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## THE SHATTERING OF THE SOUL\*

The war in the former Yugoslavia has probably been one of the most widely documented of all the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Countless television documentaries, books, journal and newspaper articles have been produced with the purpose of recording the immense historic occasion of this war. These works have analyzed the causes of the war, recorded the chronology of events leading up to and during the war, and have documented the scale and enormity of the "ethnic cleansing" perpetrated in the former Yugoslavia. From a legal point of view numerous studies have been conducted under the auspices of many international organizations or NGO's gathering information relevant for the purposes of prosecuting war criminals. And related to this legal purpose, many articles have been written in legal journals debating legal technicalities as to whether or not "ethnic cleansing" constitutes a crime against humanity, or whether rape constitutes torture from legal point of view.

From all of above we have learnt about when war broke out, about ethnic dimension of the war and about the war strategies and methodologies adopted by the various parties to the conflict; we have learnt something about the political structures of post dissolution Yugoslavia; and of how many thousands of people have lost their lives, been tortured or "ethnically cleansed" and rendered homeless. We also crafted the elements of the legal definition of a crime against humanity and genocide.

But what do we know of the individual victims of this conflict? And what do we know of what it meant to be a rural Muslim family in

\* Foreword in: Janja Beč "The Shattering of the Soul"

pre-war Bosnia, living in close harmony and community, with a neighboring Serbian family? What do we know of what is like to have that harmony shattered senselessly and, how, as a member of that same Muslim family, having survived the war, one reconciles oneself with those Serbs responsible for killing loved ones, or how one could reconcile oneself feeling for such Serbian perpetrators with ones feeling for the Serbian neighbors who throughout, and to great danger to themselves, extended a hand of love and friendship? While we have been told endlessly of the divides that separate different ethnic groupings in the former Yugoslavia, what do we know of the experiences fundamental to all citizens of the former Yugoslavia and to all victims of this conflict regardless of ethnic origin? What do we know of what it means to be a mother who witnessed the massacre of her children and the burning and looting of her home? What do we know of how a refugee with no family, no home and no hope faces the abyss and finds the strength and will to continue living? What do we know of how one deals with the hatred, terror, loss, mistrust, bleakness and confusion induced by such events as those that occurred in this war? Or of what the implications any of these very human questions have for post conflict peace building? In short what do we know of the human dimension of this conflict?

My answer would be that, that despite the extensive documentation of this war, we know very little about this dimension of the conflict. Herein lies the importance of this book. Through her recordal of the stories of 40 women victims, Janja Beč, offers us a lens into these deeply personal, yet universally significant aspects of the war in the former Yugoslavia. In it she offers us a glimpse of what it is like to be human, and in particular what it is like to be a woman and to be a victim of this war. She aspires and pretends to do no more. Absent are any factual accounts of the political or military circumstances leading up to the vents recorded. Absent is any

political or religious propaganda. Absent is any narrative. This is the strength of the work. By presenting you with nothing but the raw personal accounts of victims, and their interactions with the author, readers are forced to move beyond the confines of their own ethnic, religious, and political predisposition or of that of the author. The result is deeply moving, stirring and liberating. The reader is rescued from the numbness of over intellectualization and transported into a realm where human emotion - where sorrow, empathy and finally hope, are alive.

This book is important for other reason - it is one of the first times that we are hearing the voice of women in the former Yugoslavia talking about their experiences as women, as mothers and as wives. We all know the statistics about the mass rape perpetrated in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. And while it is immense step forward that for the first time the world community has finally been forced to recognize rape during the war as the horrific crime that it is, there is also danger in reducing women's experience of war simply to that of victim of rape or indeed to that of victim. In this text one learns of the tremendous strength and selflessness of wives and mothers and the important role that they played both before and during the war. We also hear about the terrible grief they have had to endure through the loss of the family and the home they dedicated their lives to building. Finally we learn of the courage of women who survived, and who despite the loss they have suffered, in many instances retain the capacity to forgive and to empathize with human suffering wherever it may be experienced. With this, "Shattering of the Soul" brings us message of hope for the future.

Finally, while this book is of significance to us all wherever we may be, its immediate significance lies in the opportunity that it will provide for all people in post conflict former Yugoslavia, regardless of political allegiance, or ethnic or religious background, to rediscover

a fundamental common experience - that of being human and knowing what it is like to love, share and suffer. While the voices that we hear are those of Muslim women, in this book they speak not as Muslims, but as women and as humans. And the interaction between the author and the subjects are not, as they may first seem, interchanges between Muslims and Serb, but are interchanges between people who share the same suffering and importantly who have the ability to recognize that this is all that is important.