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Ukraine – Expressive Sandwork in the war zone

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“We will win!” said Boris, the young taxi driver, emphasising each word as he navigated his Mercedes through congested traffic between the airport of Borispol and the city centre of Kiev. A little surprised at how quickly our conversation had moved from the booming Ukrainian folklore music groups to the topic of war, I did not immediately respond. Seeing my eyes in the rear-view mirror, he continued with a touch of forcefulness in his voice. “And do you know why? There are two reasons. First, because we produce our own weapons. We are not dependent on arms trade of any kind. Ukraine produces its own tanks and fighter jets. And second, we are simply more intelligent than them over there.” A moment of silence followed, as the joins of motorway segments bumped regularly beneath our seats. A giant stainless steel female figure, the 102-metre-high *Rodina Mat* or “Motherland” – sword and shield held high in her arms – approached on our right-hand side, acquired her maximum dramatic effect of socialist rhetoric in profile, and then passed graciously by, only to disappear behind bright birch forests in the next long-drawn curve to the left. “Were you at the front in Donbass, yourself?” “No, but I would go. I have two small children and I would fight for them if I must.”

I am making my way to the border area in eastern Ukraine, from where 1.3 million people have fled since 2015. Vlad, a psychologist, who has introduced

Sandwork in Ukraine and coordinates the projects in the Eastern cities accompanies me in the night train from Kiev to Slavjansk.

The train is fully booked and packed with people. The journey lasts sixteen hours and leads through vast expanses of uncultivated land and forests, interspersed with coal mines and bleak barrack settlements. The final stop is Sloviansk, a small city of about a hundred thousand inhabitants which was taken by the “separatists” just four years ago, in April 2014, and held for three months. A majority of the inhabitants left the city. Two schools and a kindergarten were bombed and flattened. We see bullet holes on buildings. At the same time, the inhabitants have started a concerted effort to beautify their city. Freshly painted facades on a number of one-story houses offer a cheerful counterpoint to the rows of dilapidated Soviet-style apartment blocks. Apple trees and plum trees blossom in the little front yards. Standing there in radiant white, they look like giant bridal bouquets and give the city a very festive air that is deeply touching. Are people trying to forget the war by any means possible?

For about a year now, the international media has spoken of a “forgotten war” in Ukraine, although soldiers still die there every day in the border areas of the newly declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and although nobody can leave the narrow trails between the villages because the fields and forests are strewn with mines. Once a term like “a forgotten war” has been uttered in journalism, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who laid those mines? Nobody knows. Did the Ukrainian army lay mines in their own homeland? Did the “separatists” lay mines in the region of their Russian-speaking ancestors? Nobody knows. I repeatedly hear the words “Njazin, njazin informatia!” spoken in Russian and in an angered tone, in the people’s narrative flow. There is no information for the civilian population. The inhabitants point with a sweeping gesture towards the horizon, where the explosions could be seen night after night. There is a note of concern in their accounts that listeners might not quite believe them; that they might believe it was only half as bad;

that the whole world might think the war in Syria is always much worse. The people here also lack information about the war's psychological consequences. At the beginning of 2018, UNICEF handed out brochures describing and illustrating the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders in children.

Ludmilla, who runs the local kindergarten, reports of parents bringing pre-school-aged children to the psychological counselling service and asking if anything could be done for their handicap. They were "born dumb." Ludmilla points out that sixty percent of children in the war zone, according to statistics of the local polyclinic, exhibit a developmental delay, yet the children's parents and relatives are completely oblivious to any connection with the war. Because the adults themselves would like to forget the month-long bombardments, explosions, shootings, lootings, acts of violence of every kind, and their escape and constant fear, they have no inner readiness to even begin to imagine the shock their infants and young children must have suffered. The conventional wisdom is that the little ones won't have really realised what was going on. Paradoxically, it is easier for the psychological equilibrium of a traumatised adult to accept that a child is born handicapped than to confront the fact that traumas of war have a long-term impact on children's development. If this is suggested to parents as a fact, anger and pain erupts all the more forcefully and they awake from an apathy into which they had fallen for months. And so the population is trapped not only in a concrete borderland where it is threatened with mortal danger from both sides, but also in a psychological no-man's land where relationships no longer function. A crying child is no longer consoled.

But defence mechanisms always also have a protective function and must not be forcefully penetrated through psychological intervention without assistance also being guaranteed. Expressive Sandwork offers just such an assistance. Of the 84 children who took part in expressive Sandwork in Sloviansk, 85 % showed positive behavioural changes, according to their parents.

The following is the example of a five-year-old child in Popasnaja. When T. was three and a half years old, her family's house was hit by a mortar bomb. Her

family survived the attack, but T. subsequently lost all of her hair. She also suffered from an intense fear of abandonment, which didn't improve and made enrolment in school unthinkable. Her hair, eye lashes, and eye brows did not grow back. At the beginning of the Sandplay project, which would take place without the parents, T. could not be encouraged to join the group. This changed in the fourth session, when the facilitator offered to hold T. in her arms while she played. In this first session for T., she observed the other, older, children for a long time. Even the loudest and most conspicuous among them were silently, almost reverently concentrated in their work. Then T. reached for the sand herself and a big heart formed under her little hands. A joyful look from the girl to her facilitator and a smile on both of their faces constituted the beginning of a psychic healing process. After four weekly Sandplay sessions, darker spots began to show on T.'s bare head. Her hair had begun to grow again. For the parents, this was nothing short of a miracle. Is there a clinical explanation? It is safe to assume that the child's fears were adequately met: the project leader had found a good balance between encouraging the girl and granting her space, and had won the girl's trust. The decisive factor, however, had been the child's holistic, non-verbal, and therefore age-appropriate, experience of self-efficacy. Resilience can be defined as reacting actively to an adverse experience. Being able to create an inner world from scratch in a sand tray gives children the most valuable experience of self-efficacy possible. The fragmented inner world is reassembled in a new way, and this has a direct and visible effect on the autonomic nervous system (children sleep better, for example) and on somatic functions. Even if no word is spoken during Sandplay, mentalisation processes are constantly occurring. Children can observe themselves from a distance and reflect on their own emotional experience as if through a wide-angle lens. Reflection in young children occurs in the form of "as if"-games. These are models for experiencing the world and interacting with it, which provide children orientation and something to draw themselves forward along like a well anchored rope.

X., a group leader from the counselling service in Popasnaja tells of an eight-year old boy, T., who had no better ideas during his first sessions than to disturb all the other children. He repeatedly overstepped the few rules in Sandplay that are designed to protect the setting: he threw sand out of the sand tray, took other children's play material, and commented loudly and rudely on their sand images. X. had tried everything and didn't know what else she could do in her role as group facilitator. There was a real risk that a single child could jeopardise the entire project. T. lived with his grandmother, who was very strict with him. His mother had moved away, and he almost never saw his father. In his first Sandplay session, T. placed a house in the middle of the sand tray, added a few trees around it, and then placed the figure of a little child on the roof of the house, so that it looked as if it were about to fall off. Then T., almost randomly, fetched a smurf figure with outstretched arms and placed it in the sand next to the house. It looked as if the smurf could catch the child if it should fall. His facilitator was moved by this scene. We understood the image to show that the boy was in great danger of being harmed by his own transgressions but that he had also clearly understood that help was available. When T. continued to disturb the other children, X. took him into another room before the fourth session and spoke with him for a long time. Among other things, she said: "T., I see you. You really don't have to do all these things that disturb us. You are important to us just as you are. Do you understand? We adults, we *see* you." T. looked at her and tears started to well up in his eyes. "But my grandmother doesn't see me."

After this talk, T. became calmer and played quietly in his sand tray. The great success of this story was that his grandmother later came to the counselling service to ask for help. T. is one of the many children who were given another chance at just the right moment through Sandplay. The little smurf figure in his sand image represented his capacity for psychic self-regulation, which had become activated. What is more, and this is something that Sandplay facilitators witness over and over again, the positive effect also extended to the child's environment.

-Eva Pattis Zoja

