

## **In 1992 – Bosnian war refugees, today – modern migrants**

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### **Introduction**

Hannah Arendt begins the essay „We refugees“ (1943) with the words: „In the first place, we don't like to be called „refugees“. We ourselves call each other „newcomers“ or „immigrants“ (Arendt, 1943:69). Arendt, who was also the refugee, deals with the question of Jewish refugees from Germany who were banished and expatriated to all over the world during and after the World War II. 50 years later, Giorgio Agamben, while referring to Arendt's essay, writes: „ (...) The refugee is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day“ (1995:114). On one side, a refugee is a real person who lost home, fears for his very existence, questions his own identity in the new society and culture where he finds his temporary resort. On the other side, a refugee as a figure in today's society is every nomad human who nowadays deals with the questions of home, identity and belonging in the broad sense.

Those two representations of refugees are about to determine the main frame of this paper. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the paper will comparatively analyze and interpret the experiences of four young Bosnian Croats born in 1991 who had become refugees at only a few months of their life. For some of them the state of a refugee lasted by the time they have reached their teen age, when their families succeeded to buy or to build new houses, but somehow, they don't plan to stay there, yet they migrate and migrate further. The difference is that they are not refugees any more, at least not officially, but modern migrants, those who are closer to the Agamben's notion of refugee.

The fact I find important for this research is that the individuals, whose stories are weaved in this paper, are my acquaintances. We belong to the same '91 generation, we attended the same class in Drvar, the place where we were temporarily settled from 1995 till 2000 and after we migrated further, we stayed in touch during the years. Even though my experience won't be reflected (at least not directly), I won't run away from my own subjectivity. On one side, the intimate relationship with my informants and the fact that we know each other helped us to talk about the things more openly without a lot of explanations (for example, some places in

Drvar that were the main playing spots in our childhood that had turned out to be also the main spots in memories about the time passed in Drvar). On the other side, I am aware of the fact that this type of approach is also faced with its own limitations and that it's difficult to make the distinct border between personal and research question. During the interviews, sometimes I didn't care about this border, but sometimes I also felt how our experiences of the same things are actually different; and at those points, I appeared to myself more as a cultural anthropologist, while asking myself: why is it so?

The research was constructed through the several questions that also follow the biographical timeline of my informants and the historical timeline of war and post-war events. Firstly, I focused on researching what kind of war memories and of their family's migrations during wartime they have, before they had settled in Drvar in 1995. Secondly, what actually Drvar, as first post-war place of living, meant to them, and how they experienced the political processes that followed after the Dayton Agreement in 1995; as in their everyday lives. Thirdly, how do they see their own identities and how do they construct the meaning of home. At last, what are their future plans in the context of migrations and where do they see themselves in the future.

The goal of the paper is to analyze the relation of historical war events created "from above" at the macro level and the narratives and the experiences of "small people", the direct target and victims at the micro level who were impacted by the war. They didn't take part in war, they couldn't even have an idea what the war is supposed to be and what it was in reality, but they have memories of it, they migrated because of the state of war and the experience of war is part of their contemporary identity.

## **Methodology of research**

As it was mentioned, the interviews were the main method for collecting ethnographic material discussed in this paper. The individual stories of informants are the most important sources and their voices are the loudest ones. As I already demonstrated my position as the researcher and the author, which is very important for every cultural anthropological research, now it is important also to examine the methodology I used for the interviewing.

The research was conditioned by the geographical dispersion of my informants, so the interviewing was not the "face to face interview", known as the conventional ethnographic

way of examination. My informants decided themselves whether they wanted only to write the answers in email, or if they wanted to talk to me on Skype call or if to combine those two ways. It happened sometimes that they have remembered something to add to their answer or something was not clear enough to me and I wanted to know more about some question. So, I didn't have the "research field" in strictly ethnographic meaning, but I used Internet communication to construct the field together with my informants. Likewise Iva Pleše, Croatian ethnologist writes in her paper "Have I been in the field? The ethnography of electronic correspondence": „Instead of dealing with culture or with certain aspects of culture and the way of life at a single geographical area, researchers deal with topics that connect different geographical areas within the same research..." (Pleše 2005:5). Though my informants and I are geographically far away from each other, we belong to the specific discourse that can be researched, through the shared memories and experiences. The methodology of observing discourse is divided into four main points, which also shaped the frame of the interviews: war and memory of a life as a refugee, Drvar as a place of post-war life, contemporary identities and the meaning of home and future potential migrant life.

## **Theoretical approach**

Because of my methodological approach that focuses on individual stories putting the informants' voices in the first place and because of the narrative complexity, it was necessary to combine more sociological and anthropological theoretical approaches to put the lived experiences of informants into the understandable textual form.

There are three theoretical concepts, sometimes very difficult to be distinguished while reading the ethnographies of informant's experiences, but they must be extracted and defined into the context of this research in order to make the theoretical frame. The concepts are: memory (of war and post-war, refugee life), migration (as the involuntary process, caused by the war and as the voluntary contemporary modern style of life) and identity (what is it and how it is partially constructed by the previous concepts).

In part, I opened the concept of memory while explaining the methodology of research and claiming how, even though the informants don't belong to the geographically and officially formed community, they belong to the same discourse through the shared memories and experiences. In order to be more concrete about the concept of memory, I will refer to the methodology of Danforth and Boeschete called "ethnography of memory" and the term

“community of memory” how it is defined in the book *Children of the Greek Civil War - Refugees and the Politics of Memory*. They concluded that “the personal narratives of refugee children contain memories that are based on experiences they shared during their formative years—departure, separation, repatriation, and migration. These memories, however, are also based on strong peer bonds developed during their lives in the children’s homes. (...) When the refugee children became adults and left the homes where they had grown up, their original community of experience devolved into multiple communities of memory, as they joined different social groups and their memories were reworked in the context of different social frameworks of memory” (2012:228). Following the proposed concept of “community of memory”, in the research results, there will be showed the different levels of work of war and refugee memory, such as personal, family and political memory.

The concept of migration in this work will be reflected through the sociological and anthropological approaches. In the broad sense, sociological concepts of migration typology and their factors can show, at “macro” historical and political level, the roots and the consequences of migrations. For example, Rudolf Heberle uses the terms: involuntary and voluntary migrations (1955). The both types of migrations are connected to the experience of the informants – in the war time, together with their family, they were forced to involuntary migrations, but nowadays they decide themselves on individual voluntary migrations, to complete their studies or for the economical reasons. But, for the cultural anthropological approach to migrations, it is necessary to dig deeper under the sociological typologies and theories. According to that, ethnologist Jadranka Grbić-Jakopović underlines that “in the reality the situation is always more complex, so to define the migrants, a lot of factors should be analyzed” (2014:20) and she defines a migrant “as an actor in a migration act”. Following this individual approach to the concept of migration in the context of the contemporary era of globalization and wireless communication, another term, connected to the transnational theory, “translocality” (Čapo Žmegač 2007) turns out to be important within this research. The author Jasna Čapo Žmegač uses “translocality” to show how “migrants not only participate in two or more different societies and create specific social nets, but they also make plural (geographical) local social spaces” (ibid.). The complexity of translocality and transmigration of the informants is reflected through their relation, on one side with Bosnia and Herzegovina where they were born, where they have family, where they have spent their childhood and on the other side with Croatia, where they live, work, study, but still not as in the same places where their family lives.

The concept of identity, with awareness of its theoretical and everyday complexity, will be also viewed within the translocality of informants concerning their refugee past, memories of war and continual migrations. As Stuart Hall uses “identity to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken' (1996: 5-6). Following the approach to the concept identity as constructed, fragmented, changeable, plural and dependent on cultural context, and with an awareness that any attempt to define and interpret it is weak, this paper will focus only on some „meeting points“ of informants' identities in the contemporary context, what relates also to the experiences of war, the state of refugee in the past, multiple migrations in the present and where the informants see themselves in the future.

## **Results**

### **1. The experience and memory of war and refugee time**

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, in 1992 started the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the first phase of war till 1993, “around 300 000 Bosnian Croats and more than 500 000 Bosniaks were violently displaced to Croatia, Slovenia or to other European countries” (Pejanović, 2009:36). “In the second wave, beginning in May 1993, after Croatian-Bosniaks arm conflict, the people of all three ethnicities were displaced all around the country or in the other European and world countries. The international statistics show that during the first three years of Bosnian war, more than 2 million people were violently or involuntarily displaced” (ibid.)

At that time, Sanja, Ema, Marko and Maja<sup>1</sup> had been born in different Bosnian places and they had become refugees at only a few months of their life. Their personal memories of war are poor because in that time they were children and during the interviews some of them said that “they are not sure if they really remember it or they were told so by their family”. But still, all of them had some pictures of “hiding from grenades, a lot of running around, worried

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<sup>1</sup> The names of informants are changed.

faces of adults, the uniforms of soldiers and boxes from Caritas”. All in all, it turned out that those memories of war didn’t affect them directly. What they see as effects of war is that “it it took homes from their families and forced them to change a lot of places of living” and secondly, “the war affected on their parents and society what they really see difficult to live with”. One of the informants – Marko, together with his family changed six places of living (in Bosnia and in Croatia) during his 24 years of life. What he found really difficult was “when he had to move from Drvar” and concluded that “war made his childhood unfortunate, but he accepted it during the time, so it doesn’t concern him anymore”. This last Marko’s sentence could be the general conclusion of all informants. The war is a part of their childhood memory, but they don’t feel this as an important factor in contemporary lives. “When I talk to my friends from Sarajevo, who are older than me and who were directly exposed to those war traumas, I think, how happy I was, actually”, said Maja.

## **2. Drvar – the city of childhood**

Drvar, the Bosnian city that in Yugoslavia was inhabited mostly by Serbians, after the Dayton Agreement in 1995, became a part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After 1996, national entity was created, thus displaced and refugee Bosnian Croats who had lived all around Croatia and Bosnia saw the opportunity in this city. Soon, they started to move into the empty Serbian houses left during the war. This was the point when the informants met. Their families had moved to Drvar during 1996 and lived there for at least for the next 5 years. During these years they have started attending the primary school. Their memories of Drvar are positive and idealized. “I don’t have any bad memory of Drvar. I wish I could go back, It was the best period of my life”, said Marko. The most repeated motives that remind them of Drvar are: school days, school friends, swimming in the river Unac, going to the sports stadium. All of them expressed some kind of nostalgia for Drvar and stated how difficult it was when they had to move. “I remember I couldn’t stop crying while we were moving from Drvar!” said Sanja.

Reasons why they had to move from Drvar (in 2000s) is because in 2000s, most of Serbian population that previously had lived in Drvar started coming back into the city demanding their homes back. The Croatians whose homes were completely destroyed started to move further to world countries or to Croatia; to a poorly developed areas of the country. The statistic showed that only 10 % Croatians who lived in Drvar succeeded to go back and

rebuild new homes in the places they lived before the war. The families of my informants moved to Croatia too.

There is also the second face of reasons to move out of Drvar. As Maja said: “I remember that at some point everything changes. The classes in school became different. Firstly, there was only school in Croatian language, but then the situation changed and everyone had to learn only in Serbian language. Firstly, Croatian were the majority and then after the Serbians came, they became the minority. The atmosphere became just different.”

Obviously, it was too soon for both Serbian and Croatian population to live together. Ethnic differences, economical reasons, and search for own home and stability coerced the families of informants together with around 10 000 people around Drvar area to move to Croatia.

### **3. What is my identity and where is my home?**

At the time I contacted the informants during 2015, their families were living in Nova Rača, Plaško, Glina and Petrinja, while they were studying or working in Sarajevo, Rijeka and Zagreb. From time to time, they visit their families, but they live independently in other cities.

When they firstly had moved in Croatia, they didn't have difficulties with the integration or adaptation. Only Marko stressed out that “in the beginning he had a feeling that their neighbors were not happy because Bosnian refugees started moving near their houses”.

However, even though they had moved in Croatia their bounds with Bosnia and Herzegovina didn't disappear. Their multiple translocal identities are constructed between Croatia and Bosnia. It is interesting that none of them showed the importance of national or ethnic identity. Marko pointed out the importance of his religious catholic identity, but when we talked about nationality he told “I am Bosnian, actually Croatian, my identity is marked by this but it doesn't depend on it”. The only one who explicitly decided for one national identity was Maja who said: “I hate when I'm assumed to denote myself in narrow sense of identity, but when I have to, I always say that I am Bosnian and Herzegovinian”.

Similarly is with the question: Where is your home? They stressed more places (“where the family lives, where I study”) or none of physical or geographical place, but more abstract, emotional places – “where I feel safe” or “where I am happy”. Talking about the “home”, Maja stressed that she “feels a huge discrepancy while talking to people who spent the whole

life in one city”. “They just don’t understand how is to move continually, not to be “born and raised” in one place.”

#### **4. Future migrants**

Even though all informants expressed that they are contented with their life in Croatia they don’t plan to stay there. Since Croatia has become the part of the European Union, a lot of young people move to the more prosperous European countries. “I like Croatia, but I am losing hope for it”, said Marko. “I like Sarajevo, where I study, but despite all my love, I am still prudish enough to use my second Croatian citizenship to go to some European country to have a better life”, said Maja. After the war and postwar migrations, there come individual migrations in search for a better life. “I can say that all those migrations during my life affected me in the sense that I can very easily move anywhere” (Maja).

It is for sure that those future planned migrations should be observed in the context of the Croatian emigration trend of young people and brain drain, what is also partially the consequence of war. The second indicative thing is that none of those people, for now, are planning to come back or to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country of their birth. Nowadays, the demography is one of the greatest political and social problems in both countries. It is difficult to predict whether the young people such as Sanja, Marko, Maja and Ema are lost generation for both countries, but it is for sure that only because they were born in war, that said, which had caused ever continuous sequence of gradual personal or less personal events in their lives, they attained unique facet of observational points from various perspectives they had a chance to witness. Such perspective made their views on identity, migration, home, belonging and in general – way of living more flexible and changeable compared to the after and pre-war generations.

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