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to  
*I Dream of Peace*

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I Dream of Peace

Introduction <sup>final</sup> (draft)

by James P. Grant

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Wars used to be fought between soldiers and on the battlefield. But today, more than ever before in history, cities and towns are the battlefield and children the victims. The trend to systematically make children targets of atrocities reflects a retrogression in human behavior.

In former Yugoslavia, harming children has become a strategy of war. During several visits to former Yugoslavia, I saw first-hand the impact of the conflict upon the young. The war is a world of darkness where children hunt for food, dodging mortars and snipers' bullets. It is a place where the best of friends can turn into arch enemies overnight.

When young Aleksandar in Sarajevo, severely burned in an explosion, said, "When I close my eyes, I dream of peace", he expressed the fervent hope of all the children of former Yugoslavia. The title of this book is a tribute to Aleksandar's dream.

"I dream of peace" is a testament both to the horrors that

Aleksandar and other children are enduring - and to the extraordinary hope that burns so brightly within them. It is also a passionate appeal by children whose right to a normal life has been taken away and whose cries for peace have so far gone unheard. Their drawings and writings are silent reminders of the unspeakable atrocities that afflict their daily lives.

In these pages, the children deliver a serious message to adults: *Understand the cruelties of this war and what it is doing to us, your children! Do whatever it takes to end it! Take our child's-eye view of the promises and possibilities of peace!*

The four chapters in this book encapsulate how children in former Yugoslavia are being helped through art therapy and counselling to heal some of the traumas of war. In the first three chapters, the children, through their art, poems and letters, confront and deal with their war experiences by expressing their anguish. In the final chapter, in a kaleidoscope of hopeful messages and drawings, they celebrate their desire for peace and friendship.

The drawing titled "War", by Zvonimir, shows the destruction of villages and asks us to comprehend the criminality of such action. In Mario's monster drawing, titled "Fear", we see how the daily traumas of war become a child's nightmares. In a poem, 10-year-old Roberto asks grown-ups to join him in creating a world in which "tanks would be playhouses for the kids. . .and

all the world's children would sleep in a peace unbroken by alerts or by shooting."

These drawings and poems bring to mind Aristophane's play *Lysistrata*, in which the women rose up collectively and demanded peace. Now it is the children's turn and *I dream of peace* is their call to action.

With the conflict entering its third year, the dimensions of the horror remain shocking. According to the International War Crimes Tribunal, established to investigate violations of humanitarian law in former Yugoslavia, women and the young and the old have been singled out for the most brutal treatment as a strategy of ethnic cleansing. So far the war has created nearly four million refugees, of whom more than 600,000 are children. An estimated 15,000 children have died. Many more have been gravely injured.

The mind reels at the notion that anyone could deliberately target a child. That the killing, maiming and psychological brutalizing of young children is allowed to continue in former Yugoslavia is simply unconscionable. It is a particular embarrassment to the world community. In September 1990, government leaders met at United Nations Headquarters in New York to participate in the first-ever World Summit for Children. There they signed a declaration on the survival, protection and development of children that committed them to concrete plans of

action. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which codifies sweeping protections for the young, came into effect at the same time.

But "the rights of the child" is a cruel joke to children who have seen their houses shattered and their loved ones killed and crippled. For those who experience such all-encompassing conflict, feelings of anxiety, fear, and guilt become overwhelming. As a result, the incidence of psychological distress - or what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - soars.

UNICEF, working on all sides of the conflict in coordination with the rest of the United Nations system and relief organizations, has responded to this crisis by training local professionals and volunteers to define the symptoms of PTSD, identify its victims, and offer group and individual psychotherapy. In addition, UNICEF is helping educate parents and the public about how to prevent long-term psychological damage.

The trauma can last for weeks, months, even years, and can manifest itself in psychosomatic disorders, anxiety and depression. Severe behavioral problems can emerge in the children, including aggression, social withdrawal, difficulty in concentrating and sleeping. We now know the after-effects of traumatic events can last even longer than a lifetime,

transmitted by parents to their children, and so continuing the bitter cycle of hatred.

War and violence-induced trauma are not irreversible.

Psychosocial trauma can be effectively treated and lasting damage prevented. The prognosis for children is especially heartening. Psychologically more adaptive to change than are adults, children respond more readily to treatment. But getting the treatment to them as rapidly as possible is crucial. It is most effective in the first few weeks after a traumatic experience, particularly if the children are in loving environments with parents and other adults. Helping the children express their emotions and externalize their fears and worries is an essential aspect of alleviating the trauma. Preventing them from sharing their feelings and experiences only pushes the emotional pain deeper and causes problems later.

The drawings and writings in this book represent the healing process at work for some of the war-traumatized children of former Yugoslavia. In dozens of schools and refugee camps throughout the region, children have been encouraged to draw and write as a way to unlock the doors to their inner emotions. Assisted by parents, teachers, psychologists and art therapists, the children recall not only the traumatic events but also happy memories from the past. They also create promising dreams of the future.

We at UNICEF support this undertaking because of our growing concern for the mental health of children in wartime – a concern as pressing as our traditional focus on providing food, shelter, safe water, sanitation and protection from disease. UNICEF has also helped war-traumatized children in Cambodia, El Salvador, Lebanon, Liberia, Mozambique, the Sudan and other countries. Simple therapeutic treatments have been devised and taught to local professionals and volunteers. They have proven effective in helping large numbers of children with PTSD.

Gradually, these methods have been systematized and standardized. For example, during the Persian Gulf War, a coordinated effort was mounted to collect information on the incidence of PTSD in Kuwait and Iraq, identify the most severe cases and build popular support for programmes that address the long-term needs of PTSD victims. UNICEF also participates in initiatives aimed at creating lasting peace, such as post-conflict programmes in Lebanon and Mozambique. Our purpose is to help change values and build interfaith understanding and tolerance among children from all sides of the conflict so they come to embrace each other as brothers and sisters.

But in former Yugoslavia, peace is as yet only a distant dream. This book is the children's rallying cry – a wake-up call for all of us to understand their plight. I urge you to go through it page by page. Imagine what it is like to be these children. Share

their fear, their sorrow and their hope. Then join them in their quest by using this book to promote peace. Let us try to establish zones of peace - conflict-free oases where children can be protected from war. Let us try to rally politicians and world leaders to forge a lasting peace in the region. Let us try to do what is just, before it is too late for children like those in one fifth-grade class who wrote, "We want to stop this madness. Like Anne Frank 50 years ago, we wait for peace. She didn't live to see it. Will we?"

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