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SCHOOL UNDER SHELLING

RADIO BROADCASTS IN KARLOVAC - A SAD BUT INVALUABLE EXPERIENCE

by Mirjana Došen, prof. mentor, Gimnazija Karlovac, Croatia

The roofs of ancient Dubrovnik are red in my mind's eye. New. Brand new, so my friend Trisha tells me. Later on, on a British Council course, I can see it for myself. My native Karlovac, nearly 427 years old, is living in peace and quiet again. 15 years before, in 1991, it was a tense spring, the summer that year saw cannon from Yugoslav Army barracks pointed at the town, early in the autumn aggression was in full swing. In spite of all that life simply had to go on - unless it was interrupted, destroyed by sniper, shells coming from the so-called Krajina, or shrapnel. So many young lives at stake. Our shelters (if you had them) and cellars became the logical answer. Schools were hardly any safer than anything else in the town, not to speak of the surrounding area which suddenly produced thousands of displaced people as well as ex-detainees and refugees from (out of the pan and into the fire!?) Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the support of the Secretariat for Social Services we started tutorials for our pupils combining them with radio broadcasts for various subjects. At the end of that academic year our students sat for the entrance exams and many of them managed to pass them with flying colours (practically any success can be considered to be a great one after what these young people had to go through). Now, fifteen years later many of them have finished their studies and are working, mostly in Karlovac. Many are scattered all over Croatia, some have gone abroad.

Back then the time at disposal to learn how to deal with the new medium, to adjust to its laws and requirements was definitely short, the pressure was great, but our teachers realised it was necessary to make the best of a bad business - and did it remarkably well. We were surprised to learn, for example, we could have only up to 10 minutes for the pilot broadcast and 4 - 5 minutes for all the others - music included! very soon we realised a minute broadcast was quite a lot of time.

Basic suggestions came from our advisers at the Ministry of Education in Zagreb and Školska knjiga. ELT Association members doing their best. Radio Karlovac's staff gave us additional advice and suggestions, as well as the reassurance we needed so badly. As I have already pointed out the medium was new to us, the cold unresponsive black, blue, red and yellow mikes looked really uninviting. One of the consolations was that all the primary and secondary schools of Karlovac were participating, which also

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meant that our turn to go on the air was not that often. In the meantime, we could go on with tutorials and consultations, meetings, paperwork (believe it or not!) and other duties that were our contribution to bringing “normal” life to our town. No, the answer was definitely not running away to some distant and quiet part of the globe. It was our way of defending our country, our chance to keep in touch with our pupils, including former ones, our colleagues, the best in our profession. It was necessary for the well-being of our town and our country, for the knowledge and psychological well-being of those entrusted to us. We could not be together in class, we could not share problems and we could not share an occasional laugh. Still, we were together in our hearts and our minds, as an extended family, we were together in shelters or cellars, in flats or houses. We were together in the dream we shared about the future and peace for this country.

One of the dilemmas we were faced with at the first teachers’ meetings was whether to use the mother tongue in these foreign language broadcasts or not - and, if “yes” to what extent. The pragmatic approach was adopted. We were quite aware of the fact that our listeners would not only be those classes a particular broadcast was meant for, but also those who would listen just to pass the time away, simply because in those days all our radio sets were tuned to Radio Karlovac practically all the time. Many would listen to learn something, while trying to forget the horrors and uncertainty around them. So it was decided the mother tongue would be used, too, but only to a very limited extent. All we had to rely on was our intuition, our common sense, professional experience, and, as I have already mentioned, the fact that the time was limited anyway. We were also expected to create something new, creative, interesting, encouraging. The experience gained listening to Radio Zagreb broadcasts for schools was only partly useful. Our audiences were denied the customary direct and undisturbed contact with the teacher. Also there was very little chance for repetition or additional explanations, no lip-reading either. And yet, we had to try and create an impression that we were not merely lecturing over the radio, that we were still organisers and advisers, as well as teachers, as friendly and co-operative as ever. In that respect ideas from The English Teaching Forum (Washington, D. C.) helped as well.

The pilot broadcast was crucial since it was meant to establish some kind of a real contact between the pupil/student, the parent (usually the mother, of course) and the school. The accent was immediately placed on (make-belief) communication - trying to make it as real as possible. The listeners were greeted, the purpose of the broadcasts and their connection with tutorials explained, our pupils were encouraged to phone in at convenient times and also reminded that the broadcasts could be recorded for future reference - to give them a chance to listen to the same broadcast at least once or twice again in order to understand the material better and/or memorise it. The rest of the time in that first broadcast was given to a letter written by a pupil of ours, Tamara Mušnjak, read by a friend of hers. It had been written as a protest against inhumanity and injustice, a plea for peace and justice, a plea for our people and our local and national heritage. The letter was also an invitation to the others to write and express their feelings, to cry out for peace, against such ruthless aggression. To

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cry out on behalf of young lives lost but not wasted, not forgotten. A plea for communication, for the future. Our friends abroad should read/hear it again.

The introductory broadcast had a quality that the ones that were to follow would also have: the logical and dynamic exchange of voices, especially important in a foreign language programme, normal and acceptable fluency and good music, closely connected with the main idea of each one of them. On that particular occasion the natural solution was the song “My Homeland” on the one hand, followed by Croatia Autumn 1991, a poem by Ljubica Koren on the other.

The programmes that followed were mostly based on our textbooks and school curriculum. The mother tongue was used every now and then to explain the most difficult parts of a text. On the other hand the key instructions were given in English followed by consecutive interpreting for the benefit of the weaker pupil or the audience in general. The introductory part as well as the conclusion of each lesson had to be dealt with special precision. Key grammatical points embodied in different texts were not forgotten, either. Of course, for young people grammar can be boring, it can be time-consuming as well so we were extra careful to have a well-balanced approach in this area. With the most difficult explanations given once again in Croatian, just as was done with the most difficult vocabulary items in our opinion even grammar must have sounded rather interesting and acceptable. After all the translation was there to somehow replace the visual element which the radio definitely lacks.

It can be concluded that a variety of topics, approaches, voices and music as well as a sense of novelty were the main characteristic of these broadcasts. They really were “masterpieces of precision” as Paul Harris called them in The Times Educational Supplement for Scotland. As the foreign language section coordinator I felt very proud of this. These tiny pieces in the mozaic of the war that had been forced on us were somehow a link with the certainties and safety of peacetime.

It must also be said here that 225th anniversary of our secondary grammar school Gimnazija Karlovac was at that time celebrated over radio waves. Our teachers and colleagues from other schools, our former pupils, prepared one of the jubilee broadcasts, the one devoted to the prominent headmasters of the oldest school in Karlovac. This time, with the aid of a young history teacher Mladen Čapin, our English language teachers turned to history. Our music teachers, Mrs Moravek-Vuković and Mrs Adamec, helped with well-chosen music.

All these activities linked with the project helped to overcome the difficulties of the time, the shock caused by aggression. They helped in keeping spirits up. And, of course, we all wished - as we wish now - that it had not been necessary, or we had been given a chance to do it with a different purpose in mind. The way the population of Karlovac dealt with the problem is yet another proof of the strength of the human spirit, the power of the human word spoken at the right moment and the power of the radio as a medium.

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I therefore take this opportunity to once again thank all our colleagues, head-teachers and pedagogues for the great good will , strength and cooperation in this team effort. No lesser gratitude goes to the staff of Radio Karlovac for all the support they have given us all.

Schools were definitely not the only institutions in the beleaguered town that were functioning. As I have already pointed out everyone in town was doing their best: from doctors and nurses to shop assistants and drivers as well as electricians and other workers. “Zora”, our well-known choir founded in 1858, went on with their rehearsals, once they needed help with an English song and their conductor invited me to come and help. Which I, of course, did. The Drama Studio, my old friends and acquaintances within Zorin dom as well, asked me to come and give a hand with THE PEACE CHILD PROJECT, another request which could by no means be denied. All in all between Gimnazija and Radio Karlovac, “Zorin dom and the Public Library on the one hand, the Town Hall and the County authorities, the Brewery which was damaged etc. on the other one had so much to do one was practically given no time to be scared. On 2nd April 1994 Gimnazija students presented the English translation of Slavko Mihalić’s ORCHARD OF BLACK APPLES in Karlovac’s Town Library. It was translated by Bernard Johnson and published by Erasmus.

Of course, the work was either taken for granted as our job or done on a voluntary basis.

No, all those terrible things cannot kill dreams, especially not the dreams about freedom and democracy.

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