

***INTER-ETHNIC COMMUNICATION, SOLIDARITY,
REFUGEE IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION***

(In the mirror of Slovene refugee politics during the Balkan war)

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ABSTRACT: The paper presents the process of refugee identity transformation in the mirror of the Slovene refugee politics. It has been discussed that the problem of the refugee mental health can not be identified with the psychopathological phenomenon of the PTSD. The identity processing of the refugees changes within the relational system of the cross-cultural communication. That has been determined by the contextual elements of the Slovene society. The process of the identity change encloses notions like "cultural bereavement", "uprootedness", "trauma" and "resettlement".

Key words: refugee, media, identity and trauma.

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INTRODUCTION:

In relation to the formation of the DSM-IV classification system Eisenbruch (1991, 1992) warned the professional public opinion that PTSD-requirements could be enforced only in certain cultures; at the same time, he gave the main features of a culture-sensitive approach. He introduced the term of "cultural bereavement" with a call for reflecting identity transformation problems that can emerge in connection with the emigration or refuge. Therefore, the category of "cultural bereavement" supposes that refugees exist in a culturally determined context (in a reality which is comprehended as a system of symbols) and this fact conditions the refugees' consciousness, their self-definitions and even their psychopathological manifestations. In this way, the psychopathological manifestations of refugeeness do not link only with traumatic experiences, and PTSD, undoubtedly, is not the only concomitant syndrome of refugee life. Some authors, investigating the psychological dimensions of refugee life, introduced a number of different, but compatible categories in order to help to understand the given phenomenon. These are terms like "homesickness" (Tilburg and Vingerhoets 1997), "acculturation stress" (Hannigan 1997), "cultural shock" (Furnham 1997) and "uprootedness", mentioned by Zalokar (1994) in relation to problems of Yugoslav immigrants in Australia, or rather the "transcultural communication" that characterizes the problems around the settlement and crosscultural communication being also a term that reflects the process during which the new cultural competence is usually obtained. The characteristic crosscultural communication of refugees and immigrants was studied thoroughly by Verschueren and Blommaert (1991).

Refugeeness can be described with these categories. Baker (1983) has divided refugee experience into 8 stages:

- 1) period of being threatened
- 2) making decision on refuge

- 3) while refuging
- 4) reaching the safe place
- 5) experiences in the refugee camp
- 6) welcome in the acceptant country
- 7) resettlement
- 8) the period after resettlement

If we contract these stages to a certain degree, the presented terms will centre round the following concepts: "becoming refugee", "being refugee" and "transformation of the refugee identity".

Nevertheless, it is also significant that these events used to be merged and they often repeat and can vary a lot in their contents by cultures. In fact, it is more practical to consider the refugees' life events as a process the elements of which often overlap one another in time as well as in space.

If we want to understand the given sociocultural phenomenon, that is the dynamics of the refugee problem it is indispensable to learn the crosscultural relation system that determines significations. These have always been generated within the context between the concrete immigrants and the acceptant society. The refugees can exist or rather survive only with those significations which are allowed, accepted or verified by the acceptant society.

Busquet (1987) proves this assumption, asserting that life in refugee camps is usually determined by the combination of 4 factors:

- 1) the refugees themselves
- 2) the acceptant country
- 3) the country in which the refugees take the first shelter
- 4) the international refugee organizations

The fundamental condition of the relation system is the state of subordination in which the refugees find themselves against the people who they are accepted by. The term of subordination, however, can be used not merely in the sense of material "dependence" but also as a signification determiner resource that is based on the exclusive reality of the acceptant country and shows itself through the manifestations of the political power. Clark (1985) also notices the dependency of the refugees understanding it as a rational and adaptive behaviour towards a powerful system.

If the identity transformation process of the refugees depends on interactions among the refugees, then it is worth learning, in the first place, the social context as it manifests itself at the arrival of the refugees, and which can faithfully reflect the relational system of the acceptant society and the refugees.

Waves of Croatian refugees

There were three refugee waves arriving in Slovenia during the last Balkan war: one at the beginning of the Croatian war events, one in the most bloody period of the Bosnian ethnic cleansing and a third one in the course of the Kosovian war. The Slovenian media reported the first Croatian refugees in the 6th of September of 1991 (Oravec J. 1996). The frequency of the daily press articles was increasing in proportion to the number of refugees. Some experts notice that people's mentality is significantly influenced by all that they have been told by somebody in some way. As linguistic pragmatics (Blommaert and Verschueren 1991, Horvat 1994) propagates, media is the organ of the "public opinion" that becomes manifest not only through the information they publish but also in the way they report things. And the public opinion, as a matter of fact, reflects the social context.

The articles above-mentioned run about the solidarity with refugees, about their provision and the enrolment of the refugee children into Slovene schools. Slovenia and Croatia hadn't had their territorial sovereignty when the refugees arrived, consequently there wasn't any formal border between them. The Slovene media didn't pretend to make believe that the government would take any step in order to stop refugee waves. It was clear then for the public opinion that Slovenia was bound to harbour the Croatian refugees. During the media campaign which lasted one and a half months no article was published that would have opposed to the acceptant point, without distinction as to the political attitude of the given review, TV or radio.

In September of 1991 the Croatian refugee still was nothing more than a victim needing help. This position can be explained with the thesis of Rorty (1989) which states that "solidarity appears when religious, national, sexual or racial differences become insignificant in relation to the community experienced in sorrow and humiliation".

The collective vision of independence, the unmarked frontiers, the common enemy, the common past within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the dominantly catholic culture, these all together played an important role in the identification of the Slovene population with the Croatian refugees as with victims.

The Slovene public opinion mostly articulated solidarity and identification with the victims in the case of the Croatian refugees. A few months later, however, when the Bosnian refugees arrived, a surprisingly new reality turned up.

The arrival of the Bosnian refugees

In the case of the Croatian refugees there were no xenophobic manifestations expressed in the media. The public opinion, however, could not identify themselves with the arriving

Bosnian refugees as with victims any more (Salec 1993, Oravecz J. 1996, Horvat 1994). In a peculiar way, the people suffering in Bosnia came to be interpreted as victims, while people having refuged into Slovenia from the same population appeared as a mass threatening the security and the health of Slovene inhabitants or the Slovenian sovereignty. There are several reasons to explain this phenomenon:

The troops faithful to the Yugoslav Federation left Slovenia in the time between the arrival of the Croatian and the Bosnian refugees and Slovenia became an internationally admitted state with frontiers, border crossing places, passport, etc. On the other hand, the Balkan events precipitated the economy into an acute crisis in which the unemployment increased abruptly and the average standard of living decreased to its quarter within a few months. The feeling of being threatened of the Slovene society was mainly due to an unlucky circumstance: refugees had been identified with those Bosnian "guest-workers", belonging mostly to the Muslim religion, who had immigrated into Slovenia in the 70s, and whom the "natives" started to treat with much antipathy as a traditional attitude owing to the cultural differences.

The unfriendly dispossession towards the refugees produced a number of concrete consequences which can be observed on the level of the global social context as well as it was reflected in the media, in the reports of the institutions established to provide or the refugees or rather in the everyday human interactions.

This can be examined on the

- global level (that affects the whole society)
- mezzo level (within the institutional system)
- micro level of the society (that appears in the human interactions).

On a global level, the attitude towards the refugees, which seemed to be rather xenophobic, manifested itself in the limitation of the refugees residing in Slovenia, in the consecuting closing of the frontiers, in the "provisional refugee" status, that is in the obstruction of the

refugees' integration into the Slovene society, or recently in the institutional pressure exerted on the repatriation. The majority of the Croatian and Bosnian refugees had left their home right at the start of the war (battle) events and even previously. A lot of this people, similarly to the Mozambican refugees (Gersony 1988) steeled themselves for this step only after the "death had become a real possibility". Later they would form the most traumatized stratum of the refugee population.

Adaptation of refugees

The majority of the Bosnian refugees in Slovenia took shelter with their relatives while the rest were put up in refugee camps. Croatian refugees got accommodation in empty worker hostels, in cheap hotels or in corporate health resorts. Bosnian refugees, however, established some refugee centres in abandoned barracks and in workers' hostels that had been found mostly in the periphery of the large cities.

The management structure of the refugee camps was characterized by the lack of qualifications, and by a repressive tendency in the beginning. Some measures introduced in many refugee centres limited the refugees' freedom to move. The situation improved only due to an international intervention. The refugees living outside the camps had to face problems of living day after day. It was very difficult for them to accommodate to their Slovenian relatives and their relatives also got "burned out" in many cases because of the increased stress (Oravec R. 1996).

Interpersonal contacts in the refugee -- refugee and in the refugee -- Slovene relations had centered around the solidarity at the very beginning. The influence of the real factors, on the other hand, soon brought the small differences that had been prevailing over the solidarity motive to surface.

The personnel's rhetoric of the refugee centers was characterized by a frequent occurrence of some negative qualifications according to the cultural differences of the refugees. The "burn out" phenomenon was also quite frequent within the personnel. These phenomena manifested themselves with much more frequency among the employees who worked in non-helping professions without appropriate qualification, motivation nor supervision. The personal uncertainty of existence and the state of being exposed to the traumatic experiences increased even more the possibility of burn out. Fortunately, the employees' attitude to work professionalized in the course of some years and a positive election of cadres was accomplished.

The Bosnian refugees didn't know anything about the presuppositions or the prejudices of the acceptant society when they arrived so they assumed to be victims without any reserve counting on the sympathetic character of the Christian culture that always had been declaring solidarity and sensitivity towards victims by nature and on the ideology of the common state that still was propagating a multicultural attitude even not long ago. Although the significant majority of the Bosnian refugees expressed their feeling of being losers as well as it was experienced by other populations too (Allmen 1987, Roe 1987) but in comparison with the other refugees the intellectuals and those from the civil professions experienced the loss of their former roles with an increased pain and disturbance. It was dramatic for them to realize that they were no more the same as before. They were rejected, as a matter of fact, not only by the acceptant society but also by the refugees themselves. Everyday interactions made visible the real face of refugeeness that was much too unpleasant manifesting itself particularly in the "curfews", in the subordination or in the state of being rejected. Some authors indicate as a fact that refugees endured their camp life as a purposeless and time wasting period accompanied with the reduction of their right to interfere in their own future and this can be observed in all cases independently from the character or the attitude of the

acceptant society (Knudsen 1983). Nevertheless, the comparison of the Croatian and the Bosnian evidences that the social context plays a determinant role in the shaping of the refugee life and of the refugee identity.

It would be proper to suppose, based on the phenomena above described above, that the primary psycho-social identity, having been constituted in pre-war roles, in social status and in narrative constructions, will continue to resist changes for a long time. The individuals insist on interpreting the world in the view of the old, no functional definitions that is to say they try to adjust the world to the more and more dysfunctional constructions of reality. Therefore, the new identity is always formed step by step under the influence of the reality reflected in the interaction with one's surroundings. Refugee definitions, which had been offered by the contextual determinant, show a great dissonance with the pre-refugeeness reality and the identification with such definitions practically proved to be impossible. The refugees, thus, invented a number of "tricks" to keep out themselves of those definitions, which have been offered by the situation.

In terms of adaptation, refugees who originated from the lower strata of the society (Gypsies, for example) proved to show the most adaptability. Refugeeeness didn't bring them a radical change in their earlier life, or they simply couldn't find a better solution to their problems but dependency.

Refugee camps - Bosnian villages

Refugee centers turned into Bosnian villages with a special, internal regulating system, norms and rules which seemed to protect refugees against the definitions coming from outside. These norms, rules and beliefs had their root mainly in the traditional culture

manifested in the Bosnian State of being and formed shape under the contextual conditions of the refugee-reality.

Refugees could refuse to participate in the interactions outside the refugee centers, could reject Slovene language, Slovenian habits and Slovenian values (at least apparently). Refugee camps got, in this way, an important, supportive part in the life of refugees. The mutual social support diminished the anxiety and the fears of the refugee life significantly. Mitchell and Tickett (1980) reported on similar experiences. The isolation from the acceptant society and the negative attitude prevailing in the camps quite often led into the ghettoization of the camp in question. Those refugees, nevertheless, who had been given harbour by their relatives could help getting into contact with the outside world. Thus, the "resettlement", that is the forming process of the new lifestyle didn't take long to start. We can realize the subculture of the refugees, properly or badly acculturated in the background of the refugeeness, the same as in the peculiarly used Slovene language acquitted by the refugees too. The surveys made in Slovenia (Flegar 1994) indicated that the refugees who had been living outside of the refugee centers could be much more adaptable than the others but, at the same time, they presented emotional disorders even after a lot of time as a consequence of war-traumas and object-losses. This means that the narrow familiar milieu often influenced the processing of the traumatic events negatively. This was proved by Lin (1986) too, who noted that the decomposition of the traditional large families deprives couples of an important damping compensatory and protective net.

The state of being traumatized came to a specific situation. The non-solidary or unsympathetic attitude of the acceptant society affected the refugee life of the refugees principally, that is to say, they didn't accept refugees as suffering people. On the contrary, this partial manifestation, the state of being victims and the trauma appeared as the only reason of refugee life. Refugees often spoke without any reserve about their war-losses and

the horrors they had been suffering, emphasizing their pre-war status that would have made them equal with the acceptant people and would have given weight to the losses they had experienced. During this process less and less emotional content came to be linked with the suffered traumas. It was frequent that the refugees verbalized war-traumas in an easier way than those painful and distressful contents that originated from their actual existential situation. Traumas provided a specific protection against the different undesirable emotions related to the "survival" in the form of conceptions like "you see, I also suffered a lot, and I owe to the Providence that I am still here". The "temporary refugee" status promoted the conservation of the behaviour models and values originated from Bosnia. In about the second or the third year the problem of hopelessness emerged in the shape of depressive and psychopathological phenomena. The temporary character of refugeeness, backed by the Slovenian side too, contradicted to those decisions which could facilitate an advance against the actual refugee status or at least delayed creating them.

The clue to hopelessness may be found in the injury of men's role and identity. The deficiencies of the supplying strategy of the Slovenian refugees was revealed in a comparison with the provision of the Bosnian refugees who had taken shelter in Israel. Markowitz (1996) notes that the Israeli refugee-provision policy has always been family- and work centred. Bosnian paterfamilias, therefore, succeeded in keeping up their cohesive function in Israel that helped families to preserve their faith in the future.

"Cultural bereavement" as a process, in which the social linguistic and cultural identity is left, took places only partially in the case of the Bosnian refugees living in Slovenian refugee camps. "Temporary refugee status" that eventually lasted 6 or 8 years, hindered the integration of refugees into the Slovenian society as well as their emigration into a third country. The culture and subculture of the refugee camp only could integrate those elements, which fitted into the preserved Bosnian culture. The only exceptions to this were the children

who attended Slovenian schools. They could obtain cultural competency related to the acceptant society in a short time. It was they in many cases that took in hand their parents' business and acted as family advisors becoming, in this way, the most competent member of their family. "Bosnian villages" persisting in the refugee camps, for their part, could conserve, with more or less success the preservable values of the pre-war, Bosnian way of life.

Passivization and dependency on the humanitarian aid as inseparable aspects of the refugee communities (Gold 1987, Scudder and Colson 1982) could be detected in the Slovenian refugee camps, too. Dependency and ghetto-life started to get pushed into the background the ideal of returning home. Though the verbalization of the desire to return home served as a protection against the defenselessness for a long time, the potential repatriation raised a lot of problems.

Myth and reality

_The Bosnian society have gone through some notable changes. War created a totally new system of values and relations. The "rules of the game" have changed to such a degree that only the cultural competence will be able to guarantee the survival of the individuum. Only the people that were present in the war events all the time have such a competence. The refugees who suffered the war in Slovenia now have become conscious of the uncertainty of their future in Bosnia. The peculiar Bosnian culture conserved by the refugees successfully is not identical with the real contemporary Bosnian culture that was formed in the course of the war. The refugees' fears were generated in the process in which they started to realize that war had made them foreigners in their own country. The sensation of shame and guilty conscience belonging to their "survival" have contributed to their anxiety, as well as, the

uncertainty of the conditions of life. The traumatic character of repatriation could be detected mostly among the children of school age and the young who were able to adapt more to the acceptant culture. They are expected to face a new "culture shock" in which they can lose their acquired feeling of security and the idealized image of their homeland that have been keeping them alive for such a long time during the exasperating years of the refugeeness. It is to be regretted that the returning refugees will probably make some disturbances in the life of their fellow countrymen. With reference to Rorty's conception, paraphrasing it somewhat, we can say that "solidarity disappears when religious, national, sexual or racial differences become significant in relation to the community experienced in sorrow and humiliation".

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