

Bosnian Children Speak War: Narrating Trauma in *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo* and *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the Bosnian war diaries, *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo* (2006) by Zlata Filipovic (1980-) and *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary* (2006) written by Nadja Halilbegovich (1979-). Both diaries provide an insight into the Bosnian genocide and the everyday life of children amid war. Both Zlata and Nadja bear witness to the horrific events in their country and create a concrete collective memory of the Bosnian war. Drawing on trauma theory and diary writing, the paper examines their traumatic childhood and suffering at a unique moment of Bosnian history and highlights the role of diary writing and testimonial narration. War diaries create a counter-discourse to war and horror and allow them to document their traumatic lives amid war. The two diaries reveal how children in that war zone were denied their basic rights to live peacefully and enjoy their childhood. Through narrating their painful experience, they try to make sense of their traumatic experience as well

as reach the outside world calling for intervention. Testimony allows them to step into the center and have a voice.

Keywords: *War Diary- Trauma- Bosnian war- Children's Diary- Nadja Halilbegovich- Zlata Filipovic*

Introduction

Diaries provide an immediate experience of events, before the benefits of hindsight or tricks of memory can distort or influence an account . . . While they are not written to be historical records, the diaries end up being exactly that, in a powerful, personal, and human way. (Filipovic, 2006, p. xiii)

Children's war diaries manifested the voices of children amidst war. They are the means by which the child commemorates his/her horrible war experience and lost childhood. War diaries, as a form of testimonial narrative, are different from any kind of literature, as Katherine Wilson (2013) in her article "Anne Frank Abroad: The Emergence of World Atrocity Literature" states, "It is these texts that bear witness to collective memories of atrocity" (p.33). Children's war diaries allow children's voices to be heard and bring them to the center instead of the margin. Reading about children's traumatic experiences from their own perspectives and listening to what they have gone through in their own expressions are more authentic than reading or hearing stories about them. Through studying the diaries of children caught up in the war, the current paper highlights their traumatic experience and their reactions to war trauma.

In the time of war, as sanctioned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, everyone in authority should make sure that children are not harmed and that the rights provided to them by the force of this convention should be applied. However, children are injured physically and psychologically. The impact of war is very devastating to children; it destroys their bodies and spirits. According to Graham (2019), 420 million children are living in war zones, which means one-fifth of children worldwide, with an increase of 30 million from 2016 (p.9). This atmosphere of violence and destruction has a direct negative effect on both the physical and the mental health of children. Thousands die or become permanently disabled because of injuries of firearms or mines during wars. Horrors of war are more battering for children than for adults as shown in

the report, “The harm that is done to children in armed conflict is not only often more severe than that done to adults, it has longer lasting implications – for children themselves and for their societies” (Graham, 2019, p.9). Therefore, it would not be easy to heal the damage on children resulting from war and conflicts. Drawing on trauma theory and diary writing, the paper explores the Bosnian war diaries, *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo* (2006) by Zlata Filipovic (1980-) and *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary* (2006) written by Nadja Halilbegovich (1979-). Both diaries reveal the effects of war on children during the siege of Sarajevo. The paper highlights the hardships children endured; how they coped with these hardships; how the war experience shaped their lives, and how their diaries reveal the violations of their rights.

Trauma, Testimony and Diary Writing

According to Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is not a wound that can be easily healed, it is much deeper, and requires special treatment, “it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that it addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p.4). Trauma is always associated with war and its horrors. People who experience war often become traumatized by its effects. War survivors have to live with their memories for the rest of their lives, memories about torture, deaths, massacres, starvation, and exile. In order to overcome trauma, survivors need to tell their stories, and to read stories of each other in order to heal. Survivors of war trauma feel that it is their duty to testify, “If, by miracle, I survive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of all those whose shadows will be bound to mine forever” (Wiesel, 1990, p.18). There is a relation between surviving and telling as Dori Laub declares, “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (1995, p.63). For the survivors, the imperative to tell can be a life task. They have an inner urge to tell; it is in telling that they survive.

Writing is considered an act of testifying. According to Laub (1992), testimony is “the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal “thou” and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (p.85). Similarly, George Yúdice (1991) asserts that testimonial literature is “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression,

revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity.” (p.17)

Laub believes that what really matters in the process of witnessing is not simply the information but the experience itself of living through the testimony and giving the testimony. He states, "In my experience, repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation" (1992, p.70). In writing about war, the survivor experiences "scriptotherapy" in which he/she writes to externalize his/her pain and share it with others. Scriptotherapy, a term coined by Suzzette A. Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects*, is “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (1998, p. xii). Such writing as demonstrated by Henke “provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder” (1998, pp. xii-xiii).

Hence, writing diaries is a therapeutic means to escape trauma; it supports the recollection of memory and provides a medium for traumatic experience that is emotionally immediate (Henke, 1998, p. xii). In the process of telling, the survivors of war trauma are putting together the pieces of their shattered lives and are likely to heal in the experience of narrating. Thus, the genre of diary dominates in the time of crisis, historical events and massive personal repression, as people have a need to document the extreme change in their lives and to collect the part of their shattered lives and try to reorganize what remains of their identity (Goldberg, 2017, p.10).

Philippe Lejeune (2009) defines a diary as “both a retreat and a source of energy in each person’s dialectical relationship with the world, which he uses to construct and sustain himself as an individual”(p.164). Diary is “a tool of transforming trauma and a means of expressing anger and frustration while reflecting on the surroundings” (Lejeune, 2009, p.194). In the case of war children, diary is a retreat or a refuge from the destructiveness that is taking place around them. It is a safe place where they can express themselves and feel like they are alive. It witnesses all their psychic conflicts. Diaries have more than one function as manifested by Lejeune; “These functions include expression,

reflection, memory, and the pleasure of writing” (2009, p.194). Expression has two objectives: to release and to communicate. To release means “to unload the weight of emotions and thoughts in putting them down on paper” and to communicate is to “empty your heart out onto paper because you are alone, unable to pour it out to a friendly ear” (Lejeune, 2009, p.194).

For Lejeune (2009), reflection “is often associated with the functions of expression and of memory, in diaries that are kept a long time” (p.194). Narrating memory is “to freeze time”, “to build a memory out of paper, to create archives from lived experience, to accumulate traces, prevent forgetting, to give life the consistency and continuity it lacks” (Lejeune, 2009, p.194). War diary functions as an outlet to children’s repressed voices. They want to release the burden of war and destruction in their country, find an outlet to their emotions of loss, anger, helplessness and fatigue, in addition to communicating their trauma. Children are unable to forget the horrible experiences of war. Through the voices of these children, the reluctant witnesses, the world could learn about their courage, determination, hope, despair, struggle, and survival.

Children War Diaries

The act of writing a wartime diary by children started after World War I. Many diaries have been written on the aftermath of the Holocaust and the traumatic experience of the Jewish children. The most popular diary is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), a diary of a Jewish girl writing about the holocaust. Katherine Wilson in her article “Anne Frank Abroad: The Emergence of World Atrocity Literature” maintains, “Anne Frank’s diary marks what many regard as the seminal example of testimonial literature” (2013, p.28). Anne Frank was a prototype of a child writing about war atrocities and children abuse. Since the publication of her diary in 1947, many war children were encouraged to share their traumatic experience and lost childhood amid war. Wilson (2013) highlights that Frank’s diary not only travels into more than sixty different languages, but it also finds itself imported into multiple works of fiction. In fact, there are several novels in which the protagonist reads the Diary. These works demonstrate a separate mode of world literature circulation, where the Diary circulates intratextually (Wilson, 2017, p.29)¹. Testimonial diaries such as Frank’s diary

¹Since the publication of *Anne Frank Diary* in the 1940s, many war diaries have been written by children as an escape from the atrocities of war such as *There We'll Meet Again: Young*

helped in transforming individual history into a symbol. Many female diarists wrote about the atrocities and the violence they were subjected to, “a number of foreign Anne Franks have arisen in the past two decades. These various “Annes” are female authors whose accounts of atrocity are marketed under the name of Anne Frank” (Wilson, 2013, p.31).

The war in Bosnia (1992-1995) produced many powerful texts such as *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo* (2006) by Zlata Filipovic (1980-) and *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary* (2006) by Nadja Halilbegovich (1979-).² Nadja Halilbegovich (1979-) is an author, speaker, peace activist and survivor of the Bosnian War and the Siege of Sarajevo.³ Zlata Filipovic is a Bosnian diarist. She kept a diary from 1991 to 1993 when she was a child living in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. Both girls share their experience and express their wishes to have an opportunity to resist oppression and war abuse. They both bear witness and commemorate the innocent children who suffered because of war. The diaries gave them a sense of being heard, a validated voice. Nadja in her diary depicts Sarajevans' view and emphasizes that

German Girl's Diary of the First World War (1998) by Piete Kuhr and *Stanely Hayami Diary* (2006). Frank set an example for other war children who wanted to share their repressed voice. Moreover, many collections have been published representing the voices of war children such as *Children's Wartime Diaries: Secret Writings from the Holocaust and World War II* (1995), *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* (1996) and *Stolen Voices: Young People's War Diaries, from World War I to Iraq* (2006).

²Since the Bosnian genocide, at least thirty books for young people in a variety of genres have been published. Elizabeth Wellburn and Deryk Houston's picture book, *Echoes from the Square* (1998), the novels *No Roof in Bosnia* (1997) by Els De Groen, *Under the Sun: A Novel Based on True Stories of Survival during War* (2006) by Arthur Dorros, Diane Yancey's *Life in War-Torn Bosnia* (1996) and Michael Schuman's *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2004). (Gangi, 2014, ch.3)

³ Known as the “Bosnian Anne Frank”, Nadja Halilbegovich has been a professional speaker for over two decades. She kept on speaking and sharing her war experiences in many global events such as The Global Young Leaders Conference, The State of the World Forum and many others. Nadja was included in the book *Architects of Peace: Visions of Hope in Words and Images* (2002) alongside Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama in addition to being recognized by her school, Butler University, with the first ever “Woman of Distinction Award”. She started a nine-month speaking tour with the non-profit organization "Free the Children" after her graduation in 2002, promoting peace and tolerance to over 70,000 students across North America. Her diary was awarded the “2006 Best Book Award” under Social Studies by the Society of School Librarians International besides being nominated for the Norma Fleck Award and the Golden Oak Award. Nadja has received an honorary doctorate for her work for peace and advocacy for children of war from Butler University in Indianapolis in December 2013 as well as the Hilton Ultimus Brown Alumni Achievement Award in 2015. (“About Nadja”, n.d)

all children can live peacefully, and that no faiths can affect their relations. Jane M. Gangi in her book *Genocide in Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature: Cambodia to Darfur* (2014) emphasizes the importance of children's and young adults' literature. Art, with its various forms, gives children voice. "In the making of art, children can push back the darkness that surrounds them, creating affirmations of life in the face of those who would destroy them" (2014, ch.3). She believes that Nadja's diary is "well-crafted and honors those to whom it is dedicated" (2014, ch.3). Zlata's traumatic childhood helped her to "shape her career as an adult, writing about children who suffer from war" (Gangi, 2014, ch.3).

Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo

Zlata's diary of her harrowing war experiences in Bosnia was an "extraordinary national bestseller diary" upon its publication in 1993. Zlata became a spokesperson for the conditions of ethnic genocide and displacement in her country. She became an activist on behalf of children's human rights, helping to launch UNICEF reports on the impact of armed conflicts on children (Smith, 2006, p.138). Zlata's diary made her a globally recognized spokesperson for children affected by military conflict. She was considered the Anne Frank of Sarajevo. It has always scared Zlata to be compared to Anne Frank, "Some people compare me with Anne Frank. That frightens me, Mimmy. I don't want to suffer her fate" (Filipovic, 2006, p.257). Zlata was inspired by Anne Frank and she decided to change her diary into a war one and gave it a name as Anne did. Similar to Frank, Zlata becomes a witness to the war and a representative of all war victims. Zlata believed her voice would make a difference, "I believed that those who would hear me would do something to stop it" (2006, p.17). Zlata was 11 years old when the Bosnian war broke out. She used to have a diary before the war recording her day-to-day life but after the war, she decided to change it into a war diary naming it "Mimmy" following the footsteps of Anne Frank. Janine Di Giovanni in the introduction of *Zlata's diary* states, "She is now safe, but there are thousands of other children who are not, who are sitting in the dark around a candle, hungry, terrified by the shelling, who have lost parents, brothers, sisters. It is for them that Zlata wrote this book" (2006, p.28).

As a survivor of the Bosnian war, Zlata feels the urge to tell, to share her experience with others. She stated, "it was important for people to hear about what it is like to be living in war, without freedom, without a normal life, with

constant fear" (2006, p.18). Zlata believed it was her mission to testify just as one of the survivors of the Holocaust (Wiesel, 1990, p.18). For her, speaking was a form of healing, "For me, speaking about the war, raising awareness about conflict and in particular, children and ordinary people caught in the conflict, is almost a physical part of me, one I wear every day like my own brown hair" (Filipovic, 2006, p.18). For Zlata, this act of speaking and writing is not an individual act; she represents the concrete collective voice of her people. She writes :

What is strange is that everyone who is in this diary, as well as many other people, have told me they use the diary to remember not only the time of war, but also to remember that humanity and strength and to remember Sarajevo and Bosnia the way they were before the war, which makes this diary not only mine, but something that belongs to many people who experienced this war: it also belongs to my city. (2006, pp.20-21)

Zlata as well emphasized the importance of listening "If we listen to each and every story or if we even hear one and imagine all the others, we can get some sense of what the extent of the war really is" (2006, p.22). Mimmy the diary was Zlata's companion during war. It represents an asylum and refuge to her. Zlata states, "I'm not writing to you about me anymore. I'm writing to you about war, death, injuries, shells, sadness and sorrow. Almost all my friends have left. Even if they were here, who knows whether we'd be able to see one another" (2006, p.108).

Zlata started her diary as normal diary recording her day-to day life. She was living a happy life, enjoying watching American movies, and listening to American singers such as Michael Jackson, and Madonna, besides practicing piano. Things started to change when her father was called up by the police reserve. At this stage, she was not aware of politics and war, "Some reservists from Montenegro have entered Herzegovina. Why? For what? Politics, it seems, but I don't understand politics" (2006, p.42). When Sarajevo launched an appeal to help the children of Dubrovnik, she prepared a package to send, hoping she would bring happiness to a child, "package. I hope it makes whoever gets it happy. That's the idea. I also wrote a New Year's card saying I hoped the war in Dubrovnik would end soon" (2006, p.61). Zlata felt sympathetic for those children who were deprived of enjoying their innocent childhood because of war.

She took Anne Frank as her role model and gave her diary a name 'Mimmy'. Zlata used her diary as an outlet to her feelings and anxieties, besides, being a document to the incidents happening in Sarajevo.

The diary is the best narrative to express feelings of loss and helplessness. Zlata said "I'm afraid of WAR!" (2006, p.84). Although the war had not started yet, but she was terrified and she capitalized the word war to emphasize her feelings. When the war started, she was scared, still did not adapt with war life; her writings was a blend of asking for peace, "War is here. PEACE, NOW" and freaking out (2006, p.85). Zlata questioned the value of war. The day she joined the march where people went on the streets to stop the war, she wrote, "I keep thinking about the march I joined today. It is bigger and stronger than war. That is why it will win. The people must be the ones to win, not the war, because war has nothing to do with humanity. War is something inhuman" (2006, p.87). She was very furious because "people parting. Families, friends separating. Some are leaving, others staying. It's so sad. Why? These people and children aren't guilty of anything" (2006, p.88). She hated war because it was the reason behind being alone and the parting of her friends "but we have to accept that this war is separating us from our friends. How many more people will leave? I'm sorry, Mimmy, I feel sad, I can't write anymore" (2006, p.165). The overwhelming feeling of sadness invaded Zlata to the extent that she could not write anymore.

It is interesting how Zlata uses the technique of renaming to reflect on the war in her country. She calls politicians "kids" playing with people's fate without caring about the consequences of their game. People lose their life, and countries are destroyed and they never agree or stop the war. On the other hand, she called the aggressors "those boys" up there in the hills keep shooting at us" (2006, p.89). For Zlata, war is a game between kids and boys, both are irresponsible for their actions playing and people and children are suffering: "The "kids" really are playing, which is why us kids are not playing, we are living in fear, we are suffering, we are not enjoying the sun and flowers, we are not enjoying our childhood. WE ARE CRYING". (2006, p.178)

As a young diarist, Zlata writes, "There's no peace. War has suddenly entered our town, our homes, our thoughts, and our lives. It's terrible" (2006, p.91). Her life turned upside down and now her life was about shelling and bombing "There's shooting, shells are falling. This really is WAR" (2006, p.91).

People tried to flee but they were stuck, no way to get out the country. Gradually, she started to understand the reality of war and show "bitterness" in her writing, "War is no joke, it seems. It destroys, kills, burns, separates, and brings unhappiness. Terrible shells fell today on Bascarsija, the old town center. Terrible explosions. We went down into the cellar, the cold, dark, revolting cellar. And ours isn't even all that safe" (2006, p.92).

Zlata decided to know more about politics to understand the suffering" All I know is that we are living in misery. Yes, I know, politics is to blame for it all. I said I wasn't interested in politics, but in order to find out the answer I have to know something about it" (2006, p.120). Although she tried to understand politics, she could not figure out why this was happening: "I keep wanting to explain these stupid politics to myself, because it seems to me that politics caused this war, making it our everyday reality. War has crossed out the day and replaced it with horror, and now horrors are unfolding instead of days. It looks to me as though these politics mean Serbs, Croats and Muslims. But they are all people. They are all the same. They all look like people, there's no difference. They all have arms, legs and heads, they walk and talk, but now there's "something" that wants to make them different. (2006, p.179) Zlata had friends Croats, Muslims and Serbs and she never thought about that. Their country did not suffer from any kind of discrimination based on religion. She added that politics tried to separate them through the worst means. People did not want division because it would not make them happy. Discrimination, division and war would lead to sadness, pain and misery.

Her diary functions as an outlet to communicate her emotions. Zlata was fed up with war; she only wished that the war would end" the "kids" will get tired of their game" (2006, p.212). She believed that children were innocent and did not deserve this hell " I just know that the war is stealing years of our life and childhood from us" (2006, p.207). Even being survived was not the best "invalids—young people without arms and legs. They're the ones who had the fortune or perhaps the misfortune to survive" (2006, p.217). She wished the game of war would end. She stopped believing that the "Kids" would stop playing and put an end to their misery:

All I know is that the result of their little games is 15,000 dead in Sarajevo, 3,000 of them children, 50,000 permanent invalids, whom I already see in the streets on crutches, in wheelchairs, armless and legless. And I know

that there's no room left in the cemeteries and parks to bury the latest victims. (2006, p.278)

Her diary became a “historical records” of the Bosnian war in a powerful, personal, and human way. She lived in harsh conditions, and every day, children and people were being killed. Bombs and shelling were horrible. Besides, there were no electricity, gas and water and there was shortage of food, "Food is becoming a big problem in Sarajevo" (Zlata, 2006, p.116). The cellar where they hide was ugly and dirty. She was feeling traumatized and grieved to the extent that she tried to forget by avoiding facing the truth, "I'd write to you much more about the war if only I could. But I simply don't want to remember all these horrible things. They make me sick" (2006, p.97). Zlata writes of a horrible day, there was a bombing near the place her mother was. She thought something bad had happened to her. She writes, "SLAUGHTER! MASSACRE! HORROR! CRIME! BLOOD! SCREAMS! TEARS! DESPAIR!" (2006, p.111). It shows how terrible this day was and how terrified she was. The next day was catastrophic too, a bomb hit the bathroom while she was alone and she "cry hysterically" (2006, p.112). She was fed up with war" here is war, war and more war" (2006, p.115). In addition, the day their house glass was broken she was very furious and wrote down, "I don't know how often I've written that word. HORRIBLE. We've had too much horror. The days here are full of horror. Maybe we in Sarajevo could rename the day and call it horror, because that's really what it's like" (2006, p.119). She writes of the death of her friend Nina that was not easy on her. Losing a loved one can be grave as explained by Shaw" Children suffer not only as innocent victims of war but also as the bereaved of those lost in battle and through cruel mischance" (2003, p.240).She writes:

AND NINA IS DEAD. A piece of shrapnel lodged in her brain and she died. I feel sad. I cry and wonder why? She didn't do anything. A disgusting war has destroyed a young child's life. Nina, I'll always remember you as a wonderful little girl. (2006, p.102)

Zlata, as a traumatized survivor, felt she lost her immunity to misfortune. Kai Erikson (1995) explains that the traumatized feels vulnerable due to their feeling of losing control of their life (p.184). However, Zlata's narration of her friend's death helps her to regain such control. It allows her to express the traumatic events, and in doing this, it helps her to cope with her trauma. Coping, as stated

by Goldberg (2017), takes place while victims represent the grave symptoms of trauma or at some cases embody them (p.7). This is apparent in Zlata's words "why is this happening? I'M SO MAD I WANT TO SCREAM AND BREAK EVERYTHING!" (p.103). In the case of persistent trauma, victims are filled with meaningless, fear and helplessness; there is no distinction between the past and the future. In *Zlata's diary*, "The present is cruel too and I can't forget it. There's no joking with war. My present reality is the cellar, fear, shells, fire" (2006, p.103). She was very depressed and frustrated, she felt that she lost control and she was helpless. Instead of enjoying childhood, playing, sunbathing and swimming, Zlata's was imprisoned, "All I can see through the broken windows is the park in front of my house. Empty, deserted, no children, no joy. I hear the sound of shells, and everything around me smells of war. War is now my life. OOOHH, I can't stand it anymore! I want to scream and cry" (2006, p.128). She was annoyed because nothing was expected to be changed and the Security Council did not take any reasonable decision to end the war. She felt that war would never end. Zlata was aware of how her childhood was destroyed by war. She wrote in her diary:

BOREDOM!!! SHOOTING!!! SHELLING!!! PEOPLE BEING KILLED!!! DESPAIR!!! HUNGER!!! MISERY!!! FEAR!!! That's my life! The life of an innocent eleven-year-old schoolgirl!! A schoolgirl without a school, without the fun and excitement of school. A child without games, without friends, without the sun, without birds, without nature, without fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with just a little powdered milk. In short, a child without a childhood. A wartime child. (2006, p.125)

In addition, she kept criticizing war, and how it affected her life and other children's lives causing the loss of their innocent childhood. She was angry and annoyed and through writing in her diary, she pours down her emotions, unloading its weight by putting them down on paper:

I am really living through a war, I am witnessing an ugly, disgusting war. I and thousands of other children in this town that is being destroyed, that is crying, weeping, seeking help, but getting none. God, will this ever stop, will I ever be a schoolgirl again, and will I ever enjoy my childhood again? I once heard that childhood is the most wonderful time of your life. And it is. I loved it, and now an ugly war is taking it all away from me. Why? I feel sad. I feel like crying. I am crying. (2006, p.125)

Her life was a series of horrible days in which she experienced hunger, shooting, fear, killing and darkness "You can't relax for even a second! Zlata" (2006, p.142). Goldberg (2017) explains that diary writing is meaningful; it affords cohesion in the disintegrated lives of the traumatized. "This war is taking us back to olden times. And we take it, we suffer it, but we don't know for how long" (p.144). Darkness was surrounding her either physically through electricity shortage or mentally through the increasing number of deaths. Innocents were killed for no reason, "And there are lots and lots of people and children in Sarajevo who are no longer among the living. The war has claimed them. And all of them were innocent. Innocent victims of this disgusting war" (2006, p.157). In addition to human losses, the city was destroyed with its famous landmark; she described her country as "a wounded Sarajevo. If only the war would stop, the wounds would heal!" (2006, p.158). She blamed war for all her misery " they've taken everything away from me (2006, p.168). War caused the flee of many people from Sarajevo. Zlata wrote "Sad and upsetting. Zlata was grateful she had her diary, so she would not feel alone, "I've got you to talk to" (2006, p.180). Writing her diary, Zlata felt no loneliness. She felt may be hope and wishing for a better life to come will move on towards a more positive attitude towards peace to stop the war and lessen the ongoing pain of people and children. As well as people being killed, children were left without their parts and others left under ruin. Life was very miserable. People were asking for peace and waiting for it restlessly. Zlata tried to help other children to forget but they kept recalling the traumatic experience they had gone through, "I try to help them forget all the awful things that have happened to them. But they can't forget. It's constantly on their minds. They remember the terrible shelling, the destruction, the flames, and everything they left behind and lost in the flames" (2006, p.188). *Zlata's diary* helps in unmuting the silent voice of war children.

My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary

My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary was originally published in Bosnia by the humanitarian organization *Our Children* in two parts: *Sarajevo Childhood Wounded by War* (1994) and *Sarajevo Childhood Wounded by War: Part 2* (1998). In 2006, Kids Can Press in English published the diary under the title *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary*. Nadja Halilbegovich was twelve when the war started. After three weeks from the war, she decided to open her diary and write about the war-torn city of Sarajevo. She became known as the "Bosnian Anne Frank". Nadja adds an introduction, reflection and afterword to

the English diary. She wanted to share her story with the world and she dedicated it to all innocent victims of war especially children .She documents the oppression and atrocities war children endured. She states in the introduction:

I often ask myself why I stayed alive when thousands of children were brutally killed. There is no answer. I know that nothing can bring them back, but only forgetting would make them truly dead. They will live in my heart and in the following pages as long as I live and share their stories. (2006, p.9)

Halilbegovich's diary was an "asylum" and "refuge" (Lejeune, 2009, p.334). She says, "Instantly this diary became a friend who listened to all that I desperately needed to share. It was my only place of peace amid the chaos" (2006, p.9). Through writing, she was trying to "freeze time" and create a concrete collective memory (Lejeune, 2009, p.194). Her Diary was "both a retreat and a source of energy" in her "dialectical relationship with the world, which [s]he uses to construct and sustain [herself] as an individual" (Lejeune, 2009, p.164).

Nadja was trying to speak for her people and document their misery. She speaks for others and to others. She felt that in writing, she was sharing a sense of solidarity and understanding with the citizens of Sarajevo, "I quickly realized that sharing parts of my diary created a sense of solidarity and understanding between me and the suffering citizens of my beloved Sarajevo" (2006, p.83). Nadja stated the reason for writing her diary, "I watched on television and kept all my sadness inside. Now, after nearly two months, I can no longer bear all my piled-up feelings. This is why I write to you, dear diary" (2006, p.11). Nadja writes:

Now I write about war- for myself and for my friends who left Bosnia. Maybe I could have gone, too. Many of our family friends warned us about the coming war, but we couldn't believe it would happen in our country. So, we stayed, each of us trying to survive in our own way. (2006, p.13)

A diary is a means to help its writers during crisis to weave threads between their shredded lives. (Goldberg, 2017, p.36). That is why writing for Nadja is a tool of

resistance to release the piled-up pain and to lessen the accumulated agony within her tortured self in search for a hope that one-day people will read her diary. She felt that all her wartime life was an illusion to comfort. She aimed to put an end to the war and wondered, "For how long will my life consist of the dead space between two explosions?" (2006, p.97).

She always suffered from dreadful images of bloody bodies; she wished she could control and enslave her thoughts "In the darkness, images of bloody, dead children revolve in front of my eyes. One image after other forces itself upon me. I feel such pain and humiliation that I cry and cry" (2006, p.89). This chimes with Erikson (1995) explanation of the traumatized as being haunted by their past and memory (p.84). Nadja lived in a struggle between her traumatic past and the unclear future to reach reconciliation. Through writing, she was trying to keep shreds of her identity. Writing affords cohesion to her disintegrated life. She was trying as Laub (1995) explained, through her testimony to face loss and go through pain in order to realize that the lost ones are not coming back, and that life is about living with unfulfilled hopes (p.74) .

Nadja lives through an atmosphere of persistent trauma due to the routine of horror, fear and disintegration, "War had turned us all into frightened children" (2006, p.12). Feeling of fright and fear controlled all children. Therefore, writing a diary was her way of surviving the "monstrous war" (Halilbegovich, 2006, p.13). Throughout the diary, Nadja was stressing on showing her feelings of fear, sadness and death; the diary was an outlet to her emotions and how she dealt with the massacre and siege "this war has brought me a lot of suffering" (2006, p.22). Nadja also showed other children, who had lost their fathers, feelings of sorrow and bitterness "I saw so many tear-filled eyes. These children never deserved to suffer so terribly! Some are just babies-maybe; they've never seen their fathers. After the performance, every child received a monetary gift, but no amount of money can lessen their sorrow" (2006, p.92).

In her diary, Nadja documents the events of the Bosnian genocide and her feelings about them. She was living in continuous fear and worry, whenever something happened, she would worry about her family members whether they were still alive or not, especially that the siege of Sarajevo was very harsh. They always felt they were like "prisoners in this city" (2006, p.17). Nadja writes of her wishes for the violence to end, the stress of having her mother go to work with the threat of sniper fire all around, how her father missed death by only a

few steps when a shell was launched killing eight citizens who were waiting in long line for bread and wounding more than fifty. Her father was there because he was supposed to pick up their rations.

Nadja created simple drawings and photographs to accompany her diary. She writes of the seven children who were killed by shell hit because they were getting cherries from the backyard. This accident is illustrated with a black and white drawing that showed the cherries covered with the blood of innocent children, it was not a normal unripe cherry, it was a bloody one, “seven innocent children were killed-and only because they wanted a few cherries” (Halilbegovich, 2006, p.14).



Halilbegovich, N (2006). [Bloody Unripe Cherry]. *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary*.

All crimes committed in Sarajevo were entirely inhumane. Nadja writes of a four-year-old girl who was wounded by a shell and was immediately evacuated to Britain, but she would never walk again despite all the operations. Nadja was shocked and felt sorry for the young girl who was exposed to that cruel accident, “she was just beginning to experience the joy of walking, running and dancing, and now she is deprived of it forever” (2006, p.49). She writes of an orphanage that was bombed and three children were killed and thirteen wounded, “children who have already experienced great hardships, living their childhood without parental love and care” (2006, p.22). She felt that these children had faced enough hardships in their lives by losing their parents' love and care, so why should they be exposed to such a brutal experience? She stated in her diary as a response to her anger, sadness and anguish, "Why is this happening? I have no answer" (2006, p.22).



Halilbegovich, N (2006). [Crying Eyes]. *My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary*.

This accident is illustrated by a black and white drawing of a crying eye. She was always wondering about how cruel war was, wishing that it would end without understanding the real reason behind it. "Are those people in the mountain happy when they shoot and kill? Do they feel sad about the people they destroy? Do they shed tear when they see an old lady mourning her dead grandson? Do they feel sorry about children's sad eyes and pale faces?" (2006, p.16). Thus, "it is essential for this narrative that could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard"(Laub, 1995, p.69).

Moreover, Nadja writes of her own injury with the subsequent painful recovery. She had gone through a life changing experience. She begged her mother to go out for a moment. While she was out, an explosion occurred, "I frantically looked around. Finally, through the thick smoke, I saw a large piece of our building dangling in front of me" (2006, p.23). She was injured in her leg, but she continued running until she found one of her neighbors who dragged her to the door. Soon her father took her to the hospital and her humble request to him was "please don't let me lose my legs" (2006, p.24). This accident changed her life "as soon as I closed my eyes, I saw smoke and blood everywhere" (2006, p.25). She became traumatized, unable to think of anything out of the source of horror as previously clarified by Erikson (1995) on the draining effect of trauma (p.184). She said, "I've also changed. I'm more frightened and worried and a lot older" (2006, p.26). Nadja feared gatherings, "I am very fearful, and I don't dare join this large gathering. I don't trust that the aggressors would spare us from bombings" (2006, p.85). Whenever Nadja remembered her accident, she wondered about the man who caused the explosion "how could a thirteen-year-old girl who loved school, music and just being a kid be a threat to anyone? (2006, p.50). Even after the passage of a year, she was still frightened to go outside "I

was afraid my nightmare would happen again" (2006, p.51). She stated that the accident left a deep scar in her soul that nobody understood even her parents. This agrees with Freud's definition of trauma as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (as cited in Caruth, 1996, p.3). Thus, trauma is not simply a healable wound, it is deeper as Caruth explained (1996, p.3)

People in Bosnia were living through extreme conditions. "There are more and more obituaries in the newspapers, more and more crippled and wounded" (Halilbegovich, 2006, p.21). In addition to starvation, girls and children suffered from physical violence in a very monstrous way, "Is there anything human inside these so-called people? How can they do this and then look into the eyes of their own children?" (Halilbegovich, 2006, p.21). Nadja criticized the inhumanity of their enemy and surprisingly, still a child she was wise enough to be aware of the psychological effect of such acts, "Those girls will always remember. They will always be afraid" (2006, p.21). Nadja's words recall Caruth explanation of the traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destruction and survival (1996, p.58). Nadja mentioned that at that time, Sarajevo was called "the world's largest death camp" (2006, p.23). There were many crimes against humanity taking place there and no one interfered to stop it, and to her extreme wonder, she could not find a reason for all what was happening.

Desperation had controlled the city "all things that symbolize culture, knowledge and education are being destroyed" as if the enemy was trying to erase their history (2006, p.30). Death was frequent during the war; life was very cheap. Amid this, Nadja still had the same frequent question "why all of this? Why did the world let this happen to me? They say that thirteen thousand children have been killed in my country. Yet the world remains silent" (2006, p.32). All she knew that whenever their defenders achieved a success in the battle, the enemy took revenge on Sarajevo, "They vent their anger on children and unarmed civilians" (2006, p.43).

Nadja for the first time showed a political gesture. She always mentioned their enemies as aggressors but in this entry, she mentioned the Serbs who were killing not only Bosnians, but also Serbs and Croats. She stated that people in Sarajevo loved and helped each other regardless of their religious differences. She also referred to the pain she suffered when writing about this issue "I can't write about this anymore! It hurts too much" (2006, p.68).

Nadja, with the help of her family and a humanitarian organization, managed to find a refuge to America. However, she had to find a way to reach to

Croatia where she would take a flight to America. The only hope for her was to go through the long dirty tunnel then take a trip in a steep dangerous road to Croatia. It was her only hope regardless of the snipers who were waiting for the people at the end of the tunnel. During her journey with her mother in the tunnel her mother showed great bravery when she was about to give up, her mother told her "Remember, Nadja. Remember your dream and keep walking!" (2006, p.110). Nadja managed to reach Croatia safely without being killed and travelled to the states and a year after her brother took the same route while their parents stayed in Sarajevo.

Conclusion

Children's war diaries create a counter-discourse to war and horror and allow children to document their traumatic lives amid war. Through narrating their painful experience, both Zlata Filipovic and Nadja Halilbegovich try to make sense of their traumatic experience as well as reach the outside world calling for intervention. Diary writing and testimonial narration allow them to step into the center and have a voice. They both create a collective memory of war; they spoke for others and to others. Their diaries became historical records of the Bosnian genocide. Through testifying and bearing witness, they confront their traumatic past, overcome their trauma and commemorate the victims of war. Their diaries function as a testimony and an outlet to their repressed voices and become a way to make their voices heard. Diary writing helps Zlata and Nadja to unfold the truth, defy their oppressors and raise the consciousness of others by presenting the carnages and ferocity of war, hoping to change the present status quo and prevent future wars.

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