

Surviving Peace, a Political Memoir by Olivera Simić, Melbourne, Spinifex Press, 1 Oct 2014, Pp. 188. AUD\$35 paper

Acknowledging the people who helped her publish the book, Olivera Simić says that every book is a product of a gift and labour (ix). This particular book has been a product of much more. It is a result of personal experience, personal trauma, the strength to live with trauma and the courage to write about it.

This untraditional book is about Simić's war and post-war experience. She describes how her academic work and interests have been influenced by traumatic experiences she gained during the 1990s in Bosnia and Serbia.

Simić was born in Banja Luka, into a Serbian family. At the age of 19 she left her homeland as a refugee. She ran away from the rapidly spreading war. She had to say goodbye to her best friends, although at the moment of separation she was not aware that it would be the last time she would see them. Her plans for future drifted away. Simić spent some time in a refugee camp in Serbia where she learned to treasure even basic commodities such as electricity and warm water. In 1999, NATO forces bombed Serbia, where Simić's new home was. Simić lived through explosions and the uncertainty of tomorrow. She lived a day by day. Once again, her whole future was totally out of her control. After she graduated in Serbia, she went to the US where she broadened her knowledge and experience in the area of human rights. This is also where she found herself on September 11th 2001. Simić again faced explosions and human death.

Simić has been victimized so many times in her life. But, despite all these personal traumas, Simić does not explicitly identify as a victim or as a survivor. She identifies as an academic who writes about war in Bosnia and whose responsibility has been to spread the truth about what was done in Bosnia by Serbs. In her opinion, as a Serb she needs to write about atrocities committed by Serbs, while it is the responsibility of academics of other nationalities to write about atrocities done by others.

Simić's dedication to tell the truth about atrocities committed by Serbs put her in disagreement with her family and some friends from Bosnia. For instance, Simić's father does not approve of Simić's work because, according to him, by writing about the massacre at Srebrenica, Simić spreads lies about Serbs. According to him, Srebrenica never happened. In the eyes of her father, Simić is a traitor because she writes about Srebrenica and blames Serbs for war atrocities (27). Moreover, he cannot understand her motivation to reveal the

truth about Serbian atrocities and believes that Simić has been forced to do so in order to pursue her academic career (29).

Yet, Simić has some likeminded friends in Bosnia. For instance, her friend Radmila Karlaš lives and works in Bosnia and she, like Simić, believes that the truth about the atrocities committed by Serbs has to be acknowledged by Serbs themselves. On the contrary, the majority of Simić's and Karlaš's compatriots do not agree with them. They believe that people like Karlaš and Simić are traitors (45) and they treat them as traitors. Karlaš's dog Toto Vuk was poisoned as a warning to Karlaš to stop spreading "anti-Serbian propaganda".

Although being perceived as a traitor has been hard, Simić and Karlaš do not wish to stop their work. They identify as truth-seekers and not as traitors although, as Simić discusses, they are aware of a relation between these two categories (26). What one person sees as an act of betrayal, the other person can see as truth disclosure.

Further, in this multilayered book Simić opens a question about the objectivity of academics and researchers who are personally involved in the topic of their research. On that note, she discusses her ability to write objectively about what happened during 1990s in the former Yugoslavia (2). As Ghassan Hage nicely articulates, even when the researcher identifies with the people (s)he writes about, one still can be a good researcher by having "a capacity to recognize and critically reflect on this vacillation" between observation and emotional participation.¹

Emotions drive Simić's writing, but they are not her standpoint.

On one hand, her personal experience has given her a passion and interest in the main topic of her work. On the other hand, being a Serb brought her not only emotions but knowledge as well. It provides her with a lot of informal knowledge about Serbia, Bosnia, the war, 1990s history, economy, politics and policies. Everyday life spent in Bosnia and Serbia has brought her information that is priceless for a researcher. Simić let her own life experience and the stories of her friends complement the existing body of literature about the war in the former Yugoslavia. Simić offers this unique insider/outsider perspective and with her writings she not only writes about the truth but also opens a door for many other personal narratives of academics whose ethnic identity determinate not only their life but their career as well. For that I thank Simić on behalf of many other emerging academics with first-hand trauma and post-trauma experience.

JASMINA KIJEVČANIN

¹ Ghassan Hage, Hating Israel in the field, *Anthropological Theory*, March 2009, vol. 9, no.1, pp.59-79.