

Working Paper Series n°4:

Arts, Peace and Conflict



Artists and War

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(Ilse's song.)

I will say more of that song at the end of my talk. First my thanks to all concerned for the opportunity to come and speak today at this conference. I am particularly pleased to talk at the Liverpool Hope University, for reasons which will become clearer later. I am pleased to introduce you to Sophie Dervan, an ex-student of mine, who has kindly offered to breathe some life into the words by other people.

Artists respond to war in extraordinary ways. I am interested in musicians, writers, actors and painters who have found themselves inside war and yet managed to pursue their art. We cannot know their reasons, but Slavenka Drakulić had this to say of a book by Primo Levi's memoir, *A Survivor in Auschwitz*:

The most moving moment in Primo Levi's book, is not a description of death – death is barely mentioned there – but an attempt to recall Dante's verses, in order to prove himself that he is still a human being. (Drakulić, 120)

I present these case-studies in an attempt to frame this idea, to illustrate the crucial importance of the arts in determining the definition of being human.

War is addressed consciously by artists and their work, such as Sheriff's *Journey's End*, Owen's poetry of pity in *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Picasso's *Guernica* and Britten's *War Requiem*. These works have their own life and provoke their own response. Unlike those examples, the case-studies in my talk testify to deliberate and conscious creativity in the face of war; as a protest, as a counter-weapon, as a symbol, as a rallying post or because they saw no alternative under the circumstances. The artists here were compelled to make *something*: the urge to create is stronger than the fear of death.

The seven artists and their stories are:

1. **Irène Nemirovsky**, novelist
2. **Alice Somner**, pianist
3. **Dzevad Karahasan**, theatre director, writer
4. **García Lorca**, poet, musician, playwright
5. **Victor Jara**, theatre director, poet and musician
6. **Kofi Awoonor**, poet
7. **Ilse Weber**, musician

1. Irène Nemirovsky

Irène Némirovsky was a White Russian émigré in Paris in the 1920's. A successful novelist and non-practising Jew, she was singled out by German occupying forces in WW2, pursued and eventually murdered in Auschwitz. *Suite Française* was written whilst on the run with her two infant girls, leaving behind her husband who was murdered later.

War, seen through the eyes of her characters, was a liminal space, where the normal rules of life do not apply. It is difficult not to read some autobiographical evidence in her novel:

But she said nothing about what was worrying her most: her husband and two sons, gone, all three called up and missing...All three away in the vaguely defined, ever-changing, terrifyingly imminent place called 'the war'... (Némirovsky, 115).

Her emotional courage in writing about Germans and French of her time transcends the racism inherent with war and denies religious or political righteousness. Whilst on the run protecting her two small children, she wrote daily with microscopic handwriting the two novels which she completed before her death, crammed into her one and only notebook. In the description of her character, the writer Jean-Marie, we might glimpse her own extraordinary act, a performance only made manifest long after her murder:

He wrote with a chewed-up pencil stub, in a little notebook which he hid against his heart. He felt he had to hurry; something inside him was making him anxious, was knocking on an invisible door. By writing he opened that door, he gave life to something that wished to be born. (Némirovsky, 182)

She was murdered not for her political views, neither for any religious convictions, but simply because she had been born. Her intelligence was perhaps a threat to prevalent racist theories of supremacy. Eradication of memory was the means by which authority sought to prove their lies. The war fought against her and millions of others was an attempt to silence her, erase the memory of her family's existence and her work. Despite them, her children survived. Her writing - published to great acclaim sixty years after her death - bears witness to the invulnerability of truthfulness as opposed to the ephemera of lies and war. In the case of her persecutors, the bell ultimately tolled for them.

2. Alice Sommer

Alice Sommer was born in 1903 in Prague. As a child, she met Gustav Mahler and Franz Kafka. She had begun making a name for herself playing concerts before the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939.

In her book, *A Garden of Eden in Hell*, published in 2006, she wrote:

When, in the early summer of 1942, my 72 year-old mother was issued with a deportation order and I had to go with her to the assembly point and say good-bye to her for the last time, I was out of my mind. How was it possible to tear an old lady away from her world with nothing more than a rucksack on her back and send her to a concentration camp? Even to this day I can clearly hear the inner voice that spoke to me: "Practise the Chopin Etudes, they will save you."...

Every day for a year I knuckled down to this seemingly insuperable task and mastered all twenty-four of them before I myself, my husband and our then six-year-old were also deported to Theresienstadt. There I gave more than one hundred concerts for my fellow prisoners, and at more than twenty I played the Etudes. (Sommer, x)

After the Soviet liberation of Theresienstadt in 1945, Herz-Sommer and Raphael returned to Prague. In March 1949 they emigrated to Israel to be reunited with her family. She lived in Israel and worked as a music teacher in Jerusalem until emigrating to London in 1986. Raphael Sommer, her only child, became an accomplished cellist and conductor. Alice Sommer died just this year, at the age of 110, still playing the piano.

3. Dzevad Karahasan

Karahasan's book, *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City*, was written about a more recent war, that of the Balkans at the end of the last century. The book is written partly as a personal testimony and as a suggestion that writers themselves are responsible for war, by not protesting about the usurpation of language for political ends, the abuse of truth through propaganda, which always precedes war:

“What is my responsibility in all this? What is it that I could have and should have done to diminish those horrors but have failed to do? What have I done to contribute to all that is happening? Yes, I am responsible. I am a colleague of these people, we share the same language and trade. I even know some of them personally. So, I could not be completely innocent...” (Karahasan, 85/6)

But within the book he also describes events he himself witnessed during the siege of Sarajevo, not least the extraordinary performances by students of the drama department of the University during that time. The main entrance was under control of the Serb gunners from Mount Trebevič which faced it. Karahasan describes how they tunnelled into the basement of the academy. Assembled there, students and teachers agreed to prioritise the graduation performances of the senior acting students. And he spoke this:

Work as much and as well as you can, please...Your work is the only thing that can liberate you from fear, for a moment at least, and help you preserve your human dignity, sensitivity, and reason. We are abandoned by other people, forsaken by good fortune. This world is leaving us behind, too, so we are abandoned even by the very material real-ity they have taught us to believe in...

Only our work has not left us: what we learn and the trade we serve still remain as our defense. One of the fundamental functions of art is to defend people from indifference—and a human being is alive for as long as he or she is not indifferent... (Karahasan 30)

A little later on, Karahasan describes the role the audiences played and we are drawn to imagine similar scenes during the extraordinary concert series given by Myra Hess in London's blitz-time concerts, half a century before.

It was similar with the audience. At first they would react to shelling, but later they gave themselves over to the performance, and with more pleasure than they ever did in peacetime. (Karahasan 32)

4. García Lorca

García Lorca, poet, musician and playwright, was shot and killed by Nationalist militia on 19 August 1936, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, probably at a place known as the Fuente Grande which is on the road between Viznar and Alfacar in Granados. In this famous poem he responds to the death of a famous bullfighter, yet his words seem so apt for his own unfortunate demise.

Ignacio Sánchez Mejías died in Madrid in 1934 after being gored by a bull. Mejías had often been gored before, but this time he died of gangrene from his injuries. Mejías was a handsome ladies' man, an actor, a car racer, and writer, and the friend of the poet Garcia Lorca. Lorca first published his lament for Mejías in 1935. Lorca was to die himself a year later.

<p><i>Llanto para Ignacio Sánchez Mejías</i></p> <p><i>Porque te has muerto para siempre, como todos los muertos de la Tierra, como todos los muertos que se olvidan en un montón de perros apagados.</i></p> <p><i>No te conoce nadie. No. Pero yo te canto. Yo canto para luego tu perfil y tu gracia. La madurez insigne de tu conocimiento. Tu apetencia de muerte y el gusto de su boca. La tristeza que tuvo tu valiente alegría.</i></p> <p><i>Tardará mucho tiempo en nacer, si es que nace, un andaluz tan claro, tan rico de aventura. Yo canto su elegancia con palabras que gimen y recuerdo una brisa triste por los olivos.</i></p>	<p>Elegy for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías</p> <p>Because you have died for ever, like all the dead of the Earth, like all the dead that are forgotten in a heap of lifeless dogs.</p> <p>No one knows you. No. But I sing of you. I sing for the future your profile and your grace. The remarkable maturity of your knowledge. Your appetite for death and the taste of your mouth. The sadness of your valiant cheerfulness.</p> <p>It will be a long time before there is born, if there is ever born, an Andalusian so bright, so rich with adventure. I sing of your elegance with words that groan and I remember a sad breeze through the olive trees.</p>
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5. Victor Jara

On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet ousted Chile's democratically elected president, Salvador Allende, in a U.S.-backed military coup. Six days later, Victor Jara, theatre director, poet and musician, man of the people, was arrested, tortured and murdered in a gruesome way by an officer of Pinochet. His British-born wife, Joan said:

Victor was an early victim of the coup because he'd ranged himself alongside Chile's working and peasant populations, filling them with incendiary stuff about the history and potency of Chilean lore.

The contrast between the themes of his songs, of love, peace and social justice in contrast to the brutal way in which he was murdered transformed Jara into a symbol of struggle for human rights and justice worldwide.

Victor Jara’s last poem, *Somos cinco mil*, “We are five thousand”, was written in a concentration camp, memorized, and smuggled out by other political prisoners shortly before he was murdered on September 17, 1973.

<i>We are five thousand here</i>	<i>Somos cinco mil</i>
<p>We are five thousand here in this small part of the city. We are five thousand. I wonder how many we are in all in the cities and in the whole country? Here alone are ten thousand hands which plant seeds and make the factories run.</p> <p>How hard it is to sing when I must sing of horror. How hard it is to sing How hard it is to sing....</p>	<p>Somos cinco mil en esta pequeña parte de la ciudad. Somos cinco mil ¿ Cuántos seremos en total en las ciudades y en todo el país ? Solo aqui diez mil manos siembran y hacen andar las fabricas.</p> <p>Ay, canto qué mal me sales cuando tengo que cantar espanto. Ay, canto qué mal me sales Ay, canto qué mal me sales.</p>

6. Kofi Awoonor

Kofi Awoonor, was a Ghanaian poet who founded the Ghana Playhouse. Banished into exile after a coup in his country and imprisoned without trial for a year, he later became an ambassador for Ghana. It was there he died on 21 September 2013 as a result of the terrorist shootings in the Nairobi shopping mall.

The following words by Kofi are from a BBC programme of 1978, *The Price of Freedom*:

“As a poet I want to emphasise only those things that make for life. I see myself as a prod on the sidelines, mitigating the excesses of men’s hunger for power and mediating between the simple demands of everyday existence, and the dreams and the aspirations of the people. I suspect that the poet is some kind of lunatic fringe man, who moves out there. But he is not moving alone; he is moving with the full force of the people behind him. And behind me I hear the footfalls of countless generations and ancestors, and around me the living community of my people, whose woes are my woes, whose moments of joy, mine. This poem expresses something of what I felt in prison, and what I feel for the future:”

Weep not now, my love
for as all die, so shall we
but it is not dying that should pain us.
It is the waiting, the
intermission when we cannot act,
when our will is shackled by tyranny.

That hurts.
Yet somehow, I know
the miracle of the world
will be wrought again.
The space will be filled
in spite of the hurt
by the immensity of love
that will defy dying
and Death.
Good night, my love.

7. Ilse Weber

A recording of Ilse Weber's song, Weigala or Lullaby began my talk. In the CD notes, Ulrike Migdal wrote:

“Ilse Weber wrote more than 60 poems in Theresienstadt concentration camp, a number of which she herself set to music. She performed them herself, accompanying herself on a guitar during her night rounds as a nurse. In their simplicity and heartfelt inwardness, they are among the most moving works written in Theresienstadt. Ilse Weber went voluntarily to her death with the sick children from the camp. Eyewitnesses report that in the gas chamber she sang her own song, Weigala (Lullaby), with the Theresienstadt children.”

The extraordinary recording we heard of this song was by Anne Sofie von Otter. It offers a glimpse of truthfulness which survived even within the worst conditions, a testimony to a human voice espousing peace from deep within war's darkness, denying death and obliteration even from within its grasp.

CODA:

These are but a few examples of the many thousands or hundreds of thousands of artists responding to war. But these seven stories will become for me the basis of new work, a new composition. It reflects on an apparent impossibility, of how art may be the alchemical process through which the hopelessness of war might be seen to transform into hope:

Seven Songs of Hope will be a chamber-music documentary written for clarinetist, Joan Enric Lluna. It will last about an hour, and will be presented in two stages:

- 1) A concert version, performed live in each of the seven countries by the five musicians; Joan will play all the performances, other players will be from the country of the narrative behind the music.
- 2) A performance-documentary, combining local images associated with the narratives with the music and the performances themselves;

The seven songs celebrate the achievements of seven artists who transcended the threat or actuality of death they faced in war through their art. For them, and perhaps for us, their pen was mightier than the gun; their oppressors sought their annihilation, but it is their murderers who have been replaced by their art. And their art is an exceptionally charged art of hope, which is why I am so pleased to have been able to give this talk here.

Note :

Joan Enric Lluna, the clarinetist for whom *Songs of Hope* will be written, may be seen in an excerpt from **In Memoriam: for those who fall in time of war**, a chamber music-theatre work by Paul Alan Barker, commissioned by him in 2009 and performed with the Brodsky string quartet : <http://youtu.be/dG2JnYvEPhM>

Bibliography :

Némirovsky, Irène *Suite Française* Vintage Books 2007

Karahasan, Dzevad *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City* Kodansha International, 1994

Müller and Piechocki *A Garden of Eden in Hell: The Life of Alice Herz-Sommer* Pan Books, 2006

Music:

Ilse Weber's *Wiegenlied* recording from the compact disc *Terezin/ Theresienstadt* by Anne Sofie von Otter, Deutsche Grammophon, 2007