

GOOD PEOPLE IN EVIL TIMES

by Svetlana Broz

Since I was fourteen, I have spent a good many years exploring books in order to find whether there is some lowest threshold 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 for in a book by Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist¹, 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 threshold 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 of times, maybe at the cost of their own lives, refused to act inhumanely, and if there are people able to testify to this, those lucky enough to escape death, have we the right to ignore them? Isn't it an imperative of the first order to talk about these people, to write about them and publish their deeds through whatever media we can: to let everybody know about extraordinarily moral people who really have lived?

¹ VICTOR FRANKL, "Why did They not commit suicide" (introduction to *Logotherapy*) taken from "Christian Reality", Biblioteka "Oko tri ujutro", Zagreb, 1986. Original title: FRANKL DR. VICTOR, *Ein Psychologe Erlebt das KZ*, Wien, 1946 (c); ID., *Basic Concepts of Logotherapy*, New York, 1958.

A few years later, once I was fully convinced that such people really had existed, a bloody war raged in my native country, the aim and political doctrine of which was ethnic cleansing and genocide.

I could not accept those dark images of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which were created by the world, Belgrade mass media, which stood at the beck and call of dominant powers, or by journalists who were eager for the smell of fresh blood, to create images depicting the cruellest of attitudes, and to give free rein to their desire to show the dominion of man over man, thereby 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 despite 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.

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

In cosmopolitan Belgrade, I saw long-lasting friendships dissolve because they were too weak to rise above quarrels on a subject that was senseless: which side had the greatest nationalistic fervour. It seemed to me that the sleepy European metropolis in which I had been born had become a beehive in which every bee had its own, ethnically fenced-off piece of the honeycomb, bearing not pollen but hatred, carefully nurtured by every dismal debate between deaf former friends. I looked for a way out of these sterile drawing-room discussions in which nobody heeded anybody else's opinions but their own, and which were encouraged by daily reports by 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 could no longer stand my comfortable armchair-view of the suffering taking place just 100 km, or even less, from Belgrade. I had been born, raised and educated in a country called Yugoslavia, at a time when all of its peoples were part and parcel of the nation. And my own family included people who were Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim, so all of them belonged to me somehow; all of these peoples were my own.

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

Refusing to believe that nothing humane existed in all that madness, in January 1993, I went to the war zones, first as a doctor, in order to help at least one human being deprived of normal medical care because of the war.

While providing care for people of all three backgrounds, I felt their need to open their souls and talk about their fate during the war. From these short, spontaneous confessions in the cardiology ward, I understood their need for truth, which, in places where grenades were actually falling, was surprisingly subtle and refined, compared to Belgrade's and the world's much more simplistic, black and white pictures of the Bosnian war scenario.

I was amazed to discover that, despite their great tribulations, these unhappy people generally remembered any small gesture of kindness somebody was ready to show them. They were so sensitive that they even noticed a compassionate glance for their suffering. They would explain that most people dared not help them for fear of their own lives and they always expressed a great deal of understanding for that sort of fear. In the eyes of those who had suffered most there was practically no trace of hatred or desire for vengeance. There was no evil nation for them. There were only evil individuals, and they knew each one's first and last name.

These first sparks of hope that human goodness could be found even in the greatest evil, regardless of category or membership, urged me to lay 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* dominates all else, the readiness to become victims ourselves for the sake of others rises to the surface like a pearl from a shell at the bottom of the sea.

Appalled by the depth of evil to which certain individuals can stoop, 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 all of us, who were born in a country where so many honourable and anonymous good people lived, in absolute darkness. 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 takes. But will everyone be rewarded for his goodness and courage? What will be of those who were killed by their own

compatriots while they were defending people of different faiths? That kind of goodness is heroism, but such heroes are anonymous. No army or government are likely to honour them. No street or square will be named after them. Their names will only survive as long as the memory of those whose lives they saved, or their children, survive. I believe that future generations must be told that such people lived and some still live.

When I decided to collect stories from this area, the first technical problem arose: how would I find the right people to talk to? I had been inspired by the stories I had heard in the field hospitals, but they had been told to me in great 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 am still not able to do so. All the people I spoke to were chosen via a random sample method and I did not limit my project in any way.

In order to find the right person, I always had to have met someone who would appreciate my real intentions and know people who had gone through such experiences. Such a person would then put me in touch with a potential respondent, because during the war, and even today, in most of the area I was moving around in, people 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 at the highest price: very often life itself.

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 strength to persevere was given to me by the very dimension I was searching for: goodness itself.

People hesitate and find it hard to talk about their ill-fated destinies. There are many reasons for their reluctance, and these 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 or dwellings unfamiliar to them, or in collective accommodation while bombs were exploding around them or later, and with the evil rhetoric of their leaders on national homogenization, it was extremely difficult to gain their trust. The key to gaining their trust was very often my family name. They almost all had fond memories of the time when their national president was Tito, and when they "lived lives matching human dignity in which they feared nothing", as they used to say.

Now they were afraid of everything: of their names being published, as well as the names of those who had helped them survive. Many of them sought anonymity in order to protect themselves from those who surround them, knowing that it is still an unforgivable sin to speak 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 for having had the strength and courage to help people of another faith or ethnic group.

There were times when I was wracked by awful fears: will not even my children 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 kicking in these areas, there is no better proof of membership or loyalty to one's nation than hatred of others. All those who never felt it or had the courage to overcome it, thereby healing themselves emotionally, are an obstacle and a threat to the dark aims of those who want ethnically "cleansed" areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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 subhumans with no eye to faith or

ethnicity, are often the greater and more threatening enemies. People who belong by birth to different faiths, or who love spouses from another ethnic group feel particularly lost. Bosnia has always been 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". Preserving the sanity, the mental health of such people is the best weapon against nationalism, which in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a phenomenon but a sickness.

I had expected people speaking about such dramatic and moving experiences to express greater and more explicit emotion. While I listened to them I realized that they kept their feelings somewhere deep inside. They often said: "You cannot even begin to imagine it." – and: "It is something that cannot even be expressed" – but they did open their souls once again to me. Then I realized that just talking about it was making their unhealed wounds bleed again, and at the end of the story they looked exhausted and in pain. Their eyes, their mouths, the trembling hands with which they picked up a glass or lit a cigarette, are still in my soul. The language they used depended on the degree of their education. Any editing I have done is limited to language and style simply to facilitate understanding and make the texts accessible. All the facts and allegations are authentic.

During one winter in the war I covered 7,500 kilometres along the frozen roads of Republika Srpska, searching for people to talk to. 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 in 1997 if those who felt 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 material I had collected was stolen from my home. This merely slowed down publication of the book, but did not prevent it; on the contrary, I went back and collected a hundred more testimonies. This was yet further proof that even "rough" material has its value, which is all the greater, when it is stolen and hidden.

In the fall of 1998 I covered over 10,000 kilometres in Bosnia and Herzegovina in my search for people who would testify to goodness. For one story alone, I covered 500 kilometres in one day. To anybody who fails to appreciate the specific value of such testimony, that effort may seem

excessive. I didn't mind. I came back to my "base" in my aunt's apartment in Sarajevo, tired and happy.

Moving around Bosnia and Herzegovina during those eight years, I always received the same impression: wherever I stopped the car to ask someone for an address I'd been looking for, I would almost always get the same reply: "I don't know. I'm sorry but I'm not from here" - After countless replies of this kind, I realized that in Bosnia and Herzegovina nobody is from there any more, everyone is from somewhere else. These local Pol Pots wouldn't have to alter the data, since many families have been destroyed, and those who survived destruction live in someone else's ruins. All those martyrs want to go back to what was theirs, even if their homes are completely destroyed. Time and time again I heard the same sentence:

I would like to return to my own home, even if I have to rebuild it, but I can't because the people who committed crimes are walking freely through my town. How can I go back when they know that I am a witness to everything they have done? If they managed to kill all those people, why shouldn't they kill me, especially since even five years after the war, they have still not been punished for their evil deeds?

In 1993 I needed to explain my work to a colleague of mine, who was head of one of the town councils in the Republika Srpska. He replied:

- 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 only good Muslim is 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 scornfully, and left the council offices.

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

My main motivation, even when I was faced with difficulties, was my desire to contrast the mood of pervasive evil, spiritual and material destruction, when human life was going cheap for the price of a bullet - and to reaffirm goodness as the supreme postulate on which, I deeply believe, lies the future of the country of my forefathers, with its three confessions.

Good people, along with those who found the strength to talk about other people's goodness in the most terrible times, as well as those who were brave enough to do a good deed, whatever the price, are the most impressive pledge of the rightness of such a decision.

Over the last eight years I have met thousands of 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 still phone me and keep in touch, wishing to add more to their testimony, to the mosaic of remembrance, people whom one of my respondents had in mind 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* is a collection of ninety authentic stories told by members of the three different ethnic groups who shared the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. You can read about the goodness that some people experienced from others of different backgrounds.

The book was published in February 1998, and it has naturally provoked 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 about some of the reactions which show that the book has had a positive impact, as one of the first written accounts from the territory of the former Yugoslavia to document testimony of good people living in inhumane circumstances.

I must admit that, while I was preparing this book for publication, my main aim was to give future generations documents showing that you can always choose how to survive. It turns out, however, judging from the repercussions of media presentations, that the book has had an topical impact as well, illustrating the value of positive examples as a new method of working toward reconciliation.

Let me present just a few of the most encouraging reactions to the book for possible future involvement in the reconciliation efforts under way in my country.

Good People in Evil Times was presented in Berlin in July 1998 by the German institute *Sudost*. The organizers were pleasantly surprised by the fact that representatives of all three ethnic groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina met in the same lecture hall and that everybody proved fully capable of taking an active part in the discussion.

In August 1998, I was in Gorazde, a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Drina River. This river marks the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. During the Second World War the population suffered heavy losses inflicted by armed nationalists from both sides, and still remembered today. It is true that there were many Bosnian victims in that war, and the town itself was terribly damaged by that 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 a 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 was handed from one person to another. By now most people have read it. What has impressed me most is that, after reading your book, the people of Gorazde have started to think 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 not nearly so full of hate and they are readier to meet their former neighbours and to talk to them.

In December 1998, I gave a lecture in London. The topic of my lecture was: "Is it possible to live together in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina again?". Five minutes before the lecture was due to begin one extremely thin man approached me. He had big dark eyes; tears were rolling down his face. He held my hands, silently. When he gathered enough strength 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 commented briefly on the same story at the International Conference about truth, responsibility, and reconciliation held in Sarajevo last February, and broadcast live on local television. After the conference the Vice-president of the *Association of ex-camp prisoners of Bosnia and Herzegovina* phoned me. This is the largest association in this country. It has some 200,000 members of all ethnic groups who survived the atrocities of the concentration camps during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina! The man who phoned me was a lawyer, and formerly 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 fight for the victory of truth, responsibility and reconciliation. He said that even former concentration 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 had managed to preserve his humanity despite his position. We have become friends and often exchange visits.

In February this year, while crossing the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, I was recognized by the police officer on the Montenegro side checking my passport. To my astonishment he asked: "Is it you who wrote *Good People in Evil Times*?", and then shook my hand and congratulated me, saying he was grateful to me for writing such an honest book. He signed the document and added sadly: "I spent a long time on the battlefields in Herzegovina".

I continued my journey thinking how people identify themselves with evil or with goodness. That Montenegrin border officer obviously identified with the examples of goodness described in the book, despite having been pushed, probably against his will, into an evil war. There are evidently many people like him, who still carry the burden of collective responsibility for something their fellow compatriots did, compatriots who may be taken to court for their crimes. Only when war criminals meet the justice

they deserve will these honourable and honest men from that evil time be able to enjoy 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 of positive example" was the topic of a special round table at this Conference, to my great satisfaction.

Radio station B2 92 in Belgrade started broadcasting a program called *Catharsis* in March 2000. The aim was to inform listeners of positive examples of inter-ethnic support during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was to be the only action of its kind in the Serbian media throughout Milosevic's regime. I am afraid it is still an isolated example, but I hope that this will change significantly in the future.

In March of this year I spoke on "Tolerance in society". The audience was made up of secondary school students in Bijeljina, a town in Northern Bosnia, Republika Srpska, not far from the Serbian border. This town is well known as a stronghold of Serb nationalism during the recent war and even today. In Bijeljina displaced non-Serbs returning to the town are still frequently attacked. Some 100 extreme nationalist youths, who openly expressed the views they had learned from parents and teachers, attended the lecture. During the two-hour session, they dominated the discussion, 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 *Good People in Evil Times*. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights presented them with free copies of the book. They even asked for my autograph on their copies, despite having criticized the book at first. Their few, heroic non-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 that I know, and many that I did not know. On reading the positive examples in my book and hearing them frequently repeated in the media, my readers have learned that such positive examples can transcend their personal experience or that of their neighbours. Once they transcend the psychological barrier of fear, and acknowledge their inhibitory mechanisms, they can for the first time cross an unmarked but 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 the Yad Vashem project in Jerusalem. Allow me to remind you that Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' 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 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.

It has been nine years since I first started digging in this so far inexhaustible mine. Yet, having found all these testimonies about goodness in the face of great evil, I have realized that a very large number of victims who experienced such atrocities are now ready to talk freely about them. This is the first sign that people have become sick and tired of evil, and that they are looking forward to an opportunity to publicly point out that such people really existed. But I will never forget what one of my respondents once said: "If everyone was evil, even the Sun would refuse to shine".