

# Stories of Children in Croatia: Resilience and Trauma

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by Aleksandra Selak Zivkovic

**H**ow much do we know about stressful moments of separation when parents send their children away in order to save their lives? Separation may occur because of the loss of children's parents, or can occur in mass evacuations. Children get lost in the crowds of desperate individuals, in the burning villages, in bombed and destroyed cities.

Separation moments under different circumstances have in common the same feeling/perception; the child's image of the world she is used to is suddenly crashing down, the change ahead is threatening, the unknown future is frightening.

The aim and strategy of the Project "Unaccompanied Children in Exile" was to support and strengthen the child's coping skills in order to find a way to recover from trauma of separation. In order to meet the best interest of each and every child related to the special needs of unaccompanied refugee children, different services and program components were provided apart from the basic project goals. Program components developed by the project itself or through other GO or NGO initiatives in the local community focused on covering basic needs related to food and shelter, health, social welfare, education, and special psychosocial needs. The Project "Unaccompanied Children in Exile" has a strong advocacy component for children's rights — the right of a child to a family, name, and ethnicity.

## Background of the UCE Project

The Project "Unaccompanied Children in Exile," developed at the peak of the war activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993, identified 5,000 unaccompanied refugee children in

13 countries of exile (Croatia, Macedonia, Austria, The Czech Republic, France, the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia).

The UCE Project goals and objectives were: registering UAMs (unaccompanied refugee minors), reuniting UAMs with their parents and close family members, reducing the period of family separation as much as possible, and ensuring the best interim and durable care solutions under the circumstances.

The UCE Project was composed of a set of activities of legal, social, and psychosocial character that could be divided into four basic phases: identification, documentation, tracing, and reunification.

After being identified, the unaccompanied refugee children were registered and documented. Documentation — interviewing refugee minors — was an activity performed by



Aleksandra S. Zivkovic, BA, MA, developmental sociology at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. She has been involved in social welfare issues for 20 years, focusing on children's and adolescents' problems. She is the director of the local NGO, Center for Social Policy Initiatives (CSPI) which is implementing the following projects: "Unaccompanied Children in Exile" with the aim of family reunification for Bosnian children, "Foster Care Program" for refugee children, "INFO Center/Counseling Center" for refugee women and children, and "Big Brothers Big Sisters" for adolescents in social risk.

## Sanja's Story

I was born and lived in Northern Bosnia with my parents till I was twelve. My father was an electrical engineer and my mother a pharmacist. Just at the outbreak of war, the people were very tense; I remember the TV broadcasts continuously predicting a conflict. I could not understand it because everything seemed more or less normal. My uncle tried to persuade us to leave but my father couldn't be persuaded, and things happened as they did.

In June 1992 my father was picked up on the street. My parents are the most unfortunate combination — my father is [ethnic] Croatian and my mother [ethnic] Serbian. Had the situation been reversed — and my father a Serb — he would have been able to save the whole family. But my mother was helpless. I know that my father was detained in some of the camps but I don't know what happened to him, whether he is alive or dead. My mother is still in Bosnia. She works at the same pharmacy, but she receives her pay every three months. Now we can at least be in telephone contact, but she cannot come and visit me since she does not have a passport. I cannot travel to visit her because of my serious health problem with my kidneys, and the doctors will not allow me to take such a strenuous trip.

I live in Zagreb with my grandmother, my father's mother. We live in the centre of town, and I attend high school in the vicinity. I get along with my grandmother well, but she is 74, and our viewpoints differ on many things. I have many friends — I am quite satisfied. I would not like to return to Bosnia; I cannot imagine living in a smaller town than Zagreb, only possibly in a larger one.

After my father was taken away, I lived on in my hometown until I finished the sixth grade of primary school, and then my mother found a way to transfer me to Croatia. My relatives waited for me at the Croatian border. Some six months after my arrival in Zagreb, the CSPI assistants found my grandmother's address. I was well prepared for the departure — I knew that I had to leave. At the time I wanted to return, but now I don't know where it is better and safer for me. When my father was taken away, my mother and grandfather asked for him everywhere, but without result.

Now I attend the third grade of high school. I am an 'A' student and I don't let my health problems interfere with me; I usually set high goals for myself — the higher the goal, the more I achieve. My kidney problems started when I was nine; my kidneys are collapsing. I am now on the kidney transplantation list.

It is unbelievable how people — because of the war — forgot how they used to live before; before the war, Bosnia was the world in miniature. I did not see when they took my father away and I do not know why. His friends could have saved him with money. But the money was dearer to them than my father.

It is hard for me to think about my father because I do not like to remember what has happened, but the fact is that I cannot forget it. I often wonder where he is now, what happened, whether he is alive somewhere. I still hope that he is alive — although it seems like Utopia. I am an optimist like my father and I never lose hope. For example, last year I couldn't attend school for two months, but when I came back to school I managed to catch up with the schoolwork and at the end I was an 'A' student, although I missed 397 classes."

professionals who were either social workers or psychologists. Documentation was comprised of the case histories of the individual children.

Based on individual plans, social assistants facilitated tracing of unaccompanied refugee children's parents or other family members, meeting the best interests of

individual children. If tracing was not necessary, social assistants either reestablished the contact between separated parents and children or started the process of family reunification. One of the goals of the UCE project was to reduce the period of family separation as much as possible. Reunification of children separated from their parents or other close family members because of the war circumstances seeks to ensure the child's right to a family, identity, name, ethnicity, culture, and religion in the child's best interest.

Social mobilization within the local community started with the question: WHERE are the unaccompanied refugee children? With the information about potential whereabouts of unaccompanied minors, social assistants started an active search for the children. After identification of beneficiaries, the documentation phase was completed, and the planning phase commenced. The planning process identified the unmet needs of unaccompanied refugee children. To meet the unmet needs in the local communities, the UCE social assistants performed intensive local networking.

The resilience, the recovery of an unaccompanied refugee child from the stressful war experience, was the priority aim of the program activities and was supposed to be achieved through different services/program components: from active social support in the process of integration of the child into the local peer groups; participation of the child in local sport activities; checking and assisting the child in school; assessing, supporting, and ensuring psychosocial support in the caretaking family (family relations in a substitute family); establishing the support groups of refugee adolescents and support groups of caretakers/foster parents, etc. Serious post traumatic stress disorder and other traumatic experiences were treated in specialized medical institutions that were available in the local community in countries of exile, and were accessible to refugee children.

In order to clarify the situation of unaccompanied refugee children in Croatia and to make it come alive, I have presented one of the original child's stories. Sanja's story is one of the 5,000 children's stories that the UCE Project has come across. It is significant in the sense that Sanja was a child with extremely serious health problems, a child who had passed stressful separation from her mother, and did not hear anything about her beloved father after he was taken away. In spite of the past experiences, Sanja is fighting hard to find her way in the new environment. She is coping with the situation, but she is also remembering and dreaming about her hometown

and her parents. She was supported and followed by the Project UCE in all her efforts for five years as follows:

- After Sanja was registered by the UCE Project in Zagreb in 1993, a legal guardian was appointed to Sanja.
- ICRC was immediately contacted to speed up the process of forwarding the Red Cross messages to Sanja's mother who was left in an inaccessible part of B and H (Republika Srpska). At the same time, the UCE Project initiated tracing activities (with ICRC) for Sanja's missing father.
- Sanja was immediately included in the specialized foster care program. She was provided with nutritionist consultations and medical support.
- Sanja and her grandmother participated in support groups and were also provided with individual counseling.

The paradigmatic framework and the rationale of the UCE Project was to reinforce and maintain the child's coping skills whenever it was possible. Group and individual counseling was used to strengthen self-esteem capacities and to assist the social integration of a child — therapy was ensured in specialized institutions when the CSPI professionals assessed the special need for it.

- Recovery of children after the family separation and war-witnessing experiences takes longer than expected. We have found the manifestation of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) with a number of children in later phases of stay in refuge. After two years, thanks to the fact that the project was still going on, children were treated immediately when the symptoms were assessed. In the child's life cycle, recovery does not go in a straight line — sensitive and unhappy events evoke the potential trauma.
- Today children need support for the most risky 50 caretakers' families in exile — the effort to restart the foster care and specialized foster care program for refugee children (as local authorities do not include refugee children in foster care programs).

Our program is phasing out in 1999, and there are still 300 unaccompanied children who cannot go back to their country of origin as they belong to the minority groups.