'We should kill our pasts with each passing day. Blot them out, so that they will not hurt. Each present day could thus be endured more easily; it would not be measured against what no longer exists. As things are, specters mix with our lives so that there is neither pure memory nor pure life. They clash and try to strangle each other, continually.'

Meša Selimović, *Death and Dervish*

‘*HOW* close have you been to death?’ she asked me while I was drinking a cocktail at her housewarming party. I was breathless and just stared at her, not knowing how to respond. I vividly remember that hot summer night two years ago. I was sitting on a veranda, happily chatting, when the question was asked and it abruptly interrupted the meaningless conversation I was engaged in. I didn’t respond, but was instantly drowned in painful memories of the past. Uninvited and unwanted images burst from my sub-conscious and I found myself miles and years away from the hot Brisbane night, back in the familiar, beloved and shattered places where I grew up, surrounded by friends I had not seen for ages and by those who had lost their lives. This wasn’t the first time I had been asked such questions. *Where was I during the war? What happened to me? How did I survive the war? Which ethnic group do I belong to?*

Once people learn where I am from, they often ask me something about my personal experiences in the war. But the fact that I am from a war-torn country does not necessarily mean that I am eager to share my stories of survival. Many who survived the war do not want to talk about it at all, while some are happy to share their stories. I am not always willing to talk and certainly not if I feel there is an expectation that I will do so. I have worked hard on myself to be able to write and talk about the most difficult things in my life: the loss of my country, language, family members and friends. When Radmila Karlaš, the Bosnian writer, was asked what losing her country meant to her, she replied: ‘My country is a part of myself. It is my root, my essence, my tissue. Simultaneously with the destruction and bleeding of my country, my soul was torn apart too.’ Because of such profound experiences, during peacetime the survivors of war need distance, time and space to decide
whether they want to share or not, and what sort of things they are comfortable with sharing. Many of them wait for years before they start to write and talk.

I was only nineteen when war started in the former Yugoslavia. I left my home and my parents after my brother was drafted into the war and after I also received my draft notice. My parents packed me up and put on the first bus to Serbia, where I lived in a refugee camp for almost four years. I had never been away from my home before, let alone in such circumstances. I was terrified of my trip into the unknown. However, as soon as I had settled and found my way around the city where I was supposed to spend a few weeks until the war ended (that is what we thought back then), I started my law degree. I studied while the wars raged in Bosnia, Croatia, and later on in Kosovo, then passed my final exam on 24 March 1999, the day NATO started bombing Serbia. I held a party with friends in my home to celebrate my graduation, not thinking that the bombs would be dropped that night. While surviving the war I studied, never knowing what was waiting for me the next day. Those years of my life were almost unbearable. We, the student refugees, lacked food, heating and normality in that refugee camp.

However, all of us survived. All the time we worked hard for our exams we worried about the families we had left behind. Although most of the time we were utterly sad and confused, most of us finished our degrees. Even now it is difficult for me to imagine that I could study in a refugee camp while sharing space with so many, too many, unknown people. But that is what happened. Afterwards, we scattered around the world in search of peace, stability and a decent life. After a long search, I came to Australia to find peace for myself and to continue to work for peace. I left the region where I was born, but I stayed connected with the people, my friends, many of them peace and human rights activists who work tirelessly.

There are common threads in all stories about surviving and working for peace, no matter where it happens: the people’s desire for peace and for a peaceful community, often pursued among people who are themselves survivors. Local populations have to play the primary role in peace building. I believe this is because no one can have a greater stake in finding peace than the locals themselves, the people who live in the country that has been affected by war. They are the people who stayed in that country and dealt with all that war brought: destruction of life, property and social fabric. These people are victims, but also survivors. They carry the burden of war, but also the tough task of building peace. It is an especially hard job for them because they are traumatised, exhausted and tired. They want to move on, to forget about it all, like my mother and many of my family members and friends do. My mother does not want to talk about the past, about war, about her feelings. In fact she is not capable of doing so because she never really dealt with the trauma that the war brought her. As soon as she starts to talk about anything related to the war and the past, she starts to cry. She, like the majority, just wants to ‘catch up’ with the rest of the world and recover the normal life they had before the war.
As a refugee myself, I often feel that I lost those years of my life in the camp. I was eager to embrace normal life as soon as possible. I was angry that I had to spend my youth, my student days, in collective refugee accommodation sharing a room with four women I had never met before, not having hot water, being hungry most days, being removed from my family for the first time. I felt trapped while I waited for the war in Bosnia to end, then for the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 to end, then for other people to build peace for me so I could safely return home. At that time I was not aware that peace in my country had to be built by people like me and that no one else could do it for us. I was also unaware that all those years would make me what I am today and that misery would be a powerful energiser for my current work. But, I was not ready at that time to work for peace. I needed time to recover and to be able to talk about war and my experiences, to work, to escape the state of numbness and emptiness.

Although many people like me feel tired, exhausted and traumatised, they also have the greatest will and energy to invest in a peaceful future. They have the resilience and courage to do so. What more can they lose? What can happen that is worse than what they have already experienced? Surviving violence and war marks a person’s life forever. You carry it with you wherever you go and only the intensity changes: sometimes it is overwhelming, and sometimes it is just there waiting silently and patiently. You become too sensitive and sometimes expect too much from others. Two years ago when I interviewed Bosnian women who had dated peacekeepers during the UN mission in Bosnia, one woman answered my question on whether local women were particularly vulnerable immediately after the war:

We all experienced the war and we all have traumas. People here think that they deserve credit just because they are survivors. They also think that people will be more caring and gentle towards them. I think that should be what happens, but I doubt the world sees it that way.

There is disappointment in this statement, but also the important realisation that one should not expect too much from ‘them’ or ‘the world’. You have to rely on yourself and your personal strength. Rather than being buried in victimhood, we should look at ourselves not only as victims, but also as survivors. We should feel responsible for the past, present and future. Besides bringing great hardship, such devastation also creates opportunities for people to look anew at ways of doing things together and to rebuild human relationships. It also teaches us to appreciate the things we took for granted before the war, such as life and peace. Material things are of no relevance during war, but spirit, friendship and kinship keep you moving, keep you surviving.

After the war, I found I had become a ‘representative of a war-torn country’. By the mere act of surviving, I unwillingly acquired the identity of a war survivor who has become an expert on war. I remember the first time I was confronted with this
new identity when I was in Costa Rica doing an MA in peace and conflict studies. I was the only one from Bosnia and every time someone would use Bosnia as a case study, everyone would look at me. They expected some comment, some words of wisdom from me as the authority and expert on Bosnia. In fact I knew less than they did about what happened to my country and I was not ready to talk about war at all at that time. After some time, though, I started to write about the war in my country and then to talk about it. I have been driven to do research on the war crimes that have been committed in my name, and have started to teach and give talks about it in Australia, but also in Bosnia and Serbia.

For the last few years I have been a visiting lecturer at the University of Sarajevo, teaching courses on gender and war. As a part of that course I discuss reconciliation with my students (many of them survivors of the four-year siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war). When is the time to reconcile? Is there a time to reconcile? Who should initiate reconciliation? Teaching survivors about war and peace is a challenging task that needs a lot of negotiation and care. During one of our heated discussions, Senada, one of my students, told me:

I don’t want to be reconciled. I did not fight with anyone. The foreigners came here one day after the war was over and the next day started their reconciliation projects. I don’t want them to tell me when and where and with whom I should reconcile. I will choose if I want to reconcile at all and, if so, when I will do it.

NEDŽAD HOROZOVIĆ, A peace activist from Sarajevo, believes that the readiness for self-critical questioning of your own responsibility is one of most fundamental preconditions for reconciliation. Surely, as Amelia Puljak-Shank argues, ‘reconciliation cannot be created out of thin air and out of nothing’. However, neither can reconciliation be forced. It needs to come from within us; our heart must be ready. For a long time I was not ready to live ‘in peace’, nor was I ready to work on peace building. I needed time to look back, to deal with the past, and to be ready to work for a better future. I needed almost ten years to speak up, to write, to work on peace in my country. In ‘Beyond truth and justice’ (Griffith REVIEW 33, 2011), Maria Tumarkin raises the question of the timing of truth and justice processes. She asks, ‘How long will it take for experiences of violence and injustice to be lived through and absorbed, for the forgiveness to emerge, not to be forced out? It will take as long as it takes.’ That can be years, decades and even centuries. It takes time and it takes trust. But trust is something that bothers me. For reconciliation to be lasting, as Trudy Govier puts it, ‘some kind of trust must be built’ (Forgiveness and Revenge, Routledge, 2002). I am confident that I would not be able to write about the things I am writing now if I had stayed in Bosnia. Even writing in Australia does not seem (mentally) safe as I often think, how will my people react to my papers if they read them? Is anyone going to attack my parents because of my words? Is anyone going to insult me? The aftermath of conflict is a difficult and often dangerous time for people who
dare to demand justice and expose war crimes, in particular war crimes committed in their own name, done by the ethnic group they belong to.

Learning to live in peace, to face the past and appreciate the present is not easy, because to quote Tumarkin again, ‘The past is never quite over...Years and decades after the event the past is still unfinished business’ (Traumascapes, Melbourne University Press, 2005). It always will be present, no matter how hard we try to erase it. War marks one’s life forever, but as well as being damaging, it can also be inspirational. Survivors write, paint, perform and tell stories. After telling their stories, victims ‘move on and become survivors’ who integrate their trauma into their lives and enter the stage of ‘wounded healer’. Surviving war is tough, but surviving peace can sometimes be even tougher: torn between war and peace, between the wish to live a normal life and the pressing impulse to look back. Surviving means finding the balance between two states of mind because neither of them will ever let go.

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