



Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

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Right Livelihood



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Never again.

Ena Bavčić

Where I am coming from

When I think of my grandmother, I think of her hands. Soft and rough at the same time, she had the prettiest hands in our family. I was always puzzled by how her hands kept the softness and roughness at the same time.

The velvety skin, and the soft and moist sensation I felt when touching her hands matched her lifestyle and nature. Rarely leaving the house, she has managed to leave an impression of a well-guarded lady. But my grandmother almost never used hand cream. And she never lived a life of a lady. It was like she wanted her rough skin to stay as a reminder of the cruel realness of her stories.

Her long fingers have combed my hair so many times while telling tales. Her stories were never magical, but I always listened to them like they were the most imaginative fairy tales. I grew up listening to them. Stories of life, survival, war, and resistance.

My grandmother's name was Muša, nana Muša (Musha) we called her. She always regretted her name, saying that she was first called Hasena. But her parents had no male children, and they lived in a village where a son was needed to work the land. Her mother got pregnant again while my grandmother was still a baby, so the old ladies of the village advised her to rename her last daughter, my nana. She should give her name that would sound like a word "male" (muško), as this, they believed, would give them a son.

My nana passed away last year, seven months after her last great grandchild was born, and two years after I moved away to another country. The day that she died was the first time in a couple of years since all her grandchildren were supposed to gather to see her. Three of us have moved abroad, and it was difficult to manage our schedules to meet, and the pandemic did not help. I had my travels planned for that day. The night before travelling, I had dreamt of her, she came to me to say goodbye. In the morning my mum called to say that she had passed. I was the last one to arrive, and she was too weak to wait for me. But she made sure to say goodbye.

Her stories have stayed with me. Over time, I always joked about how my trans-generational trauma is stronger than my war trauma. Nana Muša was born in Višegrad, east Bosnia, near the border with Serbia, several dozen kilometres from Srebrenica. This part is known for brutal stories of wars.

Nana was a child when WWII started. She has lost seven siblings due to starvation and other ailments. Her father was killed for trying to defend his Serb colleague, who was in line to be shot at by the NDH, Nazi collaborators. The designated killer was their friend though, and apparently, he told them that he needed to shoot them, but he will aim to wound and not kill them, providing an opportunity for them to get away. My great-grandfather's friend made it alive, but my great-grandfather did not. Later, she told stories of her aunt being brutally killed in front of her eyes. Nana's uncle had been a double agent, and one of the stories says that he at some point helped Tito escape fascists by dressing him as a veiled Muslim woman. Ironically, after the war, he was put in jail for protesting the Communist Party's decision banning veils. In exchange for releasing her husband, the aunt threatened to expose a former chetnik, Serb Nazi collaborator who had just pretended to be a partisan. He told her to go home and not worry about it. While they were having a family lunch, the fake partisan came and killed my nana's aunt in front of the entire family. It was a warning kill.

I was never sure which aspect of her stories is true, and which one is exaggerated. Many of them missed important context details for me to actually verify them. Also, few of her relatives have survived the 1992-1995 war, and those who did became scattered all over the world.

But one thing is sure, these stories have taught me that things are not black and white. They also taught me resilience and resistance (even though I am sure it was never her intention for me to become a vocal activist, putting my safety sometimes at stake). Most importantly, they taught me empathy, understanding that it is important to help those in need, and that it is important to value people for their individual actions. But also, that some people can change their minds, while others never do in spite of their appearances.

Where we are now

There is a folk belief in Bosnia that every generation needs to go through two wars. This was true for my grandmother and her mother. This perpetual cycle of violence has pushed women to develop mechanisms for teaching their descendants to be more resilient. A big part of these mechanisms were stories. Narratives that they tried to embed into younger generations of how to survive, how to resist, respect and, for girls, how avoid being raped if a military storms in.

So now, at the moment when we feel like each wrong move may lead to a global war, I start to wonder if the time for our “second war” would come. Despite all rationalisation, this fear is strongly embedded in me. I have managed to fight it off in my local context, where politics is playing with this fear of war to make people numb to corruption. Also, moving away made me more preoccupied with international politics.

My mum, on the other hand, who was in her early thirties and with two small children when the war in Bosnia started, is more concerned by the local politics. She does not want to make the same mistake of naively believing that a war could never break out in Bosnia. My mum has done miracles for us during the war. But now, like for most Bosnians, her main worry is if another war is breaking up. And this is true for most of my co-patriots, one way or another.

The war in Ukraine scared us. It made us relive some memories as a group of people who were sieged. But the western reaction gave us hope, a hope that maybe if the next time comes, things would be different, we would be seen.

Then another genocide started.

Scenes from Gaza completely broke us. The starvation, the abandonment, targeting of civilians under a pretext of self-preservation and security are all too familiar strategies. Just this time we can follow them live and on a much larger scale (the population of Gaza is almost the same as the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina).

And we feel so helpless.

The reactions are different. Like with any PTSD, people deal with trauma differently. Some are ignoring and being completely silent about what is going on, some are raising awareness, exposing themselves and protesting, some collecting aid, while others are getting away from seeing the images. There are those who are trying to coordinate with international movements and raise their voices in this fora, and those who are falling into ignorant generalisations which we have seen too often to lead to hate.

Helplessness can bring out the worst in each of us. And just like my grandma's stories, second-degree trauma rubs off differently, as the perspective is different.

I am still struggling to find a meaningful way to contribute and feel less helpless. My main contribution is in training my META algorithms to show only Gaza and similar situation videos. I've managed to train it after one year. One year of baby and cooking videos popping up in my reels constantly. This algorithm is so fragile though. One baby or a dog video, and you are five steps back. Don't even think of liking or commenting on some random video, then you are twenty steps back.

Of course, I join protests and national rallies. They offer a soothing comfort of not feeling alone and of actually doing something. Protests for me are probably the most important freedom, as they provide a much-needed counterbalance to all other individualised rights. Peaceful protests require solidarity, conviction, connections and joint goals.

Seeing people mobilising around Gaza gave me hope that Palestinians are seen, that I am not the only one who feels this way. The images from the protests though show that the main strength is in the mass mobilisation. While we rejoice the images of massive protests calling for a stop to genocide, we see that similar ones with couple of hundreds of people are being forcibly dispersed. Increasingly, protesters are violently detained and symbols of peace being treated worse than the symbols of hatred.

Somehow, we have come to live in a moment in history where resisting for peace is literally treated as terrorism. At the same time, the scale of atrocities makes us feel like nothing suffices. Whatever we do will not change the grand scheme of things.

Then we see activists like Greta Thunberg and Freedom Flotilla, a march to Gaza. And even though ultimately unsuccessful they give us hope. Hope that not all is lost. Hope that we can do something. She and her comrades showed that there is true intersectionality in all our fights, and that we cannot only choose a fight for climate and not fight for humankind.

In a moment when we feel energised again, another threat of war comes. The war becomes like a football match, and we see people cheering and watching in tension. But the truth is, that we all feel paralysed again. All the global efforts, mobilisation, resistance come at stake just by one malicious move.

This is when we realise that what is driving our mums' fears in Bosnia today, has transferred to the entire globe. The political play of constant fearmongering is becoming a new normal. My friends here start to joke that Bosnians are so politically progressive, that whatever was happening with us thirty years ago, is now happening globally. This may be funny, but it is not comforting, as we know that there is no real end to it, thirty years in.

Where I want us to go

If you had asked me thirty years ago, I would have been sure that “true” Bosnians are incapable of hate. It was a childish belief that once you go through such targeting and trauma, you know better. This was before I became an activist and before I saw how a potential to commonly hate the weaker one, serves as a potent incentive for developing nationalism. I still believe that most people who have seen the war have an understanding that this is not ok, whether they want to admit it or not.

Likewise, when I see how the cycle of violence develops globally, and I see pockets of ignorance, silly comments, generalisations, I realise that it is so easy to fall into this abyss of perpetual conflict. I fear for the new generation, those with a second-degree trauma, but also for me, for my child. In what kind of world will she grow up? As much as I fear for her not to have to go through war, I do not want my daughter to grow up believing she has some special immunity because her mum went through it.

The lessons my grandma taught me became more important than ever. She never went out to protests but she taught me not to hate. Yes, you can know who wants you harm and who is not your friend. Yes, you should stay away from these people, you can protest them, and you can push for their accountability. But we cannot fall into the trap of perpetual hatred and violence.

Sometimes, the best resistance is to teach our kids not to hate. To teach them empathy, resilience and strength. That things are not black and white, but that there is a difference between good or bad. But also teach them that they can confront the power, that state is not the same as a group of people, and that the true strength lies within us.

I would really like to keep hope that there is another way. That my daughter and I will not need to live through our two wars. That we can make our voices heard. That pockets of resistance exist everywhere and that we will prevail. If we want to change the world, we start by changing people around us. It is up to us to share and teach people around us that never again means never again for everyone. Because if we do not, the cycle of violence will inevitably get back to us.

From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.

The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few 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.

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