



AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Projects
Collection

This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.

The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The following pages feature selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

Table of Contents

Anonymous, Little Stories of the Big Steppe	3
Lien Arits, Home is where I planted my Akidene	11
Mattia Bastianelli Gambini, Try	19
Dawne Y. Curry, Three Mothers and a Raid	29
Evghenii Alexandrovici Goloşceapov, How to get home	37
Saugat Pokharel, AI Anxiety: Fear of Being Left Behind	45
Geanina Turcanu, Post-Revolution ghosts. A Christmas Carol	53
Machteld Vonk, The thing about children	59

Little Stories of the Big Steppe

Anonymous

“Oh, Mommy, pleaaase,” was the final appeal of my baby sister.

Mom gave it another thought and, given that all three of us were all over her, the only choice she felt she had was to surrender. Blissfully, we started jumping up and left and right while our Mom went to her coat, took all the money she had in its pockets and – after looking at the contents of her palm for a moment – put the coat on, told us to behave, and left.

From the entrance door, we rushed to the window overlooking our front yard, and only from that window was the shop visible – standing proudly on a tiny hill. At that moment I was to report to my two younger siblings on Mom’s journey to that only shop in the village.

So I go, “She’s halfway through.” They unanimously scream “Yaay!”

That reporting duty of mine was due to me being the only one of the three tall enough to reach the window. Well, with a bit of windowsill support, while those two didn’t reach even the windowsill.

“And now? Where is she now?”, they asked impatiently while jerking my hand jumpingly. I say, “She’s entering the shop!” My baby brother dropped to the floor under the weight of happiness his tiny heart was overjoyed with.

“Tell us everything you see!” my sister commanded.

“I will”, was my response.

“And now, and now? Has she exited yet?”

My jumping heart was so joyous that I’m not sure my reporting duty was being carried out sufficiently. But gosh, even a split second-long delay would upset those two, so I pulled my free-spirited philosophical self back together and said that Mom was still in the store.

My baby brother got up and, with all the seriousness of the matter, stated that that was due to the difficulty of choice. A huge smile appeared on his face when he added, “Maybe Mommy will get us something in addition to the cookies!” They both started jumping again, while I was jumping in my heart just imagining it was true.

“She’s out!” I screamed. The euphoria that came upon us filled the entire room – perhaps, the whole tiny house we lived in.

“Do you see what she has in her hands?” my brother asked.

“She is carrying a bag”, I responded.

“Is it big?” my sister continued.

“It is big,” was my response after careful examination of the bag’s size thanks to what I thought back then was my magical skill of zooming in.

“Can you see what’s inside?” one of them inquired. And while I was thinking how to respond, Mom opened our wooden gate and entered. We three rushed to the entrance door and started applauding in unison when she opened it.

“What did you get us, Mommy?” we asked altogether. And instead of answering she just stretched her arm toward us and gave us the bag.

We gladly took it and rushed to the kitchen, turned left, and entered our teeny-tiny living room. The sofa was implicitly chosen as our place for landing. As soon as we reached it, we put the bag onto it, carefully opened it, and saw the cookies. What a blissful sight that was! We asked Mom to divide them for us and right after she did, we each grabbed one and started savouring it, looking at each other with the happiest sparks in our eyes.

* * *

It was not before I got into my adulthood that I could fully embrace and appreciate how difficult it was for our parents to provide for us back in the 90s in Ukraine.

The country had just gained its independence. “Splendid!”, you’d say, right? And it was! However, the people of Ukraine quickly realized that the country was left in economic ruins after decades of Soviet rule, with an urgent need to relaunch itself... and little strength to do so.

This is how the decade that became quite idiomatic came about. In the 2000s up until 2014, you would hear from many something like, “Are they trying to send us back into the 90s?” – where 90s would stand for dark, hungry, volatile, and uncertain times.

Truth be told, this is not how we, then children, felt. But thinking back to our parents with full-time jobs from dawn ‘till dusk – for which neither of them was paid for years – and having to provide for the three of us... it never ceases to break my heart.

Those were the times of temporary currency, inflation, devaluation, and other terms only economists use confidently. Those were the times that if you get luck and get paid your monthly salary, sometimes the only thing you could afford buying would be a box of matches.

Speaking of matches: they were quite necessary, during long and

regular blackouts, which lasted for years. I remember doing my homework by candlelight while the world outside our tiny window was immersed in complete darkness. Those evenings by candlelight must have left a lasting effect on me, as even in the present times, I never fail to appreciate the evening city lights. They turn me into a little girl in awe admiring their beauty.

My family comes from the northwest of the country. After the Chernobyl disaster, our village fell into one of the radioactive contamination zones, which forced us to move all the way to the south of the country, just a few dozen kilometres up the Crimean Peninsula. Some doctor advised such a move to my mom, saying that the sea breeze will heal her children. And we did move, however, the sea breeze became the seas' breeze, in plural, as we started living between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

I clearly remember my first day at school: my classmates didn't understand me, and it felt quite lonely during the recesses. It wasn't because they were mean; it was because their language was surzhyk, a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, while I spoke Ukrainian with a few Belarusian words. Now I know they were Belarusian, but back then I was confident they were Polish.

Step by step – or better, recess after recess – we started understanding each other's '*language*' so to say. The school programme was in Ukrainian, though, but maybe their challenge with understanding me was the fact that we were first graders, and they simply didn't hear much of Ukrainian before, or at least not enough to develop an ear for it.

In the South of Ukraine, we have steppe. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as:

1. one of the vast usually level and treeless tracts in southeastern Europe or Asia
2. arid land with xerophilous vegetation found usually in regions of extreme temperature range and loess soil.

Our Steppe in the Kherson region definitely falls into the above categories: it's vast with blistering hot summers and sometimes harsh winters. It's not exactly treeless, however, due to human presence and perseverance. It's rather an oasis.

But most importantly, it smells like Home – home, where you always want to come back: be it to lick your wounds, be it to celebrate life. By pure accident or a game of fate, if you wish, the Steppe got forever engraved in my heart and soul.

Historically serving also as a home for numerous tribes like Sarmatians, Scythians, and Goths, to name a few, our Steppe is free in spirit and vast in nature. A reliable irrigation system made it possible to grow amazingly sweet fruit and juicy vegetables, providing for its people.

Our Steppe became part of my identity, the indispensable one. Its first winters, however, were a tad challenging.

* * *

Mom dressed us up: a few pairs of pants, a few sweaters, heavy scarves, headscarves and on top of them went our winter hats, then coats with gloves attached to a string. God knows how many pairs of socks, boots. And having achieved that, she put us out of the door, asking us to be careful.

I immediately put myself between my sister and brother, took their hands and we started the journey to their kindergarten. Just to help you imagine: the distance from our home to the kindergarten was a few hundred meters, but sometimes it felt like a mission impossible, and that was one of those days.

The wind got so wild that instead of walking, we were running – and not out of our own free will. It was blowing into our backs so strongly that the only thing that saved us from being blown away was my school backpack filled with heavy textbooks, copybooks, pens, and crayons.

So *runningly* we reached the kindergarten and I felt relieved that half of my mission that morning was accomplished. But right after the 'phew' moment came a question: how in the world was I going to make it in the opposite direction, having to fight *against* the wind this time? And this time without those two little balancing kettlebells I happened to have left in the kindergarten!

Somehow, I got to the kindergarten's gate and slowly proceeded one-on-one against the wind in my face, hugging every lamppost and tree on my way – at the end of that journey they felt like my best friends.

That day I didn't get 'gone with the wind' – but I was close. And that was the day when little me fully comprehended the difference between my former home's climate and the new home's climate – the Steppe's climate.

* * *

When we moved into our new home, our neighbours from all sides came to meet us. One evening our '*left*' neighbour came over and, when he found out where we were from, he took us to his barn and gave us a watermelon he preserved from the summer. Watermelon in February! We, the kids, were delighted!

A watermelon back from where we were from was a very rare treat, and apparently knowing that our kind and generous new neighbour exclaimed, "You will have plenty of those here in summer!" In that moment, in our eyes, our new neighbour looked like Saint Nicolas to us, a younger version, though, than the one usually portrayed in children's books.

We couldn't believe our luck and rushed back home to have the watermelon. Sadly, the watermelon aged inside, but the image of it got engraved into our memory forever. Now we were in the Watermelon Land! Think about that for a minute!

* * *

To make ends meet, our parents had a huge vegetable garden. There were plenty of fruit trees for jams and jellies, as well as chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs. Since no one had any money, people bartered, exchanging goods and services. Even salesmen who eventually ended up visiting the village, offering some typology of goods and knowing that nobody would have any money to pay them, often asked the price in chickens.

I remember one day a sort of tiny van came and stopped next to the shop – the only shop in the village – so passers-by would stop and ask what that family was offering. Needless to say, the news about parrots reached the school in very little time, and all the children instead of heading home, ran to the place to see real parrots. I wasn't an exception and in my own timid way approached the van and started staring at the parrots, admiring them.

They were fascinating: light blue and light green, and there were so many of them!

As I was standing there with my friend, the lady said, "They are budgies. You can get one for two hens or one rooster."

We thanked the lady and headed home, thinking that there was no way whatsoever that we would ever get our respective parents to pay such a high price for a parrot. We also discussed that a bird for bird price does actually make sense, for parrots are birds and so are chickens, just bigger and heavier, and with less flying experience.

My friend, however, unlike me, had grandparents living in our village, so we decided to ask her grandma for help. The negotiations lasted for what felt like a couple of hours, and finally the grandma gave in, adding though, "I'll give you a rooster, forget about two hens!"

Fair enough, we thought. Overwhelmed with joy, we waited outside their household for the rooster. He came in a potato sack, and we headed back to the village center.

Home is where I planted my Akidene

About love, migration and freedom of movement

Lien Arits

Me: "Boobs, I imagine you're too busy packing or coping now to have a call. So I just want to tell you that I am so happy this day has come that you can go get 'em. Your freedom and human right to be a citizen.

At what time is your flight tomorrow?

Also, more important, whenever I can help you with anything remotely, just give me a call. Promise?

I love you!"

-Ziyad: "Hey love, thank you. I don't think I want to sleep, my flight is early morning but I also don't see the benefit of talking about it at this point as I don't want to delve into how I'm feeling maybe this is why we all forget momentarily how things feel after they're done - we actively avoid acknowledging them..

I met Boobs, my nickname for Ziyad[1], during my studies in Human Rights and Democratisation in the Arab World, at the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth.

[1] Ziad is a pseudonym used to protect the individual's identity for safety reasons.

During a school trip to Chouf, a mountainous area south-east of Beirut, where the largest forest of the magic Cedars of Lebanon provides for clean air above the clouds, Ziyad gave me their shirt when they noticed me shivering from the cold. We had talked a couple of seconds earlier. And now they gave me their shirt? I was surprised by their sweetness. Without a word, I accepted the checked shirt, brown and gray, smelling like a sporty, gender neutral, deodorant. I felt seen by the gesture.

The smell of the pine leaves reminded me of those rituals the priest used to do with incense, when my parents still used to take me to church. I felt small, in that new environment. Surrounded by twenty-some classmates from South Africa to the USA, from Gaza to Barcelona, all strangers, shyly searching for a connection, an invite to a small talk. Above the clouds, in that forest, Ziyad and I planted a seed that would soon develop into a friendship across borders.

I moved to Beirut in the summer of 2021, in between two suffocating covid-pandemic lockdowns, bored of friends and family in my little established life, house and career on track. I left on my way to chase my dream of studying in 'the Middle-East', trying to grasp what makes Arabs flee to Europe. I know they flee from war, political conflict or economic hardship, of course. But, why Europe, full of racism? Is it the proximity, or the fact that Europe generally speaking has higher-income economies? And, how severe should a livelihood become for one to leave home in ways entailing the risk of dying on the way, knowing that the destination country will not welcome you as a child who falls in the arms of their parents after being bullied at school. Rather the opposite. Why do you try to make it to a destination community that will bully you?

Many evenings we spent discussing this dilemma among friends, while sipping Almaza, the Lebanese pils beer, and having late night kaak u jibneh, a typical Lebanese type of bread with melted cheese inside, delivered to Ziyad's door. (It works for breakfast, or as a late night snack.)

Ziyad doesn't have the identification papers that allow you to enter Europe. Their mother is Lebanese, their father is Armenian-Syrian. They don't have Lebanese citizenship, as Lebanese mothers may not pass their nationality on to their children, according to Lebanese nationality law[2]. Ziyad's father missed his citizenship documents to transfer them to his children, for which Ziyad did not have any citizen's rights in Lebanon and is classified as 'stateless'. Because of this law, an estimated amount of 27.000 people are stateless, although they were born in Lebanon.

Today, July 6 2024, he is on his way to get Armenian citizenship. After 27 years of waiting, to avoid military service in Armenia, he took his first plane trip with a laissez-passer, a document for stateless people to travel across internal and external borders. He is on his way to finally see his human right to citizenship and freedom of movement realized. Once he will have the Armenian passport, we will discuss again this dilemma of staying or leaving Lebanon.

Like we do over and over again. Like I also do with my other friends from Lebanon, such as Mariya.

* * *

Me: "Kifik?"

*- Mariya: Habibi ana mnih
I miss you. How's everything? And Joe is he better?*

"All is good. In my free time now I'm working on a project together with fellow alumni of the master's in Lebanon, on climate justice. It keeps me going and feeling useful in this fuckedup world. I have to admit I'm having a hard time allowing myself 'to enjoy life in a Western way, ya3ne by going out for drinks, party, and other privileged things."

[2] <https://sirenassociates.com/country/lebanon/statelessness-a-human-rights-not-political-issue-in-lebanon/>

-Wow the project sounds interesting! any help needed in data analytics lmk. I can understand your standpoint, but don't punish yourself, you are here in this western world for a reason. Advocate for what you believe in but also be gentle with yourself, and give yourself a hug everyday.

It is always good to check in with Mariya. She is the type of friend that fills me with energy and confidence, she feels me from a distance, although we don't hear each other often. She says that is because my star sign is Gemini, and all important people in her life are Gemini, like her sister and her mother. I think it is because we share a sensitivity towards injustice.

Mariya moved to Portugal nine months after we had met, in November 2021, in Akkar, the rough utmost northern part of Lebanon, connecting the country with its neighbor Syria, whose remote villages pass on a smell of bonfires to their visitors who venture into the red zone border-area[3] to absorb the overwhelming autumn colors. She sat next to me on the bus that drove us from Dawra, Beirut to Akkar, a six hour drive. Mariya and I bonded over fresh dates that she brought and generously shared with me, while we discovered our common passion for studying and reflection. That passion for knowledge drove her to migrate to Lisbon for a Master's in Data driven Marketing Intelligence. (Isn't that funny? I moved to her home to find more knowledge. She would go look for more knowledge in Europe). But fairly, it was also the urge to build stability in life that pushed her away from Lebanon, to Portugal.

I just called Mariya, a video call.

"Are you coming?" she asked me, to Lebanon she meant. She knew we had our appointment at the local migration office yesterday. By asking that question, she was actually, indirectly, asking "did he get his papers"?

[3] According to the Belgian Foreign Affairs Office, the border area between Lebanon and Syria should be avoided under all circumstances.

“Yes. He did! Our family reunion application has been accepted.”

Tears started rolling down her cheeks when I told her he is safe and freed from worries about his residence permit for the coming five years. He is free to move again, across borders. Meanwhile, my tear-stained face was being passed around among Mariya’s extended family, gathered in the kitchen of her mother’s house in Ghazir, half an hour drive from Beirut, almost 400 meters above sea-level. A classic Sunday afternoon ritual among Lebanese Christians.

“So you can come to Lebanon this summer?”, she asked once again, this time more convincing.

Should we? I really want to. But what with the war...

She assured me “the war (between Hezbollah and the IDF) will not happen in summer, Israel cannot afford two fronts and neither can the US, especially not before their elections.

Heartwarmed by her empathy, I told Mariya I felt like calling her rather than someone from my family or Belgian friends. We had informed several among them over a Whatsapp message: ‘Joe got his papers!’, which provoked loads of emojis associated with happiness. But, you likely reply with tears - happy tears - if you have been through the process yourself. The process of proving - that you are a couple, waiting - for an email with a file number, doubting - if you’ve given enough details about your intimate relationship, and hoping - for the best, or just for an honest officer at the foreigners affairs desk who will grant you the right to be with your family. In Belgium, 32,710 third-country nationals received a residence permit for family reasons for the first time in 2021, the year Joe and I met[4]. 32,710 times tears rolling down the cheeks of at least two people, be it happy tears or tears of stress relief. Little did we know back then.

[4] https://www.myria.be/files/Cijfers_Recht_op_een_gezinsleven_2023.pdf

Ziyad and Mariya are only two of the majority of young people in Lebanon trying to leave the country, resulting in a brain drain. As the Arab Youth Survey showed, more than 3 out of 4 of the youth between 18 and 24 wanted to emigrate[5]. And things in Lebanon only got worse since then. According to the Beirut-based Information International research center the number of Lebanese emigrants soared from 17,721 in 2020 to 79,134 in 2021, an increase of 450%.[6]

They take planes with their brains. They leave their hearts behind, in between the tabbouleh cut with devotion by their mothers, and the Friday night shawarma, from now on only enjoyed by those friends who remain behind.

* * *

Joe[7]: "My mom will plant your akidene[8] tree in front of the house today 😊 3

- Me: heyyyyyy 😊

*It's so nice that you have a tree that you planted in Lebanon
It means so much to me*

*- To me too. 3njad
It's beautiful*

Joe, my love and partner, was not one of those who are wanting or trying to leave when I met him. No single brain cell in his head considered moving abroad. And he was not alone.

[5] <https://beirutpoliticalreview.org/publications/f/youth-unemployment-and-migration-in-lebanon>

[6] <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/stricken-lebanon-endures-3rd-exodus-as-its-people-flee-disaster/>

[7] Joe is a pseudonym used to protect the individual's identity for safety reasons.

[8] Akidene is the Arabic name for a loquat tree. It gives my favorite fruits to be found in Lebanon.

There are other young people determined to stay. Almost one out of four among those between 18 and 24 years old. Although that sounds like a sad minority, many among them are determined to make Lebanon a better place. They start their own business, buy a piece of land to grow their own crops, or stick to the family tradition of cultivating olive trees. Although even the latter is becoming very hard, due to the 'Israeli Defense Force' who send white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon, across the border to the South of Lebanon, destroying not only the trees but also causing soil infertility for decades. They make that simple life just impossible. I hate them.

Thoughts and conversations on the role of the occupier will return in this book, when I reflect on the situation in which Lebanon finds itself today and since the civil war from 1975 and 1990, in which Joe's father had to defend himself against Syrian troops trying to conquer Zahle, Joe's hometown. The same civil war that involved Palestinians from Lebanon. It might sound complicated if you have no prior knowledge about the 'Middle-East'. I will try my best to give you new insights, based on my little knowledge and experience.

But first back to when I met Joe, my love and partner. He had a stubborn wish to stay, which made me fall in love. He made me see the beauty of life in Lebanon. On our first date, I felt butterflies in my stomach, not only for him but also for the country he called 'home'.

It was Joe's long black hair and dark eyes, lit by the stage light of the concert in Ballroom Blitz, near the shore of Beirut port, that caught my attention. (And his cute dance moves, *akid*[9].) He noticed me, but was too shy to close the gap between us on the dance floor. I did not give up. At the end of the evening, after a lot of encouragement from his friends, he asked me for my name and phone number. That is where our love story started.

[9] Akid is Arabic for 'of course'.

Little did Joe and I know that night about our future together, while dancing to the Arab rap texts of The Synaptik (السينابتيك) - that I couldn't get a word of. I was dancing for the first time again since 2020, when covid-measures in Belgium prevented people from sweating on dancefloors. I even went back to the farm where my parents raised me, in a remote area in the North-East of the Limburg province. Joe was dancing for the first time since 2020 too. His hometown friends, all from the Beqaa valley, were celebrating that Joe had reached the liberating feeling he felt that night. He had overcome more challenging obstacles than some curfews and public gathering restrictions. In Lebanon covid was a minor issue in the midst of a popular uprising (thawra[10]) and a financial crisis ignited by a corrupt government.

* * *

[10] The civil protests, popularly known as 'thawra', had started in Lebanon on October 17th 2019.

Try

Mattia Bastianelli Gambini

The familiar smell of mud and wet grass fills her nostrils, as Dorotea tries to inhale all the oxygen she can and stand up. Her mind is already projected onto the next action, but her vision is blurry from the hit and obstructed by one of her blonde curls that the mud and sweat have fixed to her face. Her knee aches – a token of the battles fought on less-than-ideal rugby pitches throughout Italy. Doesn't matter. After all, she's the captain of Romagna RFC, one of the only two women rugby XV's team in Emilia-Romagna, and they're playing on their home soil, in Cesena. She just can't afford to appear lazy.

Dorotea is a relentless rugby player. She's always looking for her next job on the field. After a pass, a tackle, a ruck, her experienced ice blue eyes will automatically begin scanning for information that allows her to plan her next move. Maybe there's a weak link in the defense line that her team can exploit. Or maybe she will notice that the opponent winger is screaming for the ball out wide. If you have presence of mind, that's what you always do. But when you play at home, something changes within. It's a sort of adrenaline rush that makes you more competitive, determined, fierce. You've got to stand your ground and defend your home from the 'barbarians' that want to invade it.

And so Dorotea musters every fiber in her body and stands up again, covered in dirt. It must be one of the last actions of the game and Romagna must make it count – the score is not in their favor. "I want the ball! Pass it!" Possessed by a hidden, aggressive side of her that only surfaces on a rugby field, she screams for the ball as her forward pack (the first eight players of the team, usually the heavier and stronger individuals) are carrying it inside the defensive line. On this chilly Sunday in February, the team hasn't been good in keeping possession of the ball for more than three or four phases: "Get it out, Luzia!" can be heard before the ball is lost under the pile of players that forms every time a player is tackled.

Dorotea is ready to receive the ball. As she sees it spinning out of the hands of her teammate towards her, time slows down. Her hands are reaching for the ball and her heart is pumping faster: in her freedom to express herself, a lucid euphoria pervades her and hunts away any fear to drop the ball down. The ball slips through her fingers and hits her chest, but she still manages to adjust it and turn around to pass it again. It's a good pass that meets her teammate running at an angle, but the defensive line has had time to push forward and the collision is imminent. A thud accompanied by the sound of compressed air being forcefully exhaled announces the physicality of the game. It's chaotic bodies in motion, wrestling, struggling for every inch, until the white oval-shaped ball squeezes out of the hands of the girl in the beautiful Romagna's daunting black jersey. Thick yet slightly elastic, it is made to withstand pushing and pulling. The number on the back lacks a name because it is not designed for a specific person, thus it often doesn't fit perfectly and players like Dorotea must tuck it in their shorts. In rugby, you don't own a jersey. The jersey owns you.

The ball is lost forward. Dorotea dives onto it, but it's more of a natural reflex at this point. She knows that once the ball is lost forwards, the possession goes to the other team. As she stands up she hears 3 whistles.

It's over.

* * *

This time they won't be singing the victory song 'Romagna Mia' in front of the stands, but for them it's still important to go and thank their small audience regardless of the score. After all, "they are the engine of it all," as Dorotea is telling me, sitting at a table outside of one of our favorite cafes in San Marino. She puts down her exuberant sunglasses and lights up a cigarette.

"Those few supporters that keep showing up, the most attached to us, they give us a motive to keep pushing through... knowing you're not doing it just for yourself. It's not enough, but it's a stimulus."

Though she's usually reserved, Dorotea appreciates her family being there to support her. The adrenaline and tension disappear – at least momentarily – when they hug after a game and she can be off to address the team with a clearer mind.

When I wear the red Romagna jersey (there are at least 2), my view of the stands is different. I have the privilege of playing for the men's team of Romagna and, being a childhood friend of Dorotea, we often compare our experiences. It's not uncommon for a Romagna male rugby player to see red and yellow smoke emanating from the stands at the end of a game, only for it to clear out and reveal an almost packed stadium (albeit a very small one) cheering, chanting, and some even preparing 'Asado'. Dorotea doesn't have to squint her eyes to find the faces of her loved ones in the stands, nor is she distracted by the smell of grilled sausages as she's playing.

While the amount of spectators is not the sole measure to assess a sport-category in its entirety, it can be a good indicator of the attention it can harness and the investments it receives. We cannot think that the amount of people that show up to watch a game depends solely on how spectacular it is. The low visibility of women's rugby in this region is a symptom of larger issues. "People can't see us, we are not enough." Dorotea knows strength is in numbers and numbers are a big factor in rugby.

It's a complex sport that requires a large and diverse pool of players with different competencies on the field. Each team has fifteen players on the pitch, plus seven or eight on the bench, and these are the bare minimum for a team that wants to compete. You need even more to get through the season. Romagna used to gather the best female players from the southern half of Emilia-Romagna, but after COVID-19 the players' base was reduced and it had to unite with another club from the area around Bologna, further north, in order to survive. Now they are left with about 20 players that are actively part of the last standing rugby XV's women team in the area.

Coming from different cities, from Bologna to San Marino, each one travels up to 50 minutes to the training grounds. Commute alone can represent a barrier for many young girls wanting to play the sport, and while travel allowances (and in

some cases even stipends) are granted to many men players at the level of Serie A and Serie B (first and second league in Italian non-professional rugby), the same cannot be said for our colleagues.

“I’d rather not look at how much I must spend just to be able to play this sport,” - Dorotea says with a patient smile, “but not everybody can afford the same luxury and this might cut them out.”

But this is just one of the barriers to accessing rugby for women. The biggest challenge is overcoming the prejudice about rugby being a “men’s sport” and the stigma around being a female rugby player. “People think that if you play rugby, as a woman, you’re either a tomboy or lesbian.” Dorotea is not new to these kinds of comments, and she’s not alone. The Italian Rugby Union recently released a video showing some of the most recurring insults that professional rugby players receive online. Many of those targeted at women were purposefully attacking their femininity, alleged sexual orientations and, ultimately, their dignity.

Dorotea has delicate features, a tight waist and small hands. “They say: ‘It doesn’t look like you play rugby.’ and when I ask them how I should look, they usually reply ‘bigger, fatter, more ‘macho.’ And they start posing and grunting [like cavemen], implying that that’s what we should look like. It’s a distorted and ignorant vision.”

These prejudices, which too often prevent girls from trying out this sport, are even perpetuated within the family and in the school environment. It is even worse when women practicing rugby face discrimination and frequently abandon sports altogether because of it. A survey carried out in Italy with rugby girls aged 10-13 and 14-18, as part of the Erasmus+ Sport Woman in Rugby project, found that while almost half of girls aged 10-13 enjoyed the friendships created thanks to this sport the most, 40 percent of them were discouraged from playing it, largely by peers and family. When looking at girls aged 10-18, the survey found that more than a quarter felt discriminated against because of rugby, mostly in school and by friends.

Stereotypes represent one of the biggest barriers to the development of women rugby. Girls that might want to express themselves in this sport, but are discouraged by the stigma around it, are missing out on ways to express and – for some – fulfill themselves.

“You’ve got to be willing to get muddy, to sweat, to mess up your hair, and get bruises and scars. These things are harder to deal with for girls because of societal expectations,” Dorotea tells me as she takes another puff of her cigarette. She wears the marks on her skin with pride, they are stories to tell from the times when she feels most alive.

Her passion transpires beyond the rugby pitch and she knows that “All these prejudices disappear when people actually go to the field and find out what it really is about. Yes you get hurt, you get dirty, but they never show all the good that it has done to people like me.” In this, our experiences align perfectly. Rugby can be deeply engaging on an emotional level and allow for a self-discovery journey that makes you grow as an individual and find confidence in sides of you that you didn’t know you had.

“As a person, rugby has mutated me and my parents have fallen in love with it by seeing what it has done to me. This is what should be communicated to those who are outside the fanbase. We should display how warm the community is, how much fun it is, how many friendships are created, how much of what you have inside can be unleashed, and how your self-esteem benefits from it. This sport is more than just brute force. This sport unites people even if they don’t play it.”

* * *

On a typical training day, around 20:00, Dorotea and I would see each other from afar at the pitch in Cesena. In winter it would be dark already, but during the summer this place treats you with some beautiful sunsets. Men start practicing earlier and take possession of the whole artificial training ground. Sometimes we would hear a loud roar coming from the nearby football stadium and, in turning around, we would see the women’s team starting to warm up in a small patch of land that they’ll use until we’re

finished on the artificial ground. Dorotea would be there almost all of the times, discussing with her teammates on how to make some sharper movements and plays. The captaincy requires that she addresses the team's weaknesses, while setting a positive mindset in preparation of the next game.

For an outside observer, the view would tell the tale immediately: on the main training ground, they would see a group of about 35 men, wearing the same training kit branded with the golden rooster holding a 'Caveja', a typical symbol of Romagna; while on a small field to the side, there would be 15 to 20 women with little in common, except for their passion.

That's because even when barriers to access are overcome, the idea that rugby is not a sport for women translates into less investments and resources allocated to their sector. This can be seen at the national level, with only the top 24 female players being put under contract by the Italian Rugby Union since 2022, but it's even more obvious for local teams: "We don't have physiotherapists that take care of us as you do, nor a training kit or a bag, very basic things," Dorotea tells me. It must be said that Romagna provides the only opportunity for these women to play rugby XV's in the region and does not ask for a subscription fee from their athletes, unlike other teams.

However, what is generally asked of a female athlete is much more. "What I feel is discriminatory is that I cannot afford to be 'just' a rugby player, like you can. I need to be the best athlete on the field, as we all do, and on top of that I must take care of keeping the team together, bringing more girls and visibility to the team by doing extra activities without any support, because we need them and there is no real dedicated recruitment project. I would just like to be a rugby player, but I can't and it stresses me out. I need to take energies away from practicing my passion and devote them to all those aspects that revolve around it: from managing the team, to planning for the immediate future with the staff. I would like to pack my bag and go home after training, but for us it's not that easy."

But Dorotea and her teammates, like many other rugby girls elsewhere, are determined to chase their ambitions at all costs, even by taking on responsibilities that would usually befall

on the managers. In doing this, they must sacrifice their time, which they take away from their studies, jobs, families, partners, and generally their personal lives. It goes to show the amount of passion, dedication, and perseverance that is required of a woman in rugby. It's not unusual to see self-managed social media profiles for these teams – this way they can tailor their communications to their audience and fight prejudices in their own words. “We even created a team Tinder profile so that more people know we exist!”

This feeling of being left alone in maintaining the team, counting only on your own resources and energies, undermines any attempt at creating a feeling of belonging to the same colours – of pride in wearing the same jersey. In the long run, it can be debilitating. “We’re always thinking of whether there would even be a team next year, there’s a constant uncertainty that affects our experiences.” The regret starts surfacing. “I love this sport, it’s part of who I am, but it has hurt me so much. It gives me a feeling of something unresolved; that I haven’t achieved all that I could have, because I could have given more, but without the opportunities, the support, the platform, it’s impossible. And when girls ask for equal conditions, we are seen as pretentious.”

* * *

It’s May. A peaceful sense of belonging quiets all the apprehension for the weeks to come. Dorotea has made sure that everything is in order for the departure of San Marino’s national rugby 7s team, which will compete at the 2023 Games of the Small States of Europe in Malta. She sighs, making peace with the side of her that wants everything to be perfectly arranged for others, and which too often pushes her to load an unfairly heavy weight on her shoulders. She sits on a bench facing the rugby field outside the clubhouse, the home of rugby in San Marino, her home that she contributed to build. She takes in the clean air that only a place so surrounded by trees and hills can provide and then she lights up a cigarette.

Dorotea watches us practicing in the field, knowing that now it’s up to us. Hoping that we can understand and live up to

the opportunity we're given. When you come from a micro-state, sometimes you forget of how difficult it is for other people to represent their nation in sports, the fierce competition, the sacrifices...

In San Marino, our hometown, our involvement in rugby differs slightly: Dorotea has an active and crucial role in the Sammarinese Rugby Union and, while she takes care of the development of rugby in our little country, her main focus is making sure that the men's national team can compete on the international stage every summer. I am one of the beneficiaries of Dorotea's efforts, and just recently became involved in women's rugby development in San Marino

Despite the strong mutual support that such a small community can enable, there's very little opportunities for her here. Just last year we were able to re-create a grassroots women's rugby team, held together by the coach's and the players' dedication, passion, and friendship, but the numbers are still low. Dorotea is almost 30, she has a job and rugby has been taking a lot from her; she doesn't know how long this will last. Despite everything, as if she could conjure more hours than a day is actually made of, Dorotea shows up at these local training sessions too. When I ask her why she gives so much, while receiving so little back, she replies: "I live off of the adrenaline that it gives me to see you playing. That adrenaline that I'd feel if I were in your shoes during these tournaments, I can put it to work so that at least you can feel it first-hand. I do what I do hoping that, one day, I'll also experience this."

Enabling other people to chase their dreams, while you don't know if you're allowed to dream in the first place is hard enough, but Dorotea doesn't falter. "I give my contribution because we rejoice together for what we can achieve with such a small group of people. This can resonate with others and hopefully bring bigger results than a win in a game of rugby. Hopefully, one day, there will be someone to give me the same opportunities."

Once the Games are concluded under the hot Maltese sun, it's time for the awards ceremony. It was the first time that San Marino had played against other national teams of such a high

level, and the results were not in our favor. Even in defeat, these experiences fill your heart to the point that you smile and are content regardless. Being able to travel, confront yourself with other players, tackle them, score tries to other national teams far better than you and most importantly, express yourself freely, all while representing your nation on the international stage sparks a feeling so liberating and empowering that it's very hard to put down in words.

Anyway, it's a very emotional moment now, especially for Dorotea: it's the women's national teams' turn to receive their awards. As she watches them smiling, taking in all the applauses, walking towards the event director, ready to shake their hands, she can feel her dreams hitting the wall of the harsh reality that San Marino is not ready to allow her to be there, to be proud of herself as a player and of her teammates, to be recognized for the way that she expresses herself on the field. And in that moment a tear breaks through her proud eyes. "I will never be able to experience this": that's what's pounding in her head as she watches her peers cheering.

Dorotea is a rugby player, a very good one too, one of those who will keep showing up week after week for years, who will withstand injuries, who will intentionally switch on her 'rugby-brain' before entering the pitch to be better than last time. She has ambitions and she knows she'd deserve to see them fulfilled. She knows she would enjoy herself competing at that level, if given the chance.

It's a bitter tear the one that's falling. "Despite all the work in any capacity, all the sacrifices, all the dedication, I will never get there, even though I know I could be one of them. To me, dreaming causes sadness and disillusionment because I know that the times are not ripe for me to have the same opportunities, there aren't enough players in San Marino." The next tear though is somewhat sweet and hopeful, it's the tear of a player that stands up after being tackled in the mud and looks for the next opportunity:

"You guys need to give it your all, because what you do is inspiring to others. If there's just a remote possibility that I can do the same in the next years, I'll break my bones to get there."

Although women's rugby is slowly becoming more popular and normalized worldwide, there are still barriers to its fulfillment. The prejudices and stigmas around girls playing rugby come in various forms: from online hate speech, to discouragement from peers and family. Discrimination takes shape in a continued under-investment in the women sector, because rugby is still considered a sport for big, strong, primitive men; with management paying little attention to the very basic requests that players like Dorotea have. Yes, it's more difficult to play rugby as a woman. It requires commitment, passion, perseverance and the courage to go against the world.

But Dorotea has hopes for the future: at some point the turnover of the people in power will bring decision-makers that are more sensible to their participation in sports and things will start to change. Girls that are currently playing will grow up to be the ones who take the lead in providing better and equal opportunities for the next generations.

"I wish I could give more. If I didn't play, I could transfer my passion in a more constructive manner to other people. Right now I'm so frustrated that sometimes I forget why I'm here, doing what I'm doing. I would like to find that healthy passion again and really communicate it to girls new to rugby. Maybe even build something 'serious' in San Marino." Rugby needs these people and it will keep failing and missing out on them until Unions worldwide do not take concrete steps to eradicate stereotypes and renew the public image of rugby.

But fighting discrimination is not enough. Resources should be allocated based on effort and needs. If we keep giving more to the same categories that have benefitted from the status quo for years, the gap with more vulnerable ones can only increase and women rugby players will have to run more and more to reach their try-line.

Dorotea puts down the cigarette and looks in the distance, projected into the future.

"I wish to conclude my career with satisfaction, leaving something positive behind and knowing that even if I stop playing, the team will go on and it will be in a better place than before."

Three Mothers and a Raid

Dawne Y. Curry

On 10 December 1976, the police from John Vorster Square raided and ransacked the home belonging to Hilda Phahle, an educator from Alexandra Township in northeastern Johannesburg, South Africa. The story that she recounts involves George and Levi Phahle, two of her sons who both went into exile in Botswana where they lived in that nation's capital, Gaborone. George operated a transport business while Lindi was a social worker for the Botswanan government. Lindi's cousin Joseph Malaza was only visiting Gaborone for the night. The other house occupant, Levi Phahle, George's younger brother and Phahle's last born ultimately became a survivor, an eyewitness and a modern-day griot-storyteller.

The family's trouble began in the seventies not too long after the Soweto Uprising when it began on 16 June 1976. Students marched out of Morris Isaacson High School to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for all classes. The revolt, which lasted over the year, also encouraged students and ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) activists alike to flee the country and go into exile. This backdrop set the tone for the government's harassment of the Phahle family.

On one occasion, the police paid a visit and

“ they. . . did not have the decency to tell us what they were looking for. Their language was spiced with the violence of words.”

Phahle concluded that this episode began the beginning of the rest of her beloved son George's life. George's life expired on 14 June 1985 when the South African Defence Force (SADF) crossed international borders and raided their home in Gaborone. Lindi, George's wife and her brother, Joseph Malaza also lost their lives from gunfire.

News of this assault reached Alexandra via the radio. An announcer proudly reported SADF's successful raid. The units had flushed out ANC exiles and had annihilated them. The Sunday Times denigrated George while The City Express offered a consoling report. Television channels broadcast scenes of the raid. The same communicative power used its platform to prove that George was a terrible man who had deserved his merciless death.

Phahle wanted confirmation. She called her son and daughter-in-law, but there was no response. She phoned a friend in Botswana who confirmed the deaths. Phahle then asked herself:

“how does a parent receive and react to such devastating news?”

All she said [was]:

‘My God, My God, have You forsaken me?’

When Phahle finally settled down, she gained the courage to inform Lindi's mother of her daughter's passing. Later on, during the day, her son Levi Phahle, the sole survivor, phoned to break the tragic news. Levi survived because he had hidden underneath the bed. They killed Joseph Malaza thinking that he was him.

On the night of the raid, Levi explains how the SADF arrived swearing.

They behaved as if they were drugged and drunk. They wanted George to open the door, but instead, the couple ran into his bedroom where they pushed his portable piano against it. Lindi kneeled on the floor faced down. George fell over her as a sign of protection. The SADF blew the door wide open. The piano fell against Levi's bed where he took cover and watched the events unfold.

Levi saw them pump bullets into his brother and his wife. The bullets penetrated them simultaneously.

The police then turned over face upwards with one asking:

“is hulle dood?” (are they dead)?

“Morsdood-stone (dead) was their reply.

God spared Levi to tell this story, otherwise Phahle would have lost two sons that day.

Mamokete Malaza was another mother who lost her son Joseph Malaza during the Gaborone Raid. Malaza went to Phahle’s house after all the wailing and crying that had occurred when she and her family heard the horrific news.

Phahle, Esther Mthembu (another parent who lost a child) and Malaza attained a kombi (mini-van taxi) to transport the cadavers back to South Africa from Botswana.

It took six or seven days before the three mothers had reached their destination. Immediately upon their arrival, local community members transported them to church so that they could pray on their behalf. They went to George’s place and found it in extreme shambles.

“The house was damaged beyond repair. It was proclaimed uninhabitable. All the furniture was bullet-damaged, nothing in the wardrobe was spared by the police.”

Flora, the family’s helper, survived because she had spent the night out. Her room also stood in shambles. By witnessing this horrific scene, the mothers carried out two responsibilities.

First and foremost, Phahle, Mthembu and Mamokete carried out African cosmological duties when they visited the sites of death. Their journeys enabled them to tell the spirits that they were taking them back home to South Africa.

These fulfilled responsibilities meant that the parents had engaged in two processes: reclamation - the pursuit to find the whereabouts of the deceased and to reclaim their cadavers for proper burial services. The other mission, repatriation, undertook several activities.

Of most important were the church services that women attended. They did this until the Botswana government finally announced that all the assassinated victims were going to be buried on Wednesday. The mothers arrived to witness big white sheets inscribed with the names of the decedents. Malaza looked frantically for her son Joseph's name. She found it at the bottom. It was only then that Malaza believed that her son was among those killed.

Despite Malaza's pleas to take Joseph Malaza back to Soweto, the Botswanans had to follow protocol. They telexed Pretoria for permission to bury Joseph in South Africa. After the official papers arrived, the three women began their journey back to South Africa.

When they reached the border gates, Phahle, Mthembu and Malaza ran into some trouble. Attendants wanted to open Joseph's black coffin, but they struggled to open it. When all attempts proved futile, they finally let them pass. All three mothers completed repatriation, which was another goal that these mothers pursued when they went to Botswana, by conducting a proper burial. These parents firmly believed that their children deserved to rest in peace on the soil that they had died for.

“[Their] children fled [South Africa's] oppression. They went into exile, fighting for their rights, for the land of their birth, the land of their forefathers.”

The SADF followed George and Lindi to Gaborone, to torture and to massacre them beyond reason. Phahle's, Mtembu's and Malaza's children stood among the approximately 21,000 South Africans who died under apartheid from gunshots, pistol whippings, torture, bludgeons or 'alleged' suicide. Their deaths made them part of the collective oral obituary that the Apartheid regime created.

Oral obituaries are testimonies that discuss how people died rather than how they lived. They document past times, eating habits, first words, last words, the positions of the cadavers, the decedents' political affiliations and sporting activities that provided a briefing of the last days of their earthly life.

This whole affair conjured up three other oral obituaries that existed. For instance, the 'Guns of Gaborone' strike consumed the lives of fifteen men, women and children. The attack initiated and fomented militarized aggression. This encounter also wrote the ANC's elegy. A cadre of Black and White South African soldiers

'Liberation Struggle Eulogies: Death and Violence in Apartheid South Africa' offers a unique perspective on how nations deal with the demise and sacrifice of those who undertake the task of liberation, with a focus on South Africa. It provides specific examples of important approaches to understanding how Apartheid, the rigid system of racial segregation (1948-1994) denied the right to mourn on multiple occasions for different reasons during forty-six years of oppression. Officials dictated the date, time and length of funerals (Mzambu, 1996) and what survivors inscribed on tombstones (Curry, 2012). The state went as far as to disrupt the funerary process. Its police units invaded the sacred space, dispersed teargas and harassed attendants.

During the forty-six years in which apartheid operated, approximately 21,000 South Africans died (HSRC, 2019). They passed away from gunshot wounds, torture, bludgeoning, barbecuing and 'alleged suicide.'

The central question that *Liberation Struggle Eulogies* uses the digital and published transcripts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is:

did Africans enfranchise their grief by finding other ways to mourn or did they remain disempowered by never having full closure about the loss of loved ones?

Established the year after apartheid's abolition in 1995, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a major repository of digital and written transcripts of 21,000 testifiers. A little over 2,000 respondents appeared at the various public hearings held throughout the country. The purpose of the TRC was to '*promote reconciliation and forgiveness among perpetrators and victims of apartheid by full disclosure of the truth*' regarding gross human rights violations from 1960 to 1994 (Tutu, 1995). People came forward if they or their kin had been killed, abducted, tortured or severely ill treated for political reasons (Bozzoli, 1996).

Chroniclers documented the historical and structural background of Apartheid's violence, its system of racial oppression, and its gross violations of human rights (United States Peace Institute, 1995). The TRC sets the stage for many of the important questions engendered by its transcripts. The major concern is:

how did those testimonies provide a framework for analyzing and theorizing about death?

Respondents appeared in East London Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban to render testimonies that support the stages of eulogization that this study proposes. Sunrise connotes the deceased's birthdate and their baptism into politics. Twilight covers the period in which decedents neared their final hours while sunset marks their transitions from the earthly to the spiritual worlds. Each stage explores, interrogates and documents the ways in which the aggrieved tried to enfranchise their grief on behalf of the decedents.

This much-needed, innovative study, is crucial for understanding the anatomy of Apartheid: (1) how state sponsored assassinations provided a structural framework for analyzing eulogies; (2) how the decedents' repatriation represents another type of obituary, (3) how the tombstones inscriptions conceal truth, and lastly, (4) how oral obituaries raise questions about childhood and adulthood.

ANC activist George Phahle crossed both age thresholds. His marital status connoted adulthood, however, his mother crossed international boundaries to perform maternal duties for her 'grown, adult child' who died violently during the South African-sponsored raid in Gaborone, Botswana.

The Truth Commission's oral testimonies and government documents like the Cillie Commission Report which provides the findings of the Soweto Uprising, raise several important questions. Of most important is this one:

did these sources act as historical pallbearers and as
gravediggers because of the information that they provide on
death?

They include details about how loved ones passed away, the position of the cadavers, the decedents' ages, how survivors reclaimed the corpses and visited the sites of death or things like conversations they had before some of apartheid's fallen left the earth to enter the spiritual world.

Despite criticism of the Truth Commission, this body like the Cillie Commission Report, deserves credit for the internment and exhumation that it carried out.

The Truth Commission's transcripts, governmental documents, oral testimonies, funerary art, cemetery visits, protest music and poems will carry the caskets (the narratives) into the analytical arena for the oral obituaries' public viewings or wakes.

Bereavement will also take place. Subjects and 'wake' participants will grapple with how the Truth Commission's and the Cillie Commission's dirges represented three things: a form of repatriation, an edifice constructed by African oral traditions and a case study germane to other areas around the globe where repressive regimes inhibited or prohibited funerary practices. Thus, this innovative study is apartheid's elegy wrapped in an entanglement of systemic violence, racial oppression, and White minority rule.

How to get home

Evghenii Alexandrovici Goloșceapov

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unexpected result: working with people living with HIV, I began to hear that others were becoming more accepting and friendly towards them. One day at a work meeting, a colleague of mine mentioned his HIV-positive status to an official. The official's response was very succinct and unexpected, but perfectly reflected the new reality: “HIV? Well, that's OK. We have COVID here!”

Suddenly, the world was faced with a more powerful, obscure and dangerous virus, one that made HIV pale in comparison. Yes, well, as we say, ‘everything is a comparison’.

In fact, it was a kind of déjà vu. Fears and prejudices about HIV, which have been circulating in the world for 40 years, were magically transferred to COVID-19 and spun in society in the accelerated mode of a three-year pandemic. ‘The virus doesn't exist - it's all made up by the authorities! Have you seen the virus yourself? It's a worldwide conspiracy, they want to scare us! This virus was developed in a foreign laboratory to kill us! We're all going to die!’ All of these fears and prejudices have also spiralled among the officials whose decisions affect the lives of all of us. Our story is about this and about overcoming problems created by the people themselves, not by the virus.

* * *

It so happened that in 2009 I became the first Moldovan citizen who, thanks to the Chevening Scholarship, entered the prestigious Master's programme in Human Rights at the University of Essex in the UK. By doing so, I paved the way for Moldovan human rights defenders to study on this postgraduate programme.

Several of my mates and colleagues followed my example, which I was very happy about. After all, the more well-trained professionals there are in the country, the faster we can achieve better living and development conditions for each and every one of us.

Exactly ten years later, in 2019, my mate and human rights activist Ion Schidu enrolled in the same Master's programme and his wife – Daniela Schidu – in another postgraduate programme at the University of Essex. Both were of average height and slim build, very hard working and aspiring. Ion, with expressive dark eyes and a small beard, was 35. Daniela, with long light brown hair and a kind smile complemented.

“It was my dream of my life to study abroad, and it came true thanks for the Chevening scholarship I’ve been awarded! But we didn't want to spend a year apart. To study together, we covered part of Ion's tuition and living expenses by selling our car. The rest was covered by our savings and by the fees Ion earned during the study year: it took him about 20 hours of online consultancy every week,” Daniela explains.

All would have been well, but in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Like many other organisations, the University of Essex moved to an online teaching regime. It became clear that you didn't have to be physically in the UK to continue your studies. In addition, the university informed the couple that health care workers would be placed in their dormitory to fight the COVID-19, and so they would be relocated to other student accommodation. After weighing up the pros and cons, Ion and Daniela decided to return to Moldova.

“During this difficult period, we wanted to be close to family: loved ones might need our help, or we might need their help. I knew that the COVID would have major health impacts on my grandparents and mum. We were able to be a pillar at a time when we needed to be there for our family. And we really were there for them when they needed it,” Ion explains.

“Besides, another reason was uncertainty. There were very relaxed attitudes and rules in the UK at the time, in the sense that everyone would get over the disease and everything would be fine. There were cases where our classmates would call the ambulance service all day long, but it would always be busy or no one would answer the phone. But in Moldova, you know the doctors you can call - there is a personal relationship and trust that they will answer and help you. So, we decided that in such a situation like that, it was better to be in an environment that we knew well,” Daniela adds.

It is one thing to make a decision, but quite another to implement it in these uncertain times. “It was a bit of a challenge to book our tickets. It took about two weeks from the moment we decided to come back to the time of our return. Once we’d made up our minds, we wrote a letter to the Moldovan consulate in the UK and to the company selling charter tickets, asking to be put on the waiting list. A week later we got a positive response.”

It looked like everything was set for the flight. But on 31 March, the Moldovan authorities decided that only those Moldovan citizens who have a Moldovan compulsory health insurance policy will be allowed to board flights.

“We got why the authorities were making this demand. Health insurance is compulsory in Moldova, and it is enshrined in the legislation. But we didn’t get why the presence or absence of a policy affects the possibility of returning to the country? This led to the question of how legitimate it is to prohibit people without medical insurance from returning to Moldova? In our opinion, this condition is illegal even in an emergency situation,” says the couple.

“In addition, we found the mechanism of fulfilment of this requirement questionable. It turns out that an airport in another country should have refused to let a Moldovan citizen board a flight without a medical policy, even though they had a ticket and a passport.”

If you have citizenship of a country, that country is your home and you always have the right to return to it. But now, it seemed, the issue of health insurance could bring the possibility of returning into question.

Just picture this for a moment. You get back home in the evening after work, ring the doorbell, and it's opened by your home 'front porters' with a question:

- "Do you have health insurance?"
- "No."
- "Then come back when you've got it," they say and shut the door in your face.

It is worth noting that the authorities in Moldova provide free health insurance for students. But Ion and his wife were studying abroad, and this was not recorded in the database of the National Health Insurance Fund. "There was no mechanism for notifying the fund. The airlines, in turn, relied on this database to allow passengers on board."

Normally, human rights defenders fight for the rights of others. But at that moment, Ion and his wife had to fight for themselves. "It gave us a lot of headaches," Ion recalls. He wrote to the Moldovan Prime Minister and his advisor, as well as the foreign ministry, asking them to change the foundation's database so that students would not be forced to pay for health insurance.

"After making some noise, including on social media, I was contacted by the Prime Minister's advisor, who confirmed that students studying abroad do not have to buy health insurance. However, we then received a call from the company selling the tickets and were told that we had to buy the policy. Then, just 24 hours before the flight, we were told that we could fly without insurance. Even so, we still felt pretty uncertain."

In this situation of confusion, the young couple decide to travel to Stansted Airport at their own risk without medical insurance.

Their relative who drove the couple to the airport even joked to them, 'Should I park and see if you get in or not?' To their delight, they were given boarding passes and allowed to board the plane. However, the airline representatives told us that students who had travelled back to Moldova before us had bought insurance. After several hours of a flight that seemed like a bad dream and resembled Armageddon with people wearing masks on their faces, fellow travellers coughing carelessly, constant disinfection of their hands, which made their skin dry and flaky, with flight attendants in white spacesuits, the couple arrive in Chişinău, the capital of Moldova.

It seems like we could be happy for the students and put an end to the story. But that's not quite where the story ends.

* * *

From 2018 to 2014, I was a member of the Equality Council. This is a public body that works to combat discrimination and promote equality in Moldova. But my 'love story' with the Council started much earlier.

At the end of 2010, I submitted my Master's thesis at the University of Essex, which included an analysis of discrimination issues, and returned to Moldova. To my delight, shortly afterwards the Ministry of Justice announced the creation of a working group to draft country's first ever anti-discrimination law, which I obviously joined.

What a naked professional joy it is to be involved in the creation of something new from scratch, at home the national level, something strategic and useful for people, and even to be able to apply the fresh knowledge you have just acquired at a top-notch foreign university! I don't have to eat my bread – just let me think up something advanced and write it into the text of the law!

We worked on the draft for about a year, on a pro bono basis. On 25 May 2012, our work was crowned with success when Parliament voted on and passed the Law No. 121 on Ensuring Equality.

By that time, I had already spent four days working for the United Nations Development Programme in Moldova (UNDP). Over the next six years, therefore, I was able to programme and provide much needed and varied support for the implementation of this law and the creation and development of a new public body - the Equality Council. This included recruiting consultants, organising training, conferences and study visits, purchasing the necessary office equipment and scientific literature, conducting sociological research and developing the Social Distance Index survey, establishing cooperation with Moldovan authorities and foreign partners, optimising the drafting of decisions on complaints, developing a website, conducting public awareness campaigns, and much more. Over these years, the Council has become the youngest but already reputable public institution in Moldova.

In 2018, I applied for the competition to form a new composition of the Council and was appointed by the Parliament as one of its five members. Because of my active support for the Council, some of my mates joked that I had prepared my new workplace myself. From the beginning of the pandemic, my colleagues and I at the Equality Council monitored the authorities' decisions to combat COVID-19. We realised that in these extraordinary circumstances, overreactions were possible and we could well run into problems. This is what happened on Tuesday, 31 March 2020, when I heard about the introduction of the health insurance rule.

Having dug through the Internet, I quickly found the Decision of the Commission for Emergency Situations that introduced this requirement. This decision specified that only those citizens who travel back to Moldova by plane should buy health insurance. Those who return to the country by car, bus or train can cross the border without health insurance.

Perhaps this rule was introduced because the new virus was spread by air-and-drop rather than above-and-below-ground? Who knows! I'm not going to guess. But it was this aspect that caught my attention: you cannot do it by air, but you can do it by land! What's the logic of that? It became clear that we were dealing with discrimination: some citizens could return without any problems, while others were subjected to conditions – and the only difference was the means of transport used.

After discussing the discovered problem with our Council colleagues, we agreed that there were no reasonable and objective explanations, including medical ones, for this distinction of people. We also realised that there was an urgent need to act, as tens of thousands of people would not be able to return to Moldova because of this rule.

As you probably know, bureaucracy loves paper. But in this emergency situation, paper alone might not have been enough. That is why we did it in such a way: we were developing analyses and recommendations for changing the decision of the Commission for Emergency Situations. And in parallel, Council President Ion Feldman was already calling officials, explaining the problem and urging them to change the rules. On Friday, 3 April, the Council members – the President, Ms. Svetlana Doltu, Mr. Andrei Brighidin, Ms. Victorina Luca and myself – approved our analysis and recommendations we sent them to the authorities. On the same day, the obligation to have health insurance to return to the country was cancelled. This insurance rule was in force for three days.

* * *

I soon found out that Ion was in Chişinău and I phoned him to talk about all his 'adventures'. Now that he and Daniela had returned, they were able to exhale and even recall what had happened with a certain amount of humour. But as we talked, we also realised that we were working on the same problem in parallel. Each of us using our own methods and resources.

I don't know what was the last straw that overflowed the cup and changed the situation. I like to think that it was the belief in justice, knowing one's rights and standing up for them in a critical situation, complemented by simultaneous – albeit uncoordinated – efforts, that brought about change.

* * *

Since the beginning of the pandemic, tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of citizens have returned to Moldova without presenting health insurance. Few of them know who acted and what was done so that they could return to their homes without unnecessary obstacles.

AI Anxiety: Fear of Being Left Behind

Saugat Pokharel

As the excitement for the fourth industrial revolution looms, anxiety grips me. With AI being positioned as the technology that will reshape the world, I can't help but question: Will some or all of our jobs disappear? Is Nepal ready, or will we be left behind? And is anyone doing something about this?

The questions are relevant as the Oxford Insight's Government and AI Readiness Index 2023[1] paints a stark picture for Nepal. It ranks Nepal 150th out of 193 countries, far behind the top three: the USA, Singapore, and the UK. Other South Asian nations fare similarly poorly: Afghanistan (186), Bangladesh (82), Bhutan (114), Maldives (146), Pakistan (92), and Sri Lanka (95), with rising superpower India (40) as an exception. The report shows a similar position for low-income developing countries across the globe. It makes it clear that Nepal is not ready, but will it be left behind?

Darshan Parajuli, a young Nepali entrepreneur, personifies the same anxiety. While studying Development Studies in Nepal and Journalism at the Asian College of Journalism, Darshan witnessed firsthand the transformative power of Generative AI.

However, when he came back to Nepal after his education, he realized that most Nepalese didn't share the same enthusiasm. More importantly, most Nepalese were not aware of AI, and those who were aware were reluctant to adopt it. With the problem statement in mind, Darshan co-founded TeachMeAI with Sunil Chaulagain and Devadas Rajaram. Their venture offers workshops,

[1] Emma Hankins et. al. Government AI Readiness Index 2023 (Oxford Insights, Dec. 20, 2023), <https://oxfordinsights.com/ai-readiness/ai-readiness-index/> (accessed July 10, 2024).

training, and consulting services to institutions, students, and businesses, aiming to bridge the AI knowledge gap. Darshan says, “It’s my mission to make AI easy, accessible and exciting for everyone.”

Within a sea of raised hands, you can see a passionate Darshan with a mic on, and in the background, a digital banner reading “Responsible AI for Youth.” In the audience, young students and graduates attentively listen to Darshan speak. He conducts several of these workshops aiming to educate the masses about AI.

In another instance, you see him standing with a mic in hand and a brown notebook, reading out facts regarding Nepal’s national policies and asking policymakers, “When will Nepal make its own National Policy on AI?”. Advocacy from youth like him has resulted in Nepal releasing its concept paper on June 30, 2024.

Darshan sees AI as having enormous potential to impact students and views it as a great equalizer. Having faith in the younger generation and considering that the median age of Nepal is 25 years old, Darshan is optimistic about the future. He believes that with awareness and upskilling, they would not only be saved from falling behind but “100% possible” to compete in the global market.

However, in the backdrop of Darshan’s optimism for the future, the present is but bleak. While the Asia-Pacific region leads in AI adoption, Nepal clearly lags behind. There are no exact studies, but experts estimate that only 5% of Nepal’s population uses AI regularly,[2] and those figures seem accurate considering Nepal’s economic realities. With a per-capita income of \$1,456, spending \$240 (the cost of ChatGPT Pro) annually on AI seems inaccessible.

[2] Anup Ojha, The Promises and Pitfalls of ChatGPT in Nepal, The Kathmandu Post (Jan. 31, 2023), <https://kathmandupost.com/science-technology/2023/01/31/the-promises-and-pitfalls-of-chatgpt-in-nepal> (accessed July 10, 2024).

For developing countries, the true potential of AI lies not in mass-consumer products (like ChatGPT) but in leveraging data to solve local problems. A study by Saurabh Mishra et al.[3] suggests that nations have diverse needs, necessitating AI specialization.

It's believed that with specialization, AI can help developing nations enhance traditional industries and uncover new opportunities, allowing them to stay competitive in the rapidly expanding and evolving field of AI. The study highlighted an example: the use of AI in Agro-Tech to boost the competitiveness of India's agricultural sector (a large portion of India's GDP). While the study focused on just four countries, it underscores the importance of national or sub-national level investment in AI specializations, which is needed if a nation wants to be competitive.

Prabhat Khadka, a Nepalese software engineer with a master's degree from the University of Greenwich, exemplifies this localized approach. Having studied natural language processing and AI in Nepal during his Bachelor's at Kathmandu University in 2006, Prabhat is an AI enthusiast. Running a tech company called ktmbees in Nepal, Prabhat was approached by Sampanna Tiwari, a law student with a social problem, hoping for a technological solution. Sampanna recognized the gap in legal literacy in Nepal and proposed developing Juriease, a legal chatbot that could generate answers to legal questions using AI.

However, in developing Juriease, the team is encountering several challenges, particularly among them is the processing of Nepalese legal texts. Legal texts in Nepal use the Devanagari script, which is written in the Nepali language. Juriease currently is built upon base LLM models like Gemini and ChatGPT, which support Nepali, but their capabilities are limited. Prabhat notes that the results often miss linguistic nuances, producing odd

[3] Mishra, S. et al. AI specialization for pathways of economic diversification. *Sci Rep* 13, 19475 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-45723-x>

translations and sometimes even producing Hindi as a response. This is because the models are mostly trained in Hindi for the large consumer base of India, and these companies have limited incentive to prioritize or focus on the smaller consumer base like Nepal.

These issues highlight the need for a native LLM model trained specifically in Nepali. Prabhat, too, recognizes that developing such a model will be crucial for Juriease, viewing their current product as but a proof of concept.

However, the development of a native LLM is not easy; Prabhat acknowledged that extensive investment would be required for such a model. “Access to AI infrastructure is not a problem,” Prabhat notes to me. “The issue is access to investment.”

This is because creating powerful language models like ChatGPT demands millions of dollars of investment in computing power. A few global companies like Nvidia primarily provide the infrastructure for this computing. Providers for such infrastructure are limited and charge a premium for access, and big tech is willing to pay the price. However, for entrepreneurs in most developing nations, the cost can be an insurmountable burden.

This has significant implications for the future of economic prosperity as even when developing nations are successful in AI Specialization building native solutions, the end beneficiaries (those receiving payment for using the computing infrastructure) are limited to big-tech giants in the rich nations.

Additionally, AI research is generally dominated by a few actors, namely large technology firms, well-funded unicorn startups, and elite universities. For instance, 100% of the world’s supercomputers are located in only 30 nations, leaving 85% of the

world's 204 countries[4] without the necessary domestic AI infrastructure to develop or compete in this sector. While with enough investment, access to AI Infrastructure is currently not an issue, it might not always be true. For example, on April 4, 2024, the US significantly restricted China's access to advanced AI chips, citing national security reasons.[5]

* * *

AI's disruptive potential extends beyond the tech industry, affecting jobs across multiple sectors. However, experts say this is natural. A study revealed that more than 60 per cent of employment in the United States in 2018 was in job titles that didn't exist in 1940.[6] Thus, AI matures, and while jobs in other sectors are reduced, the scope of AI-related jobs is expected to increase.

An analysis of LinkedIn data from Latin American countries suggested that half of the 20 fastest-growing skills (including AI) were directly linked to technological advancements. Similarly, in India, demand for AI-related skills has grown exponentially since 2016, with these roles offering substantially higher wages than other white-collar service jobs.[7] Innovative technologies often create new job opportunities. The question is what the new jobs will look like and whether the workforce in developing nations can upskill to meet the requirements of these new AI-related jobs.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Bureau of Industry and Security, Department of Commerce, Implementation of Additional Export Controls: Certain Advanced Computing Items; Supercomputer and Semiconductor End Use; Updates and Corrections; and Export Controls on Semiconductor Manufacturing Items; Corrections and Clarifications, 15 C.F.R. §§ 732, 734, 736, 740, 742, 744, 746, 748, 758, 770, 772, & 774 (2024) (interim final rule).

[6] Autor, David, Caroline Chin, Anna M. Salomons, and Bryan Seegmiller. 2022. *New Frontiers: The Origins and Content of New Work, 1940–2018*. Technical Report. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

[7] Wall, Sheridan, and Hike Schellmann. 2021. "LinkedIn's Job-Matching AI Was Biased. The Company's Solution? More AI." *MIT Technology Review*, June 23, 2021.

With an increase in AI capability, the nature of jobs created will change. For instance, AI image recognition requires extensive human effort in data labelling, with 1 hour of autonomous driving video potentially needing 800 hours of human labour. This has created a new and rapidly growing data labelling market, estimated at \$1-3 billion and expected to see double-digit growth for the rest of the decade.

However, these new jobs often exacerbate inequality. They primarily benefit highly skilled labour and capital owners. Trends show rising wage premiums for high-skilled workers, while low and middle-skilled workers face sluggish wage growth. AI is expected to intensify these disparities. It is evident that while an AI engineer at the top would be paid a premium, jobs like data labelling will require minimal skills and thus be paid less. This reduction in pay and jobs can widen the income gap, which affects not just individuals within countries but also between nations.

AI favours scale and early adoption, potentially deepening the divide between higher and lower-income countries in terms of both income and technological complexity. The first-mover advantage in AI is significant, with Chinese and US companies currently dominating the field. The massive funding required for the AI arms race makes it challenging for competing products to rival tech giants.

This raises clear concerns that AI-driven productivity gains will likely concentrate in rich countries where these technologies are first created and adopted. There's a risk that a few big-tech companies in wealthy nations will produce globally disruptive technology, potentially making these countries the next superpowers while leaving the rest of the world behind.

But all is not lost.

Bishal Kharal, a young engineer from Nepal, is working remotely as an AI Engineer at Fagoon AI. Currently, Bishal is working on highly sought-after sectors like LLMs and diffusion models, which qualifies him as a highly-skilled tech employee. He exemplifies the participation of individuals from developing countries in the AI revolution. But maybe even more interestingly, he is a self-taught engineer.

Having finished Grade 12 at Burnhardt College, Bishal already had experience working on tech-projects as a back-end developer. He used his background experience and his interest in AI to land his internship as a Data Scientist in Reduct Nepal, which started his career in AI.

When asked if such upskilling was possible for other students like him, Bishal notes, “With enough hard work and dedication, one can learn the necessary skills regarding AI.” As he points out, “The mathematics course in Grade 12 in Nepal is advanced and really helped in such a transition.”

However, Bishal also pointed out that “Many of the terms and technology relating to AI were scientific and technical in nature, making self-study difficult.” This was especially a problem as Bishal entered the AI space at a young age when mentorship and guidance were key to proper development. Recognizing this gap and seeking a community of like-minded enthusiasts, Bishal co-founded the Data Research Council for Students (DRCFS). DRCFS is a student-led, research-based, non-government organization working on data-intensive hands-on practice for students at all levels.

He said that while the interest in AI has increased significantly in recent years, the utilization of AI for productive work is still in development, for localized development technologies like native LLMs trained in the Nepali Language would be required, which

needed extensive work and collective effort.

When asked about the potential of AI to impact jobs, he stated that non-creative work will be reduced significantly, and without a global policy for AI, inequalities can be expected to increase.

* * *

Ultimately, these are massive challenges that risk undoing years of efforts put into reducing income inequality and narrowing the gap between developing and developed nations. They can't be ignored. There's an urgent need to democratize AI and address the digital divide. But the stories of Darshan Parajuli, Prabhat Khadka and Bishal Kharal offer optimism about Nepal and other developing nations' participation in AI.

Studies emphasize the necessity for specialized investment in AI infrastructure, local AI ecosystems, skill development, sectoral strategies, and AI regulations to keep nations competitive. Developing nations can't do this alone; sharing of investment and technology along with global support is essential to ensure developing nations also get to participate in this Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Post-Revolution ghosts. A Christmas Carol

Geanina Turcanu

Ghost 1: Christmas Past

“The Dictator is Dead!” It (no longer) was the silent word electrifying everyone’s lips, the only word in the wide world that would make it whole out of a cordless phone chain of whispers, starting on Radio Free Europe, all the way up in Prague, and ending with my grandparents’ village in North East Romania, bordering the next level frontier: Ukraine and Moldova.

Article 30, Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

The morning of December 26, 1989, I heard it spelled out loud for the first time in my 5 years of life. Freed at last by my tiny grandmother’s grave voice, from all the by now unchained chests, instantly filling up with the beginning of a new era’s vibration. My granny was the sunniest human being ever, most resilient and least political, but then again, merely breathing was political back then. Tucked under my thick blanket, and without comprehending the historic significance of her statement, I was still struck by the sudden shift in the trend of private news delivery: never before had it been initiated by her and even less so, loudly. This time around, her sentence fled from the wood fuelled red brick stove, where she was multitasking breakfast, all the way down to the hall, filling in for the arrested greeting that would usually welcome our most omniscient and omnipotent neighbor, who now stormed in with the frozen expression of Munch’s Angst. Her face was as always contained between her palms, yet this time the function of her gesture was not to preserve secrecy, but to admit defeat. The village’s Rumor Mill herself was speechless.

The scratchy harsh sound of torn paper is still ringing in my ears, like it happened yesterday. My granny proceeded to rip off the first page from my older cousin's ABC schoolbook, aka the Dictator's portrait. She then removed his framed picture from the wall.

"What if it's not true? What if he's coming back? Trouble is written all over your family, if that's the case!", the Rumour Mill summoned cautiously. "Better wait and see that it gets confirmed!"

My granny pointed at the Radio and with the power of her mind amplified its sound, or perhaps with her luminous smile, that could invariably melt down even the coldest winter, as it just did. It was in the news and that's as real as it'd ever get. Truth be told, some people had more to lose than others, when communism fell. The state apparatus had as many eyes as citizens who were willing to skip the queue for daily groceries, or save their skin if need be, at the price of spying on their neighbors. Mistrust was the first value instilled in me. You never knew who had signed the Pact with the D, so to protect yourself was to act as though everybody else but you did, for fear, or for need.

But that was the Ghost of Christmas past, or so we most thought. For me, and to a certain extent for every other middle class child during the 90's, we were free. Which meant the Dictator's portrait was replaced with golden Orthodox icons (forbidden under the previous regime, a sudden counterintuitive freedom hit, following five decades of religious oppression), porcelain figures and most spectacularly... cable TV superheroes. They made three distinct symbolic dishes served on the transition menu, which one felt truly free to re-combine in an a la carte choice, to best suit their personality styles. The region you were coming from would determine the languages that you were already able to speak, and inform the ones that you were willing to learn. Kids in the capital and other bigger cities had access to LEGO bricks, debate clubs and alternative lifestyles, based not so much on economic differences, as much as on proximity to the West.

By the time I was fifteen, I was studying in the bilingual English class. Because that was my and everyone else's ticket to building the dream life that we were fed for the subsequent decade to the Revolution - or at least a version of it portrayed on our holy Cable TV.

Ghost 2: Christmas Present

“Dear Student: We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Central European University's Political Science MA. This year, CEU received over 3000 applications from more than a hundred countries around the world, making the selection process extremely competitive. We congratulate you on your success.” My graduation year coincidentally marked 20 years since the Revolution.

Art. 30, UDHR: Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

You know how in the news, in the aftermath of horrific crimes, journalists coalesce across the spectrum, from conservative to progressive, towards the very opposite strategy of that they would normally adopt, and decide not to disclose any distinctive traits of the criminal? They do it to prevent adding the critical drop to a boiling pot. To avoid bearing the guilt for blowing up the ideological powder keg on which we are all sitting, in the worst case scenario, or stirring into that illogical mixture and risk perpetuating the very same stereotypes that we are trying to fight, in the best case scenario! For the sake of preserving social harmony, or for lack of critical thinking skills, we never questioned what has become of the perpetrators in Romania. And who should have done it? It took a couple of years before the decimated state-controlled media regrouped itself. Private TVs excelled at importing what was sold abroad. The State Party shattered in a myriad different names, while still running on the same old electoral platforms. The price of dissent, even if legal, was to not resonate with the masses... To be sanctioned by the popular vote.

I didn't leave because of a lack of food. I didn't leave because of the lack of a roof. I left for lack of justice. I left for a rights based life. According to pre-Ukraine war UN statistics, 4 million Romanians had left the country since 1990, making up for a diaspora second largest only to Syria, a war torn state. But that's a narrative that landed flat with most of my newly found companions, who grew up in the heydays of democracy, and for whom my childhood equaled the Dark Middle Ages. Roughly, their parents were unable to relate to me were it not for either the iconic horror images from Romanian orphanages that circled the West on Christmas '89, followed by regular notorious news of robbery and human trafficking, or most random examples of co-nationals who made it to top positions in their circles. My friends and partners would travel home with me in my and my country's Renaissance phase, chasing fading urban legends, only to experience a rampantly widening social gap between the rich and the poor, pushing Romania closer to infamous soap operas than to social Europe. They'd take pride in progressive views by befriending someone exotic enough to stand out and yet similar enough to fit in...

Except... fitting in was never my dream. They were power and I was speaking truth to power. And the last thing I wished for was to reinforce the flawed imagery of what a dream life as portrayed on our by now unholy cable TV looked like. Rather, by shining light on the unacknowledged and the unseen, I wished to expose the dying myth of "a savior" or "a match made in heaven" powered by a "Prince Charming on a white horse", in its plain planned obsolescence, all of which belongs to a uniform world that no longer holds or rings true. Assuming it ever did, beyond the propaganda trumpets cutting all across gender equality from socialism to liberalism. My dream friends and partners, from my twenties to my thirties, were all that and beyond, and yet I watched my relationships fail like domino pieces, pushed against my limits by the same currents that pulled them in, to begin with: my deepest wounds, stemming from the Revolution within. My unprocessed collective trauma, in its economic, social and human complexities, made and broke my life script as I was writing it.

- "What do you wanna do when you grow old?" Asked my dream partner with a sense of urgency. An emergency like no other. At stake was our future. Our thirties were about to end and our dreams had not yet begun. We were well past asking ourselves what we wanted to do when we grew up, or even when we grew young. But... we still had a go, one final shot at happiness. Growing old. Together. We melted together across the East-West divide and it was the only thing that mattered. The rest was history. In the making. We sighed and sided, with our shared story, and golden cable TV dream!

- "You go first!" I giggled with a sense of electric expectation, half pleasure delaying and half people pleasing. Except... I'm no people pleaser. I read the rules before I break them, or so my Facebook cover photo states, and I have worked for an iconic NGO for about a decade - the equivalent of the Big Five in the world of world-savers. And yet, every time I must go first, I back down. As if the first move could potentially turn into a last piece of information, that might as well prove pivotal in turning the tables, and eventually flip my whole strategy on its head. I do that in my private life as well as in my work.

- "What did you get for Christmas... when you were my age?" His 5 year old nephew popped. Boom! A match made in Heaven - I can help the little one understand how freedom is born. That would clearly be news to him, inheritor of thousand years of stability, as impactful as the adversities plaguing my own country for generations.

- "When I was your age, you see, I got democracy, following... the Romanian Revolution! " I couldn't be any prouder of myself! Here's something we can bond over, my formative story, a Christmas present to remember... the blond little boy sank into his pillow, his big blue eyes widening to the point of overtaking his whole face, like in those Japanese anime I watched when I was 5.

- "What? Can you still buy that thing nowadays?"

My Cable TV like dream partner pulled my sleeve in a slight gesture of panic, his gorgeous features as composed as ever, in a Ken type of grin, for whom it has just hit home that... he might be next to the wrong Barbie or even worse, next to no doll of sorts at all.

- "Have you lost your mind? You're gonna traumatize this child! You're a lost case, no matter how happy we are, you keep spoiling it! Why can't you just drop the drama and live mindfully in the here and the now? You're living in the past. You should seriously consider therapy!"

Ghost 3: Christmas Yet to Come

We are doomed to repeat the behaviors that make us sick, until we sit down with our feelings for long enough to become conscious of their roots. And then, boom! Change creeps in! When I will have added my Christmas story to the world children's encyclopedia, as a legitimate piece of history, and not as a transitory nuisance in the world of yesterday, then my dear, will be my "Christmas yet to come!"

The thing about children

Machteld Vonk

"In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict" (UN CRC art. 38(4))

I had been thinking about my mother's story for some time. My mind had been travelling to her experiences of war as a girl, in a women's internment camp in Indonesia – where she, her mother and her four siblings, spend some two years of their lives. I know snippets of their story. I know my grandmother was on the brink of death at some point but miraculously recovered, I know they had little food, and I know they were afraid each day that their brother would be taken to a men's camp. I also know my mother played and found ways to be a child despite their imprisonment.

The thing about children is that they are immensely resourceful and think of ways to play however dire the circumstances.

Last month, students at my university placed a long line of children's shoes trailing all the way from their anti-war encampment to the building that houses the university board. The shoes represented children injured and killed in the war Israel was waging against Palestine after the 7 October attacks by Hamas on Israel. When I talked to the students in the encampment, they told me they wanted the university to show that it did not condone the killing of children. The encampment was removed by the police shortly afterwards.

But the line of shoes remained. Walking past this long line of children's shoes in the early morning on the silenced campus on my way to work, was an experience that is hard to describe. I followed the zigzagging line to the end and tried to take in each pair. The small red and blue sandals for a toddler that has just learned to walk, the pink princess shoes of a ten-year old girl, the worn-out soccer shoes of a boy on the brink of puberty, and the trainers of a well-known brand that would have been the pride of any 15-year-old. I imagined the children who died during armed conflict and then the children who survived, and the burden they would carry with them into the future.

The thing about children is that they find joy in the smallest places.

I imagined children running around campus in the bright yellow rain boots and purple ballerina's, playing, screaming, laughing, inspecting the trees in the small forest alongside the road to the university board building and swinging in the newly installed swing chairs on the grass.

The thing about children is that they play no part in the wars they survive, but war will play a part in their lives long after it is over, whatever side those responsible for their wellbeing were on.

And I thought of my mother, and how she played with whatever she could find in a Japanese internment camp World War II. After liberation of their camp in August 1945, my mother's family stayed in Indonesia until the summer of 1947, before returning to the Netherlands on leave. Both my mother's four siblings and her parents survived the camps, my mother's maternal grandparents did not. My mother's father was a missionary, sent to Indonesia by the church in the early 1930's. Before leaving he married my grandmother who had been born and raised in Indonesia as the daughter of a missionary. Their work did not end with the end of the war with Japan, so they returned to their church on Java and continued their work until they were due for leave in 1947.

In those years after the war with Japan, an independence war raged in Indonesia, which finally led to the recognition by the Netherlands of the independence that Indonesia had proclaimed in 1945, on 27 December 1947.

This is a complex part of my family history, because it involves the colonialization of Indonesia by the Netherlands and the fact that my family lived there for an extended period during the 20th Century.

During the Japanese occupation my mother and her siblings were imprisoned by the aggressor, but now they were involved in a war in which their motherland was the oppressor. This switch in perspective probably went unnoticed by my mother at the time, there was a war going on and they were afraid either way. She was 6 years old when the war with Japan ended in 1945 and 8 years old when here family returned to the Netherlands on leave in the Summer of 1947. This switch in perspective did, of course, influence how their experiences were perceived afterwards.

My mother remembers her father sitting just inside the door of their home at night with a gun, while gunshots were fired outside. Their house was built adjacent to the hospital that was part of the missionary project, and in the morning my mum and her sister would look at the injured from both sides arriving at the hospital. They helped looking after babies and small children, so the nurses had their hands free to look after the wounded. No surprise they both took up medical professions later in life.

My mother's family does not talk (much) about their experiences. My mother told me her parents never discussed their experiences during the Japanese occupation with their children, so they have no idea what happened to their father during his imprisonment. By the time they arrived in the Netherlands, there was no interest in their stories. The country was recovering from the German occupation and the terrible blight of the Holocaust.

Zooming out, we all know that the Dutch were on the wrong side of history with the colonization of Indonesia. But my mother and her siblings were children. The thing about children is that they play no part in the wars they survive, but war will play a part in their lives long after it is over.

Almost all the world's nations are party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and have committed themselves to safeguarding children's rights. We know that children are affected by war in many more ways than adults simply because they are children.

Armed conflicts impact their right to care, security, freedom of violence and abuse, education, protection, food and housing, medical treatment, play and so on. I know the Convention urges State Parties to take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict, and this includes the children on the other side of the conflict, something which is easily forgotten. But I think it would make much more sense to urge State Parties to accept that war in and of itself is a violation of children's rights.

A couple of weeks ago my mother's elder brother passed away. An old friend of my uncle led the service. He told us he had been instructed by my uncle not to talk about my uncle and his experiences as a child during the war. The service was about his faith and not his life.

During the reception afterwards my cousins (all in their 50s and 60s) all had the same questions: does your mother talk about the war and the internment camps? What do you know about what happened to them? We all knew it had influenced their lives and ours and possibly our children's lives as well, but we did not really know what our parents had been through as children – just that it was rough and that it was always there and was part of our history as well. My uncle was the eldest child and the keeper of the family history, but he and his stories are gone now.

Last week I discovered the line of children's shoes was no longer there. I found them in a big, messy pile close to the former encampment site. Next week they will probably be gone just like my uncle's stories of his and my mother's childhood during WW II. It worries me that we forget. Maybe only the grief for the children killed and the stories of the children who survived war that can prevent us from starting new ones. We need to keep telling their stories over and over again, until we no longer forget that war destroys the lives of children.

The thing about children is that they are the future. If we jeopardize their lives, we jeopardize the future.



E-Learning Department

Global Campus of Human Rights
Monastery of San Nicolò
Riviera San Nicolò, 26
I-30126 Venice Lido, VE

P +39 041 2720911

F +39 041 2720914

e-learning@gchumanrights.org

www.gchumanrights.org