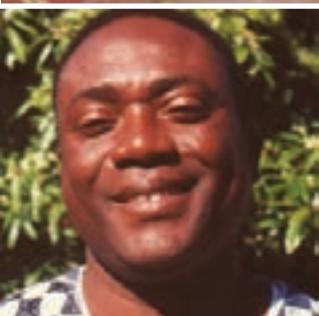


20 YEARS OF STARTTS



REFLECTIONS FROM THE OUTSIDE

By Elizabeth Ban

The Budapest Jews didn't suffer!" This verbal grenade was thrown at me in 1983 at the First Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Washington DC by a woman from the Hungarian provinces who had survived Auschwitz. I went there hoping to learn something about the fate of my relatives who had disappeared in the Great Abyss. I wasn't ready for such venom. Having grown up with the ghosts of the dead, the sorrow of the living and my own, secret nightmares of falling bombs, I didn't know there was a hierarchy in despair.

I suppose, when you are in a war situation, you experience the war subjectively and your perspective of events will revolve around that. After all, it was you ducking the bullets, the tanks; you were the starving skeleton on our TV screens; you looked into the crazed eyes of the machete-waving murderer or passed out from the torturer or rapist(s) thrusts. You alone.

The irony is that this awful experience

has automatically placed you in a family of thousands, tens of thousands, even millions of strangers who have faced similar or far worse moments. The 20th century has been the bloodiest in recorded history, with some estimates of 183-203 million dead as a result of political mayhem of one kind or another, and countless million others made homeless refugees. The mind boggles at the inhumanity of man to man - or women to women for that matter, as gender is no barrier to the rapaciousness of torturers, murderers and rapists.

What happens when the insanity stops? How do you pick up the pieces?

The sad truth is that for most victims of trauma and torture there has been very little help available. Most just picked up the pieces as best they could and then muddled through. That's what we did - my mother, brother and I - and I didn't know how to respond to that woman's accusatory statement. I felt vulnerable and out of place.



Almost a decade earlier, as a new US citizen after 16 years of being stateless because my mother was refused British citizenship, I penned a poem that asked: 'I know who I am, but what has the world to do with me?' A little later, I wrote in my diary: 'When will I start to live?'

Interestingly, at the same conference in Washington DC, I discovered that I was a Holocaust child survivor as well as a child refugee (see box), and I became involved in the emerging Child Survivor support group in Washington DC. This helped me put things into perspective and eventually come to terms with my youthful demons and 'live'. At least, that's what I thought, until I was asked to write something for the 20th anniversary of STARTTS and I met Dragana, her brother Milos and their mother Rada, who escaped from Bosnia 10 years ago.

Milos politely said hello and good-bye

as I walked into their spotless, cosy apartment. Like my brother so long ago, he was 'fine' and got on with life, and sorry, but he was going out with his friends. His mother and sister, on the other hand, were happy to share their problems with me and discuss how STARTTS helped them get on the road to recovery.

Their story was eerily familiar. The peaceful, productive life of this professional, middle class family from Drvar is turned upside down by political turmoil they neither create nor have the power to control or change. The town, made famous in 1944 by Germany's attempt to assassinate Tito there, falls to Croatian aggression as Tito's Yugoslavia falls apart five decades after its creation. The head of the family dies, and the widow and her two children move to the safety of Kosovo, where Rada, a lawyer, went to university and still has friends.

A few years later, Kosovo is engulfed by the madness and it's time to move on. Australia opens its doors: Operation Safe Haven. Dragana develops separation anxiety from her mother. The school recommends she goes to see a specialist counsellor and she spends one year at home doing her schoolwork by correspondence, while she is helped to deal with her trauma by STARTTS.

Today, Dragana is working and going to university. Her life no longer revolves around STARTTS, but she knows that, should she need them, they are there. Her experience with STARTTS, she says was 'life-changing'.

"I don't know if I would be where I am today without their help" – she says with conviction and adds: "I don't think I would be going to uni and work, having friends and going out and enjoying life."

Rada's external achievements may not



STARTTS

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors

match her daughter's, but she's strong all the same. Although she struggles with English and has health problems, Rada is the fertile soil from which her children have grown. It is Rada who they call on for help, Rada who wipes their tears, Rada who celebrates their achievements.

As I look at her, I see my mother struggling to cope with the loss of husband, family, friends, and culture. Yet, Rada has hope, because she knows she has support. My mother didn't.

When I leave the apartment and the car turns the corner, I am overcome by an inexplicable fit of crying. I experience, what STARTTS counsellors tell me they struggle most to avoid: 'trauma over transference'. Inadvertently, the visit opened scars I didn't know I still had, and wondered if it would have been so hard if we had had a STARTTS in our time of need?

I have been aware of STARTTS existence for some time, through my volun-

teer work with Jews for Social Action, as THE organization that helped trauma and torture survivors recover and get on with their lives. To me, in my ignorance, that meant psychological counselling. The breadth of its reach only became evident last year, when I participated in the 'Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Strengths' conference, and I learned more about community building, sports and education, than what I expected would be a kind of litany of sorrows. It was exhilarating. The delegates – all ages – were bright, engaged, energetic and, most important of all, positive about the future. STARTTS staff appeared more like brothers and sisters – to each other and the delegates – caring, attentive, attuned and engaged. WOW! I want in. Maybe I can help and get involved?

As I explored further, it became obvious that STARTTS is an incredibly well oiled machine, with a hard working,

cohesive team at its core, whose amazing success appears to have come from the team's ability to keep alive and build on the original vision of the organisation's founders by tapping into the talent and experience of the communities it serves and, the same time, getting and keeping government support for its multidisciplinary operation.

THE STARTTS STORY

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) was established in 1988 as a small, specialized unit for the treatment of trauma and torture survivors. This came in response to strong community pressures – including from the Latin American community – and the recognition by the health service that existing structures could not provide appropriate support for the increasing number of traumatised refugees who were arriving to the area,

mostly from Latin America and East Asia.

From a small, three-bedroom house in Fairfield and a permanent staff of five, STARTTS has grown exponentially over the years and today operates from its sprawling headquarters in Carramar, with more than 100 staff serving clients not only in three Sydney service centres, but also across the state and, increasingly, internationally as well. They are at the forefront of trauma treatment and research, community development and knowledge transfer to health care workers in the wider community.

This continuous growth has been made possible by the unusual independent structure of the organisation within the NSW Health System: its management committee reports directly to the NSW Health Minister; its administrative, financial and employee services are administered by Sydney South West Area Health Service, and its financial independence is bolstered by its non-profit arm, Friends of STARTTS.

From the beginning, the STARTTS philosophy embraced a holistic approach to recovery. 'We see people as part of a system,' explains Executive Director, Jorge Aroche, a clinical psychologist and leader in the Latin American community, who migrated to Australia with his family as a child in the mid 1970s, when Uruguay was experiencing political upheaval.

'We understand that people have a need for social support networks...you have to be able to acknowledge both the culture and the socio-political background of the people we work with.'

And that involves community development, which is a slow and continuously challenging task, according to STARTTS

Community Development Coordinator Jasmina Bajraktarevic Hayward, a refugee from Bosnia, who became interested in the topic when she taught children science and maths in a United Nations' run Bosnian refugee camp in Croatia.

'Community development is a process, not a project for me. Projects are part of the process.' She says that the community must own community development, and STARTTS role is to step in where there is a skills gap. In other words, the community must first decide where it wants to go, assess its capabilities to get there and then turn to STARTTS for help where there is a knowledge gap. And the reason is simple, says Jasmina: 'ultimately it's their journey, and we are here to support people on their journey'.

Because of the close community consultations – both formal and informal – every project has a skills transfer component, Jasmina explains, and she cites the example of a group of illiterate Hazara women from Afghanistan, who participated in a Families in Cultural Transition Program. The women became concerned that they had no job skills and would be forced to enter the mainstream workforce before they were ready. They may have been illiterate, but they were superb needlewomen, producing exquisite embroidery. Through a STARTTS volunteer's contacts in the fashion industry, their embroidery was sold and is about to become part of a significant fashion show.

This holistic model, which underpins STARTTS success, was developed in the early days under the leadership of Jorge Aroche and Clinical Services and Research

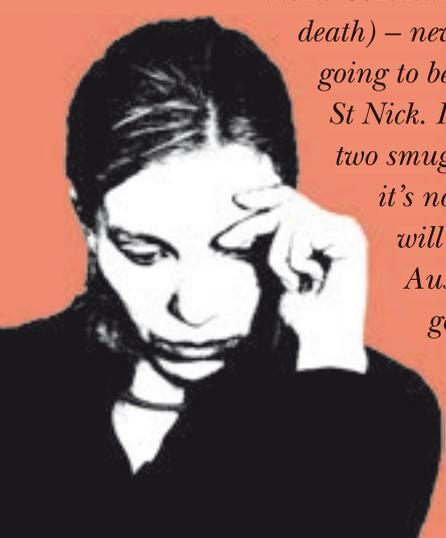
Coordinator, Mariano Coello. They presented it to the international trauma research community in 1994 at the 4th International Conference of Centres, Institutions and Individuals Concerned with Victims of Organized Violence.

This model held many innovations, such as employing bi-cultural counsellors and regarding the individual as being at the confluence of the interaction between the traumatic experiences of the past and the stresses and strains of resettlement in a new country, with a different language, culture and educational system.

Children were of special interest, as they are the future of the community. 'Children try to adjust quickly in to a new culture, because they don't want to be different,' says Nooria Mehraby, a medical doctor from Afghanistan who worked for five years in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, and is now a senior bi-cultural counsellor with STARTTS. She likens children to passive smokers, 'because ... parents would talk about their concerns, their worries in front of them, without thinking that they will have impact on the children, so they are exposed to all this trauma without being acknowledged.'

And it's especially hard for children born overseas who grow up in Australia, according to Tiep Nguyen, one of the first Vietnamese bi-cultural counsellors to join STARTTS. 'They stand between the two cultures and don't know which side they belong to'.

Since those early days, the number of services targeting various aspects of trauma, resettlement and community development has been dramatically expanded, so



Birth: bombs falling, twin dies. Start life alone. Holocaust - death. War ends. Parents grieve – a new start for them. Communists: – my country's new start – downhill. Stalin dies. Hope. Dad dies (worked to death) – new start for my family. Revolution – ENOUGH! Mom is packing a suitcase, says it's going to be cold. It's Michaelmas. I should be at home with my shoes in the window waiting for St Nick. Instead, I am trudging through the minefields to the lake. Four kids, three adults and two smugglers. The fishing boat leaks! Mom says FORWARD! The smugglers are nice to us; it's not their fault we get stuck in the ice. Patrol boats behind us, ice surrounds us, what will the new day bring? Refugee camp – new sights, sounds and smells. Planning to go to Australia, but my brother had gone to England and beckons: it's paradise. Mom says let's go and leaves her brother to go to Australia. Six weeks after we arrive in London, my brother leaves for Canada. Mom and I are alone for another new start. 18 months later, Mom's brother dies in Sydney. The final straw. Mom collapses. Will she die next? The fear is terrifying, but I manage. I must. I am the adult now and I am am 14 years old.

that refugees arriving to NSW today are automatically screened for signs of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) under the Early Intervention Program, and families often receive support through the Families in Cultural Transition Program.

There are youth camps; there is help to set up community sports groups, leadership training and opportunities for information exchange. Following the success of last year's Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths conference, plans are underway to keep the communication going across communities in a variety of ways, culminating in triennial conferences. And of course, there is individual counselling at all levels and ages.

Bi-cultural counsellors, with intimate knowledge of their own communities, are at the heart of all this activity. This was a STARTTS innovation, since most overseas trauma centres believed that, for a variety of reasons, torture and trauma survivors would prefer to share their problems with someone outside their own communities, and worked exclusively with interpreters. However, STARTTS was of the view that the process of adjustment and resettlement would be expedited if the survivors could express themselves in their own language with someone of the same cultural background.

When he joined STARTTS, Tiep, who was a teacher with some counselling training in Vietnam, worked closely with Robin Bowles, an Australian social worker. Both recall their early days as being very difficult, because everything was so new and they were operating in uncharted territory. Tiep was involved in youth work then,

while Robin worked with translators and bi-cultural counsellors as they studied to become fully accredited counsellors or to get their overseas training recognized in Australia.

Training and staff support has been another key component of the STARTTS ethos, as well as the 50-30-20 job description that requires counsellors to spend 50 per cent of their time in counselling, 30 per cent in community development, and 20 per cent in study, research or training of their own choosing. This regime prevents burnout, according to Nooria Mehraby.

'Self-care is very important in working with refugees' she says, 'we have an excellent clinical supervision and support system. Each counsellor is entitled to have weekly supervision from another clinician and we have a peer support system. We help each other and support each other....'

'It's a challenging job. We are faced with cruelty and we hear horrible stories of what one human being can do to another. At the same time, we are seeing the resilience of our clients as well.... It's not easy to listen to these horrible stories, but when clients begin to change that's an inspiring process. It's rewarding and that's what kept most of us here.'

STARTTS workers have helped more than 42,000 individuals over the past 20 years. They were the major counselling service provider for Kosovar refugees like Rada and her children, who arrived under the government's Safe Haven program. They counselled trauma and torture victims from East Timor and helped set up that country's psychiatric public health system.

They have brought innovative solutions to help their clients, and are probably the only torture and trauma service that has developed protocols for using neuro-feedback for patients with hard to treat symptoms.

To say that it has been a challenging 20 years is an understatement, but Jorge Aroche says the service can't rest on its laurels, it must remain 'nimble, flexible and willing to learn and be open to different things'.

One of the biggest challenges of the past and future, he says, is the changing background of new arrivals, which necessitates learning about new cultures, political realities and training of new bi-cultural counsellors. He says the profile of new arrivals has already begun shifting from Africa since the African bi-cultural counsellor training program started three years ago.

AND WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

'We would like to see [STARTTS] as an affiliated health organisation' says Jorge Aroche, 'still part of the health service provision for the State, but at the same time being able to having our own legal entity, so we can sign contracts ...we want a bit more freedom to explore different ways of doing things, which could also result in increased funds for the service and therefore for our clients.'

He sees the organisation moving forward, strengthening its research capabilities, and outreach to the mainstream health community so they become educated about the needs of trauma and torture survivors. ■

CODA

In the course of my research for this story I meet Minh, one of STARTTS' recent success stories.

In the mid 1970s, Minh was an interpreter with the US Special Forces in Vietnam for many years and he was badly tortured during a two-year imprisonment after the communist takeover of South Vietnam. Like many people who put their trauma behind them, Minh started showing signs of posttraumatic stress 25 years on, when his business failed and other aspects of his life fell apart. He fell into a deep depression and was in danger of harming himself or others.

As I listen to his story, I realise that this gentle man with those clear, smiling eyes, has been witness to both sides of the fence: the torturer and the tortured. The hairs on the back of my neck start to bristle when I ask where he would be today if there was no STARTTS. His answer is unequivocal: 'Maybe I become crazy. Maybe I kill somebody or I kill myself or I hit somebody and I get put in jail.'

I think about a friend's brother and others I knew or heard about, who committed suicide or went mad in exile from Hungary. Again, I wonder how things would have been different for our cohort if STARTTS was there. The thought that comes to mind is the fervent hope that the STARTTS team will be able to continue on the path they charted for themselves 20 years ago for as long as their services will be needed. Hopefully, that won't be forever.