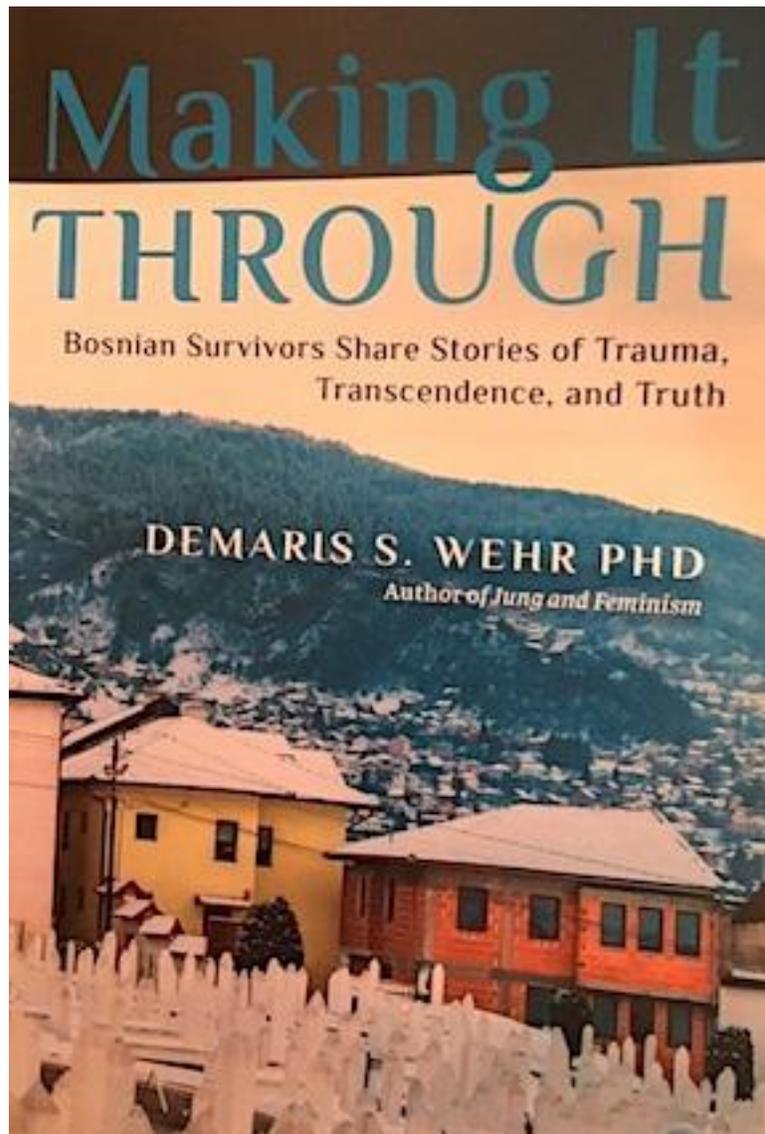


A RECKONING



MAKING IT THROUGH: Bosnian Survivors Share Stories of Trauma, Transcendence, and Truth. (Chiron Publications, 2020)

Demaris S. Wehr PhD

The women from Ahmici arrive. Eighteen women file out of an old

bus and solemnly process along the cracked cement walkway that leads to the kindergarten classroom we are using for our meeting. Of varying ages, the eldest wear long dark coats, their flushed faces wreathed in white scarves. They enter the room and seat themselves on small chairs meant for young children. These old ones hold my full attention. They are the first to speak. Their language is translated into English. More arresting than their voices is their breathing.

Several days earlier, a small group of us, Americans and Bosniak (Muslim) women, visited Ahmici, the small village in central Bosnia in the Lasva river valley near Vitez. We stood in front of a bombed mosque, the fallen minaret pointing earthward instead of skyward. Nine years after the bombing and still no one has removed the debris. Like a skeleton, the destroyed place of worship remains a grim and shocking memorial or is it a warning?

In 1991, Ahmici had a population of approximately 450 people most of whom were Bosniaks. On the morning of April 16, 1993 a massacre began. Within 24 hours, along with the murder of a quarter of their population, all the Bosnian homes and buildings including two mosques were destroyed. The two local men responsible for the bombing were arrested, imprisoned at The Hague and charged with war crimes for the murder of Bosnian

villagers, mostly women and children in their houses

While we stood in front of the destroyed mosque, a distraught woman rushed out to greet us. The translator could barely keep pace with her panicked speech. A few days earlier the two men charged with the carnage were exonerated and released. She tells us that a Muslim man had been paid off to testify on their behalf. The night before, a big party in the Croatian section of Ahmici celebrated their release. The woman relaying this information was caught between terror and fury.

Days later, back in the kindergarten, the old women from Ahmici, speak in Bosnian about giving their testimonies against the perpetrators at The Hague Tribunal. Their voices and swaying bodies perform a tragic chorus, recalling, reliving, lamenting the slaughter. Communal sighs fill the room. Their deep exhalations enshroud us. We inhale the long wordless breaths that do not require translation.

Almost 20 years have passed since my two trips to Bosnia. I still ask how people so betrayed by each other can ever reconcile with themselves, much less with their neighbors? Is forgiveness even a concept worth considering? Is justice possible? Can we learn anything from the people who survived this terrible time?

If not forgotten altogether, the war in Bosnia may linger as a vague recollection for people in the United States. Demaris Wehr's book, *Making It Through*, brings it back in all its complexity. I am stunned by the acute timeliness of this book, not only the stories of survival, the 'Making it Through' of the title, but the powerful messages encoded in the subtitle: *Trauma, Transcendence, and Truth*. The parallels to what has happened to our American democracy in the past four years are unmistakable. We have much to learn.

The most striking thing about pre-war Bosnia was its post-World War II reputation for peaceful coexistence in the socialist federation of Yugoslavia. For twenty-five years, Tito's motto, "Brotherhood and Unity," forbade nationalism and religious expression. Under this rubric, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs lived side by side as a secular community; they were neighbors who easily intermingled, worked together, and inter-married. In February, 1984, Sarajevo hosted the winter Olympics, an international event that showcased the country as an example of a diverse and rich community living well together.

Yugoslavia's political stability began to erode in the 1980's after Tito's death. The map of Eastern Europe underwent radical realignment as communism collapsed in 1989, East and West

Germany underwent reunification a year later, and the Soviet Union began its collapse. In 1989, the Serbian-born Milosevic became president of the Yugoslav Federation.

Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence from Yugoslavia and were internationally recognized. Bosnia's independence followed soon thereafter. They joined the United Nations on May 22, 1992 while Serbia and Montenegro formed a new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as a successor state to old Yugoslavia. The international community did not recognize its claim.

Milosevic began a power grab with the assistance of the mostly Serb Yugoslav army. He envisioned incorporating Slovenia and Croatia into a Greater Serbia. The two countries' international standing and proximity to Western Europe, ensured that these wars were brief. Milosevic backed off. In the spring of 1992 when Bosnia declared its independence, Milosevic again used the army and the well-honed propaganda tools favored by dictators. He exploited the state-owned media to rekindle Serbian nationalism, falsely portraying the Serbs who currently lived throughout the Balkans as being under threat of a Muslim jihad. He ignited a mythic memory of a 500-year-old Serbian defeat by the Ottoman Empire at the Field of Crows in Kosovo. A new term, ethnic

cleansing, entered the lexicon as thousands of Bosnian Muslims were forced from their homes and executed. Over the next three years, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions from their homes, as Europe witnessed the most horrific fighting on its territory since the end of World War II.

War was never officially declared and the international community was loath to intervene in a conflict misnamed as a “civil war” undertaken by “ancient enemies.” The Sarajevo Library was burned along with its priceless, irreplaceable documents; Serbian snipers hid in the nearby hills above Sarajevo where they picked off innocent civilians standing in bread lines; reports of rape and torture camps wrongly named as refugee camps, sprang up. It took the slaughter of 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenca to bring the International community to bear on crimes against humanity, and ultimately declare a genocide.

Dr. Wehr provides a map and a concise background chapter to help orient the reader and ground the individual testimonies that follow. She begins with the heartfelt story of her personal call to Peace Work, akin to a revelation, that eventually led her to “Projekt Diacom, (Project Dialogue),” Dr. Paula Green’s Peace Work in Bosnia. Dr. Wehr, author of *Jung and Feminism: Liberating*

Archetypes, (Routledge, 1988) came to Projekt Diacom with a background in Religion and Jungian Psychology. Her Quaker background, her work as a psychotherapist, and her dedication to peace-building informs the depth and quality of her presence as she bears witness to the four women and four men, Bosniak Muslims, Serbs, Croats featured in her book. Three of the interviewees had attended Projekt Diacom, a program for peace-building available for any country that has intractable strife.

War has a terrifying archetypal dimension. Wehr quotes C.G. Jung: “There is no lunacy people under the domination of an archetype will not fall prey to.” (23) The war in Bosnia is testimony to Jung’s statement. As one participant said, “This was not Serbs and Muslims fighting, but good and evil fighting.”

Wehr is quick to point out that in the beginning her participants “were still experiencing hell. They cried, they were angry and confrontational, and they struggled.” They do not whitewash their experiences. In the end, they deliver on all three accounts of the subtitle, “Bosnian Survivors Share Stories of Trauma, Transcendence and Truth.”

No matter their nationality or religion (or lack of it), each participant is presented in a deeply respectful way. Wehr provides a brief introduction that includes a sketch of the person’s

background, as well as her personal feelings and impressions. Then in italics, she presents them: “*Here is _____ in her (or his) own words.*” The reader understands what she is about to read is the individual’s uninterrupted narrative.

We never read Dr. Wehr’s part of the dialogue. All we learn is her guiding question, “How did you make it through?” followed by, “How did you make it through *that?*” By using such a simple question, the interviewees are able to shape their stories unobstructed. In retrospect, when Dr. Wehr considered an underlying metaphor for these survivor stories, the myth of Odysseus came to mind. “He clung to a literal mast—a centerpost—that would both strengthen and restrain him through a challenge so difficult that, without that much resolve, he would not have made it.”

Even though the participants didn’t put a name to what kept them going, Dr. Wehr discerns and names the principle or value that constituted their Centerpost, their particular source of strength: forgiveness, humility, love of family, integrity, faith, duty, optimism, and transcendence. Like a medieval morality play, the interviewees put a face and a human story to these abstractions.

We learn that victims and perpetrators suffer, but not equally, nor do they require the same response from each other. As one

Bosniak said, “I was glad I was a victim, rather than a victimizer....what victims go through isn’t as shameful as what perpetrators have to go through....Healing is harder for perpetrators than for victims. Victims merely have to tell their own truth.” The young man who is speaking is convincing when he tells of his deep hatred. He comes to his wisdom after surviving crushing ordeals. When he talks of forgiveness, he talks in terms of “burdening and unburdening.” “To forgive means to unburden yourself and make your life easier. You don’t forgive because the other person deserves it. You do it to unburden yourself.”

There are more than victims and perpetrators here. There is the shame one feels for being a bystander, for not doing more to stop the violence. A Serbian woman, a single mother, bears the burden of her guilt with humility and contrition. In doing so, she makes a bridge to others, however fragile. Her testimony is not heroic, but it is deeply courageous. She is able to represent the possibility for Serbian accountability.

Faith is the centerpost of one young woman’s interview. A practicing Muslim, studying theology, she returned to war-time Bosnia as a social worker. Her religion and profession allowed her to speak with women in ways that they might not otherwise have

felt comfortable. When men were not present, they spoke to her of rape.

Rape is a supreme act of violence. In the Bosnian war it was specifically and purposely weaponized to destroy the Bosniaks' spiritual and social fabric. The aftermath for an individual woman or a group of women is devastating, both physically and emotionally. Even worse, daily rapes often resulted in pregnancies. By simply being alive, Bosniak women and their children literally carried a tragic cultural stigma, rendering them as shameful, worthless, damaged beyond repair. The Muslim religion is considered traditional, yet this deeply religious interviewee describes her community's resilient response to these mothers and their children.

A new *fatwa*, a Muslim law, was declared that reversed the stigma. The new law declared the raped women “*shahid*, innocent people who had suffered atrocities.” Rather than treating them as outcasts, families were encouraged to support the mother and child. A trust-building process culminated in a ritual *Aqiqah*, where these mothers and their children born of rape were welcomed into the community. “I would take the baby in my arms and say a prayer. When I was finished praying, I'd say, ‘This is the son of Sabiha. His name is Tarik. He is a member of our

community. He is a beautiful gift from God.' We showed them that every child is a blessing, even when the birth is the result of rape. It was a ritual we made up out of necessity."

Depending on who is counting, the incidence of rape during the Bosnian war runs from 12,000 to 50,000 women. On June 28, 1996, The New York Times carried a first page article announcing the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague had indicted eight Bosnian Serb military and police in connection with rapes of Muslim women during the war. Although rape has long been associated with war, this was the first time sexual assault was treated as a separate war crime. Without precedent, the magnitude of rape in Bosnia was so shocking that chief prosecutor Richard Goldstone insisted on confronting rape as a strategy of terror and a separate crime without including other criminal charges.

Justice is an agonizingly slow process. When it does arrive, it is cause for solemn celebration. The children born of rape are now in their early twenties. Their innocent lives have been marked, as have their families. Not everyone had the benefit of *Aqiqah*. It takes time and a concerted individual and social effort to reweave the torn social fabric. Rituals born of necessity are a start.

Transcendent is not the first word one imagines arising from a person who has survived the war in Bosnia. Dr. Wehr attributes

this state to her last interviewee, a man of mixed linguistic and cultural heritage: His life contains at least five different nationalities: Croatian, Bosniak, Hungarian, Austrian and Jewish. In this, his being breaches the usual confines of national or religious identity. Wehr calls him “a man of faith and courage,” easy to tears as well as laughter. For this man, terror and beauty coexist in a mutual state of awareness. Wehr says his Centerpost “involved a deeply spiritual component.” He was also very earthy and sensuous—music, song, communal parties, theater, food, and a long view of history that arises from his multiple lineages were what nourished him. He was the one who saw the war as being between good and evil, not between “three tribes.” “We were facing the forces of evil, supported by the enormous power of the Yugoslav army.... Though it’s hard, I still believe in the power of good to overcome evil.” He works with various training groups to promote peace. “We have such a beautiful country. We need to work harder to ensure peace.”

Dr. Wehr’s closing chapter, “Making It Home,” has an archetypal dimension, akin to Odysseus’ journey home. “These Bosnian survivors’ stories represent just such a grand noble, arduous soul-searching and ultimately archetypal journey home.”

As an American woman, the messages in these mini-memoirs are warming, yet a distinct chill lingers in the air after reading them. Masha Gessen, in her November 10, 2020 article in *The New Yorker*, “Why America Needs a Reckoning with The Trump Era,” states: “The soul of America has been battered by a hateful and lying President, by a government intent on destroying itself, and, when the *COVID-19 pandemic* struck, by a government that demonstratively rejected the value of human life.” Gessen, a Russian-American journalist, author, translator and activist. is writing after the 2020 election. She acknowledges the fatigue many of us feel, the deep damage done to our society after four years, only four years! There is a longing to “get back to normal,” “to move on and move forward.” “Individually, some of us may recover, but it will take more than that to repair our battered collective soul.” An astute observer of tyranny, she warns Americans: “The broad lessons of societies that have undergone major transitions apply to us. In general, these societies have had to choose between two paths: the path of reckoning and the path of forgetting.”

The stories in *Making it Through* represent how a handful of people were able to survive in the midst of a terrible war and act from a place of human courage and dignity. By entering their

narratives, a reader can locate a Centerpost for our times and instead of the trail of forgetting, discern a path of reckoning.

Patricia Reis is a psychotherapist and writer. Along with numerous essays and articles, she has published five books, including *Motherlines: Love, Longing and Liberation* that won an Independent Publishers Gold Medal for memoir. She divides her time between Portland, Maine and Kingsport, Nova Scotia Contact: preis@midmaine.com, www.patriciareis.net