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## **Unofficial Storytelling as Middle Ground Between Transitional Truth-Telling and Forgetting: A New Approach to Dealing With the Past in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Oberpfalzerová, Hana; Ullrich, Johannes; Jeřábek, Hynek

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Is transitional truth-telling more beneficial to reconciliation than remaining silent about past crimes? The aim of this article is to contribute to the debate by exploring the impact of “My Story,” an NGO initiative that uses multiethnic storytelling by victims of the Bosnian war to promote reconciliation. We report field observations and the results obtained from interviews with young Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Empathy, as a reported outcome of the storytelling, seems to enable deeper reflection and attitude change. Respondents reported reduced prejudice, competitive victimhood and blaming, and increased interest in information about the outgroup, increased interest in peace activism, a change of emotions toward the outgroup and feeling guilt for the misdeeds of their ingroup. We conclude that this storytelling initiative is beneficial and worth spreading internationally. It deconstructs many of the same factors that prevent reconciliation that truth commissions aim to deconstruct, while improving interethnic attitudes and enabling to look toward the future, as forgetting does.

Keywords: reconciliation; forgetting; dealing with the past; storytelling; Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This article contributes to the debate on dealing with the past as opposed to forgetting, by exploring how storytelling can foster reconciliation. It was inspired by Eastmond and Selimovic’s claim that silence is the only option for ordinary Bosnians to rebuild their lives in a situation where there is a “lack of po-

litical will and institutions for providing a shared narrative of the past and a vision for the future in contemporary Bosnian leadership and politics” (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012, 505). We aim to enrich the larger debate by studying an NGO initiative called “My Story” that uses storytelling by war vic-

tims to promote reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim of the research was to find out whether this kind of initiative manages to combine the positives of transitional truth-telling and forgetting while avoiding their negative effects, and whether it therefore represents a useful middle ground between the two for supporting reconciliation when the creation of an official truth commission is not possible.

The initiative My Story represents one of the key outcomes of the peacebuilding project Choosing Peace Together (CPT) run between 2010 and 2014 by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Caritas of Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, financed by USAID (see Hart and Colo 2014). About 230 war victims (former concentration camp prisoners, civilian victims, family members of missing persons etc.) and war veterans were trained in nonviolent communication, dealing with trauma and forgiveness. About ninety of them were trained for public testimonies run by CRS and Caritas aiming at promoting reconciliation, in which about sixty of them participated. The testimonies always involve one member of each of the three main Bosnian ethnic groups: one Bosniak, one Croat and one Serb sitting next to each other with an audience and telling their stories of war, suffering and their way to reconciliation, concluding with a message of peace. Approximately 218 such events had taken place by the end of May 2019 (Bubalo 2017; Sajević 2019).

This initiative faces a great challenge, since people in Bosnia have a turbulent past to deal with. After World War II, Marshall Tito swept atrocities committed by Yugoslav nations against each other under the carpet (Bašić 2006, 357–358). Ethnic relations in communist Yugoslavia were very good but at its dissolution, manipulative elites caused the 1992–1995 war (Gagnon 1994), involving mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing and genocide (Toal and Dahlman 2011). Post-war Bosnia became a de facto international protectorate (Bagatskyi 2016), which the Dayton Peace Agreement divided into two principal entities. These largely reflected the war gains of the opposing sides and the extent of ethnic cleansing (Banac 2009,

469): the mainly Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (51 percent of the territory, divided into ten cantons), the predominantly Serb Republic of Srpska, (49 percent of the territory), and the small District of Brčko. Croats demand their own entity (United Nations Development Programme 2015, 14), while Serbs claim autonomy or even independence and unification with Serbia (Brunwasser 2016). School curricula are ethnically separated, books often present one-sided narratives and “enemy images” and there are a number of ethnically segregated schools (Swimelar 2013).

This article presents a theoretical framework of intractable conflict, storytelling, dealing with the past and forgetting in order to analyze the possible impacts of “My Story” testimonies on the readiness to reconcile, as well as the advantages and disadvantages they may have compared to truth-telling and forgetting. We will try to conclude whether “My Story” represents a useful alternative to the classical options of truth-telling and forgetting in a situation where no national truth commission exists and people have chosen silence in order to continue their everyday lives.

## 1 The Social-Psychological Infrastructure in Intractable Conflicts

The conflict in Bosnia is classified as an *abeyant intractable conflict* (Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2005, 13) since the US-enforced peace avoided a mutually hurting stalemate that would force resolution of the underlying “fundamental existential conflict” and enable it to continue with “more peaceful means” (Burg 2005, 200). Therefore, along with Petrović (2010), we apply Bar-Tal's (2013) theoretical framework.

Intractable conflicts are protracted, violent, and perceived as irresolvable by peaceful means; they demand intensive investment and certain groups have vested interests in their continuation (Kriesberg 1998, 332–34). They are total (concerning existential goals), perceived as zero-sum, and central to peoples' lives (Bar-Tal 1998; 2007, 1433). Prominent causes of intractable conflicts include polarized, zero-sum

identities denigrating the Other (Zartmann 2005, 50–51; Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2005, 7; Kelman 2004; Coleman 2000), elite manipulation (Brown 2001, as cited in Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2005, 7) and indiscriminate violence, trauma and desire for revenge (Kriesberg 1998, 334–35; Coleman 2000).

Living in an intractable conflict leads to the creation of a social psychological infrastructure that helps people overcome the difficult life conditions. It is composed of *collective memory*, *ethos of conflict* (narratives) and *collective emotional orientation*, and sustains a *culture of conflict* that prevents peace-building and reconciliation (Bar-Tal 2000; 2007; 2013). Narratives are central to intractable conflict since they represent a crucial part of a group's identity (Hammack 2010; Zartmann 2005).

Bar-Tal (2013, 138) conceptualizes collective memory as “a shared narrative with societal beliefs on particular themes regarding the remembered past of the society that provide an epistemic foundation for the group's belonging, solidarity, existence, mobilization, and courses of action.” Although considered to represent the truth, it is “biased, selective, and distorted” (Bar-Tal 2013, 141). It consists of societal beliefs about the conflict, outgroup delegitimization, positive and glorifying ingroup image, ingroup victimization, celebrating victories, honoring fallen civilians and heroes, and matters not directly related to the conflict such as *chosen traumas* (Volkan 2002) (Bar-Tal 2013, 149–50).

The *ethos of conflict* is a “narrative about the present” (Bar-Tal 2007, 1438), defined as “the configuration of shared central societal beliefs that provide a dominant orientation to a society; these beliefs illuminate the present state of affairs and conditions and set goals for the future” (Bar-Tal 2000, as cited in Bar-Tal 2013, 174). It consists of beliefs about positive ingroup image, outgroup delegitimization, justness of ingroup goals, ingroup victimization, necessity of ingroup unity, patriotism, ingroup security and attaining peace (Bar-Tal 1998; 2000; 2007; 2013). To the beliefs of victimization we add competitive victimhood or the belief that the ingroup has “suffered more than its adversaries” (Noor et al. 2012,

351). Reconciliation requires the transformation of the ethos of conflict into an *ethos of peace* consisting of legitimizing beliefs about the opponent, admission of ingroup guilt and outgroup victimization, reconstruction of the past, and cooperative relations (Bar-Tal 2000). Peaceful conflict resolution requires the creation of an alternative peace-supporting narrative (Bar-Tal 2013, 439; Hammack 2010) that can start with an *instigating belief* coming from a credible source (Bar-Tal 2013, 327–28).

The *collective emotional orientation* supports collective memory and the ethos of conflict, and prevents peacemaking (Bar-Tal 2013, 213). It consists of fear, collective angst, hatred, anger, humiliation, pride and hope (Bar-Tal 2013, 213–46)

Intractable conflicts require reconciliation to ensure stable peace (Kelman 2004, 112). We adopt Jeong's definition (2005, 156):

“Reconciliation can be generally defined as a process of mutual accommodation comprised of acknowledgement of past wrongdoing and contrition from the perpetrators in exchange for forgiveness offered by the victims. As a critical first step, guilt needs to be recognized with the acceptance of responsibility for atrocities or other events symbolizing intercommunal and interpersonal relations. Since reconciliation invites actions of both victims and offenders, the process of apology and forgiveness comes as all sides are better able to humanize each other.”

## 2 Reconciliation through Truth-Telling or Through Forgetting?

Reconciliation and conflict prevention can be reached either by dealing with the past, including transitional justice (Bickford 2007; Teitel 2000, Mendeloff 2004, 356–57), or through forgetting (Rigby 2001; Connerton 2011). *Dealing with the past* is a “coming to terms with violent history and violence committed against all victims, regardless of their ethnic, political, or any other background. This process usually needs to occur on a number of different levels, ‘from the micro-level of an individual in a small community, to the macrolevel of national, regional and global political bodies’ (Stubbs 2003)” (Banjeglav 2013, 34)

A common strategy for dealing with the past is *transitional justice*: “Transitional justice is a response

to systematic or widespread violations of human rights. It seeks recognition for victims and promotion of possibilities for peace, reconciliation and democracy. Transitional justice is not a special form of justice but justice adapted to societies transforming themselves after a period of pervasive human rights abuse” (International Center for Transitional Justice 2009). Its key mechanisms are criminal prosecution of perpetrators, truth-telling, reparations and institutional reforms, conducted mainly by the new regime (Teitel 2000; Boraine 2004).

While dealing with the past and transitional justice both aim at reconciliation, transitional justice focuses on individual responsibility and the rule of law, whereas dealing with the past also deals with collective responsibility and has a broader scope; moreover, it is a constant process that lasts beyond the transition period (Popović 2009, 12; see also Bickford 2004).

*Truth-telling* is done mostly by truth commissions that aim at uniting contradictory versions of truth in an official account of the past and removing its competing interpretations in order to prevent a renewal of conflict through manipulation of history. They give voice to victims to speak publicly about their suffering and receive acknowledgement (Hayner 2001; Mendeloff 2004, 361). They go beyond the defendant’s individual guilt, looking for patterns of human rights violation (Brants and Klep 2013, 42 and 48). They represent a form of justice by public shaming of perpetrators (Hayner 2001, 107–32; Brahm, 2007, 21; Teitel 2000). They facilitate reconciliation by psychological healing of victims and survivors (Hayner 2001, 133–53), heal societies (Kiss 2000, 72, as cited in Mendeloff 2004, 358), and promote social trust (Hayner, 2001) and individualization, in the sense of assignment of guilt to individuals, not groups (Akhavan, 1998, 766). However, testimonies can “rekindle anger and trigger posttraumatic stress among victims,” and at the societal level they “may generate resentment and insecurity” (Brahm 2007, 23).

“My Story” belongs to the category of *Unofficial Truth Projects* (Bickford 2007) that are similar to

truth commissions and share their aims, but are conducted by civil society. They can be replacements for or precursors to official truth commissions (Bickford 2007, 1004), especially when the latter cannot be established or are “ineffective or politically compromised” (Bickford 2007, 995), or where perpetrators are in positions of power (Bickford 2007, 1026). They may thus have more legitimacy and neutrality (Bickford 2007, 1027). They cannot construct a national narrative, but they may influence collective memory (Bickford 2007, 1033) by focusing on “smaller components of the national story” (Bickford 2007, 1027).

However, a number of authors argue that forgetting is preferable to reopening the past as the basis for the new societal order. Rigby warns that transitional justice may produce conflict, that forgetting may be a better option and that the past can be left for later generations to deal with (Rigby 2001). Connerton names three types of beneficial forgetting. *Prescriptive* forgetting is prescribed by the state in order to stop the vicious circle of revenge (Connerton 2011, 34), create social bonds and support nation building and democratization (Connerton 2011, 34–36; Misztal 2005). It prevents disputes about the past which contribute to conflict, and related nationalist propaganda and mythmaking (Misztal 2005, 1326). Secondly, a forgetting that is “*constitutive in the formation of a new identity*” (Connerton 2011, 36) entails forgetting old narratives that are not part of the new identity, which enables the construction of new, shared memories, accompanied by shared silences (Connerton 2011, 36–37). The third type of beneficial forgetting is *annulment*, a “response to a surfeit of information” in a society (Connerton 2011, 38). Also, maintaining *silence* about the past without forgetting it can help to renew disrupted social bonds and prevent disputes (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012).

“My Story” represents *dangerous memories*: stories of the other side’s suffering are dangerous to the *status quo* as they are subversive of conflict narratives and essentialized group identities (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 127). They do not erase memory but widen it “to include the Other’s memory” and allow the society to move on without amnesia (Zembylas

and Bekerman 2008, 145). In juxtaposing a “duty to remember” and a “duty to forget”, Ricoeur (2002, 10–11) proposes to cherish both – the former to keep the memory of suffering alive against a historical trend of celebrating victors, and the latter in order to go beyond anger and hatred. Dangerous memories allow the anger, hatred, enmity and the unilateral narrative of one’s own side to be forgotten, “so as to enable the space for reconciliation” (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 139–40). Therefore, they “oppose the dichotomy between forgetting/remembrance” (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 145). This claim is corroborated by our findings that dangerous memories in “My Story” have some crucial benefits of both truth-telling and forgetting.

### 3 Storytelling and Reconciliation

*Constructive storytelling* fosters positive peace and “peaceful relationships within communities” (Senehi 2002, 45). However, “stories may just as trenchantly exaggerate differences, foment discord and do violence to lived experience” (Jackson 2002, 11). Research on a number of storytelling initiatives similar to “My Story” will help us lay the foundations of our theoretical framework. The most famous initiative, *To Reflect and Trust* (TRT), brings together descendants of victims of the Holocaust and of Nazi perpetrators in a series of workshops, helping them to work through (live with) their unresolved pain and traumas through sharing their personal stories (Bar-On and Kassem 2004, 290). Working through does not mean the same as reconciliation, which is an individual achievement (Bar-On 2004, 247–48). The TRT approach was successfully used in other conflict settings (Bar-On 2006; Bar-On, Kutz and Wegner 2000; Bar-On and Kassem 2004). The *Narrative/Story-Telling Model* of reconciliation-focused contact interventions that is founded on the TRT specifies the following mechanisms: “Encountering the experience and suffering of the other through story-telling is seen as enabling conflicting groups to create intergroup trust and compassion by re-humanizing, and constructing a more complex image of, each other (Bar-On 2006; 2008; Maoz and Bar-On 2002)” (Maoz,

2011, 120–21). The “personal ties and empathy to each other as human beings” (Maoz 2011, 120) resulting from this kind of intervention also extend to other outgroup members (Bar-On 2002, as cited in Maoz 2011, 120). The evaluation of these initiatives mainly comes from participant observation by TRT authors.

Another initiative, the most similar to “My Story,” is *The Parents Circle - Families Forum* (PCFF, also called *Bereaved Families*). Israelis and Palestinians who have lost a loved one to the conflict share their stories among themselves, and later with the public. Kleinot (2011) studied conversion experiences of Palestinians through interviews and participation in therapeutic group sessions. Furman (2013) did ethnographic research including attending presentations and interviewing PCFF members mainly about their conversion experiences. Empathy has been found to be one of the key factors of attitude change (Kleinot 2011; Furman 2013; see also Stephan and Finlay 1999), a shift in the perception of the other (Furman 2013, 131) and in the “conversion experiences” in bereaved Palestinians occurring in a couple of hours “insofar as seeing the suffering of the other opens up the possibility of identification with and compassion toward the other’s pain” (Furman 2013, 131). The latter also “replaces blame” (Kleinot 2011, 108, see also Finlay and Stephan 2000). Empathy encourages intergroup bonding (Furman 2013, 131). Witnessing the Other’s suffering opens people to multiple narratives (Furman 2013, 144), makes them perceive the suffering of both sides as equivalent (Furman 2013, 135; see also Shnabel, Halabi and Noor 2013), inducing “a relief from the experience of being victims” (Furman 2013, 137). Viewing suffering similar to one’s own can induce the withdrawal of hatred (Kleinot 2011, 106). Also, recategorization into common (Gaertner and Dovidio 2014), superordinate (González and Brown 2003) or cross-cutting identities (Brewer 2000) reduces prejudice and intergroup bias. Witnessing the Other’s suffering also fosters the “inclusion of the Other’s memory” into one’s own memory (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 145) and rehumanization (Furman 2013, 132 and 135;

Kleinot 2011; see also Bar-On 2006, Maoz 2011). This can lead to trust and solidarity with the Other (Furman 2013, 132) and moral inclusion (Furman 2013, 132). As a side note, the acknowledgement of collective guilt, which “My Story” seems to foster, may support reconciliation (Čehajić-Clancy 2012, 239).

According to Bar-On (2006), a “good enough story” is “a story that creates intergroup empathy and does not alienate or hurt the other participants” (Maoz, 2011, 121). However, the social and institutional context of storytelling is also important (Jackson 2002, 40). Jackson (2002, 28) highlights the close interaction between the bodies of the storytellers and the listeners “sitting closely together, sitting in unison, laughing or crying as one.” This is a form of *contact*. Contact can reduce prejudice, especially given equal status in the contact situation, pursuit of common goals, institutional support and a perception of common interests and common humanity (Allport 1954, 281; Pettigrew and Tropp 2011, 69).

#### 4 Dealing with the Past, Forgetting and the Role of Storytelling in Bosnia

In Bosnia, the international community supports reconciliation through transitional justice. Some Bosnians, especially Serbs, maintain that the war should be forgotten and not spoken about (Bubalo 2017). History tells us, however, that forgetting has not paid off. Past traumas that have never been dealt with, such as the atrocities of World War II or the battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) in which the Serbs succumbed to the Ottomans (Volkan 2002), later served as fuel for the war in the 1990s (Bašić 2006, 357–58; Volkan 2002).

Interethnic relations in Bosnia today can be defined as negative peace (Clark 2009a), although reconciliation on the level of ordinary people is happening (UNDP 2015, 22). However, prejudice (Skoko 2011, 16), distrust (Hakansson and Sjöholm 2007), competitive victimhood (Keil, Bates and Noor, n.d.), relativization of outgroup suffering (Selimović 2010, 55), denial of war crimes (Raković 2005; Obradović-Wochnik 2013), denial of guilt, alternative narratives (Clark 2009b, 476–78), blaming and narratives of col-

lective innocence (Selimović 2010, 58) prevail. Moreover, three competing versions of truth about the war exist and prevent reconciliation, and despite numerous calls for a national truth commission (Kritz and Finci 2001; Clark 2009b), attempts to establish one have failed (Popović 2009, 58). Local truth commissions for Sarajevo and Bijeljina also failed, only the commission for Srebrenica was successful (Popović 2009, 62–68, Dragović-Soso 2016).

Reasons for the failure to establish a national truth commission may lie in their closeness to the South African model, leadership by foreigners, lack of local involvement and ownership, lack of transparency and consultations with the public, suspicions about the approach of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the presence of wartime leaders in politics who did not wish their guilt to be uncovered (Simpson, Hodžić and Bickford 2012, 71–76, Dragović-Soso 2016, 302–3; Popović 2009, 54–57). Some of those reasons still persist: victim groups’ fear of losing their victim status (Dragović-Soso 2016, 304–6; Popović 2009), Bosnian Serb leaders’ resistance and lack of allegiance to a unified Bosnian nation, and Bosnian politicians’ resistance to participate in a truth commission due to fear of discovery of their actions during the war (Dragović-Soso 2016, 304).

Current truth-telling in Bosnia involves documentation (often monoethnic), films, books and festivals (Simpson, Hodžić and Bickford 2012, 76–84, see also Popović 2009). In a storytelling initiative similar to “My Story,” run by the *Center for Nonviolent Action* in Sarajevo, war veterans from all three sides share their stories and call for peace. The aim is to “motivate people to reflect critically and honestly on their role and their personal responsibility before, during and after the war” (Fischer 2006, 388).

#### 5 The “My Story” Initiative

According to one of the founders of “My Story,” Bubalo, the initiative was inspired by the so-called *theories of change* and by truth commissions (Bubalo 2019). The core idea was to make war victims into promoters of reconciliation by helping them to work



through their traumatic experiences (Bubalo 2017). It supposes that war victims enjoy the status of opinion leaders because they suffered traumas that most of the ordinary population did not (Catholic Relief Services, n.d.).

The storytellers were prepared for public testimony in a series of seminars within the project “Choosing Peace Together” where trained psychologists helped them to deal with their trauma and move toward forgiveness (Hart and Colo 2014, 83). The stories are always told with one Serb, one Bosniak and one Croat sitting side-by-side, just like in the PCFF testimonies. Such a setting “undoubtedly functions to model for students empathy and the possibility for reconciliation” (Furman 2013, 140). As a matter of principle, the storytellers in “My Story” do not mention their own ethnicity but only the name and town. They use nonviolent communication and never offend or inculpate. Many of them do not name the perpetrators’ ethnicity; this information can sometimes be inferred from the names of places, concentration camps or adversaries. However, young people especially often do not know enough details of the war to decipher this information. The storytellers frame their stories exclusively as personal accounts of what they themselves witnessed (hence “My Story”) and refuse to comment on what they have not.

The stories themselves represent important background. Smilja Mitrović is a Serb mother who is still looking for the body of her missing son who had been drafted into the Serb army against his will and sent to the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Andjelko Kvesić (Croat, male) told a story of being severely wounded on the frontline and saved by “enemy” Bosniaks, an ambulance driver and a doctor. He barely mentioned being in a concentration camp (without naming it as such). His story had an optimistic tone. Edisa Šehić (Bosniak, female) told a story of fighting on the frontline as a young mother and educating her daughter to love and tolerance for Croats and Serbs. Amir Omerspahić (Bosniak, male) was captured by the

Serbian army trying to flee Bosnia and taken to a concentration camp inside of Serbia where he endured terrible conditions, mistreatment and torture. An extremely kind Serbian doctor saved his life, and one of his prison guards gave him a blanket and promised nobody would beat him again. Janko Samouković (Serb, male), was imprisoned by his own Bosniak neighbors in his elementary school and later in the infamous Silos concentration camp. He described torture, fainting of hunger and other realities of camp life. Stanislav Krezić (Croat, male) was imprisoned in a concentration camp by his Bosniak fellow combatants. He did forced labor and witnessed killings and people dying in his arms. After the war, he hated both Bosniaks and Serbs and ran a nationalist café where he only allowed Croats as customers, but then attained full reconciliation with the other nations. Latifa Begić<sup>2</sup> (Bosniak, female) survived an aerial bombing of her house as a child (without saying who attacked) and, when brought to the hospital, saw many of her friends lying dead. Vesna Tomić<sup>3</sup> (Serb, female) told the story of fighting on the frontline and becoming disabled after being hit by a shell that also killed her sister next to her.

Based on our analysis, the testimonies have three key components: the content of the story, emotions the storyteller conveys (empathy and suffering vs. hope and optimism) and the message pronounced by the storytellers. Previous research on “My Story” has shown that public testimonies promote interethnic trust, collaboration, acknowledgement of outgroup suffering, peacebuilding and communication (Hart and Colo 2014, 83–85).

<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the real names of the storytellers are used, with their informed consent as per EU General Data Protection Regulation.

<sup>2</sup> pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> pseudonym

**Table 1: Locations and context information on the interviews**

	Mixed town with Bosniak majority (2014)*	Bosniak-Croat town (2014)	Serb town (2014)*	Two small towns in the same ethnically mixed area (2012–2013)
<b>Wartime fighting</b>	Serbs vs. Croats and Bosniaks	Bosniaks vs. Croats	Serbs vs. Bosniaks	All against all
<b>Stories</b>	Smilja, Andjelko, Edisa	Amir, Janko, Stanislav	Latifa, Andjelko, Vesna	Amir, Janko, Stanislav
<b>Setting</b>	High school	Youth center promoting peacebuilding	High school with support of municipality	Testimony for the general public in a large hall in a bigger town
<b>Audience</b>	Ca. sixty listeners, mainly Bosniak	Ca. thirty listeners, Bosniak and Croat	Ca. thirty listeners, all Serb	Large number, mainly Croat and Bosniak, some Serbs
<b>Respondents</b>	<u>Male:</u> Kasim (B) <u>Female:</u> Jasmina** (B) Zehra** (B) Hanifa (B) Dina (B) Halima (B)	<u>Female:</u> Azra (B) Meliha (B) Danica (C)	<u>Male:</u> Marko (S) Jovan (S) <u>Female:</u> Ana (S) Marija (S) Jelena (S) Mirjana (S) Serb teacher (S)	<u>Male:</u> Franjo** (C) Josip** (C)

*Note:* \* First author videotaped the testimony; \*\* Reported pronounced attitude change involving prejudice reduction or a reduction of competitive victimhood.

B = Bosniak; S = Serb; C = Croat.

## 6 Methodology

The present article is based on qualitative field research by the first author. She assisted in two public testimonies which she videotaped (stories of Amir, Janko and Stanislav were videotaped in a testimony for Ukrainian NGO activists) and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the storytellers and their listeners. The organization of the testimonies depended fully on the local partners and could not be influenced; the current project within which testimonies are organized aims at young people, hence our focus on this category. The field research was conducted between October 2012 and April 2015, beginning with the CPT project itself, followed by the main interviewing phase in 2014 and

2015. A total of seventeen young people from 16 to 25 years old, plus one teacher were interviewed: eight Bosniaks (one male, seven female), seven Serbs (two male, five female), and three Croats (two male, one female) from four towns and their surroundings (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, most respondents were female, which may be due to the young women's greater willingness to share their experiences.

In the mixed town, some of the respondents were recruited by a teacher, in the Bosniak-Croat town, all were recruited by employees of the youth center, the two male Croats by collaborators of "My Story" and the rest through a questionnaire on the impact

<sup>4</sup> In the interest of anonymization, all names of audience members have been changed to pseudonyms.

of the testimonies (main mode of recruitment; not included in this study) in which listeners could leave their contact information. Interviews took place in an empty school office, a café and a youth center. They were conducted partly individually, partly in small groups, or in some cases by phone. Possible group conformism was checked for by a later round of interviews. The interviews took place on the day of the testimony or up to one week after. Franjo and Josip were interviewed on earlier testimonies. Many respondents were interviewed a second time after four months to check for possible attitude change. This period was chosen because Franjo and Josip had indicated that they had experienced attitude change after two or three months.

Four respondents reported pronounced positive attitude change and a few some partial changes. Serb respondents did not report any attitude change; this may be because they already had positive attitudes thanks to being involved in a contact program with Bosniaks and NGO volunteering, and because some students in the class did not trust the testimonies since Andjelko (in good faith) was reading his story from a written version. Importantly, the testimonies had institutional support from authorities, and authority figures (teachers, school director, religious leaders or NGO staff) were present, which could have facilitated the effects (see e.g. Allport, 1954, 281; Pettigrew and Tropp 2011, 69; Jackson 2002, 40).

The interviews were in-depth (around one hour) and semi-structured. The research was focused by establishing hypotheses – based on existing theories of attitude change and reconciliation – that informed the formulation of interview questions. For example, the respondents' opinion and experiences were elicited through questions such as “What feelings did you have during the public testimony?” to elicit answers regarding empathy, or “What is your attitude toward the Serbs?” to elicit answers regarding prejudice. Only a few hypotheses (the role of reflection, willingness to engage in contact, and the gradual character of attitude change) were derived from the data. Biography, socialization, contact were

asked about; narrative questions controlled for factors not expected by researchers. Attitude change means here the reduction of negative emotions, beliefs and attitudes and an increased willingness for reconciliation. It was operationalized through questions about feelings and attitudes before, during and after the testimony. Remarks about adversary nations were also analyzed. Willingness for reconciliation was operationalized based on a scale developed by Petrović (2010) that includes the dimensions of rehumanization (counteracting prejudice, delegitimization and blaming), forgiveness, cooperation and trust, and a scale by Shnabel et al. (2009) that includes ten items such as the willingness to learn more about the outgroup.

The interviews were transcribed and coded by the first author based on theories of reconciliation, complemented by codes generated from the data. The data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, cross-case comparison and contextualizing them into respondents' biographies and socio-political relations in Bosnia. Analysis was also enriched by interviews with CPT staff and with most of the storytellers (mostly not included here). The testimonies were also transcribed and analyzed in a similar fashion. The conclusions of this research are not causal and should be understood as an account of the respondents' self-reported experiences interpreted in the light of theory.

## 7 The Impact of the Public Testimonies on the Audience

### Nationality does not matter

Our prime observation was that many listeners did not notice the storytellers' ethnic identity but focused on their suffering instead. Azra, a Bosniak young woman (2014) said regarding Amir, Janko and Stanislav: *“I only had the image in front of my eyes of how they were being tortured. I did not listen to who was torturing them. (...) I did not pay attention to it and I did not care about it.”* We believe that the side-by-side setting strongly contributed to this perception.

### The pivotal role of empathy

We also propose that the key outcome that mediates many others is empathy, which the stories evoke in abundance. *Emotional empathy* in the form of “sadness” (*tuga*) and “regret” or “pity” (*sažaljenje*) was named as making the deepest impact of all the testimony on most listeners. The empathy for the three concentration camp prisoners seemed to be strongest, since some of their female listeners were in tears during our interview. The storytellers also gave the listeners clues with their body language as to how difficult it is for them to speak about these matters. Azra (2014) observed the storytellers’ movements of hands and feet and emotions:

“When Amir was speaking, he had his eyes full of tears. I, too, was feeling like I was going to cry ... My eyes were full of tears (...) and I was feeling some kind of sadness, pain (...). And simply I could not breathe normally. It was very difficult.”

This is congruent with theory according to which imitating the cues and emotions of the target leads to a similar state in the observer (Davis 1996, 15 – 16, 39). These cues would likely not have been picked up so easily if the testimony had been broadcast on television.

Franjo (2014) and Josip (2015), who reacted to the same stories, reported deep sorrow but not tears. Male gender or fading memories could explain this. Smilja’s story also evoked strong empathy but not tears.

Besides strong emotional empathy, *cognitive* empathy was also omnipresent. It entailed imagining the story in front of one’s eyes like a film, but also the strongest form of empathy, *imagining oneself* (Davis 1996) in the storyteller’s place. Zehra, a Bosniak young woman (2014) said she was sorry for Smilja because “*the loss of a child is the worst thing that can happen.*” Kasim also recognized this, but the young women seemed to relate to her story more personally as future mothers. Jasmina (2014) went on to imagine how it would be if Smilja’s son turned up at her door one day saying: “*Mum, I am alive, (...), here I am.*”

The *similarity between observer and target* (Davis 1996, 14) also seemed to play a role. Azra, Meliha

and Danica related to the stories of the former concentration camp prisoners more personally since they were the same age at the time of the events. Jasmina (2014) and Zehra (2015) related to Smilja as future mothers. Zehra (2014) felt special empathy for Andjelko, since her father was wounded on the battlefield and nearly died.

Stories of the three concentration camp prisoners suppressed any other thoughts and focused the listeners on the story, according to Franjo (2014). Yet many others, especially if reacting to other stories such as Smilja’s, were induced to think about what was happening to their families during the war. Empathy was, however, diminished when the listener was desensitized to wartime stories because he had heard too many of them (Marko, 2014).

### The more tragic the story, the deeper the impact

We also assume that stories that highlight negative experiences are more likely to change attitudes than positive stories communicating an optimistic belief in the future and presenting positive war heroes. The more tragic the stories in this study, the higher the empathy was. However, empathy seemed to be diminished by an optimistic tone on the part of the storyteller, as Zehra (2015) said regarding Andjelko for whom she had a lot of empathy, but less than for Smilja: “*Thank God, he is alive.*” This could be because the stronger the display of negative emotions by the target, the stronger the response in the observers (Davis 1996, 14–15). We cannot, however, assess the real impact of positive stories because no such storyteller had listeners with negative attitudes toward his or her national group.

### The message

Another outcome of the testimonies consisted of reactions to their message. The latter had two components: *what was said* and *what was not said but was implied*. The themes focused on not judging people or the importance of victims based on their nationality, but spreading peace, avoiding hate and building a better future. The “brotherly interaction” of Amir,

Janko and Stanislav was evaluated by Franjo (2014) as a message by opinion leaders worth following:

“You see the former concentration camp prisoners and they tell you (...) that you should forgive your neighbour and turn the page and move on.”

However, emotions were reported to have been more powerful than the message.

### “We are all victims”

Respondents with initially negative attitudes also reported *decreased denial of the outgroup’s suffering*, which represents a *decrease in competitive victimhood* (Noor et al. 2012) as it reduces the gap between perceived ingroup and outgroup suffering. Some respondents came to understand that all three nations had suffered in the war, which represents a successful induction of common victim identity (Shnabel, Halabi and Noor 2013). Franjo (2014) reported regarding the wartime victimization of the three nations such as persecution and war crimes:

“In that period it was as if things were happening only to us, as if we were the greatest victim of the war. But now when you start to re-examine those things, you see that it was happening to all sides, as through those public testimonies that I saw, the testimonies of those people, you see that things were happening to them, too.”

Josip (2015) highlighted that “when you see the people [the storytellers] and the pain in their eyes and what they have all been through, you understand that it was all the same.”

Franjo’s competitive victimhood, but also prejudice and hate, were reportedly largely based on biased national media and lack of access to alternative information. The testimonies confronted him for the first time with “*the three truths from the three sides*” that helped him to “*put the pieces of the puzzle together*” and “*get the whole picture*” that all three nations had been subjected to war crimes. He admitted that the other Bosnian nations suffered “*the same way*” in terms of the types and scale of suffering (killings, persecutions) and that victims are just victims, regardless of their ethnic origin (Franjo 2014). Zehra (2015) came to the same conclusion and her empathy for Smilja seemed to have generalized to

the group: “*This way, we can feel empathy for other people.*”

Except for Franjo (2014), the testimonies did not seem to make listeners believe that all nations suffered roughly the same scale of casualties. The stories are, however, not designed for this as they are framed as personal testimonies and do not affect peoples’ beliefs regarding the “war of numbers” over the official death toll.

### “All sides committed crimes”

Several respondents reported that after the public testimony, they *acknowledged for the first time that their ingroup had also committed crimes* during the 1990s war. The lack of such an acknowledgement was often explained by the respondents as simple ignorance, or lack of information. Danica (2014) observed, regarding the concentration camp stories:

“It was really useful for me as I got to know many things that I did not know earlier. I had the occasion to hear stories from the three sides of the war. I mainly learned that everyone was in the same situation, that Bosniaks were torturing Croats, Croats were torturing Bosniaks, or the Serbs did, everyone was in the same situation. And especially that ordinary people were victims.”

The effect of acknowledging ingroup guilt can be potentially strongest if a storyteller was hurt by a listener’s ingroup, although Josip (2015) admitted the same even if no storyteller was hurt by Croats: “*If Bosniaks and Serbs committed war crimes, Croats had to commit them as well.*” A few respondents reported they felt some guilt and shame about their ingroup’s misdeeds, and also empathic anger (Davis 1996, 18) at the perpetrators. Notably, Franjo (2014) felt “*wrath*” and “*hate*” against “*the people who committed the cruelties.*” Only the stories of Amir, Janko and Stanislav impacted perceived ingroup guilt. Andjelko’s Bosniak listeners denied guilt by restating the common view that Bosniaks were “*only defending themselves*” (Zehra 2015).

### “I cannot blame them all”

Another outcome of the testimonies may be the *reduction of blaming of the outgroup for the ingroup’s suffering*. This was most remarkable in Smilja’s case.

Her listeners concluded that many Serbs did not want to go to war and that they were forced to, while it was “*the powerful people who started it all*” (Zehra 2015)

Listeners also reported *individualization*. Franjo (2014) had believed that Bosniaks and Serbs were “*all the same*” but said the public testimonies made him “*see the real truth*” and he could no longer generalize and condemn everyone. He learned that “*there were only some bad individuals who were the bad guys. You cannot look at a whole nation through the lens of those few people.*” In this case, the individualization was facilitated by the awareness of “*many good things*” happening in the war, most probably the story about a Serb doctor who saved Amir’s life.

#### “They are not all bad”

Some respondents reported *prejudice reduction* or a beginning of the process. The starting point was sometimes the conviction that “they are all bad,” “all [war] criminals” (Jasmina 2014, Zehra 2015, Franjo 2014, Josip 2015). Especially the Serbs are most often blamed for causing the war (Kasapović 2015). This image was reported to be changed by Smilja:

“The new thing for me was that I understood that there can be Serb people with whom you can speak about everything, who can be nice and who have good intentions with you ...”

Smilja served as a positive example that there can be good Serbs, since she was perceived as a “really nice woman” (Jasmina 2014).

Another factor seems to be the confrontation with authentic outgroup suffering and with positive stories of helping, such as the Serb doctor who saved Amir’s life. Franjo (2014) converted from hate to reconciliation:

“Through the public testimonies you see the real truth and you cannot generalize. (...) There were even many good things, so you cannot condemn such people and you get a more realistic picture of it all. Then you begin to try to push it to the background. You see how people get closer to each other as time goes by and how they try to forgive each other and so on.” (Franjo 2014)

Franjo comes from a multiethnic setting and he could not bear hating his Bosniak and Serb neighbors anymore. The stories gave him great relief, making him aware that he does not need to blame

his neighbors for the war, and he can let the past go. His comment that “you begin to try to push it to the background” is in line with the argument that storytelling fosters forgetting (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 139–40). The testimonies gave him a “*more accurate picture*” of the truth so that alternative information he had already from other sources became “*more trustworthy and closer*” to him, initiating gradual attitude change (Franjo 2014).

#### Wanting to know more

The public testimonies bring *new information*, surprising – and often shocking – insights such as insider stories of outgroup suffering, from concentration camps or from the front. Although Bosnians may easily acknowledge outgroup suffering, they often avoid speaking about the war with outgroup members (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012) or may have no occasion to hear their perspective at all due to lack of interethnic contact. Most of our respondents reported that the public testimony encouraged them to think and incited their curiosity and *willingness to acquire alternative information about the outgroup* and its war experience, which encouraged them to research the topic. Respondents with negative attitudes reported increased *willingness to engage in intergroup contact*, for example a wish to have a Serb friend. Jasmina had no positive contact with Serbs since there were few in the town, only a few threatening episodes. Referring to Smilja as an example of a nice Serb, she reported:

“I wish to meet the good Serbs who still exist so that they tell me their side of the story and I tell them mine. I think that we would agree on most things” (Jasmina, 2014).

We conclude that openness to alternative information can lead to reflection and gradual attitude change as in Franjo (2014) and Josip (2015).

#### Forgive (and forget?)

Josip (2015), who went through a Bosniak concentration camp as a child, reported that the public testimonies helped him to forgive. He interpreted the public testimony as advocating forgetting the war. A Serb young woman, Ana (2014), interpreted the mes-

sage as “Let’s put the past behind us and move forward – if the victims can do it, then everybody can,” supporting our claim about opinion leadership.

### Trusting your neighbour

In this research, the public testimonies did not seem to directly impact trust. Franjo (2014) and Josip (2015) indicated increased trust, which could be due to interethnic contact that the young Bosniaks lack (Tam et al., 2009).

### Gradually increasing attitude change

The aforementioned attitude changes took time to occur. Empathy and thinking about the storyteller’s experience were immediate and were followed by a deep reflection about the war and the outgroup’s experience in it and by an active search for alternative information. Respondents who reported attitude change stated that the actual attitudes only started to change after about a week and they thought that all outgroup members were not bad. Josip (2015), who saw two public testimonies, the first eighteen months earlier, indicated that attitude change was noticeable two to three months after the first public testimony but that it “may last even today.” We believe that attitude change may be strengthened by participation in further public testimonies and through intergroup contact, because Franjo (2014) and Josip (2015) were the only ones who reported (near) complete attitude change, whereas Zehra (2015) did not have contact and four months after the testimony only reported partial prejudice reduction.

Internal evaluations of two public testimonies indicated that these supported attitude improvement (80 percent of respondents indicated this), increased trust (88 percent) and increased willingness to join peacebuilding activities (88 percent) (CRS 2013a, b). Importantly, some Serb respondents said that they were “*mature personalities with firm attitudes*” that a brief testimony could not change (Marija 2014). We propose that personal reflection which the testimonies induces may help overcome this.

### Multiplicator effect

The listeners do spread the message of the public testimonies to others. For example, Franjo (2014) reported a total change from absolute *hate* to *reconciliation* over the course of less than two years, achieving the same change in his parents just by talking to them about the public testimony and about his own opinion change.

### Confirmation that positive attitudes are correct

Several respondents reported that the stories, including the positive, optimistic ones, strengthened their existing positive interethnic attitudes, reassuring them that their point of view is correct (Marko 2014), and making them more willing to engage in peacebuilding activities and to spread the message of the testimony to others.

## 8 Negative Reactions and Negative Impact of Public Testimonies

### Reactivation of conflict-related frames

In this research, no evidence suggests that the testimonies worsened listeners’ attitudes. Only Kasim, a Bosniak young man (2014, 2015) who was somewhat prejudiced, saw the stories as a reminder of the Serbs’ crimes. However, he indicated that overall, the public testimony improved his attitudes a little. We therefore conclude that in a small minority of respondents who are high in prejudice and blaming, the stories can *reactivate conflict-related interpretive frames* and that they can be used as a proof of outgroup perpetration.

### Retraumatization

Some storytellers and listeners stated that people who lived through the war are unlikely to change their attitudes. Also, some people fear a retraumatization of the audience. It happened to a Serb teacher who experienced the war as a teenager and lost a loved one. She broke down in tears during the testimony, saying that the war should be forgotten and not be spoken about, as she was trying to do herself. She and some of her students stated that young peo-

ple did not think much about the war and that reminding them of it was not good (Mirjana 2014).

### Sabotage

According to “My Story” staff observations of other testimonies, some people with negative attitudes reacted by saying that the stories were not true and some tried to sabotage the events with verbal attacks. Amir Omerspahić (2014) said he believed these were people who had “something to hide.” Other people may see the perpetrators as their heroes. For example, a young man whose father was a prison guard in the concentration camp where the storyteller was imprisoned reacted to one testimony saying: “*Why would we need to reconcile? Why did we go to war then?*” (Bubalo 2019). Other listeners claimed that the stories were not true, that the perpetrators did not represent their respective nations, or denied the crimes altogether, saying that they did not need to apologize for anything. Some called the stories pathetic moaning (Bubalo 2016).

## 9 Unofficial Storytelling as a Middle Ground Between Transitional Truth-Telling and Forgetting?

Based on the above findings, we conclude that the “My Story” testimonies retain many of the key advantages of both truth-telling and forgetting. As to the advantages of truth-telling, the crucial outcome is *empathy* with the other, just like in the PCFF and the TRT (Furman 2013, 131; Kleinot 2011; Bar-On 2006; Bar-On and Kassem 2004; Maoz 2011, 120–21). Furthermore, the reported attitude change represents a pronounced positive shift from the *ethos of conflict* toward an *ethos of peace* (Bar-Tal 1998; 2000; 2013, 387–89). Outgroup members became personalized, and prejudice and delegitimization became transformed into legitimizing beliefs and rehumanization, just like in the TRT and the PCFF (Furman 2013, 135; Kleinot 2011; Bar-On 2006, Maoz 2011, 120). The moral integrity of the ingroup and its role in the war were often questioned and ingroup perpetration of war crimes was admitted (Bar-Tal 2013, 190; Čehajić-Clancy 2012). Literature on the PCFF

does not deal with ingroup guilt. Beliefs of competitive victimhood were deeply shattered or extinguished and the suffering of the other nations was acknowledged, just like in the PCFF (Furman 2013, 135; Shnabel, Halabi and Noor 2013). Blaming of ordinary people from the outgroups was also clearly reduced as listeners became aware that people were manipulated into fighting in the war by the politicians and against their will, and that therefore they should not be blamed (Kleinot 2011, 108). As to the collective emotional orientation, anger and hate seemed to be strongly impacted in some cases (Kleinot 2011, 106). This is coherent with previous research on the TRT and the PCFF (Kleinot 2011, 108; Furman 2013, 131; Bar-On 2006; Maoz 2011, 120–21). “My Story” affected *collective memory*, as storytelling leads to the inclusion of the “Other’s memory” and suffering into one’s own memory (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 145). The stories in this research brought new knowledge about other nations’ suffering, which became part of the listeners’ memory of the war. Also, they made the listeners understand that some Serbs were forced to fight in the war. The testimonies seem to be *instigating belief* coming from a credible source (see Bar-Tal, 2013, pp. 327–28). This is congruent with research on the PCFF according to which storytelling opened people to multiple narratives (Furman 2013, 144).

Notably, the testimonies activate many known mechanisms of reconciliation and attitude change such as empathy (Stephan and Finlay 1999) or common identity (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014). Our evidence suggests that receiving empathy may be more important for victim groups (mainly the storytellers), while giving empathy may be more important for perpetrator groups (mainly the audience) (Čehajić-Clancy, Goldenberg, Gross and Halperin 2016). It also suggests that stories of suffering may have more impact on attitude change than stories told with an optimistic tone (Davis 1996, 14–15).

Importantly, “My Story” testimonies seem to lead to some of the key outcomes ascribed to official truth commissions, such as reducing blame and ingroup guilt, as well as promoting individualization



(Akhavan 1998, 766), affecting collective memory and the ethos of conflict, and beginning the process of reconciliation (Hayner 2001, 24). Negative outcomes of truth-telling mainly include the reactivation of conflict-related frames (Oberschall 2000) and re-traumatization.

The public testimonies minimize the negative consequences of truth-telling (Brahm 2007, 23) by not directly bringing up general narratives about who is culpable for the war or for specific war crimes. They do so through personal stories that are framed as such and by avoiding blaming and pointing fingers. According to accounts of “My Story” staff, this seems very successful. School representatives tend to be cautious, suspicious and afraid of reopening the past through wartime stories, but in the end, they are generally happy with them (Bubalo 2017).

As to the benefits of forgetting, some listeners report that the testimonies have enabled them to make sense of their traumas, put the past behind and move toward reconciliation, as the CPT trainer Ranka Katalinski (2016) also observed. This entails forgetting anger and hatred (Ricoeur 2002, 10–11; Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, 139–45) and some unilateral national narratives.

The key to the impact is in large part the trustworthiness of the stories, which stems from the face-to-face format. We presume that if the public testimonies were broadcast by media, their impact would be lower because of weakened transmission of emotions and cues, and also there would be the risk of uncontrolled spread of the stories and their alienation from the storytellers (Ross 2003).

Among the key success factors of “My Story” seem to be its side-by-side format, empathy and authentic shocking stories of outgroup suffering. What makes it unique are rare types of stories such as testimonies from a concentration camp that people hardly can bear to hear, the strict adherence to non-violent communication and the avoidance of stating the storytellers’ and sometime even the perpetrators’ identity, which underscores that we are all human and nationality is not important. This contrasts sharply with the approach of truth commissions that

are based on public shaming of perpetrators (Brahm 2007, 21; Teitel 2000). Another remarkable feature is the capacity of the storytelling to engage people in a long-term process of reflection and attitude change.

To conclude, in our research, positive impact largely outweighed any negative effects. We believe that the “My Story” design can be successfully applied in other post-conflict settings since the same factors need to be addressed, and personal stories can be acceptable even in situations when other initiatives aiming at societal-level goals would likely be rejected. The side-by-side design is especially suited for addressing competing claims and emotions, while nonviolent communication helps address guilt minimizing adverse reactions. The (political) independence of this storytelling is also crucial.

Further research should focus more precisely on mechanisms identified here, on measurement instruments and on measuring causal paths, possibly by having a control group of high school students who were not exposed to the stories. The role of empathy, the side-by-side format, the avoidance of mentioning nationality and of the framing in nonviolent communication should receive particular attention.

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## Interviews

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