

I HEARD BIRDS SING.



Bosnia

The research team from Coventry University and Wings of Hope BiH explored the journey of young people to adulthood during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). The research primarily focused on understanding the milestones and transitions from youth to adulthood for those between 14 - 23 years old during this time (1992-1995) and their post-war experiences, evaluated through surveys, interviews and a workshop. Our research placed special focus on former underage fighters (minor soldiers) of which minimal research exists. Our survey was conducted with 62 women and 18 men and comprised 46 structured questions. In-depth life story interviews were conducted with 15 minor soldiers (3 women and 12 men), and a workshop was used as the last activity, which included 10 minor soldiers (2 women and 8 men). All the participants came from the three constitutive nations of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosniaks (Muslims), Serbs and Croats.

The journey of young people (minor fighters) after war is fraught with different challenges. As young individuals thrust into the chaos of armed conflict, their experiences are unique and often overlooked.

Understanding their post-war journey is crucial in addressing their challenges and facilitating their reintegration into society. In the aftermath of conflict, the voices of minor fighters often remain unheard, overshadowed by the broader narratives and processes. However, understanding their lived experiences is paramount in addressing the unique challenges they face in rebuilding their lives post-war. War has always been a devastating and life-altering experience for those who have had the experience. Moreover, the impact on young fighters is particularly harsh. As adolescents and young people are drawn into conflicts as soldiers, they face unique challenges that shape their lives long after the war has ended. These individuals often face physical and psychological trauma, miss educational opportunities, and grapple with the challenges of reintegration into civilian life. There is a feeling of being lost, deceived, afraid and ashamed of what happened, as well as a feeling of losing a part of life, alienation, and an attempt to compensate for that loss with alcohol and drug abuse, an attempt to catch up with lost youth. The topics that particularly stood out in the research process are loss of innocence, disrupted education, forced maturity, and psychological trauma.

JOSIP BROZ, KNOWN AS "TITO" (1892-1980), WAS A YUGOSLAV SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARY AND POLITICIAN, WHO BECAME THE PRESIDENT OF YUGOSLAVIA FROM 1953-1980.

HE DEVELOPED A STATE STRUCTURE BASED ON A NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY AND CENTRALISED ECONOMY WHICH WAS COMMONLY KNOWN AS SELF-MANAGED SOCIALISM.



YUGOSLAVIA WAS A ONE PARTY COMMUNIST STATE, WITH SOME SEEING TITO AS A UNIFYING FIGURE! THIS HAD THE EFFECT OF BINDING TOGETHER THE DISPARATE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS WITHIN THE FEDERATION.



MANY PEOPLE OF THE GENERATION THAT LIVED THROUGH THE SECOND WORLD WAR HELD THE OPINION THAT DISUNITY AND PARTITION WOULD BE A TRAGIC BLUNDER ...



... AND THAT THE COUNTRY'S CORE COULD NOT BE PARTITIONED WITHOUT VIOLENCE.



THE RELATIVE STABILITY OF THE STATE LASTED UNTIL TITO'S DEATH IN 1980.



THE DECADES FOLLOWING TITO'S DEATH SAW A PERIOD OF POLITICAL UNREST AND RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SIX REPUBLICS OF THE FEDERATION BEGAN TO DETERIORATE.



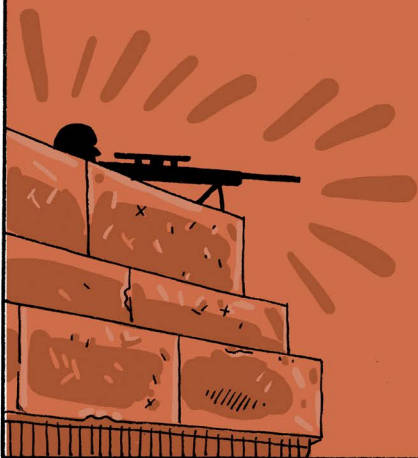
IN ADDITION, IN THE 80'S AND EARLY 90'S THERE WAS A PERIOD OF ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY AND HIGH INFLATION.



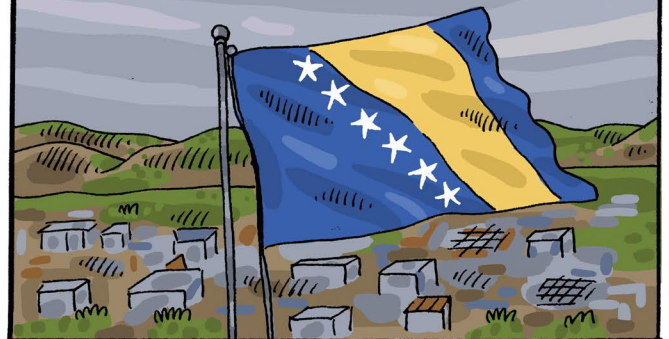
IN 1991 THE YUGOSLAV WARS BEGAN WITH THE CONFLICT KNOWN AS THE TEN-DAY WAR AFTER THE SEPERATION OF SLOVENIA FROM THE FEDERATION.



OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT DECADE THE REGION WAS ENGULFED WITH A SERIES OF TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS, WARS OF INDEPENDENCE, AND INSURGENCIES.



THESE CONFLAGRATIONS RESULTED IN THE DISSOLUTION OF THE FEDERATION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SIX INDEPENDENT COUNTRIES: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, SLOVENIA, CROATIA, MONTENEGRO, SERBIA AND MACEDONIA.





I REMEMBER MY CHILDHOOD
WITH FONDNESS.

IT WAS CAREFREE, WHICH MANY PEOPLE DON'T
HAVE TODAY. IT WAS A NICE LIFE. I LOVED BEING
OUT IN NATURE. I WAS YOUNG AND WE HAD SUCH
FUN.

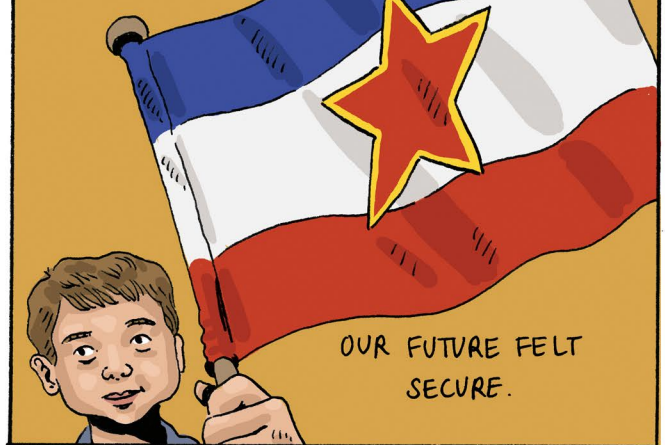
IT DIDN'T MATTER WHERE YOU CAME FROM,
WHERE YOU WERE. THE VALUES WE LEARNT
WERE REALLY IMPORTANT TO US ALL.

MY PARENTS RAISED MY BROTHER AND I IN THE
SPIRIT OF COMMUNISM. BEING HONEST FIRST,
THEN EVERYTHING ELSE. HARD WORKING, YES, BUT
BEING HONEST, THAT WAS NUMBER ONE, THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING.

OUR COMMUNITY WAS EVERYTHING, WE LOOKED OUT FOR EACH OTHER. WE LEARNT HOW TO BE GOOD, AND WE WERE TAUGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY. WE KNEW TO RESPECT OUR ELDERS.



WE HAD A REAL LOVE OF OUR HOMELAND. WE FELT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO DEFEND OUR COUNTRY.



OUR FUTURE FELT SECURE.

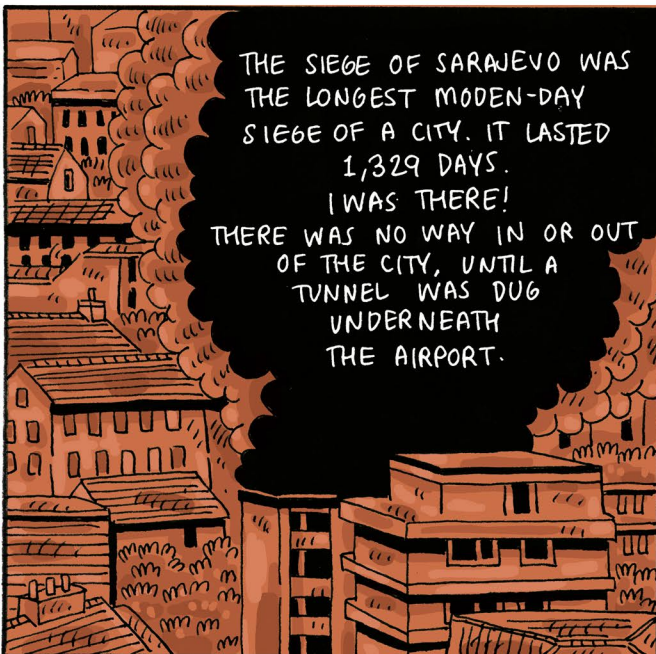
BUT ALL THAT CHANGED WHEN THE WAR CAME.



THE SIEGE OF SARAJEVO WAS THE LONGEST MODERN-DAY SIEGE OF A CITY. IT LASTED 1,329 DAYS.

I WAS THERE!

THERE WAS NO WAY IN OR OUT OF THE CITY, UNTIL A TUNNEL WAS DUG UNDERNEATH THE AIRPORT.



THE WAR CAME TO MY HOME, THE WAR CAME TO ME! A BULLET HIT MY WINDOW! THEN I REALISED THE WAR HAD STARTED, AND SINCE THEN THERE HAS BEEN A FEAR IN ME WHICH HAS NEVER PASSED.



THIS TERRIBLE TIME LED SO MANY OF US TO JOIN THE FIGHT. BEING PART OF YOUNG PIONEERS FELT LIKE A NATURAL TRANSITION INTO MILITARY LIFE. YOUNG PEOPLE ACT INSTINCTIVELY AND IMPULSIVELY.



WE WERE INSPIRED BY THE STORIES OF CHILD SOLDIERS FROM WORLD WAR TWO AND THE ANTI-FASCIST PARTISAN MOVEMENT THAT WE LEARNT ABOUT IN SCHOOL. WE WANTED TO BECOME HEROES JUST LIKE THEM.



WE LOVED OUR COUNTRY AND WE WERE ALL DESPERATE TO DEFEND IT. EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US JOINED VOLUNTARILY. EVEN THOUGH WE WERE UNDERAGE! I THINK THAT MANY YOUNG PEOPLE WENT TOO FAR IN MANY THINGS DURING THE WAR, WHICH THEY CANNOT OR SHOULD NOT BE PROUD OF UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.



I WANTED TO PROVE TO MYSELF, AND MY FRIENDS, THAT I CAN ENDURE IT.



IT WAS A CRAZY TIME. WHEN I WAS SENT TO THE FRONTLINE, I FOUND MYSELF FIGHTING AGAINST PEOPLE I KNEW. IT'S REALLY CRAZY, THE YEAR BEFORE WE WERE HAVING COFFEE TOGETHER!



I SPENT NINE MONTHS TRAPPED AS A PRISONER OF WAR (P.O.W). I MANAGED TO KEEP MYSELF GOING BY DAYDREAMING ABOUT MY FUTURE. THAT I WOULD FIND A NICE LADY ONCE THE MADNESS ENDS.



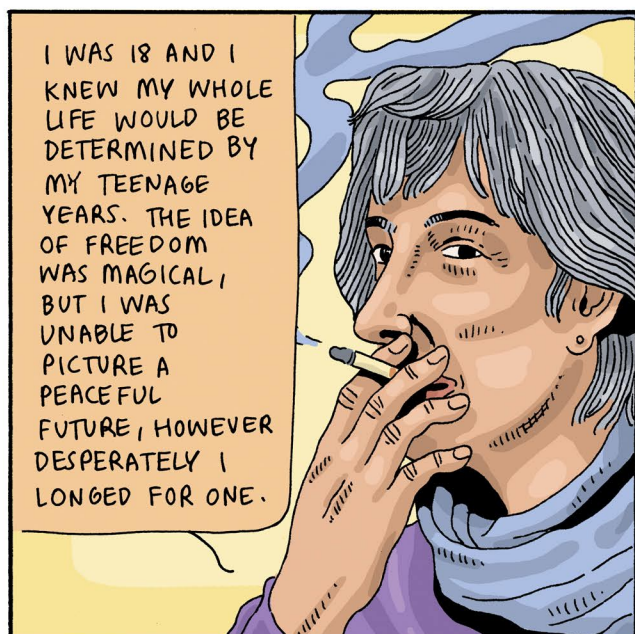
I CAN SO CLEARLY REMEMBER THE START OF THE CEASEFIRE WHEN THEY SIGNED THE DAYTON PEACE ACCORDS IN 1995.

I COULDN'T QUITE BELIEVE THAT THE CHAOS OF THE LAST FOUR YEARS COULD END

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WHAT FELT LIKE FOREVER I HEARD BIRDS SING. SOMETHING SO SIMPLE, WHICH WE COULD NEVER HEAR OVER THE SHOOTING, IT MADE ME CRY.

WE WERE SO USED TO LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR THAT I WASN'T SURE HOW I WOULD FEEL TRANSITIONING TO A MORE PEACEFUL LIFE. 250,000 LIVES HAD BEEN LOST, CITIES DESTROYED, AND MORE THAN TWO MILLION PEOPLE DISPLACED.

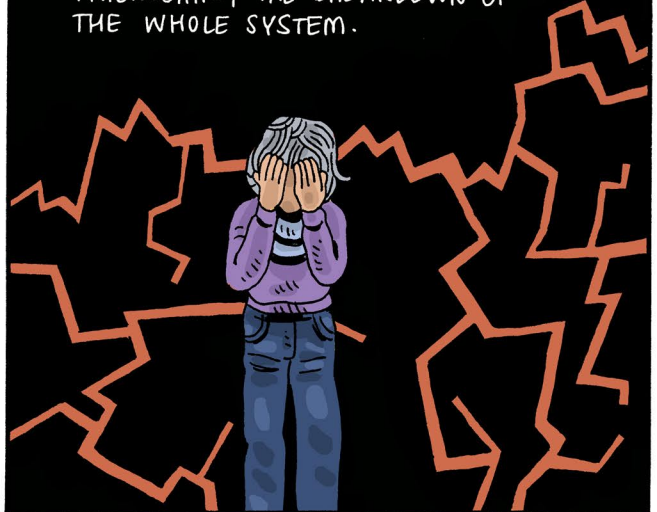




AT FIRST I WAS FULL OF HATRED, I WAS CONSTANTLY ASKING WHY DID THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ME. INITIALLY EVERYTHING FELT DRAMATIC AND I WAS CONFUSED ABOUT WHAT TO DO, I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO TURN.



ALL I COULD SEE AROUND ME WAS DISTRESS, BROKEN MARRIAGES AND FRIENDSHIPS, THE BREAKDOWN OF THE WHOLE SYSTEM.



I HAD NO SENSE OF DIRECTION, I LIVED A LITTLE FASTER, TO MAKE UP FOR THE PERIOD I MISSED IN THE WAR, I THINK. I DRANK A LOT OF ALCOHOL, LIKE A DOG LET OFF A CHAIN!



AND THEN I DECIDED TO HELP MYSELF. I FELT I HAD TO CREATE SOMETHING, IN ORDER TO MAKE UP FOR THE TIME I HAD LOST.



I FELT A VITAL NEED TO BE PROACTIVE AND INVOLVED IN REBUILDING MY COUNTRY.



I WANTED TO TRY AND MAKE A CHANGE AND FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT MY CONTRIBUTION, RATHER THAN DWELL ON THE HORRORS OF THE WAR, THE STORIES THAT HAUNTED US ALL.



I SPEND THE WEEKENDS HELPING MY PARENTS IN THE GARDEN. I LIKE TO PICK THE RASPBERRIES AND STRAWBERRIES WHICH ARE MY FAVOURITE.

THEY LOVE TO GROW FOOD. IT MAKES THEM FEEL HAPPY AND CALM BEING CONNECTED TO NATURE.

WHEN FAMILY COMES TO VISIT US THEY OFTEN TALK ABOUT THE WAR, AND HOW HARD LIFE HAS BEEN SINCE. THEY FEEL FREE TO SPEAK AT HOME AND SHARE THEIR FEELINGS.

BUT MY AUNT BELIEVES OUR FREEDOM IS A LIE.



SHE TALKS ABOUT 'CANCEL CULTURE' AND NOT BEING ABLE TO EXPRESS HERSELF FREELY. SHE FEELS LIKE SHE'S A BIRD TRAPPED IN A CAGE, CONSTANTLY MONITORED & CONTROLLED.

MY PARENTS HAVE RECENTLY BEEN TRYING TO RECONNECT WITH OLD FRIENDS FROM THE WAR TOO. I SIT AND LISTEN TO THEIR CONVERSATIONS. THEY SHARE MEMORIES AND EXPERIENCES.



IT SOUNDS LIKE SO MANY OF MY PARENTS' FRIENDS ARE SUFFERING. FOR SOME OF THEM THE TRAUMA OF THAT TIME IS ONLY JUST SEEPING OUT NOW. I KNOW MY DAD STILL WAKES UP SOMETIMES WITH NIGHTMARES.



I FEEL SO LUCKY THAT I HAVE NOT HAD TO GO THROUGH WHAT THEY EXPERIENCED. BUT EVERYONE LIVES WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF THAT TIME.



I WORRY THAT WAR MIGHT COME BACK TO MY COUNTRY. IF IT EVER HAPPENED TO ME I'M NOT SURE WHAT I WOULD DO. I WOULD WANT TO RUN AWAY, BUT I WOULDN'T WANT TO LEAVE MY HOME. I WOULDN'T WANT TO BE A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN IN ANOTHER COUNTRY.



HISTORY

I GUESS I WOULD BE PREPARED IN SOME WAYS. I'VE LEARNT ABOUT OUR HISTORY AT SCHOOL, I THINK I WOULD HAVE SOME STRATEGIES UP MY SLEEVE.



BUT I CAN'T REALLY IMAGINE HOW SCARY IT WOULD BE. I DON'T EVER WANT TO BE IN THAT SITUATION.



MY MUM DOESN'T LIKE ME AND MY BROTHER WATCHING VIOLENT FILMS. I JUST SWITCH CHANNELS AS I CAN SEE HOW UPSET SHE GETS.
IT MAKE HER JUMPY.

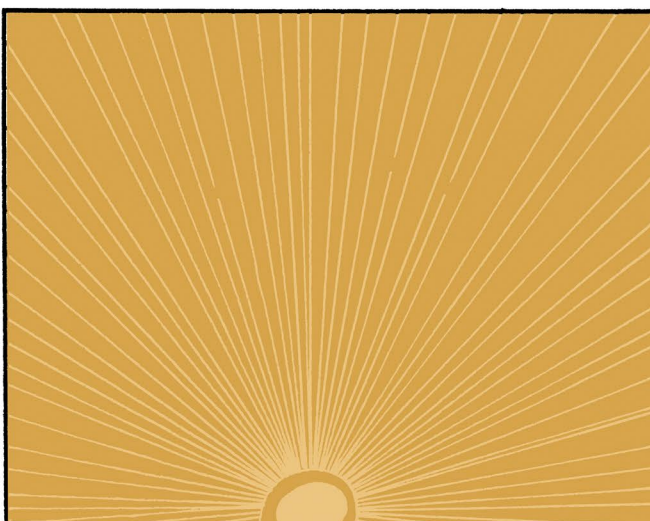
RATA-TATA



EVEN LISTENING TO THE NEWS YOU CAN SEE HER MOOD SHIFT. IF A POLITICIAN MAKES A DRAMATIC STATEMENT, OR THEY START TALKING ABOUT TENSIONS IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES SHE STARTS TO LOOK UNCOMFORTABLE. I HATE TO SEE HER ANXIOUS.



I REALLY HOPE FOR A BETTER LIFE WHEN I'M OLDER. I DON'T WANT TO WORRY LIKE MY FAMILY. THEY OFTEN TELL US HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO BE GOOD PEOPLE AND TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER



THEY HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, SO THAT THEIR SACRIFICES WERE WORTH SOMETHING.



I TRY HARD AT SCHOOL AND I AM LUCKY TO HAVE GOOD FRIENDS. WE ALL KNOW ABOUT OUR COUNTRY'S PAST. IT'S IRONIC THAT WE NEED TO FIGHT TO PRESERVE PEACE.

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