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Bearing Witness

Susan Rose

Clothesline: Bosnia-Herzegovina features interviews with women in Mostar who contributed to the Global Clothesline Project. The Clothesline Project, started as a grass-roots movement in Cape Cod, U.S.A. in the early 1990s, invites women to construct T-shirts that express the violence they have suffered and the healing they are experiencing. *Clothesline: Bosnia-Herzegovina* continues this work and features interviews conducted with women in Bosnia who were part of a witness protection program. The ten women interviewed for this project were testifying against Mla?o Radi? who has since been sentenced for war crimes and imprisoned. These women tell their stories of struggle fifteen years after they were imprisoned in the Vojno concentration camp.

Listening and Bearing Witness

Ultimately, recovering from trauma is not just an individual act but a collective process: it demands dialogue. But it takes courage to listen as well as to speak. And while bearing witness to trauma is a process that involves the listener, many people are unable or unwilling to listen, and trauma-survivor narratives often meet with great resistance from the larger society. A backlash against speaking out occurs because it exposes the atrocities in our midst and challenges both those who abuse power and those who stand by as muted witnesses. It is 'easier' to side with abusers than to serve as effective witnesses to the abused, as Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman wrote in her ground-breaking book *Trauma and Recovery*:

All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the other contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering.

Herman continues:

Violence is inflicted, replicated, resisted – it can be repressed but it is not forgotten. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*... Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work...Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both

for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.

Cited by the *New York Times* as “one of the most important psychiatric works to be published since Freud,” Herman’s analysis comes out of her work as a psychiatrist with war veterans and survivors of sexual violence. She found that both groups were exhibiting very similar symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): hyper-arousal, intrusion of past memories, flashbacks, dissociation, and constriction as a result of experiencing sustained trauma. Herman’s work provides insight to the narratives of contributors to the Bosnia-Herzegovina Clothesline Project.

Speaking out takes courage; it involves risk as well as promise. But as the narrators of the Bosnian-Herzegovina Clothesline project also remind us, we need to consider what it means not to risk. While there are dangers involved in speaking out, there are also dangers in remaining mute. Although silence may serve as a refuge, it is also a place of bondage. Silence stifles the soul, affects the quality of relationship with others, and affects one’s physical and mental health. It also reinforces an unjust and abusive system of power that renders the victim powerless, and enables abusers without holding them accountable. In the process of breaking silence, survivors are not only finding their own voices, they are also collectively creating new narratives that challenge the individual and collective denial of abuse and the reproduction of violence. They often encounter resistance to the telling of their stories for speaking out is a political as well as a therapeutic act, and as such, is a claim to power. As Milan Kundera writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “Man’s struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

Most important for the women was telling the truth about what had happened to them rather than burying or denying what had happened. While they still suffered the effects of the war and the concentration camp and expressed clearly both through words and images to “not forget 1993,” they also held out hope:

Bosnia and Herzegovina is multi-ethnic, it is a multicultural land. I know that Croatian people here feel like they are just tenants here. Bosnian Serbs feel the same. They need to know that Bosnia is like an orchestra. It cannot be just one instrument playing, we need to play all together, and live together, and be together like an orchestra. Only a united Bosnia will survive.

Links

The Bosnia-Herzegovina Clothesline Project in Two Parts: [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#).

The second documentary short features a conversation with Mersida ?amdži?, a Bosnian woman now living in Central Pennsylvania, who in the process of helping us with the translation, wanted to tell her own story.

The two-part documentary (total running time 20 minutes) was co-produced by the [Community Studies Center \(CSC\)](#) at Dickinson College and Dickinson College students: Manuel Saralegui 09, Shannon Sullivan 09, Gabriela Uassouf 10, and Professor of Sociology and Director of the CSC, Susan Rose. Shannon Sullivan conducted the interviews in Bosnia. For more information, see [Global Clothesline Bog Website](#).

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