

THE STORIES: VAHIDA



First name: **VAHIDA**

Last name: **H.**

Age: **48**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA now
Republika srpska**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1993**

SHORT SUMMARY

Vahida H. was 19 when the war in Bosnia broke out and she had to leave her native village near Bosanski Novi first to spend a year in Croatia at her brother's place where she wanted to recover from her traumatic experience and escape. In 1993 she came to Slovenia, spent one year in a refugee centre, started translating upon what she was invited to join refugee schools network. She then decided to enrol in a university undergraduate programme. Now, she holds a BA of English and English literature, and a scientific master degree in social pedagogy. She has been working on national and international level with outstanding experts and finally she herself became an international expert. She currently works for one of the Slovenian ministries.

“IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO REBUILD A HOUSE, NOR IS IT DIFFICULT TO BUILD A NEW ROAD, THE REAL ISSUE IS HOW TO REBUILD LIFE”

Vahida H. at a conference in 2011

CONFLICT

In 1991 the war with age-old historic, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural roots broke out in Bosnia, though this former Yugoslav Republic was considered as the most Yugoslav of all with different ethnic groups peacefully living together. It was an immense tragedy for the region and its inhabitants, an immense social disruption and disruption of individual life histories. Today this region has a new name, *Republika srpska* and the majority of the population are Serbs. Muslims and Catholics left. Actually nobody knows what the population structure is today since the last census painting the exact picture of population and its well being was back in 1991!

ESCAPE

So, we said that Vahida was 19 when the war broke out. From the villages located behind her village Muslims were chased. She remembers that in her family house 45 people found refuge. It was difficult to say who chased them from their homes. Their neighbours, their friends? Difficult to say since the attackers were wearing masks. People who stayed at Vahida's family house brought food with them, but they would not share it with others, on the contrary they would hide it away for difficult times. Vahida's family had grains and vegetables but in a month or so all was gone. 45 hungry people were just too much to feed. The house soon smelled bad of the food not consumed, stored and hidden away. This was one of Vahida's first impressions of the war Vahida remembers travelling by train together with so many others. Surprisingly she was not afraid. At each railway station she would jump off the train, fetching water for those who were thirsty. She would give a haircut to those who needed it. “When you are endangered, threatened, your are not afraid”, she says” since you have already lost what was most dear to you.”

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She also remembers that she could not control her talking and her mother would frequently put her hand over her mouth to silence her. But then Vahida was young, and she was not afraid of anything. Much more experienced and reasonable, her mother was more cautious.

Slowly the train reached the Croatian boarder. The family got separated there and Vahida's mother remained in Bosnia in a safe place while Vahida travelled on into Croatia. For a year or so she lived at her brother's to recover her forces after traumas she experienced. There was war in Croatia too but not in Zagreb.

VAHIDA'S STORY

From Zagreb, Vahida travelled on to Slovenia to land in Hrastnik, a small industrial town and in a local refugee centre. She precisely remembers when it was: on the 15th of July 1993

I am OK,
you are OK!

She lived in a wooden cottage, sharing her room with ten room mates. That this kind of intimacy was not always easy, goes without saying. In those days she was thinking a lot about her future. Where is she going to live? What is she going to do for living? What. . . So many questions! She started working doing translations and she learned a lot about herself and other people, her own ability to relate. Being able to relate, is extremely important when in refugee condition. Not only grown-ups and older people were displaced. There were many children, scattered over Vahida was asked to work a school for refugee children. "For God's sake, will I be able to do it? I haven't been to university, I do not have the knowledge and skills., A refugee should try hard o learn the language of the host country and should have a good command of English. But there were people who trusted her. "Education and knowledge cannot be taken from you,

no matter what the circumstances are", says Vahida. Education is of outmost importance. Vahida was 24 when she felt an urgent need to study.

Vahida enrolled at the University of Ljubljana to study English and English literature. Her double life began. She worked and she studied. Moreover, the organisation where she worked took good care of people working there. Each month there was some training organised for the employees and additionally they spent from one to two days discussing their working life under the supervision of an expert. There was also a psychologist who in those days had just got retired to devote all her time and energy to children traumatised by war. She had her own international network of professional colleagues from different European countries. She asked them, she invited them to offer help. Which they did. They kept coming from Switzerland, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Belgium. This circle of intimates and colleagues became somehow also Vahida's circle, people whom she could rely on for help when needed.

Refugee families who lived in wooden cottages were focused on waiting, killing time, waiting for the situation to change. Often they did not think about the schooling of their children.?They would not easily open up to anybody and their attitude would get reflected on their children. Going to school belongs to the times of peace. But does it really? The children did not like to go to school. If they came, they often came dressed in pyjamas, their eyelids glued by long hours of sleep. But Vahida and her colleague teachers would not make a drama out of it. They would accept it and slowly the children would come neatly dressed to classes. One of the basic learning methods is by imitating and this is what happened in Vahida's classes.

Moreover, psycho-social help was organised for children and though she was not a good dancer, Vahida was invited to teach children dancing , teach the children and herself at the same time. And she learned how to dance teaching

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them like she had done it so many times before. And then the children were invited to give a public performance. And they were happy to be applauded. Their parents would come, proud of their children. Proud and happy. As for Vahida's role "I helped the school and the school helped me".

Vahida was 24 years old when she enrolled in a university undergraduate studies. Not speaking Slovene and being five years older than other students she was again in a situation of exclusion. But she clearly felt that education in the long run would be inclusive. She was sure of that.

In 1994 Vahida was coordinating learning assistants to refugee children, working closely with the volunteering retired psychologist who was older than herself, much more experienced, much more knowledgeable. This was a happy circumstance since in her she found a mentor. "There is no greater happiness", say Chinese people, "than finding a teacher".

When she started working she went with her mentoress to her first international transcontinental conference in Edmond, Canada. Her mentioress moderated a workshop on volunteering. Trembling, Vahida could not figure out what her own talk would be about. But then Eureka! She started telling her own volunteering story. She felt the large audience slowly got quiet listening, and she thought it was because she was ni good. In the end, when she dared to give it a look, she got standing ovations for sincerity and congruency and knowledge, of course. One has to be congruent to be persuasive. Comforted by this experience, she returned to her studies more confident and less shy. A real transformation was operated.

In 2000 Vahida was granted Slovenian citizenship.

Some refugees go further because of the drama they experienced.

BELONGING

Vahida belongs to at least two cultures, Bosnian and Slovenian. In Ljubljana she feels at home, when in Bosnia she "goes to her mother's place". She has critical distance to the two cultures based on self reflection and transformative forces of her personality. She says: "*We in Slovenia...*" What makes her belong is her readiness to learn and to work, which makes her evolve together with her social environment.

MILESTONES AND STRATEGIES SUPPORTING VAHIDA'S TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION

Scrutinizing Vahida's life course, it becomes obvious that she has the kind of psychological profile that stimulates inclusion, that she is resilient having overcome traumas, her life position has become I am OK you are OK. It is important to whom a refugee is connected because this person is a bridge between a refugee and the host society.

Several times in her life course she thought about the future (she enrolled in university undergraduate and later postgraduate studies) Her master thesis was closely related to her work and was about motivation, older people and volunteering. She is still on friendly terms with her master degree thesis director for whom she was also an interesting and resourceful student. She has learned Slovenian by doing, studying, working not sitting in school benches. She has acquired lots of experience, reflected experience. She has mastered Slovenian language, she has practically no accent. She is fluent and she can write in several languages, her work is not limited to one country but Europe and the world. She is a good communicator. She is a good project manager, she is a team player, always connecting people, institutions, areas of work, target groups. She likes solving problems and problem learning.