



COALITION FOR WORK WITH PSYCHOTRAUMA AND PEACE KOALICIJA ZA RAD SA PSIHOTRAUMOM I MIR

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BELGRADE AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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In 1903, my mother's father left Magilov, in what is now Belarus, and walked and was smuggled across borders to get to Rotterdam from where he went to the USA. My mother's mother left Kiev and got to London, from where she took a boat to New York. She was rejected at Ellis Island, and went back to London and, after a few years, took a boat to Montréal, and then took a train to New York. She thus was what now would be called an illegal alien. My father, who was born in 1909 in a village in Bukovina, now in the Ukraine, near Chernovci, was a refugee in Bohemia during the First World War, and went to New York in 1920. The stories that I heard as a child were that several of his older brothers were somehow misused during the war. One uncle had a severe tic and another wore an orthopedic shoe. None of them ever spoke to me about it directly. Yet, the traumatization was obvious, and it was transmitted to their children and to me. These people made something of their lives. My mother and her sisters became high school teachers and my mother became a guidance counselor. Despite my father having gotten his official high school diploma in his 40s, his books show that he had studied economics and psychology in what we now would call "informal education". My father's brothers became physicians. My mother's father, despite having had perhaps a few years of formal education, spoke four languages. He loved technology, and bought every new piece of equipment that he could afford. They all loved and respected learning and books and music and art, and our house was full of all of that. They worked hard for their children.

Why am I telling my personal story in this blog? When I go to Belgrade to work in a non-governmental center for asylum seekers from Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, I see my relatives. The stories that they tell are very similar to those that I heard as a child. It doesn't matter what nationality or religion or color the people are. They are human beings who left their homes because of war or violence or persecution for their ethnicity and/or their political or other beliefs. Many have lost members of their families, and their friends. Many have been tortured. They left because they want to have better lives for themselves and their children. Every one of them to whom I have spoken wants more education, wants to work, wants a new life away from the suffering. They speak of feeling responsibility for their families who are left in the places that they come from and wanting to help them. While there are, of course, a few adventurers and terrorists and criminals among them, I have come across very few of those. And why do people become terrorists or criminals? Even

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of these, most are frustrated by what they have experienced. They are depressed and angry and see no other way to go forward.

The stories they tell are of inhumanity by governments and traffickers and police and virtually everyone else. They walk for long distances. They are physically and psychologically abused. Many die in the attempt and others are severely injured. And yet they keep trying. They have spent months, and sometimes years, getting to Belgrade through various routes, some overland and some across the Mediterranean. They speak of starvation and illness underway and currently.

The current attitudes by governments are, in our view, reprehensible. Instead of treating them as fellow human beings who are suffering, they are treated like criminals. They are beaten by border guards, held down in the mud for hours, bitten by guard dogs. They are imprisoned. They are subjected to intense questioning and long bureaucratic procedures. They have no status and don't know where they will be tomorrow. They are left in limbo for years.

These are people who, with the right kind of treatment and encouragement, could be extremely valuable members of society. They want to be educated. They can contribute the skills, the knowledge, and the diversity of the cultures that they have. They can make societies richer.

Yet, if they are not integrated and treated well, they can become dispirited and turn to terrorism. They also can become ill and thus a huge burden on all societies. Thus, it is our duty, both to them as human beings and to the societies of which we are a part, to assist them.

How can we do that? The psychological and physical traumas among them need healing. We think that the best way to do that is to train people among them to assist one another. We have a program called Pragmatic Empowerment Training (PET) that trains people without previous psychological education and which uses their experience and skills and cultural knowledge to do just that. Details are on our website, and future blogs will give more details. We also need to assist the people assisting them through psychological supervision. The involvement must be long-term. Quick fixes don't work.

Our experience is that working with people makes us much richer. Let us do that and show our humanity.

