

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Serbia and the World at the Dawn of 2016 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

After a brief explanation of this particular workshop being a part of an international project, the free associations started with one participant who shared her surprise of seeing people hiking and running on a Sunday morning in mid-January, through a hilly part of town. She saw them on her way to the workshop, and she never saw them anytime when coming before. Another participant continued that many of her friends started joining running clubs in the past year, as if everybody wanted to become more active. Then, somebody remembered that particular hilly part of Belgrade being also full of caves and sport facilities and that it should not be strange to see people being active in that part of town.

Associations went to Belarus, and the city of Minsk that was reportedly one of the cleanest towns in Europe. Almost all people there are employed and for sure there are no medical doctors without job. Then, a lady pensioner remembered that Lukashenko was in power in Belarus, and she continued remembering a story about China she heard recently. She repeated a story of a Chinese person she heard on TV about Mao Zedong actually creating basis for the modern China's development that was enabled in the time of Deng Xiaoping, even though Mao was an autocrat. One citizen wondered why autocratic and tyrannical rulers are only found in the East, and said that we are non-aligned as a nation and enjoyed the richness of the third position. An engineer said that we can connect more to tradition of the Prince Lazar than to the new plans for building Belgrade Waterfront through Arabic investment, symbolically represented through palm trees. It seemed to him as if we were living in Emir Kusturica's film '*The Underground*'.

Another participant wondered if we were ready for upcoming changes and to which extent we were paralyzed by fear. Only through

embracing changes one can conquer fear, she added. One of the conveners wondered why people were not presenting themselves before speaking, and some replied that they liked speaking without presenting, somebody remembered the group anonymous that operates against the establishment and some said that we needed clearer instructions by the leaders.

Then, there was a voice that said that there are too many interpretations and no feelings shared in the group. Somebody noticed that maybe sharing the feelings of being worried would feel as if we were slowing down, and that was not welcomed or preferable behaviour. Suddenly, a lady participant remembered a book she read recently, called *The Siege*, about the siege of Leningrad in 1941, which portrayed horrifying stories about surviving in the winter-bound Leningrad, while Germans were trying to occupy it. She remembered how the book described clearly the moments in which things that seemed important at one point in life were not important any more. However, people survived, there was spring after winter for those who managed to sustain famine, and people continued living in that city. Another participant said that people used to be hungry in our country and that many were hungry at present, and told a story about his cousin who lived in Ivanjica, in central Serbia, and who lived without any income for months.

A woman participant, mathematician by profession, shared her feeling of being robbed a part of her life. She continued by saying that it was true that we could find small oasis of peace within ourselves, however that she felt that a robbery of time and life happened. Another participant remembered holocaust and how she heard a story that people used to survive also thanks to music and she said that salvation could be found if we managed to find peaceful parts within ourselves. In this sequence another women participants shared a story of her teenage daughter who listened to a story of concentration camp survivors recently and that her daughter was very stricken by it. From her role as a parent she was happy that the school organized such an encounter and that her daughter had an opportunity to listen to such a story.

A woman architect shared with the group that there was an interesting exhibition being shown in Belgrade of a modern Austrian – Irish artist Gottfried Helnwein, which was called '*Between Innocence and Evil*'. The artist was living in post war Vienna and Nazi crimes and Holocaust were not discussed, which irritated him and he started provoking and criticizing society through aesthetics of fear and intimidation. Then, a participant remembered slogan "*Arbeit macht frei*", a German phrase meaning "work sets you free", known for appearing on the entrance of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. She thought that when times were difficult it was important to work hard and remembered also

two scientists of Serbian origin - Mihalo Pupin and Nikola Tesla - who were born as underprivileged but through hard work and dedication managed to succeed in life.

A woman participant said that she noticed that lately there were more people interested in art, in attending exhibitions and lectures about our painters, however there was no information about these events in the mainstream and small circle of people knew about it. A woman urbanist said that last year she had a feeling similar to the one she had in the 90s, when she was not able to express herself professionally, so she started studying and did her MA degree. Nowadays, she was studying again, doing her PhD thesis - learning, studying and noting that many people in her surrounding were turning to studying, coaching and self-development. However, the outside world seemed to be so terrifying, that we were building walls and camps to preserve our identity, another participant noticed.

A good example of National Health Service and its emergency services going out of their way to help an elderly cousin was shared at the approval of the present participants in the group. A participant said that it was so common to hear only bad examples that hearing this time a good one was really comforting.

Participant shared with the group that she decided not to watch TV anymore, because it was bombarding us with bad, crime related news. Another one said that we were very selfish as regards sharing our own space, however we were behaving very freely as regards the use of somebody else's space.

A young participant, a philosopher by profession, said that she did not understand the dichotomy East-West, mentioned at the beginning of the group session. She recalled a book on Nikola Tesla written by Serbian author Pistalo, and she paraphrased a part from the book where Tesla was also saying that he lived in the West – in America, however at the same time he could understand the East as well as the Arab and Chinese world; he could also understand the individual and the collective side of things and that there was no point in arguing which of the two was better.

According to one participant, art was connected to survival, and creation through any artistic medium - was the only way to survive. Music can heal one's soul. Or reading Viktor Frankl's book 'Man's Search for Meaning' also helps to survive, as well as the film 'Life Is Beautiful' (*La vita è bella*).

Towards the end of the first session, a participant said that many people died in concentration camps and that it was necessary also to think about them, to think of those who did not have a chance or

possibility to say anything. The final comment related to idyllic village life where everything was done at a slower pace and where people were living in tune with their surroundings.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim is to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

The group was asked to separate into smaller working groups to try to identify the major themes that had emerged spontaneously during part one. Then a spokesman from each shared with the whole group and we clustered them in the following main themes:

- (1) Dichotomy in the world and ourselves: East – West; Yin and Yang; Black and White - as well as the position of the third / nonaligned;
- (2) Passing of time – fast and slow tempo of living;
- (3) Being in active and passive position – lack of social activism
- (4) Theme of concentration camps and holocaust – what type of holocaust we were actually discussing
- (5) Artistic expression and creative potential needed for survival

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and develop hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world, their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

There was a lot of discussion about dichotomy and the things that are on the opposite poles, however they do not have to exclude each other. Moving and being active enables possibility of getting out of the *either/or* situation. Electric current moves from positive to negative terminal, and we get light out of that movement. Also, there is the position of the third one which is something in between and which is

sometimes difficult to define. There needs to be capacity to embrace different things. Predominantly we mentioned the East and we did not have the capacity to discuss the growing number of police states in the West. The West is misusing the migrant issue and terrorism for creating policing states. In Belgrade, there is still possibility to walk freely for New Year's Eve in the city centre – and we still have a choice, whereas strolling freely in the night in towns such as Paris is getting more difficult. Terror and fear are in the foundation of the black & white perceptions, and it has to be overcome through creative work. 'Yes, notice the rift', one participant said, 'and then say – no thank you, and move on'. Option is also to endure and wait for the right time to come.

Hypothesis 1:

Dichotomy in the world and within ourselves – the opposite things do not necessarily have to exclude each other – through capacity to understand and embrace different viewpoints one can overcome the rift.

Analysis and hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Participants wondered why they were so overburdened with time and asked if it was because it was a metaphor for passing of life. It was connected to discussions on meaning and on own abilities to make sense of what we do in our everyday lives. It is connected to fear of change and fear from those who are giving us tasks. On that note, the group member while presenting tasked participants to hug each other, which the entire group enacted. A group member said that in order for us to preserve each other it was necessary to preserve interaction between people and good interpersonal relations. She also reminded of a writer who used to say that everyone had a certain number of steps to take in life, and there was no need to hurry to spend them all. In this regard, how it is possible, while walking through life, to find time for reflection. As if all difficult issues were exported from Serbia to other parts of the world, and it was so difficult to utter in simple words that it was hard at times, that there were some things in life difficult to endure. When we speak in metaphors people may not understand us and empathize with us. Each of us should have his/her Lazar's Mountain, and we should not forget that palm's leaf in Jerusalem is the equivalent to our 'badnjak'. It was important to focus on the present, on the 'here & now', and have hope and faith when discerning reality and trying to find a compromise.

Hypothesis 2:

Perception of accelerated passing of time - faster than slower tempo

of living makes it difficult to focus on the present (here and now) and to find the time for reflection.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:

It was obvious that the group was evading mentioning of the migration issues. We mentioned the camps, busses, transportation means and wondered about our own capacity to move without mentioning the migrants, which represent the movement. The lack of social activism was noticed, and the participants were wondering if going back to villages was an active or passive position. Are the 'social sleepers', those who withdraw for a while, going to create/produce anything? Participants wondered what the impetus for such creation would be. In many changes around us we tend to go back to the past, however we should find maybe some new reference points and find compromise as well as accept the inevitability of events around us. An example from architecture was given, describing capacities of an architect that managed to recognize different requests from politicians, citizens, investors, etc.; so there are more than two opposing views that have to be taken into consideration and digested. In describing active/passive positions and solutions to it, one of the small groups wanted to use the language of mathematics to make their presentation in large group less comprehensible to others. Some said that mathematics might give an explanation of the theory of chaos. Others thought that mentioning of mathematics was expression of a need for a pragmatic solution in being fearful that one would be understood by the others, as the language of mathematics is universal. Philosophers tried to explain the world by using mathematics, but the question is if the truth is to be found also in thinking and feeling. In the work of the group love and human touch (through the enactment of hugs) appeared.

Hypothesis 3:

While some are living in camps, with borders getting more clearly delineated, how the 'social sleepers' contribute to it. Through expanded capacities of the socially active to try to understand diversity and to uncover artistic/creative ways to find a compromise.

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