

# **WAR ON THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIAN TERRITORY**

## **Integration of Refugee Children into the School System and Musical Activities as an Important Factor for Overcoming War Trauma**

### **YEAR 1991: BEGINNING OF WAR ON THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIAN TERRITORY**

In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from the former common state of Yugoslavia because their tendency towards decentralisation and democratisation within the federation had been disregarded. The conflict resulted in a war which started in Slovenia but did not have serious consequences there. The results in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, however, were disastrous. Huge refugee waves towards many countries of the world followed.

Slovenia became a shelter for a large number of refugees, mainly coming from neighbouring Croatia in 1991, and who did not manage to get refugee status because of the belief that “war has not spread throughout the entire Croatian territory and, therefore, the status of a refugee is not legitimate” (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 16). Another refugee wave from Bosnia-Herzegovina followed in 1992. There were an estimated 70 000 refugees and more than half of them were children (Mikuš Kos 1999a: 127). They were given special attention from the very start, as many of them stayed for longer periods of time, even up to several years.

The Ministry of Defence was the first to deal with political refugees, and was later joined by the Office for Immigration and Refugees, the Ministry of Education and Sports, as well as the Ministry of Health; the Slovenian Red Cross also played a significant role.

Article 22 of the Convention on Refugee Status of 1951, which states that “regarding elementary education, contracting parties will provide equal treatment for refugees as for their own citizens”, triggered more or less successful efforts for organising the educational process for refugee children, who were staying with their relatives or at refugee centres.

## KINDERGARTENS

Kindergartens emerged spontaneously in several refugee centres. Education was carried out by the refugee girls and wives without sufficient experience in working with children. Therefore, they were trained by the Counselling Centre for Children, Adolescents and Parents, and the Slovene Foundation – Centre for Psychosocial Help to Refugees who organised seminars every three months. It proved that children attending pre-school education were more successful at school afterwards (Mikuš Kos 1999a: 142).

October 1992 brought organised kindergarten educational activities in two groups: The first one included children aged three to four and the second group children aged five to seven. Education was carried out in six subject fields, namely mother tongue, elementary mathematics, nature studies, music, gym and art (Grošičar 2002: 57–72).

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

According to estimates, there are 20 million refugees around the world and half of them are children. Engaging children and adolescents in school activities is one of the most important methods for providing a balanced psychosocial education in the host country (Mikuš Kos 1994: 14).

In the second half of 1992, 64 collection centres were established for refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, where they were provided with refugee status, accommodation, meals, and in some centres, also schooling and a small financial aid (Grošičar 2002: 58–59). Besides medical and social assistance, activities in the recently established kindergartens, schools and youth clubs were also of great significance in normalising children’s psychosocial development. Activities in the form of different courses in art, music, dance, sports, etc. were run by a voluntary service.

The Ministry of Education and Sport organised an elementary school for refugee children in collaboration with the representative of the Education Institute of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In autumn 1992 there were 52 such schools with over 9 000 children tutored by approximately 450 refugee teachers from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Half of the teachers from Bosnia-Herzegovina had not received pedagogical training and had worked as engineers, doctors or economists before the war; some had even been studying or still attending high school. They began working as volunteers with no pedagogical background and without receiving any financial reward. Thereafter, the Ministry of Education and Sport organised financial support with the help of foreign sponsors in order to compensate the teachers with a modest sum for their efforts.

The work motivation of most teachers was high, because they were the only adult refugees with a daily job that matched or nearly matched their education. Their work was socially beneficial because they helped many children. This was reflected in the children's successful learning, the children's attachment to them and to school, but also in the recognition from their Slovenian colleagues.

Educational programmes for refugee school teachers, organised by the Counselling Centre for Children, Adolescents and Parents in Ljubljana, have greatly contributed to the energy at work and to the quality of refugee teachers' pedagogical efforts. The aim of the teaching seminars was to teach them how to help children in overcoming psychosocial and psychological problems and how to increase their efficiency in the classroom during the educational process.

In addition to the usual learning issues that emerged in class, there were also other, war-related difficulties in getting the learning material. Learning problems were shown as memory disturbances, especially recalling disabilities. Many children could not manage to recall the name of the school or teacher. They also had problems concentrating because their thoughts were often directed to their homes in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Mikuš Kos 1994: 15).

The establishment of schools went together with the designing of textbooks. Besides teaching methods, authors mainly focused on selecting contents that could not be associated to war or hostile atmospheres in any way. Literature, music and art education excluded all ideology and included artistic contents by authors of various nationalities, who lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Topić 1993a: 34).

Preparing children to live together after the war was also one of the important tasks of the education provided. School symbolised normality, permanence and durability in times of war.

For three years, the Bosnian school in Slovenia was attended by approximately 2 000 elementary level refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their achievements were not far behind the average results of Slovenian children, even after entering Slovenian schools. Refugee children overcame all obstacles and continued living in their host country with success, in spite of traumas, losses, lack of knowledge and the relatively poor education of

their parents. The Bosnian school was not part of the Republic of Slovenia's education system; it served only as a parallel system that would enable children to integrate into the schools after returning to their home country (Mikuš Kos 1999c: 33).

## HIGH SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

The integration of adolescents into high schools was more difficult than that of children into elementary schools. The main reasons were the lack of documentation about education in their home country, overcrowded Slovenian high schools and different high school education programmes. If refugee students were lucky enough to be granted admission, they were given a status of occasional students and a certificate on the performed duties (Mikuš Kos 1999c: 69).

In 1994, 140 students from Bosnia-Herzegovina were enrolled at two Slovenian universities. Financial aid was provided to the students of the Medical Faculty and the Faculty of Economics, while the rest were exempted from tuition fees (Đonlić 2003: 26).

## TWO CASES OF EXTRACURRICULAR ART ACTIVITIES: CHILDREN'S PROJECTS *KULTURNI VIKEND*<sup>1</sup> AND *PREGNANC*<sup>2</sup> IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

A group of educators and artists from Sarajevo organised activities helping refugee children in their spiritual, physical and intellectual growth. One of them was the Slovenian music educator Vekoslav André, who spent almost half his life in Ilidža, near Sarajevo, where he and other Sarajevian educators established a music school. Then there was the music teacher Marija André, the poet Josip Osti, the painter Ismar Mujezinović, and many others. They were greatly supported by *Vodnikova domačija* [Vodnik Homestead], the birth place of the first Slovenian poet Valentin Vodnik.

Financial aid was steadily provided by the organisation Open Society Fund Slovenia; instruments and equipment were lent by Causes Communes, Belgium. 180 refugees from Ljubljana, aged five to 20, attended music and art workshops every weekend. Every Saturday was perfectly scheduled: workshop activities from 10:00 to 12:00, concerts from 12:00 to 13:00,

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1 'Cultural Week-end'. Translated by the author.

2 'Expellees'. Translated by the author.

after which they went on with their work. At that time, Vodnik Homestead was a unique cultural point.

Members of the literary section were engaged in publishing activities. After several months of work, they published *Kulturni vikend almanac*, as well as EGZIL-abc that was supposed to present current literature from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The video workshop was in charge of documenting all the cultural activities.

Among other musical activities, the vocal-instrumental band *Vali* and the children's choir *Bonbončiči* played a significant role. They toured numerous Slovenian areas as well as bordering places. Even after the war, *Vali* continued their mission. They fought against prejudices about minorities and different types of music with their diversified repertoire. They performed native songs from Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Sva bol svijeta*, [Help Bosnia now]) and national songs (*Ne klepeči nanulama*, *S one strane Plive*), legendary tunes from former Yugoslavia (*U svemu naj*, *Good bye teenage years*), universally known songs (*Stand by me*, *Help*) and Slovenian songs (*Zarjavele trobente*, *Dan ljubezni*) (Donlić in Črnivec 2003: 43). One year after their last large-scale performance in Portorož in 2004, *Vali*'s leader, Hazemina Donlić, set up the band *Sabahbluz* that performed successfully until she left to study in Russia.

The initiators of *Kulturni vikend* endeavoured to spread their artistic activities to other areas of Slovenia. Therefore similar centres opened in Piran, Novo mesto, Črnomelj, Kranj and Ilirska Bistrica. Children were frequently visited by well known artists from Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; parents also shared their artistic experiences with their children.

The project *Pregnanci* took place in the rooms of the Culture and Art Association KUD France Prešeren in Ljubljana, and was mainly designed for young people and children. Its goal was to present the Slovenian culture and support the preservation of the refugee culture. Its members attended events under the association's patronage and also prepared their own events. The project *Pregnanci* was launched in Finland in 1994 in the framework of a TV promotion of the international campaign against racism and xenophobia, where it received an award from the Council of Europe. Besides numerous awards for Slovenia, there was a remarkable performance by the Orff Orchestra *Mašta Može Svašta* with conductor Etbin Stefančič, who performed at the final event of the campaign *All Different, All Equal* in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1995. There was also a performance by the eminent violin player Yehudi Menuhin and his orchestra (Donlić in Črnivec 2003: 39).

## THE PROJECT *OTROCI, MATERE IN GLASBA V PREGNANSTVU*<sup>3</sup>

The guidelines for the project *Otroci, matere in glasba v pregnanstvu* were based on the psycho-physical condition analysis of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina in Slovenia. Its aim was to improve their current situation through musical activities by achieving four principal goals:

1. To overcome the psycho-social problems of refugee children and their mothers,
2. To strengthen emotional ties between them,
3. To preserve their national identity, and
4. To integrate the refugees into the cultural reality of Slovenia.

The project was initiated in 1994 as part of a seminar in music education methods at the University of Maribor's Education Faculty.

Musical activities referred to listening to and performing music; special attention was given to musical creativity. The aim was not to achieve artistic perfection, but to allow children to feel free and be willing to build up self-confidence and trust in their environment. The musical content was mainly based on the musical tradition of Bosnia-Herzegovina (approximately 70 %), Slovenian music (20 %) and European music and music worldwide (10 %). Whenever possible, songs were sung in both languages, Bosnian and Slovenian. Vocal and instrumental compositions related to the home towns of the refugees proved to be the most appropriate for listening. Some songs and dances of non-European nations were introduced with a view to developing openness towards various types of music and cultures.

The project was carried out in three refugee centres: Maribor, Celje and Postojna. Six students (Barbara Arlič, Anamarija Krvišek, Mateja Kuharič, Maita Milutinović, Mojca Širca and Maja Vodenik) led musical activities in 1994–95 that involved refugee children and their mothers and tried to achieve goals that had been set. The project encompassed 46 children aged from three to twelve. Approximately half of them were accompanied by their mothers. Three groups of schoolchildren were formed in Maribor, but the teaching students could not persuade their mothers to attend the sessions as well. The mothers stayed in their rooms, were busy doing their work and did not express any desire to participate. The children were thereby given the role of adults, especially the boys. This was probably a consequence of the specific life situation in refugee centres because of the absence of the

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3 "Children, Mothers and Music in Exile". Translated by the author.

fathers, but it was also partly rooted in the culture of the refugees' native environment. The situation was different in two other centres, where the mothers, who felt more attached to their children, attended musical sessions together with them.

The musical activities took place once a week. The rooms in which the activities were carried out could hardly be called classrooms. In Maribor it was a wooden cottage without heating, in Postojna a big hall also without heating; only in Celje did the place seem quite welcoming.

When the project started, the children and their mothers were quite distrustful of the student's efforts. Only one of them, who was a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina (Zenica) herself, managed to establish immediate contact. Before each music lesson, the students devoted some time to informal conversations with the participants to establish an atmosphere of trust. They discussed news from the home country, school adventures and also music. The refugees' initial refusal to engage in music was a consequence of them being sorry for their country and their dead and wounded relatives, and expressing concern about their husbands and fathers. In groups, where mothers cooperated with their children, there was also a problem: The children and their mothers were not used to working together apart from their daily activities.

After a few sessions, remarkable changes occurred. The children's natural desire to play music and pleasure at participating in musical activities was transferred to their mothers. Singing and listening to music became a part of their lives again and they said that they had started singing together with their children at home and managed to escape the issues of their current situation for at least a few moments.

In two of the groups, one consisting exclusively of children and the other one including children and mothers, it became evident that the most appreciated musical activities were the ones connected to movement. It is known that dance includes non-verbal expression of emotions and encourages an authentic mutual communication. Pre-school children favoured dances that helped them to express the contents of a song, while older children preferred energetic dances, which offered them relaxation and pleasure.

The results of the survey on these musical activities were obtained on the basis of prepared observation techniques and conversations with parents. The surveyed categories were: The pleasure of attending musical lessons, the pleasure of listening to music, the pleasure of singing, the pleasure of playing small instruments, the pleasure of moving to the music, the pleasure of creating music and creating while listening to music, and the pleasure of making music together with their mothers. Children and mothers could choose among the following options: "I like it very much", "I like it", "I like it to some degree", "I do not really like it", "I dislike it". Individual

alternatives were evaluated with grades from five – “I like it very much” to one – “I dislike it”.

According to the observations and surveys, the estimated goals were achieved. Moments spent with music have had a positive impact on children and their mothers: children enjoyed making music, which made their mothers happy as well. The joy in their mother's eyes encouraged the children to perform musical activities. Bosnian, Slovenian and global musical contents were accepted by the children and their mothers without any reluctance or disrespect.

The students themselves also felt enriched by working with refugees. Besides learning many Bosnian songs and dances from them, a strong emotional bond was established between them and the refugees. One of the students wrote in her diary: “One of the most beautiful days in the refugee centre was when a child, who was showing reluctance at the beginning, finally expressed his appreciation.” (Pesek: 1996).

## **CASE STUDY: MINKA ĐONIĆ**

Minka, 17 years old, came to Slovenia in April 1992 with her five-year-old younger brother Suad. She was encouraged to visit her aunt in Postojna by her mother, who anticipated the approaching war. Minka settled in a one-and-a-half-roomed apartment at her aunt's, a single mother with two children. She first lived in the expectation of leaving to go back home, where she could finish the third grade of music high school, but she soon realised that this was unlikely to happen until the next academic year. In the autumn, she was granted the status of occasional student in the fourth grade of music high school in Ljubljana, but could not finish because of numerous complications, such as failing exams in Russian, which was her second foreign language back in Tuzla.

She spent the entire following year in the hope of returning home as soon as possible, but towards the end of the school year realised again that it was not going to happen. She managed to finish her high school education and pass the final examination three years after her arrival in Slovenia. She wished to enrol at the Music Academy of Ljubljana, but unfortunately she belonged to the high school generation of students who could not pursue university studies because of the incomplete Slovenian legislation in relation to the possibilities of university enrolment.

The Matura examination was set up, but high schools did not prepare their students for it at the time. So the only choice she was left with was a four-year study at a College for Social Work, where merely the final high school examination was required instead of the Matura. She finished her



studies in 2003 with a college diploma entitled *Deset let samote* [Ten Years of Solitude].

Because she had been prevented from studying in the field of music, she started parallel studies in musicology and passed the entrance examination in 2001. But because the legislation on possible enrolment at a Slovenian university was still not enforced for the generation, which had graduated from school in 1994, she had to postpone her enrolment till 2004, when she was allowed to apply as a graduate for another faculty. She successfully finished a three-year degree in 2007.

Minka has been very active as a musician throughout her time in Slovenia – as a singer and accordion player. She was also the organiser and carrier of numerous projects for refugee help; her current projects are concerts for marginal groups of people such as the ‘erased’ and members of other ethnic communities. She participates in recordings of motion picture soundtracks, documentaries and theatre performances, and she has also performed at the international ethno-festival in Saint Petersburg. She is considered one of the five best accordion players in Slovenia.

Encounters with refugee students show that war and exile problems on the one hand, and a fairly rigid education legislation on the other hand, prevented half these students from enrolling at various faculties of their choice.

Minka is a great example of persistence, because she managed to overcome many troubles to pursue her way to education. She is now about to finish successfully a second study programme while offering help to other people in search of a better life outside their home country.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia in 1991 triggered a wave of refugees towards Slovenia, first from the Republic of Croatia, and a year later from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Most refugees stayed in Slovenia for many years, some of them still live there today. At first, only the Ministry of Defence was engaged in refugee policies. But according to Article 22 of the Convention on Refugee Status from 1951, it soon gained the support of concerned institutions, and more or less successful efforts were made to organise the education process of refugee children staying with relatives and in refugee centres.

Research carried out by the Slovenian Ministry of Education and Sports shows successful results among refugee children in elementary school, who attended special elementary schools for temporary refugee children from Bosnia-Herzegovina. After entering Slovenian schools in the school year

1994/95, the percentage of children with positive evaluation was 87 %, and even 95 % in the following year. Good results were brought about by an additional learning support, mostly organised for mathematics and Slovene as a foreign language (Hočevár 2002: 103–105).

The quality of the learning assistance was also demonstrated by the fact that children learned the elements of the language of their host country in a very short time. Global research indicates that the daily usage of a second language helps a child learn this language in three to five years' time and reach a level where communication no longer hampers gaining knowledge at school. But if children only use their second language at school, they need five to seven years to graduate (Knaflič 1995).

There is no doubt that several factors contribute to the successful integration of children into the education system of a host country. In addition to learning assistance, there was also a very efficient psycho-social help, the organisation of additional cultural and sporting activities, as well as communication with the parents of refugee children.

The significance of the projects *Kulturni vikend* for children from Bosnia-Herzegovina and *Pregnanci* can also be considered as successful from the psychological, educational and social viewpoint, because they certainly contributed to achieving essential educational goals such as, for instance, greater self-confidence, tolerance towards others and the development of creative working habits. Artistic activities connected Serbian, Croatian, Muslim and Slovenian children, and helped them to preserve their own cultural identities without nationalist and ideological prejudices.

The observation and survey results also indicate that the aims of the project *Otroci, matere in glasba v pregnanstvu* were achieved. Moments of musical activity had a positive impact on the children as well as their mothers: Children enjoyed playing instruments, which also made their mothers happy. Musical content, such as Bosnian, Slovenian and world music, was accepted by children and mothers willingly and respectfully. Singing and listening to music brought them back to life and kept them from pondering on their problematic situation. It became obvious that the most popular musical activities were the ones connected to movement.

Pre-school children favoured dances, which helped them to express the song's message, while older ones preferred energetic dances offering them relaxation and joy. The students themselves also felt enriched by working with refugees. In addition to learning many Bosnian songs and dances from them, a strong emotional bond was established between them and the refugees.

The psychological burden of war, exile problems and a fairly rigid school legislation has also had a bad impact on the refugees: Half of the students enrolled at different faculties have failed.

It would be worth considering, in the future, systematically training teachers working with children, who arrive in Slovenia as refugees, asylum-seekers or children of parents looking for a temporary or permanent settlement in this European country. At a time of globalisation and increased migrations, working with children speaking foreign languages will require the development of special teaching methods.

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