

EMDR IN THE WAR CHILDHOOD MUSEUM SARAJEVO - TO REPAIR THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY THE WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 1992-1995

Šemsa Šabanović¹ & Mevludin Hasanović^{1,2,3}

¹EMDR Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

²Department of Psychiatry, University Clinical Center Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

³School of Medicine, University of Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Dear Editor,

when in the autumn of 2019 I stood at the door to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, holding a pass in my hand with "Blacks Only" written on it, I experienced more deeply than ever before the terrible weight of discrimination that determines the quality of life and even life itself. The exhibits in the museum and the documentary films I saw brought me even closer to the tragedy carried on the shoulders of the innocent descendants of the original inhabitants of the "black" continent - the mother of all continents. The humiliation and suffering they were exposed to, which resulted in many of them losing their lives, are hard to bear even from a distance in the role of an observer, as a visitor to the museum. I calculated silently to myself: the nineties! That was the time when there was war in my own country! A time when, intoxicated by ethnic and national hatred, people who had until yesterday been our neighbours (whether close by or further away) raped, robbed, burned, expelled, imprisoned in concentration camps and murdered their own compatriots. With the same skin colour. Speaking the same language (Kravić et al. 2013, Hasanović 2011).

In my seven years as an EMDR (Eye Movements Desensitization and Reprocessing) practitioner, I had had clients with various diagnoses and difficulties functioning, and somehow I expected/waited for people with war traumas to contact me (Šabanović & Draganović 2018). However, to my surprise, I had had only about ten such cases in my entire career. I needed time to understand that this was due to the defence mechanism of avoidance. I found this hard to accept, as an enthusiast, who wanted to "solve the problems of the world". But since I did not have much choice, I worked with what I had available (Hasanović et al. 2018).

At that time in South Africa, I could not even dream that very soon, only a few months later, one of my greatest wishes that I had nurtured in my heart for many years, would become true: to be useful to those innocent, war troubled souls, and contribute to easing the terrible pain that was pent up in their souls, to transform it into brightness, laughter, into strength that could change the world for the better.

Already at the end of January and the beginning of March this year, two institutions:

- the Potočari Memorial Centre in Srebrenica,
- the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, launched a joint project, documenting the experiences of people who had survived the trauma of Srebrenica as children.

My desire to be part of the process of healing the wounds and pain of human beings began to be realized. The Museum administration invited me, as an expert associate, to make a contribution to this testimony project. So, in the period from 20th January to 4th March, I worked with 70 people who had been aged between one month and 18 years during the war.

The project in fact covered a total of 100 people, but the initial testimonies were taken without the participation of psychologists as expert associates, which led to the retraumatization of many participants, and also the cameramen and journalists taking part in the interviewing process. This was also the basis of the decision by the Museum administration to protect the health of their employees, as well as to facilitate the whole testimony process. Since the time frame and financial limitations of the project did not permit us to work on processing the traumatic evidence given by the witnesses, we agreed that we would work on the level of the preparatory phase of the total of 8 phases of the EMDR protocol. In that way we successfully covered:

- Cognitive emotional stabilization through a counselling conversation;
- Installation of a quiet place - a self-calming technique, aimed at it growing into a permanent resource for each individual, depending on how much they would practice it in future;
- Reprocessing traumatic memories (for people engaged in recording the testimonies) triggered by coming into contact with the traumatic testimonies about genocide, which made their work much more difficult.
- Creating positive resources and stabilization to make it easier for the witnesses and people involved in recording the testimonies to cope with the traumatic content they were testifying to.

At this pace, we achieved the following:

- To make the testimony process easier for the participants and to avoid retraumatization caused by retelling disturbing content.
- To ensure the quick cognitive and emotional stabilization of participants after giving testimony.
- To begin to build a basic feeling of trust in the psychotherapy relationship, so that the participants are motivated to continue working on themselves and to make a decision in the future to reprocess the traumatic experiences that have a negative effect on their quality of life.

The trauma of war, that powerful destructive energy, seemed to have been peeking out (im)patiently, assessing how dangerous the situation was, and whether it was possible to step forward. That energy of the fear they had experienced on the level of trauma, often never understood, was also present in the interview room in such a concentrated form that it filled the entire room. Already after the early days on this project I was overcome by a powerful mixture of carefully packed away and misunderstood pain, optimism, and the desire to build a life and to move forward. But somehow there was always a strong element of the desire for beauty, the wish to testify, so that it would never happen to anyone again. In each story, although it remained untold, because we kept within our resources and the quiet place, the desire to forgive could be felt. And it seemed to be trapped, because of the problem posed by the lack of confession of the injustice committed, an apology and the desire to establish normal relations, on the part of the perpetrators of the crime. The tension of the incomplete processes and the mixture of desire to move forward (albeit mutilated as they were), the need to forgive, and the inability to do so completely (Delić et al. 2014). Many clients in the Project, in the effort to create some kind of system for survival, had written and published their testimonies as a kind of sign of their triumph over their own personal suffering, but also suffering in general, as a sign of their personal victory over violence, the evil committed and the conspiracy of silence, which had consumed their surviving family members and the family itself (what was left of it). I was taken aback. The force of that energy did not allow me to return to my permanent clients, and soon, with a heavy heart, I had to decide to take a break from working with them (fortunately I did not have any new clients at that time). For the first time I was faced with the dimension of the charge of positive energy, like a mask that covers enormous sorrow, the incomplete process of mourning, fear due to uncertainty (the vast majority of witnesses had gone back to live in Srebrenica and the surrounding villages), anger, secret, timid hope, a vague sense of guilt due to the natural need for forgiveness. That "mask" had many functions. Alongside the need to permit parallel processes to take place constantly within the person it is hiding, it is also the shield the person uses to protect themselves from inquisitive

strangers who every time the word "Srebrenica" is spoken, put on a halo of interest, and the mode of communication changes from relaxed to tense because of the unspoken adjective "wartime", and everything it implies. But, this masked misfortune and unhappiness, wrapped up in a covering of optimism and defiance, quickly began to be revealed. It would drop away, as though it had only been waiting for the right moment, to be replaced by surprise and enthusiasm.

What was particularly important was the knowledge that the vast majority of all the participants in the project had NEVER had the experience of talking with a psychologist or therapist. That is to say, only three of the total of 70 had had that experience. But, what is even more important to me was the discovery that all the participants were interested in continuing work on processing their experience when the project ended. Very excited with this whole dynamic, I immediately began working on a proposal to the Museum, Potočari and the EMDR Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina to come up with a project for reprocessing and detraumatization for all the participants in the programme, and in that way to encourage other people who had not been ready at that moment to testify about the crimes, and to motivate those who had taken the first step by coming to testify, to free themselves from the invisible (but almost tangible) weight that was secretly oppressing and exhausting them.

One other interesting thing that I noticed was that all the participants who had in the meantime got married had chosen partners from the same area, with the same traumas. This seems to be some kind of invisible rule which no one talks about. Seen from the perspective of psychotherapy, I dare say that this is one of their unspoken survival mechanisms. "What happens in the family, stays in the family" (by which I mean the Srebrenica family, but also the family that witnessed the suffering) (Hasanović 2017).

Today, when I am writing about my experience in the War Childhood Museum, the living story from the Museum of Apartheid is still in my heart. The story which is still current today. It is still current today, in the midst of the world crisis caused by the corona pandemic. In the midst of the violence burning out of control as a result of racial intolerance, violence which, for many many years has been fed by people's intolerance and hatred of those closest to them, and the closest of all creation - mankind. It is living and powerful, but in comparison with it, the story is more powerful of the light that shines from the eyes of each one of the 70 witnesses of genocide that I met through the testimony project. The vibration of forgiveness, grace and hope in the fact that from all these bitter experiences a higher level of awareness will be born, ennobling their hearts, finding a way to realize that people have always been and will forever be made of dust and that they will return to dust, reverberated strongly with each of the witnesses who had survived that suffering. The vibration of hope that that insight will bring contrition and

good-will to the burdened souls of the suffering perpetrators of violence. For people must first of all commit an act of violence against themselves to be able to do so to others. The prayers uttered by the witnesses of that violence whilst we were walking together along the paths of their strength and beauty, left a deep mark in me of a belief in good. They proved to me once again that all the evil in the world will only strengthen the extraordinary power of good, as the strongest light with which it can be borne. Good, as the greatest resource for survival, is indestructible in character, and its source is precisely in the evil that has been experienced.

Post scriptum

It is the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the world has been divided into new layers within its already deeply layered and disorganized soul. While some follow the news about new patients and their fate with complete trust, fearing for their fragile health and possible horrifying end, others are doubtful, distrustful and angry, seeking the right of freedom to breathe without a mask, freedom of movement and association, the basic freedom and right to choose illness and death versus the masked freedom of survival, burdened by new fears. This gap of mistrust and frustration results from being shut inside four walls, the loss of employment and the huge quantity of contradictory information, creating additional tension in the already fragile structure of the human psyche (Hodžić et al. 2020). The story of apartheid can also be told in this situation. And like so many times before in its history, when life becomes complicated until it is almost unbearable, when the earth quakes and the waters are in uproar, some (selected) examples of humanity come to the fore and become visible, that arouse both admiration and hope. The pandemic has helped one more, this time admirable division to become visible to the world - the division into those who, weakened by the virus, have become dependent on the care and concern of others, and those who fight ruthlessly to provide them with care and increase their chances for victory of health over illness, life over death. In this great family of praiseworthy helpers, psychotherapists have bravely taken their place, literally becoming organized overnight and re-organizing their work in person to work remotely (Jakovljević 2020). This transformation, unimaginable to most, has proven to be very effective all around the world. In my country, already in the early days after the declaration of the pandemic, the response by psychotherapists was impressive. Although we have not seen the dramatic developments there have been in our neighbourhood, in

Italy for instance, I think it is important to point out my colleagues' readiness to respond to calls for help in crisis situations and their good organization. Personally, I have not had any experience with anyone who has been affected by this crisis directly or indirectly, but I expect that later there could be an increase in the need for EMDR interventions. The situation with COVID is still smouldering. Some people express their opinions, others keep quiet and simmer. The image of a volcano comes to me. I am listening. That is a skill that we desperately need.

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Correspondence:

Prof. Mevludin Hasanović, MD, PhD, Head of Social Psychiatry Ward
Department of Psychiatry, University Clinical Center Tuzla
Ul. Rate Dugonjića bb, 75 000 Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina
E-mail: dr.mevludin.hasanovic@gmail.com