the society, thinking, anxieties, aspirations and hopes just as great majority of others do. At the same time, these are the voices we can rarely hear. It's absurd, isn't it? How often (if at all) did you have a chance to hear what it was like to spend an entire time during the war in Sarajevo or in Priština, how does a person from Belgrade, Šibenik, Skoplje, Jajce think, what do people in Knin, Gnjilane, Loznica hope for and what do people who lived as refugees, participated in the war or were watching the war on TV fear from?

We wanted to make an effort and find some space for those voices to be heard. Our long-lasting experience of work in peace building showed us how much the exchange of those reflections about some painful issues of our societies contributes to mutual understanding and building of trust: about hopes we have, who we are and what is bothering us, and what we would like to be – as one of the interviewees said "You cut yourself, I cut myself – our blood's the same". Better mutual understanding and trust are crucially important for building of peace, lack of which makes our societies suffer so much.

Reflections that are presented here surely do not fit into the cliché described as "let's have peace, no one's to blame". It is quite possible that some of these opinions are going pinch quite a lot and perhaps you'll think that they should not be a part of the publication that aspires to contribute to peace building. I'd say: Oh, yes, work on peace building surely pinches, since we believe that it is not possible to work on peace building if we neglect the tragic past that we lived in and that many of us still live in. And if we open up the question of the past and take into consideration its complexity – than, of course we will not agree on all issues. That is exactly the greatness of us, "ordinary people": to try to understand the very opinions that are so different from our own (excluding the ones of

fascist provenance – they do not belong here since they usurped enough space all around us). When we manage to come to such an understanding: why does someone think so differently about things than we do (and perhaps it isn't so different, after all), not because they are guided by some blind, inexplicable hate, but by some pain, fear, experience – that is when we will make a big step).

As one great “ordinary” man – our friend Dževad Budimlić, said “I cannot feel well if my neighbour does not”...

We asked people and they talked about all those great notions that became phrases, for which it goes without saying what we mean when we say them, while we really understand them in different ways: reconciliation, past, dealing, oblivion, guilt, responsibility, peace, future, life together, war, ... – trying to make them clearer through personal experiences, and not using some other great notions, in order to make space to understand each other better.

We did not aspire to do this as a research on a representative sample that would show where our public opinion is (or in plural: our public opinions). This idea for the book originated from a clear notion that we wanted quality that personal experiences bring along, rather than quantity that would make it a representative sample. As I have already said: there is no room here for some voices, the noisiest and the most aggressive ones.

Inescapable richness of this book is the number of languages that can be found in it. Someone may say that it would be more economical and/or practical if Macedonian and Albanian were printed in separate publications. But we rather liked the idea to keep it all in one place, tightly connected just as our destinies are mutually entwined.

Interviews were made in the period of time from March to November 2005. Eighteen interviewers (also from the region of former Yugoslavia) were responsible for choosing their interlocutors and were free to choose how they wanted to conduct the interviews, in order to cover relevant questions. Interviews were conducted in Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, and perhaps some other languages (Serbo-Croatian, Montenegrin, etc.). Interviews were recorded with a dictaphone and their true transcripts were released here.

It was not easy to choose conversationalists; it required coordination with other interviewers in order to cover diversity of the society and include people with different profiles and opinions while it was difficult to find conversationalists who were willing to talk publicly about painful issues – not a few people felt frightened and uncomfortable. Even though we decided to present them just by their first name, some people felt better being presented only by their initials, mainly for the reasons of their own safety. We understand that fear completely. That is what tells us exactly how deeply our societies are stuck and how much they suffer, but also how urgently we should all act in order to achieve change of the society that is so expected (that doesn't just come down to: “that we all have higher salaries”, as one of the interviewees said). I cannot resist but to quote the famous writer Meša Selimović: “Have fear of maverick, have fear of shit – when will you live, then?” And I agree completely with the woman who says that we don't live, but we try to live, instead.

A question remains: who will be interested in this book? We have our list of wishes and recommendations regarding those who should be interested. There's a part of it that corresponds to reality, and there's another one we're not sure about. However, we could use some feedback from the readers, therefore we wish to ask you to send us both your criticism and impressions. Peace work requires action and reaction – so we could change ourselves and the societies we live in.

Ivana Franović

**Esma**

(58)

**Sarajevo**

pensioner

**Interview**

*You cut yourself, I cut myself – our blood's the same*

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*By Tamara Šmidling*

**Tell us about yourself, briefly.**

I'm from Prijepolje, Sandzak. I've been here in Sarajevo for thirty years now. I have two sons, my husband's passed on to the next world, as they say... I'm retired.

**When you go back to the period of the beginning of the nineties and those years just before the war, what is it you remember?**

You usually remember those days of the war like, mortar shells, as they say. When they call you up and say you must run, when we were hiding in cellars and fleeing around the neighbourhood. Me and the kids. By the car, downstairs at late neighbour Branko's – that's where we were the most, spent nights there. The whole neighbourhood, all together.

**Have you felt some sort of hatred at that time, anger?**

No, can't say I have. Don't know. I did have this fear within me, just awaiting like that, with the kids by my side, what's going to happen next. That's what was the worst for me. Somehow you have this uneasiness within your body and all that, you can't sleep, you think of who might come knocking on your door, because that's where we were, on the front line. Whether they'll come to your door. That was the only thing for me. And other than that, as far as the rest of the neighbourhood is concerned, it was easier for me there, having all of them around. Means a lot. I recall, we go to the grandpa's, grandpa wasn't afraid of anything. Shooting everywhere, and yet himself, he's all over the place... When we were all together, we had no fear at all. And we were all sorts – Muslims, Croats, Serbs. All three nations.

**So how were you explaining yourselves, who was this war being lead between?**

I couldn't figure it out, believe me. I myself am from Prijepolje, my neighbours there are Serbs too, here, I can show you pictures, last year they came to visit. Stayed here with me they did. And then, what's the difference now, how can I feel a difference? It all depends on the person. I don't know, I can't get my head around why this is how it happened to begin with...

**You don't have answers now either?**

I really don't have the answer.

**When it comes to this situation now, what does it look like to you?**

Well, let me tell you, we here remained just as we were. Some were here all the time, some fled, like this one neighbour M. You know, everyone around my neighbourhood were Serbs.

I remember, me and the late Branko, God rest his soul, we were eating this bairam baklava in 92, just before the war. He comes over, I had no idea what was going to happen. They said some had had weapons at home, but me, not as much as a

proper blunt knife around. The truth be told. And so he comes over just before bairam. I ask, is it true what they say, and he tells me, 'By god, my Esma, it doesn't look good'. And I tell him, 'Fie, to the devil, why wouldn't it look good.' I thought something was going to clash out there somewhere, on the sides, much rather than in Sarajevo. My husband and I have had no clue that it was going to start roaring in Sarajevo, right in the middle of the Old Town, first of all and most of all. We could see the tanks driving around, up there on the transit, and us – no one as much as lifted a finger, just stood there watching them from the balcony. Branko then says they're summoning his son every now and again, that thing had already started in Croatia. And his wife says to me, 'I won't let anyone beat my child, or let him kill anyone. This is bad'. And they leave for Switzerland, and the late Branko stayed here to look after the house, and he tried to go over to the relatives', in Marin dvor, and as he was leaving, he leaves me the keys to the house, says 'On your life, take this key, if someone wants to come in they can just open the door properly instead of breaking in, let them take everything as long as they don't tear the place down'. Gives me the key for me to keep an eye on his house! The truth be told. He's being truthful with god now, we're the ones stuck in all the lies. So, no way, he could barely make it for two whole days over there, there he is, coming back on the third day. And whenever they celebrated their slava, uncle Branko always gave treats to the kids, candy, chocolate. They invited us, I always went to theirs for their slava. I can never forget that, they used to come over to mine for bairam! I should tell it like it is!

They used to come and visit, they still do to this very day. And when my husband died, they all came to say their condolences, and we went there when they killed uncle Branko...

And in the first year of the war, the neighbour J. made some winter preserves, jam it was, Branko gave it out to us. So she was sending us packages from Switzerland afterwards!

Not everyone's the same, it should be told like it is. As they say, not even the five fingers on one hand are all the same. And heaven forbid, too, us all being the same...

And that, when they killed Branko during the war... We wake up one morning, and I can tell, something's not right. So we go downstairs, where is uncle Branko, we ask, and this one neighbour says to me, 'hush, Djula, they killed him...' And I said, who, I said, killed him, may his own mother kill him for that! I felt so, I felt everything turned upside down inside me. That's when it was really hard for me. You know what, I thought I was going to freak out. That's how I felt. Because, you don't normally see these things. You just hear mortars shooting and all that, mortar shells flying around you. But this was another matter... and it was 'ours' who killed him...

And this other thing I want to say – I used to work in the factory, and in comes this one S. from Vukovar. Used to work as a technologist in the factory in Borovo and he comes over and says: 'They tore Vukovar down to the ground; by god, it's not going to be good around here, you take good care of yourselves!' And he a poor man, so we all gather round and make shoes for him and his family... We were so sad about it, didn't know that's what was going to happen right here for us too! So, when it all started in Sarajevo, he left....

*How can I keep it from you if your loved one was killed somewhere, his throat cut? It can't happen. Or, as I would say, how can I forget the good someone's done me? In the neighbourhood, wherever, nor can my child forget the good that's been done to him. And he can't forget the bad either. Just as I can never forget those cases, this goodness of late Branko for example...*

**How about those shooting from the hill, how did you experience them?**

How? By god... Heaven forbid, that was. I don't know, words fail me, I can't imagine what sort of people these are. When I went to Prijepolje in 1996, first time after the war, I took my children with me. We started from Grbavica. Do you know how nervous I was when we were on Grbavica and we were supposed to climb down to Lukavica, that's where the bus for Serbia was leaving from. I was only waiting for someone to tell me, the bus broke, I wanted to be relieved, to go back. There was so much of that fear. And at the same time, I wanted to go, see my mother and my brother...

And this situation now... you know what, I get goose bumps when that one there says I'm in Bosnia but I'm not in favour of Bosnia! I mean, we should be realistic. How can I not be in favour of you who are here with me, living right here... A neighbour is closer than a distant relative.

That very same neighbour J. used to take me to the doctor when I was to weak to go on my own. None other, she did. And now, what, now I'm supposed to speak ill to her? Please...

**Nowadays, when you hear someone say reconciliation should take place here, how do you understand that?**

I really don't know... It's them over there who should reconcile, those politicians, those, excuse my language, pieces of shit! Who am I to reconcile with, I never argued with anyone to begin with. We had a case of this neighbour, a Serb, right there, he was always grumpy, but I never even argued with him either. And this other one, the one who left and never said a word to us, even him, whenever I meet him today I always ask how are you, how's it going. And he also calls, to wish a happy bairam to everyone.

Who am I to reconcile with? I never argued with anyone, neighbours haven't argued with me, nor I with them.

**How about this higher level, the state level?**

I don't think it's just politics, but it was the politicians who started the fight. They started the fight, and the people were getting killed for no fault of their own. Someone said rightly the other night – I'd rather preserve my own head than the state. The man was right too. We don't have a state! We don't, and just look what's being done to us.

**What is this BH then, if not a state?**

Well, what is it? A country torn to pieces, that's what it is. And I can't put my head around what should be done, believe you me. How they cooked it all up and uncooked it back again, I really don't have a clue... I'm only sorry for the youth today. What are they going to do, today, tomorrow? Even if they do finish schools and all that, but still, where to go from there, how? Those provided for themselves, and their grandchildren and their great grandchildren... And what is it we provided for our children? In an honest way... We did everything nicely, honestly, but, thank god, may we only keep healthy. I hope there is a god...

**And how would you like for this society to be, this BH?**

Like it used to be before. Unified, a single state, as they say, one president, everyone together, Serbs, Croats, Muslims... And the ones who won't have it like that, they're

the ones who should be driven out. Eh, no places like Goli otok any more, but these are not fit to be sent to a Goli otok either. And I mean these politicians who cooked all this up... not the people...

**So, do you see the responsibility of this 'ordinary' folk anywhere in there?**

And what can I do about it now? How am I supposed to know if you were the one shooting or not? Well, I don't know, I don't, I can't be that wise... That's what I was starting to tell you, when I was going to Prijepolje, over Trebevic. One bunker next to another up there, so someone must've known about it all. They had us from up there, like sitting ducks we were... That's no simple feeling... The worst thing is it was the Serbs who cooked it all up, even now they're the ones who are keen on that stuff of theirs, they don't want this, they don't want that, they want something they want and all the rest's in vain. You can see for yourself. What is it that they want, I wonder, we're all made of flesh and blood. We're all going to meet the one maker. But the poor, what can they do? Keep quiet, suffer while you can...

**Do you think the things that happened during the war should be talked about? What's to be done with all these things?**

Well, it shouldn't be hushed up, we need to be realistic. We need to say, let it be known! I want to tell you this too – when my children first started going to school... this is not right. If I could've studied history at school, world war one and two as well, why should this history now be hushed up? They're not allowed to talk much about history. And why is that? It was neither you nor me who did it! Let it be known, let the truth be brought to light, let it be known, why not? If God knows, let people know too. This is an old saying. How can I keep it from you if your loved one was killed somewhere, his throat cut? It can't happen. Or, as I would say, how can I forget the good someone's done me? In the neighbourhood, wherever, nor can my child forget the good that's been done to him. And he can't forget the bad either. Just as I can never forget those cases, this goodness of late Branko for example, maybe they can't forget their thing either, killing and exiling and the lot...

**What can encourage things not to be hushed up?**

The youth shouldn't let it be hushed up! My child can't forget the sound of those mortars shells being shot and all that, and me taking him to the shelter for school. The child can by no means forget that. Of course, my child will have normal contacts with your child, because it wasn't your child who did it, it was some hotheads from who knows where. It will never be forgotten, no question about it, but it will fade in time. And the quickest way to do so would be for the industry to start, for the youth to start working, for there to be as much freedom as possible. There will never be that kind of freedom, my Tamara.

**Can the economy develop, in your opinion, without us dealing with the issue of who is responsible for the war and all that?**

Well, things would be defined if those main culprits were put to prison. And then slowly, slowly, everything would start. And these entities would be abolished, and the youth would come together, everything. And the industry to start. Because, by god, on an empty stomach and with all that pain atop of it, you can't move on... Well, there, my son works with the Serbs, and let him! You too, you are a Serb, aren't you? You cut yourself, I cut myself – our blood's the same!



**Darko**

(30)

**Horgoš**

economist

Interview

*Third level of guilt:  
those who didn't turn out at the elections*

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By Tijana Gnjidić

**Please introduce yourself.**

Darko, from Kula, I work in Horgoš.

**What are your experiences from the war, or some memories of the war and the war years?**

Since I was born in 75, I haven't taken part in the war, but I was able to observe my environment. My brother was a participant, as a reservist, they drafted him. An interesting thing happened right after we said goodbye to the brother. Since our old man signed his drafting notice, and he'd never wanted to go, he was hiding and there were rows at home like 'why did you sign it?!', and 'you shouldn't have!', and so my brother had to go. There were some irregularities in their records, the morons over there in the drafting board failed to make a proper record of his leaving. So the cops come over, barging in at four am, they received a tip that he hadn't even gone. The old man comes to meet them, in his pyjamas, they move him out of the way, flash a spotlight all over the place, I'm lying in my bed and they go 'who's that?', the old man goes – 'that's the younger one, leave him alone'. When the brother got back... these were evidently traumatic experiences. He kept shivering, he wasn't himself, kept going to the garden to smoke, he was crying, said he'd seen some dismembered people over there, since he hadn't been a direct participant in the battles, he was located at the headquarters, where they used to bring the wounded. It was during the Croats' invasion on Torjanci, twenty five of them from Kula municipality got killed. It was pretty uncomfortable.

And secondly, I had a girlfriend who fell in love with some character from Bosnia, and then, influenced by that, I guess, she started coming up with some statements like 'the Serbian people should be defended', this and that. I remember having a totally pacifist attitude even back then, like 'oh please, that's rubbish, what are you saying, what's the matter with you'.

So, all these were some kind of indirect experiences. That's it. I haven't had any relatives over there.

**And now, from this ten year long distance, how do you feel and what is the prevalent sentiment in your environment?**

I have personally never had a problem with that, it's never been my war. And when they say 'ours conquered this and that' ... which 'ours'? They're not mine. I'm not a member of that tribe waging war on another primitive tribe over there, so, as far as I'm concerned, I have never been a part of it to begin with.

And the environment, it's well known what's being done and what the sentiments are – 30 percent of them are still into it all.

**You think we're heading towards reconciliation?**

*My brother was a participant, as a reservist, they drafted him. An interesting thing happened right after we said goodbye to the brother. Since our old man signed his drafting notice, and he'd never wanted to go, he was hiding and there were rows at home like 'why did you sign it?!', and 'you shouldn't have!', and so my brother had to go.*

Well, I don't know what reconciliation means. For me, a complete reconciliation can take place not sooner than in four or five decades. When the children who have no memories of the war have grown up, and when their children have started to marry each other, like in Vojvodina between different nationalities and ethnicities. So that's this sort of complete reconciliation, and this thing now, I don't know, merely coping with it all. Those people are sort of like returning a bit...

It can't be done, you know... Human brain is wired in such a way as to reach a solution in the shortest possible way – Serbs have killed my... A Serb, a lunatic, an extremist has killed my father, mother, brother – Serbs are bad. The brain goes straight to 'Serbs are bad'- generalising. That's why arresting those criminals is important, for the real culprit to be located.

### **Is there such a thing as collective guilt?**

Well, there is. Maybe I'd rank guilt in three sort of levels: those who killed – that's the most severe, the second – those who voted, and the third – those who didn't turn out at the elections. Now they're being punished, now they have the radicals in power, like in Novi Sad, say. I am not guilty on the bases of any of these, because I've always come out to vote, I have always been a pacifist and talked against the war, I have always tried to convince people around me they shouldn't vote for Milosevic, that he's the evil. I may have lacked a bit of activism, I have minded my own ass a bit too much, what was I to do in all that, maybe I should've been more active, but that's got to do with charisma too. A man's got to be more charismatic to be able to move the masses. But at any rate, a little less passivity – that's what I could hold against myself. That's it.

### **It's up to whom to initiate the process of reconciliation?**

Well, there, I told you. To arrest those guys, sentence them. So, it's the authorities first. And then, apologies... What does an apology mean to someone who has lost? I don't know. In any case it should happen, but I can't tell what good it will do. Apologies on whose behalf, mine? Well, alright, maybe for this form of passivity I had shown. I don't know, it should probably be initiated at highest levels, and then... I don't know. It takes time for this process to happen.

### **Do you see it starting?**

The passions have calmed down at any rate, that's the first step. But then, how long was it I estimated it was going to last, four or five decades.... I think it's started, let's say.

### **How do you think the upbringing of the young is going on? What are the values they are presented with and will they, in forty years, with pure hearts...**

There will be germs of it even then, but this first generation under the influence of biased parents, they will probably be like 'Serbs – that not good', 'Croats – that evil' etc. So it won't be until the third generation, the children of this children now growing up, they will have been under the influence of less biased parents and more normal, for sure. Some mixed marriages will begin to happen etc.

*Maybe I'd rank guilt in three sort of levels: those who killed – that's the most severe, the second – those who voted, and the third – those who didn't turn out at the elections.*



**Can you define reconciliation? What does it mean to you?**

Well, there, I've already told you – for it to be on the level of this life in Vojvodina between people, for it to function like that – you're Croat, I'm, I don't know, Ruthenian, now we're going to make babies, or you're going to be my friend, anything. That's reconciliation, for me.

**And facing the past?**

Well the truth has to be known. I don't know, it's a tricky question. There, during WW 2, I'm not really that well informed about history, how many Hungarians were there among the horthyans, how many of them were partisans, lie might be a good thing at times, I don't know. Because, in primary school we were taught that there were both Hungarian and Ruthenian units of partisans, and there were the horthyans too, maybe I'd subconsciously see them as bad now, I don't know. No idea, it's a tricky question.

**And on 'this' side?**

All those people should be redeemed. By admitting, 'yes, we had voted for Milosevic'; they were probably blinded at the time and said 'so we should, so we should too, they attacked us too, they wanted to exile us', and now, when all has settled, now they go 'well, that's horrid', a part of them says 'that's all been edited'... I think everyone should do something for their own soul. And those women who had voted, the ones who'd never have to go to the war, that's what had always annoyed me the most – 'Voja knows how to put it, Voja knows'. And those who hadn't taken part, hey too should know what had been done, become aware of that, see a bit of their own responsibility in all that. And those who never turned up at the elections, I see them as stinkers, you're not aware of it yet you had been running away, that's some sort of escapism – 'I don't know what's going on'.

**And who should open their eyes?**

Well, government. Authorities in charge, Natasa Kandic and the rest of them, they should tell the truth – this is how it had been, this and this, and not oppress and harass her. So, there was this this and this, the facts should be precisely established on both sides. I don't know how good that is for reconciliation, but it's good for the nation's redemption. Be aware of what you have been doing.

**And in the current situation, do you see facing the past as an obligation or a necessity for another reason?**

As an obligation – to oneself. How to look at yourself in the mirror when you wake up in the morning. I'm to blame for this this and this. As an obligation.

**Do you see any obstacles to this?**

Oh, there are as many as you like! Let's not go into politics....

**What is it that keeps us from reconciling before 2050?**

There's a lot of bad blood still around. It's all still fresh. Some time should pass, first of all. I think time is the key factor, only then comes determining who'd killed how many people and how. But that too, the responsible ones hiding, that should be cleared out, urgently. And they should be sentenced, tried, it has to be done urgently, and then we can move on. Because these governments in

both Croatia and Serbia, it's like they're courting the nationalist public opinion. They see them off with some kind of honours (to the Hague). One should distance oneself from that sort of politics. They were bad, now we're here doing something else, now the people supports us – meaning they're not just as stupid as they had been, they got a bit smarter.

### **What can an individual do?**

To ask themselves what they have been doing for all those years. To wonder how it had been since the start, when the instigation started, in 89, 90, to wonder what their mental outlook had been like, under the influence of it. So, to start an introspection, to go chronologically through the entire course of how all that had developed in them, all that ugly period – starting with 88, 89 – until today, and to see where they'd gone wrong. So when they meet a member of another nation afterwards, there will be no bad blood. And if they start running away and going 'you're to blame for this and that', 'you started it', 'you wanted to banish Serbs, just like Hitler before you', 'Croats are bad', 'Croats had Jasenovac', it's the same pile of shit, Croats and Serbs and Muslims, the primitive tribes. Jasenovac would've happened on the other side too had the constellation of historic events been different, I'm sure of it. And those excuses of 'you started it, we had to defend ourselves' etc... One should go back to the start and then go through all this again with this experience under one's belt.

### **Should one forget?**

Of course not.

### **And forgive?**

Forgive who? I personally, for instance, have nothing to forgive anyone. Nor does anyone have anything to forgive me, so I don't know. Now, all my experiences are 'from the sides'. All that had been happening somewhere nearby, but not to me personally, so I don't know how competent I am to discuss it; no one close to me had been killed nor have I done anything to anybody, so, as far as I'm concerned, I'd marry a Croat woman tomorrow... or an Albanian one.

### **What's our future together?**

Our future together? Well, in the European Union (*laughter*)! I don't know, there'll always be some rivalry there: 'Dinamo', 'Cibona', 'Partizan', 'Zvezda'... And we'll be something like the Turks and the Greeks! That's it, but we'll cooperate, there'll be Croats among my friends and I'll be their friend too etc. It'll be alright, the world's moving towards the better (*laughter*). Two hundred years ago, a woman who now may be a Nobel prize winner sat at the stove, so that two hundred years from now we won't fight each other either, we'll all be smiling, happy

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