

# COURAGE, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

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From when I was fourteen, I spent a good many years exploring books in order to find whether there is some lowest border of human dignity and how to recognize it. After having read thousands and thousands of pages of testimonies from people who had survived the hell of mass slaughter, I found what I was looking in the book by Victor Frankl, psychiatrist,<sup>1</sup> who survived Auschwitz.

He says: We, who returned home, managed to do so because of some happy circumstances or miracle, but whatever we call that, deep in our hearts we know very well that the best of us did not come home."

I think I learned from this that the lowest border of human dignity does exist, and the best of us would draw it boldly with our own blood and death, refusing to accept living life at any cost, because that would mean living in our own insanity. The best of us would choose death to preserve dignity. Some, like Dr Frankl, survive the atrocities of camp life and remain to testify that braver people really did exist, and vanished because of their bravery. If there have been people who even in the worst times, sometimes at the cost of their own lives, refused to act inhumanly themselves, and if there are people able to testify to this, those having been lucky to escape death, have we the right to ignore them? Isn't it an imperative of the first order to talk about, to write and publish through any kind of media, to let everybody know of extraordinarily moral people who really have lived?

A few years later, once I was fully convinced that such people really had existed, a bloody war raged in the country where I was born, the ethnic cleansing and genocide being its aim and the political doctrine behind it.

I could not accept the dark images of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which were created by the world and Belgrade mass media at the back and call of the powers that be or created by journalists eager for the smell of fresh blood, and to create images showing most cruel attitudes and gave free rein to their desires to show the dominance of a man over a man, arousing the lowest chauvinistic passions in viewers, and gaining glory at the expense of other people's misfortunes. These images, offered by the various media, gave no ray of hope for those who wanted to hold on to their compassion in such a war and to sustain their faith in people. I dipped deep into the core of horror and decided to follow the paths and footsteps of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Frankl, V., "Why Did They Not Commit Suicide" (Introduction into logotherapy) taken from "Christian Reality", Biblioteka "Oko tri ujutro", Zagreb, 1986  
Original title: Frankl Dr Victor, Ein Psychologe Erlebt Das KZ, Wien, 1946 (c) Frankl Dr Victor, "Basic Concepts of Logotherapy", New York, 1958

It seemed as if there was only evil to meet, evil, evil, evil alone... aggressive, assertive, everywhere, impressive, as if it hadn't left space for any other subject. Nevertheless, I continued to follow my project and my hopes.

I saw long-lasting friendships dissolve in cosmopolitan Belgrade from a lack of strength to rise above quarrels on a subject, which was nonsense: which side's amount of nationalistic fever was greater. It seemed to me that the sleepy European metropolis in which I was born had become a beehive in which every bee has its own, ethnically fenced-off piece of the honeycomb bringing not pollen but hatred, carefully nurtured by every unfortunate debate between the deaf - former friends. I looked for a way out of these sterile drawing-room discussions in which everyone listened only to his own voice, without respecting other opinions, talk reinforced and encouraged by daily reports people to whom loyalty was more important than truth. And I found a way out for myself in my decision to go where the real suffering was, the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I couldn't have stood any more watching from a comfortable armchair the suffering that was happening to my people only 100 km, or even less far from Belgrade. I was born, raised and educated in a country called Yugoslavia, while all of its peoples were its integral part. And my own family included people who were Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim, so all of them belonged to me somehow; all of them were my own.

I was irritated by the endless indifference, baffling insensitivity and lack of elementary human solidarity from all those blind to the fact that not very far from them somebody's houses were burning and somebody's children were being killed.

Refusing to believe that nothing human exists in all that madness, I went to the war zones, in December 1992, first as a doctor, in order to help at least one human being devoid of normal medical care because of war horrors.

While providing care for the people of all three backgrounds, I felt their need to open their souls and talk without be questioned about their war destinies. Out of these short, spontaneous confessions on the cardiology ward, I understood their need for truth, which, in places where grenades were actually falling, was surprisingly subtle and refined, compared to the Belgrade's and the world's much more simplistic, black and white pictures of the Bosnian war scenery.

I was amazed to discover that this unhappy people, against the greatest tribulations they have been through generally better remember every small sign of kindness somebody was ready to show them. They were so sensitive that they even noticed somebody's glance full of compassion for their suffering. They used to explain to me that many didn't dare help them at the risk of their own life and they always expressed great deal of understanding for that sort of fear. In the eyes of those who suffered most there was practically no trace of hatred or desire for vengeance. There was no evil nation for them, only evil individuals; they knew each one's first and last name.

These first sparks of hope that human goodness can be found even in the greatest evil, regardless of category or membership, provoked my need to put down my stethoscope for a while, and take up a cassette recorder instead so that I could

record the authentic stories of men and women from the three ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Goodness under normal living conditions is taken for granted. Often enough we do not even notice it. In evil times when someone's survival depends on the moral and ethical norms of other individuals against a backdrop of horrors, where the saying "*Homo Homini Lupus est*" dominates all else, a willingness to become victims ourselves for the sake of the others rises like a pearl to the surface from a shell at the bottom of the sea.

Appalled by the amount of evil which individuals were capable of, I was aware that this would be a crucial subject for many years to come and that the black cloud of their crimes would hold in absolute darkness for all of us who were born in a country where so many honorable and good people lived whom no one spoke of. Someone needed to dive for those pearls and make a necklace.

I believe that everyone will be held accountable for his crimes; regardless of how long such a process lasts. But will everyone be rewarded for his or her goodness and courage? What will be with those who were killed by their own compatriots defending people of different faiths? That kind of goodness is heroism, but such heroes are anonymous. No army and government are likely to honor them. No street or square will be named after them. Their names will last only as long as memory lasts of those whose lives they saved, and their children. I think that the next generations must hear that such people lived and some still live.

When I decided to collect stories from this area, the first technical problem arose: how to find interlocutors? Stories from field hospitals were my inspiration, but I had to hold them in confidence. Such a delicate topic was not something I could interview people about in the streets while the war was raging, and today, five years after peace was declared I still cannot. All of those who spoke were selected using a random sample method and I did not limit my project in any way.

In order to find an interlocutor I always had to get to know somebody who could understand my intention and know people who had gone through such an experience. That person would connect me to a potential interlocutor, since people during the war, and even today, in most of the area I was moving around in, have lived in great fear.

The readiness of my friends and relatives of all backgrounds to step forward whenever I showed up and asked them for help was the first quality check of my idea. Domestic and foreign journalists reacted in the same way:

"I am jealous of your idea. I have been involved professionally in journalism for so many years and live here but it never occurred to me to write about this..."

The stories are about people's experiences with others whose religion was not their own. Given the conditions known today as hostility, civil or religious war, no testimony to goodness, can be discarded.

Every encounter was an experience of personal tragedy. People who survived the most painful experiences of expulsion from their own homes, who knew the horrors of

concentration camps, who lived in a place apart from other members of their own ethnic group keep in their memory the most terrible testimonies even when they have had positive experiences of human kindness. In such conditions goodness itself comes with the highest price: very often it was paid for with life.

Encounters with the stories of those who survived only horrors renewed my own admiration for people who gather evidence on war crimes.

Each individual fate I have heard of has left a scar on my soul. The power to persist was given to me by the very dimension for which I searched - goodness.

People hesitate and find it hard to talk about their ill-fated destinies. There are many reasons for hesitate, which must be understood. The scars of suffering which even today are visible on their faces should stop anyone trying to manipulate their fate. They had to be released from that fear. They feared their own sincerity. Often they would ask me: "Will others on the two other sides talk about goodness?" - And they would always get the same reassurance that those others already had talked and that the books would not be published until everyone on each side had a story in it.

I have to say that what with the terrible conditions in which these people lived, in ruined houses and damp cellars, in someone else's apartment and dwellings unfamiliar to them, or in collective accommodations while bombs were exploding around them or later, and with the evil rhetoric of their leaders on national homogenization, it was extremely difficult to earn their trust. The door to their trust was in most of the cases opened by my family name. Almost each of them remembered with nostalgia the decades in which, while the president of their state was Tito, when they "lived lives matching human dignity in which they feared nothing", as they used to say.

Now they feared everything: publication of their names, as well as the names of the people who helped them survive. Many of them seek anonymity in order to protect themselves from the people who surround them, knowing that it is still an unforgivable sin to speak of the truth about other people's goodness. They have sought protection even for those they have spoken of, rightfully fearing that something bad might happen to these good people where they live for having strength and courage to help someone who is not of their own faith or ethnicity.

There were times when I was wracked by awful fears: is it possible that even my children will not live to see the catharsis of their peoples and the light which only then will return to the country of their ancestors?

For the Gods of evil, who are still alive and well in these areas, the major proof of membership in and loyalty to one's nation is hatred of others. All those who didn't feel it or had courage to overcome it, thereby healing themselves emotionally, are an obstacle and a threat to the dark goals of those who are in favor of ethnically "clean" areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I also found places I called "black holes", where individuals with completely healthy views live but who have been so marginalized that they have no work, or chance to live normally, who are threatened, murdered, whose cars blow up, and their children

have no future thanks to the fascist commitments of the authorities. These people are being treated where they live as traitors to their own people, since the authorities declare themselves one with the people. What then can members of other ethnic groups do in such an environment?

It seems as if all the criteria have been turned upside down: those who managed to keep their common sense and moral and ethical criteria, those who divide people only into humans and sub humans, with no eye to faith or ethnicity, often are the greater and more threatening enemies to local bosses at all the levels, that are the unfortunate obedient ones, most of whom don't agree with nationalist politics but who have neither the strength or the courage to show it. They are defeated by the knowledge that they are all surrounded by a grim reign of intolerance and blind uniformity.

People who were determined by birth as belonging to different faiths, or those whom love connected with their marital partner who doesn't belong to their ethnic group feel particularly lost. Bosnia was always full of such people and I think that within them lies an important chance to move beyond the present national madness. There are so many of them that they are always a thorn in the side of those working to create "pure races" and therefore they have every reason to feel persecuted. Preserving the sanity, the mental health of such people is the best weapon against nationalism that in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a phenomenon but a sickness.

I had expected that when they spoke of such dramatic and moving experiences people would show more explicit emotional expression. While I listened to them I realized that they kept their feelings somewhere deep inside, perhaps even in their sub-consciousness. Probably such horrors cannot be discussed emotionally. The ability to verbalize among most of my interlocutors was far less than the power of their emotions, even when years had passed since the events they described. They often said: "You cannot even begin to imagine it." – The knowledge that someone who had not experienced the suffering could not understand it entirely, inhibited them even from talking about their feelings.

Although at each would say: "It is something that cannot even be expressed." - They did open their souls once again to me. I knew then talking about it was making their unhealed wounds bleed again, and at the end of the story they looked exhausted and in pain. In trembling voices interrupted by quite or barely audible sobs, long pauses between words in which they had summoned the strength to continue, overcome by feelings so strong they'd stop the person from speaking, and curses, as outlets of relief, are recorded on the cassettes. Their eyes, mouth, trembling hands with which they picked up a glass or lit a cigarette, are still in my soul. Therefore in these stories there are no many descriptions of emotions. I have left that to each reader to understand, each within his own sensitivity, the depth of suffering and joy. There is no other way.

The language they used depended on the degree of their education. My editorial interventions were only on the level of language and style to ease understanding and make the texts accessible. All the facts and allegations are authentic.

During one winter in the war I covered 7,500 kilometers along the frozen roads of Republika Srpska, searching for people to speak with. My persistence was rewarded: I recorded over 100 moving testimonies, faced with which even the most adamant supporters of ethnically divided entities could find nothing to say.

The book would have been finished during 1997 if those who were threatened by it hadn't done something, which I might have expected during my time in the field, but had never expected in the heart of Belgrade, most of the materials I had collected were stolen from my home. That merely slowed publication of the book, but did not prevent it; on the contrary I went back and collected a hundred more testimonies. This was yet another proof that even "rough" material has its value, which is all the greater, when it is stolen and hidden.

In the fall 1998 I covered over 10.000 kilometers in Bosnia and Herzegovina searching for those whose stories could testify to goodness. For one story alone one I covered 500 kilometers in one day. To somebody who doesn't know the specific value of such a testimony, such an effort may seem too large. I didn't mind. I come back to my "base" to my aunt's apartment in Sarajevo, tired and happy.

Moving around B&H during those eight years, I had the same impression: wherever I stopped the car to ask someone for an address I'd been looking for I would hear almost on regular basis the same answer: "I don't know. I'm sorry but I'm not from here" - After a number of such responses, I realized that in BH nobody is from there any more, everyone is from somewhere else. To them local Pol Pots wouldn't have to change the data, since many families have been destroyed, and those who have survived their ruins remain in someone else's ruins. All those martyrs want to go back to what was theirs, even if the home is completely destroyed. Time and time again I heard the same sentence: "I would like to return to my home even if I have to build it all over again, but I can't because the people who committed crimes are walking freely through my town. How can I go back when he knows that I am a witness of all he has done? If he was able to kill all those people why won't he kill me, especially since even five years after the war, he still has not been punished for what he did?»

It happened to me in 1993 that I found myself needing to explain to a colleague of mine who was a president of one of the municipalities in the RS. He responded:

- Why don't you write a book on bad people?!

- Someone else is doing that, I responded calmly.

- There are no good people! - He stated angrily.

- Look, do you mean to say that you haven't helped a single person since the war began? - I asked.

- The only good Croat is a dead Croat; the good Muslim is only a dead Muslim! He shouted red in the face, pounding the table.

- I have nothing left to say. I only regret that we are both doctors, but I hope that won't be true for long- I said with contempt and left the municipality.

That man who was in the inner circle of the ruling party sent a telegram out to all the police stations in the Republika Srpska to prevent me from working on my project and even to arrest me. The police chiefs were wiser than he was. I went to one of them, who knew about the directive and said: "Arrest me, and that will be the story, only someone else will tell it" he smiled and responded: "Go ahead doctor and do your work. There are all kinds of fools among us."

He had been a professional policeman who refused to carry out a political order issued by the doctor in the name of his own feeling for the humanity.

The main motive that guided me even when I was faced with difficulties, was my desire, within the mood of pervasive evil, spiritual and material destruction, when human life was going cheap for the price of a bullet fired - to reaffirm goodness as supreme postulate, on which, I deeply believe, the future of this country lies of all three confessions in the country of my forefathers.

Good people as well as those who in the most terrible times found some strength to talk about other peoples' goodness as well as those who, without thinking of the cost had the courage to do a good deed are the most impressive pledge of the rightness of such a decision.

For the last eight years I have met thousands of those people in B&H who experienced something similar to what I have already written about in my book «Good People in Evil Times». Many of them, even nowadays, phone me and keep in touch, wishing to add more to their testimony, to the remembrance mosaic, people whom one of my conversant was thinking of when he said: "This war has shown that those who were humane stayed that way, and it is always hardest to be humane".

This is how I wrote the book. «Good People in Evil Times» represents a collection of ninety authentic stories told by the members of three different ethnic groups who shared the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. You can read about the goodness that some people experienced from people of other backgrounds.

The book was published in February 1989, and it has provoked naturally different reactions. The criticism and anger of nationalists from all ethnic groups, exposed – to my satisfaction -their morbid genocidal attitudes for what they are. And then there are the responses to which this talk is dedicated.

Let me tell you of several of the reactions which suggest the positive impact of the book, as one of the first written documents from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia which publishes the testimonies of good people living in inhuman circumstances.

I must admit that, while I was preparing this book for publication, my main aim was to give future generations documents to show that a person always has a choice of ways that lead to survival. It turns out, however, judging from the repercussions of media presentations, that the book has had an actual impact as well, illustrating the value of the positive example as a new method of working toward reconciliation.

Let me present to you a small portion of the reactions to the book, which I consider most encouraging for possible future involvement in the work on reconciliation going on in my country.

The book was presented in Berlin in July 1999 organized by the German institute "SUDOST". The organizers were pleasantly surprised by the fact that representatives of all three ethnic groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina met in the same lecture hall and everybody proved fully capable of taking an active part in the discussion.

In August 1999, I was in Gorazde, a small town in B&H on the Drina River. This river is the borderline between B&H and Serbia. During the Second World War the population suffered heavy losses inflicted by armed nationalists on both sides, which is still remembered. It is true that there were many Bosniak victims in this war, and the town itself was terribly damaged by this war's "Chetniks" – by Serb troops. During one of the sessions organized in Gorazde, which I myself attended, a man in his thirties approached me and said: "Excuse me, Mrs. Broz, I would like to tell you something that might be of some importance for you. You see, I fought in this war with the rifle in my hands, defending the city of Gorazde against Serb forces. We have had only one copy of your book and for six months the book went from one person to another until by now the majority have read it. What makes the biggest impression on me is that the people of this city, after reading your book are thinking differently and they are talking about people of the two other groups. They have stopped generalizing guilt and are prepared to accept the return of all those Serbs who did nothing wrong. Nowadays, the people of Gorazde are much less subject to passionate hatred and are more ready to meet their former neighbors and to talk to them, than they before".

In December 1999, I gave a lecture in London. The topic of my lecture was: "is it possible to live together on the territory of B&H again?" Five minutes before the lecture was due to begin one extremely thin man approached me. The man had big dark eyes; tears were rolling down his face. He held my hands, silently. When he gathered enough energy to speak, he started his story: "I lived through Omarska, Keraterm and Manjaca (three infamous concentration camps, in the vicinity of Prijedor - in Republika Srpska, where Bosnians and Croats were kept prisoners). They killed my wife and our daughter. But still, you are absolutely right, there are good people everywhere. Thank you for writing a book about good people. Thank you for coming all the way to London to tell us that it is possible to live together again. I, too, want to go back to my country, which would have been crazy otherwise".

I told and shortly commented the same story at the International conference about truth, responsibility and reconciliation held in Sarajevo this February, which was broadcast live on local television. After the conference the Vice-president of the Association of Ex-Camp Prisoners of B&H phoned me. This is the largest associations in this country some 200,000 members of all ethnicities who survived atrocities of the concentration camps during the war in B&H! The man who phoned me was a lawyer, and used to be a judge before the war. He wanted to meet me and tell me how right I was when I insisted that nobody had the right to deny anybody's will to engage for the victory of truth, responsibility and reconciliation. He said that even ex camp-prisoners wanted to talk about truth, responsibility and reconciliation. Unfortunately, they had nobody to talk to, because the ruling nationalists simply did not want to listen. Eager to tell at least a part of his untold stories, at one moment he said: "I survived seven Croatian concentration camps. I am sorry not to have met you two weeks ago, when the commander of one of the camps came to visit me in my flat in Sarajevo. This man managed to be human as a prisoner-camp commander as he was human before. We have become friends and visit each other often."

In February last year, when I was crossing the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, the police officer on the Montenegro side recognized me while he was checking my passport: "Is it you who wrote the book Good People

in Evil Times?" I was really astonished, but of course I said yes. He shook my hand and said: " I congratulate you and I am grateful to you writing such an honest book." He signed the document and continued with sadness in voice: "I spent a lot of time on the battlefields on Herzegovina."

I continued my journey thinking how people identify themselves with evil or with goodness. That Montenegrin police officer on the border obviously identified with the examples of goodness described in the book, despite him being pushed into an evil war, probably against his free will. It is evident that there are many of people like him, who even nowadays carry the burden of collective responsibility for something their fellow compatriots had done, who may be taken to court for their crime. Only when war criminals meet the justice they deserve will these honorable and honest men from that evil time have had the sound sleep they deserve.

There was another International conference on truth, responsibility and reconciliation, held in Ulcinj, (Montenegro) in March 2000. "Positive examples as innovations in methodology – the sense and the impact positive example" was discussed as a topic of a special round table at this Conference, to my great satisfaction.

Radio station B 92 in Belgrade started broadcasting a program in March 2000 they called CATHARSIS. The aim of this program was to inform the listeners of positive examples of interethnic help during the war in B&H. This remained the only action of its kind within the Serbian media through Milosevic's regime. I am afraid this still is an isolated example, but I hope that significant changes will happen in the future.

In March last year I spoke on "Tolerance in the society". The audience was secondary school students in Bijeljina, the town in Northern Bosnia, Republika Srpska, situated not far from the Serbian border. This town is well known as one of the fortresses of Serb nationalism during the recent war and even today. In Bijeljina they still frequently attack returning displaced persons who are non-Serbs. Some 100 extremely nationalistically oriented young people, who expressed openly their views, which they had learned from parents and teachers, attended the lecture. The two-hour session –they marked discussion prominently, and I could feel it. Giving positive examples of inter-ethnic tolerance, formulated as 'preventing the suffering of others' by Professor Berberovic at a talk in Sarajevo, I invited these young people to think of similar examples in their own experience. The discussion resulted in their asking me to forgive their narrow-mindedness and they said they wanted to read the book "GOOD PEOPLE IN EVIL TIMES". The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights presented them with the book free of charge. They even asked for my autograph on their books, which they had criticized at first. Their rare, heroic un-nationalist teachers told me later that much more tolerant thinking was observed among the youngsters after the lecture.

Reducing this to my individual experience, I can speak of the positive reactions of dozens and dozens of people whom I know, and many whom I did not know. After finding out that the book gives positive examples, which the same examples are often present in the media, my readers have learned that such positive examples transcend their personal experience or that of their neighbors. Once they transcend the psychological barrier of fear, realize their inhibitory mechanisms they can cross for the first time an indrawn yet real border for them, the border between the two

parts of Bosnia, the entities where the other ethnic majorities live which sadly still pose a psychological threat to the members of the ethnic minorities.

The importance of this project has already been recognized in the experiences of other countries. A good example is given by the project Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Allow me to remind you that Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyr's and Heroes' Remembrance Authority', was established in 1953 by the act of the Israeli Knesset to commemorate the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, the Jewish communities which were destroyed in an attempt to eradicate the name and culture of Israel as well as the heroism and fortitude of the Jews and the Righteous Among the Nations. I am so glad that my book can be a humble contribution to efforts such as this.