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Allow me the privilege to share with you my personal experience in working with Arlene Audergon and Lane Arye in a project in Croatia in a period 1996-2001.

I met Arlene and Lane in Slovakia in 1994, on a large international conflict-transformation forum dealing with some of the world's most difficult issues, such as anti-Semitism, racial discrimination, gender issue and strong polarisation around Soviet legacy in Eastern Europe.

As I was impressed with their skills, ability to remain open for many different sides involved in social conflicts, and above all their caring spirit and personal warmth, I had cordially invited them to come to Croatia and try to help with burning issues of polarisation, both ethnic and political, in the Croatian society.

At that time Croatia was still in war and there was no communication between ethnic Croats and ethnic Serbs. Divisions were much more complex than that, as conflicts were going on along many different lines of social polarisations. Bringing people together, providing them space and support to establish communication and heal trauma was my highest dream at that time.

Indeed, we started working on this in 1996, with a forum in Osijek, town on the front line between Croatian and Serbian side in Slavonia. It was the first time that people from Eastern Slavonia crossed the front line and entered Osijek to sit together with their colleagues and to explore possibilities of stating to communicate. Arlene and Lane facilitated this event with a great compassion and skill. It resulted in a commitment of all participants to continue working together in order to restore their communities in the spirit of respect for other people's pain, or, as the participants concluded "to put the puzzle together".

Since then this project evolved in an ongoing community building programme "Building a Sustainable Community in the Aftermath of War", carried out by local NGO "MI" from Split and with continuous involvement of Arlene Audergon and Lane Arye. The programme included large-group forums of people living in war-affected areas in Croatia, small regional forums, training group and a newsletter. Hundreds of people participated. In 5 years of its implementation the programme was supported by many respectful donors, including UNHCR, OSCE, IRC, The Threshold Foundation and British, US and Norwegian Embassies in Croatia.

All of us involved with this process witnessed tremendous transformation, not only among participants, but also in their communities. With pride we believe that we made a substantial contribution to a slow reconstruction of communities affected by war and helped many people to start healing deep trauma. Not only these forums dealt with issues directly connected with war, they also assisted democracy-building processes. Most participants experienced their own power to make a difference in their community. I recall a very quiet woman from a small town facing environmental disaster. After one of our forums she felt empowered and supported to take leadership and organise her community to confront the problem.

During these years Arlene and Lane were not only teachers and facilitators, but also a personal support to each one of us. Their skill and qualities of the process work approach were complimented with good understanding of the complex history and cultural differences. Although the programme is now over, we continue working on a vision for new projects, including those that deal with day-to-day democratic practices on a level of local communities, and also those that deal with regional issues on the Balkans.

From letter written by Tanja Radocaj

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