

*Book review*

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**Jasminko Halilović. *War Childhood: Sarajevo 1992-1995*.  
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“Great irony – so much horror but still a beautiful childhood.”

*Alen, 1977*

As early as at the beginning of the last century, the Polish-Jewish educator, children's author, and pedagogue Janusz Korczak called for the right of child to happy childhood. This revelatory vision was accompanied by Hellen Key, who proclaimed 20th century as the century of the child, publishing book of such title and calling for the rights of children to free growth. Unfortunately, the history of the modern world added to these humane ideas rather pessimistic post scriptum, involving children in the armed conflicts and totalitarian regimes, making them the victims of adult cruelty to an unimaginable extent. In such context, the “War Childhood” book provides a very important and exceptional pedagogical and sociological study, for it induces readers to ponder over the position and status of children in armed conflicts, with the biographical, psychological and social repercussion of the latter.

The book is dedicated to the existentially critical experience of growing up and becoming an adult during war. Over thousand participants contributed to this project, answering to the public call of Jasminko Halilović, the author and director of the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo. He placed it on the internet and addressed it to everyone who had spent part of their childhood during the war (and siege) in

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Sarajevo. Thanks to this, the readers can gain insight into the life marked by constant trauma, suffering and fear. Yet, paradoxically, it also exposes the area of experiencing care-free childhood, first teenage love, as well as enormous will to life, and playing Rat-A-Tat-Tat (sic!).

The book consists of three parts, creating coherent, extremely thought-provoking and equally touching story of the autobiographic experience of armed conflict, as seen by children. The first part introduces readers to the cultural complexity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, revealing the wealth of historical and cultural peculiarities of Sarajevo, i.e., the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also brings the readers closer to war as experienced by the author, who was a child during the Siege of Sarajevo. The second, main part contains autobiographical recollections of 1 030 people, whose part of childhood fell on the time of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the years 1992-1995. The recollections are from people now living in the United States of America, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Norway, Hong Kong, Japan or Cambodia. In this chapter the participants of the “war childhood project” answered one question, i.e. ”what was the war childhood for you?”. In accordance with the methodological assumption of the author, the answers - short and limited to 160 characters - disclosed a wide range of the personal experiences and emotional memory of this period and events. The third part of the book is devoted to the museum of war childhood, explaining its idea and enabling the readers to become familiar with some of the elements of the collection, detailing its conception, and providing a glimpse into its hallmarks. Taking into consideration the research perspective, the methodology of the project is particularly interesting as it throws light on the process of gathering and processing data as well as the exposure of the artefacts and the narratives entailed. For that reason, the outcomes of this project can be helpful during designing research of the experiences of war childhood and its consequences.

As the author writes, Sarajevo “was systematically attacked – with tanks, rocket launches, machine guns, sniper fire... The Siege of Sarajevo lasted 1 425 days; it was the longest in modern history. Schools, hospitals, libraries, museums, and religious buildings were destroyed. In the full view of the whole world, citizens on their way to work, children on playgrounds, and even infants in the maternity hospital were killed. The attackers were not picky. Their goal was clear: to destroy the city”. This dramatic description reflected the daily observations and the lived experience of the youngest, as the book contains recollections of people who were born between 1974

and 1992, hence most of them were teenagers or children at that time. According to the estimates of the author, there were some 70 000 children under the age of 18 who lived in Sarajevo during the war. More than 11,000 civilians were killed during the Siege of Sarajevo, including over 1 500 children. 15 000 of the young were injured. On the other hand, more than 1 000 individuals made their voices heard through the project “war childhood”, becoming a representative, collective voice for this generation of Sarajevans. Still, it does emphasize individual nature of this experience, as it embraces memories from almost each district and each street of the city.

Nowadays childhood is an object of intense pedagogical, educational, psychological and sociological research. The framework of this discourse entails the controversial subject of “child-soldiers” associated with military organisations, such as state armed forces and non-state armed groups (children trained and used for combat or for tactical advantage as human shields). Another group encompasses children indirectly involved in the armed conflict, i.e. not being able to leave the war zone and forced to live their adolescent years without (international) protection, amongst the fire of artillery, explosion of grenades and mortar attacks. Halilović’s book tackles this issue as a first publication undertaking the matter of collective experience of growing up during the war in Sarajevo.

As such, it is a very valuable onset for reflections over contemporary determinants and conditions of socialization, upbringing, mental health and resilience of the young generation affected by armed conflicts. At time of a global migration crisis it can, concurrently, provide a worthwhile point of reference for the deconstruction of the experiences of children and teenagers migrating from the war zones in Syria, or Ukraine, and searching for shelter and asylum in Western Europe. It is equally of paramount importance given its methodological aspect, i.e. biographical and autobiographical testimonies, processed in a culturally sensitive manner. Moreover, ethnomethodological character of the story telling can provide inspirational resources for the scholars and field researchers building up their qualitative workshop.

The greatest value of the book, however, lies in its deeply sympathetic humanism. The recollections reflect not only the traumatic early biographies of the Sarajevans, but they also reveal the strength of the spirit, power of friendship, mutual support, unbreakable faith and hope. The recollections reconstruct the power of bonds between peers and family members (“Puberty and first love in the cruellest environment imaginable”, “We kids, were closer. We played, had fun and enjoyed every day”), paradox-

ical joy of the lived childhood (“... We made a war childhood easier through laughter and play”), education in dark cellars in provisory “school classrooms” without light (“sirens, school in the basement...”, “school in the cellar, recess in the hallway”), and how the first teenage loves came to live and how suddenly and dramatically they were terminated by the sniper shot (“War killed my love...my first childhood crush was killed...”,”I remember my Selma...the day she was killed, I grew up”).

The stories of hunger, permanent fear and anxiety (“Years of fear, hunger, and suffering...”, “Hunger and terror”, “Darkness and fear. 60 seconds a minute, 60 minutes an hour, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week”, “Fear and hunger, the pain of losing people”), witnessing the death of the nearest and dearest (“The image of my friend getting hit by a sniper...”, “A sniper killed my brother. It killed my childhood, too”) and the life in darkness and bitter cold (“The basement was my little world...”, “Being in a dark musty basement”, “Childhood in the dark”, “Loneliness, cold, hunger...”), seem all rather unreal (and surreal) from the perspective of today’s Europe of peace and welfare. Thus, the memory of these events should be preserved as a source of reflections on the conditions of contemporary societies of the adults and children that rely on them.

This unique book is a precious study of consideration for pedagogues, sociologists, psychologist and the ngo’s workers taking part in the decision process concerning minor refugees and children affected by armed conflicts. Moreover, the “War childhood” book helps the wider audience to comprehend better this ordeal, giving insight into the experiences of those, whose formative period falls on the war time, depriving them of the possibility to fulfil their basic needs and live their childhood happily, as Kroczak appealed over a century ago.