

Croatia, April 1996

Unknown author

The following is an extract from the diary of a young French lady volunteer on our Croatia convoy, April 1996 convoy. The author of this extract is unknown, but we would love to know who you are so we can credit this to you.

The day had been long and exciting. Many things I had never experienced before, like the feeling in your back while hearing the phrase "Please, keep off the grass, this is a place full of mines, we are not in normal country." The awaiting at borders had enhanced a feeling of fear and the awareness of injustice.

The day had been long and sunny. For our first drop, nothing had really hurt while we were unloading the lorries in front of that Majestuous Hospital, once the home of kings. Indeed the trees were about to flourish and the scarce staff of the establishment were smiling with this frank and not exaggerated smile.

I do not know why, certainly the warmness of the day, but Vickie and I, Victoria as she told me at the end of the trip, decided we should have a shower. So, we went into the impressive and dark building to be shown our way, with as a guide, Holly, a young and delicate American girl working here as a volunteer.

And this was the end of the dream. We were now able to discover what, or who should I say, was buried behind those pale yellow walls. We walked through several rooms where handicapped children in bed were trying to breathe as we passed. My eyes could not retreat from them, neither my ears, with some screams and deep shouts all around. No need to go further, just to the point I started to cry.

Why? Why are you crying? Because this is a place where some children are the shame of their parents, or if not the shame, a burden. This is happening as well in my country, I know. But here, in the middle of nowhere, I have the impression of being in a fortress without a place in the space, which should not be on the planet because somebody said one day that an abnormal child had no right to live.

But I stopped crying. Very quickly. I stopped crying for Holly, for respect to Holly who had just pointed towards three occupied beds and said "They are my children, and I love them". And I had my shower, trying to hide the screams of the children next door with the noise of the water flowing.

The night had been dark and noisy with people celebrating Easter with gun shoots... The stars were above our head, just above the thin plastic roof of our lorry which had become our home.

A new day, a new personal discovery. You drive into unhappiness to sounder deeper in you and try to answer the question "What am I doing here?". I believe I was a different person when I saw this old man running in the field. The cliffs around us were as soft as in a child story book, green and bright. The road was an endless ribbon, with some unusual bomb holes, just like the scarves, the more frequent as we approached villages.

Is village the right word? Can a series of damaged and empty houses and barns be called a village?

I was thinking of some former blessed times here, when cows were grazing around, dogs were barking and water coming out the well, when I saw this old man running across the field. Running towards us a mere sign of life, as a sign of hope, as a person alive. It took me some time to get out the cabin. I had never experienced the strange feeling of being seen as a sign of hope.

And who was I? A young French woman trying to escape from the day to day life? A French girl trying to forget a sentimental failure? A young woman fool enough to come here without thinking of danger? An instable occidental person travelling to make life worth living? I do not know which was the answer then, but it did not take a long time before I stopped thinking about myself.

With the same strength which had made me stop crying in the hospital, I stopped thinking of myself, and so for the rest of the week. And believe me, to stop thinking of ourselves is one of the most agreeable things in the world.

I walked straight to this old man's wife, seated on the door step in a wheel chair. She was wondering about all this agitation, first her seventy year old husband running through the field, then some energetic English men carrying loads of sugar, flour and nails. I talked to her with my eyes, and she made me realise how desperate life had been for her in the past few years.

Probably the war had brought about this wheel chair above all the other humiliations and despair we can not imagine.

The farm will be printed in my mind for ages. It was modest and green, covered with wood and tiles, surrounded by nothing but grass, rotten grass with yellow ribbon signalling a mined area.

The old man was smiling and pointing at this huge hole in the middle of the house roof, which was no longer their roof as they had moved to a one room ground floor home in the barn. He was smiling and had this burnt and dry skin after years of working in the countryside. He was the happiest man with a new saw, even happier with a flask of whisky prescribed by Andrew as a medicine for him. Someone who was not here can't believe there was a great deal of complicity between us. Complicity between two people who have very few things in common but who, for a second believed in hope.

Hundreds of empty houses.

This is not so the view of the wasted stones that hurts, but the total absence of livestock in the landscape. The countryside is like death valley, this was the first expression that came to Michael's mind as we were driving back from Dvor. No one can talk as we drive through the former villages deserted, left from a second to another by families who might have been playing, watching TV or eating when the first bomb dropped. The clothes are still on the drying line, the doors are open, the furniture at its place, the pig dead in the middle of the court yard and the little dog running across the road as mad as a wild animal in danger.

Spaces of despair, where some people want to come back whatever happens. Spaces where we come, when war is over, but where despair seem to be installed for years and years.