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## INTER-ETHNIC TRAINING WITH PSYCHODRAMA METHODS

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### The antecedents

The Sandor Marai Foundation was established in August 1990 by enthusiastic Hungarian intellectuals living in Slovakia. The foundation wished to continue the spiritual message of the famous Hungarian writer, Sandor Marai (1900-1989), who devoted all his life to the service of civic values. The foundation was one of the first non-profit organizations established following the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. For the founders it was clear that after 45 years of communist ideology it would not be a simple venture to reintroduce liberal civil values.

Sandor Marai was born in Kassa (Kosice) at the time when the city was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. As a young man he wandered all over Europe and when the communist dictatorship seized power in 1947, he left his homeland and settled in the US. He died in San Diego, abandoned and poor at the age of 89.

Marai became famous only after his death. His book *Embers* was acclaimed by the Western European and American public. After the success of this book, his other works have also been translated into various languages.

### Introduction

The Slovak Republic is a multinational state located in Central-Eastern Europe with a territory of approximately 50,000 square kilometers. It is bordered by Poland on the north, Ukraine on the east, Hungary on the south and Austria and the Czech Republic on the west. The independent Slovak Republic was formed on 1 January 1993 after the breakup of the Czechoslovak Republic. The population is 5.2 million, including 550,000 people of Hungarian nationality and approximately 350,000 people of Roma (Gypsy) origin. Citizens of non-Slovak nationalities make up 18% of Slovak population, including Czechs, Ukrainians, Poles and some Jews.

The Hungarian minority presents the largest number of all nationalities living in the country. Ethnic Hungarians live in a relatively homogenous block along the entire southern border of the Slovak Republic, north of the Slovak-Hungarian border. This southern zone is called the territories inhabited by Hungarians. This designation is not entirely true because approximately 700,000 Slovaks and 70-80,000 Roma with Slovak citizens live in this southern zone along with the 550,000 people of Hungarian nationality. In fact, we are talking about territories with a typically mixed population where Hungarians form a majority only in very few regions.

The minority question in Eastern-Central Europe has always been considered as a sensitive social problem and this especially applies to those countries where the proportion of minorities is as high as in Slovakia. The majority population in general looks at representatives of minorities distrustfully and often in a hostile way. The Hungarians were considered many times as the fifth column or the Trojan Horse of Hungary, located on the south of Slovakia, and suffered various discriminative measures. Fewer young Hungarian students are accepted in universities; Hungarians cannot enter some positions of trust, and more.

After the country became independent, serious tension built up in the country because the representatives of leading political parties began to aggressively attack the members of minorities through the press. The strongest propaganda was against Hungarians, who were accused of not being loyal to the country, of trying to disintegrate the young republic and to re-annex the southern territories of Slovakia. There were angry outbursts not only against Hungarians, but also against members of the Czech, Roma and Jewish minorities. During these years (1993-1998) we would often see graffiti on house walls and fences which said that the Czechs should go back to Prague, the Roma to India, the Hungarians to Hungary and the Jews to gas chambers.

Members of the Slovak government led by Vladimir Meciar did not do anything to remedy this situation; moreover, the parties of the government coalition in the Slovak Parliament attacked the minority representatives with increasing intensity. They also kept reminding the Slovak nation that in the course of history Hungarians and Czechs had always been against Slovaks and in the new situation, in the independent Slovak Republic, they would continue their undermining work.

They claimed that Jews had established a secret Tel-Aviv – New York – Budapest network for the overthrow of the Slovak Republic; and that the Roma are antisocial, alcoholic, work-shy, criminal elements that had no business in the country.

Let's not forget that exactly in this period, only 400 km from Slovakia, the increasingly bloody civil war raged through Yugoslavia. Most people feared that under the influence of the Balkan events, similar brutalities could take place in Slovakia.

Since the government had not taken any serious steps for the solution of interethnic tension, we, intellectuals thought that we should find ways to solve this problem.

### **Data of one survey**

In 1994, we decided to elaborate a special training program at the Sandor Marai Foundation for the sake of easing the Slovak-Hungarian tension. At first, we conducted a survey in order to determine the most problematic areas of the Slovak-Hungarian relationship. We interviewed 1,650 citizens, out of whom 550 were Hungarians, 550 Slovaks living in the mixed population of southern Slovakia, and 550 Slovak citizens living in northern Slovakia in territories where there are practically no Hungarian inhabitants.

We used sociological and ethno-psychological methods, starting with a sociological questionnaire. We wanted to find out what kind of national and civic identity they had; their habits and traditions; on what basis and models they chose their ideals; and what their priorities were. After this, we administered a battery of psychological tests. We were curious about our subjects' stereotypes, system of attitudes, prejudices, empathy, solidarity, social distance, and emotional background.

Finally, in addition to conducting these surveys, we performed one hundred and fifty in-depth interviews. With ten percent of the sample we carried out a longer conversation during which we focused on more critical questions concentrating on the most sensitive areas identified in the psychological survey.

1. A strong sense of national identity was found in members of both nations. Among the Slovaks, emotions and traditions dominated, while among Hungarians, along with emotions, achievement had an important role.
2. Negative attitudes and stereotypes related to the opposite nation were equally characteristic of both nationalities. In our sample, Hungarians demonstrated a more negative picture about Slovaks than vice versa.
3. Both groups revealed distortions in self-evaluations, with both overestimation tendencies and inferiority complexes.
4. Both groups presented distinct separation tendencies, with Hungarians demonstrating a stronger social distancing.
5. More than half of the examined individuals reported personal ethnic frustration coming from a member of the other group. The scale of these frustrations ranged from banal experiences to existential threats. This was mainly typical of Hungarians.
6. As a result of this frustration, Slovaks often reacted with aggression, while Hungarians tended to be submissive.
7. Capacity for empathy and cooperation were low in both groups.
8. Many surveyed individuals indicated the phenomenon of *delegation*. This means that the *delegating* subjects never expressed their opinions in the first person singular, but emphasized that they think and act on behalf of their whole nation. Most of their information was acquired second-hand. Underlying their opinions and actions were often direct or indirect instructions derived from influential members of their nation, which they did not wish to dispute or felt they were unable to contradict.
9. Members of both groups indicated interethnic communication difficulties relating to issues of political differences (i.e. not due to linguistic misunderstandings). For instance, the same concept was understood differently by each group, as in interpreting the Peace Treaty of Trianon, the results of the Second World War, etc.
10. The frequency of interethnic meetings and relationships was lower among Slovaks than Hungarians.

Generally, we can state that during our survey we found the worst results among those examined individuals who had never been in direct contact with members of the other nationality and their opinions about the other ethnic group were only based on second-hand information.

### **The theoretical preparation of the training**

Based on our findings we developed the following training model:

- development of self-knowledge, confrontation of the individual with his/her own negative and positive characteristics;
- acquisition of **awareness** of inner tensions; constructive awareness of aggressiveness - **learning how to deal with these and how to decrease them.**
- acquisition of empathic skill; ability for tolerance; and the skill of assertiveness (often missing in the initial presentation of participants);

- development of communication skills; decoding of communication of people belonging to different ethnic groups;
- improvement in willingness to cooperate;
- acquisition of skills in problem resolution in conflict situations.

The duration of each training series was one hundred hours, to allow sufficient time for the practice of all the above-mentioned skills.

During the development of the training program, we began with the assumption that personality attitudes developed under the influence of the family and surroundings can be changed or qualitatively improved by specific group therapy processes. Moreover, such social skills as effective behavior, communication, cooperation, and establishment of contacts can be acquired through practice.

Nowadays, relationships between people are so complicated that they put a big burden on individuals and require certain preparedness and flexibility. This is increasingly true in the case of relationships between people belonging to different ethnic and religious groups.

Underlying conflicts we can often discover maladaptive approaches, communication obstacles, distortions in communicating and understanding information. The prevention of the above can be acquired by practice. Even rigid attitudes can be modified and changed through group experiences.

The 100-hour training was divided into five weekends. We worked 20 hours every single weekend. The first three weekends (60 hours) were devoted to self-awareness training. In this period, we aimed at the development of improved self-awareness, constructive identification of aggressiveness, improvement of empathic and assertive skills, as well as increased tolerance levels towards different 'outgroups.' We also aimed at improvement of skills in cooperation and team-building.

The fourth weekend was devoted to the development of communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal. We introduced the concepts of *meta* communication, as well as decoding of one's partner's communication.

The final weekend program focused on acquiring techniques of management of conflict situations.

Naturally, we did not intend to separate strictly the different learning modules because basic elements of communication techniques were acquired during the first training sessions so that the work could continue more smoothly.

The training we elaborated is based on own experiences rather than being derived from didactic, educational or research origins. The basic pillars of the training were two psychotherapy methods: psychodrama developed by Moreno, and person-centered psychotherapy elaborated by Rogers.

## **Psychodrama**

Psychodrama (PD) builds mainly on human spontaneity, creativity and personal experience. Moreno often emphasized that instead of so-called cultural worldviews, the psychodrama participants can use their own experiences and ideas during the exercises. This definition was extremely important for us because during our survey we often met with the phenomenon of delegation and overemphasis of the significance of cultural worldviews.

[Editor's note: The process of psychodrama involves stages of warmup, enactment, sharing and analysis.

Psychodrama allows complexes and conflicts to be concretized by casting group members to play roles from the life of the protagonist. It allows the protagonist to have a physical “encounter” with the self; to see and experience what he carries within his mind and body, so that it can be made explicit, concrete and can be dealt with in the here and now. “A picture is worth a thousand words.” The purpose of psychodramatic role plays is to resolve through action insight rather than talk alone. Through role play, thinking, feeling and behavior emerge simultaneously to allow for a fuller picture of what is being carried in the psyche to come into view. The “double” acts as an inner voice putting words on interior thoughts, sensations and emotions that may be less than conscious. This “doubling” from others helps to enhance awareness of self and provide the protagonist with a feeling of being seen, supported and understood. “Role reversal” allows the protagonist to actually stand in the shoes of other persons in the role play in order to see the self from the position of the other and to actually experience being “in the skin” someone else. (Dayton).]

During the psychodrama exercises we can make the most of dramatic elements in the self-knowledge work. With the help of such exercises tension is brought to the surface and can be put into therapeutically directed frames.

We assume that psychodrama is the best help for the curious person to reach the depths of his/her own life and past, find the monsters lurking there and then to securely find his/her way back to the light. The psychodrama method differs from other self-knowledge techniques because it is a group technique during which participants use their spontaneity and creativity to perform and dramatize their own experiences rather than exploring their issues through mere verbalization. Under the supervision of the director, psychodrama participants can replay and relive their lives again; recalling and reworking major conflicts, experiences, and emotions they went through in their lives. The whole game takes place in the territory of ‘as if.’

The group member who is performing is called the protagonist. Protagonists select so-called ‘assistants’ with the help of whom they may perform, for example, their conflict with a father who died a long time ago, discuss their problems with an ex-wife/ex-husband, or perform and re-enact their recent conflict with a boss, partner, or child.

The basic rule of the protagonist exercises is that the course and process of the action is determined by the main character, the protagonist. His/her assistants have to act solely according to the protagonist’s instructions. Therefore, they cannot change the course of action to their liking; they cannot criticize or speak ironically of the protagonist. The protagonist during the role-play tells the assistants what they have to say or do. For instance, s/he may pre-play a certain sentence or act.

In the course of the exercise, often major emotions are brought to the surface, emotions which were lying deep down for years or even decades. They may have constituted a huge weight which distorted and damaged the individual’s character and relationships. During the psychodrama, as people recall these conflicts or feelings, suddenly their eyes brighten up. They begin to see and understand themselves much better. By the end of the exercise, they often have gone through a real cathartically purifying experience.

Another advantage of psychodrama is that the content of the exercise shown by the individual becomes exciting, intense, and interesting for the whole group, and is often a lasting memory for all. By the end of the exercise the individual and group tensions dissolve and canalize (during the ventilation/discussion phase) so the problem, compressed into the individual’s drama, is drawn up with clean outlines for every group member.

Within the context of the group, individuals continuously represent themselves whether they want to or not even if they are quiet or only passive participants in the group work. This self-representation is information from the individuals about themselves for the group; in fact, it is part of a self-opening process. It is a well-known fact that this self-opening often involves serious stresses and emotional

pain. On the other hand, the big advantage is that individual can profit a lot and they can increase their self-knowledge enormously. Naturally, at the beginning of the work many participants feel that by self-opening they become unprotected and become vulnerable in front of the other group members. However, they soon realize that their group mates often struggle with similar problems and difficulties; therefore, it turns out that 'individual curses and horrible secrets' that seemed to be unbearable before the training are by no means individual issues which afflict only one person. The 'performances' of other group members prove that they also have carried a hump composed of similar secrets and tortures in many cases for decades.

At the end of the exercise, the group members give the individual spontaneous feedback. In other words, they act as a live mirror for the protagonist. Protagonists can learn a lot from these feedbacks. First of all, they feel relief because from the feedback by the others it becomes clear that not only they, but also other people have similar inner conflicts.

Through feedback (mirror), the group members start to get acquainted with and understand each other's worlds of emotions and ways of thinking. They begin to understand those secret motives which move the other group member. This develops and facilitates progress in the acceptance of each other. If we reflect upon the fact that group members belong to different ethnic and religious groups, we immediately understand what kind of possibilities are hidden in Moreno's psychodrama.

During the drama play it becomes evident for group members that we can get to know ourselves only to the degree others help us get to know ourselves. With regards to this, during trainings we often quoted the words of one of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian writers, Attila Jozsef: "It is useless to try to wash your face in yourself because you can only wash your face in others."

### **Person-oriented psychotherapy**

The second psychotherapy method we used is person-oriented psychotherapy, developed by Carl Rogers. One of the basic thoughts of Rogers was that people are only able to live in harmonious relationships with others if they live in harmony with themselves. In our over-politicized societies we often meet with the opinion that only those people can be accepted as our friends, mates, or partners who think similarly to us about basic things in life. We find it difficult to accept if our child, spouse, friend, or colleague forms a different opinion about various social, political or religious issues or problems. In multi-ethnic and multi-religious social conditions this attitude often leads to tensions and conflicts. The originators of this project assumed that through proper practice and training we can acquire the ability to accept fellow human beings just as they are, even though they have different ways of thinking.

During the specification of basic rules of group work we gave preference to closed groups (with permanent membership and no new participants allowed) because such a group provides greater security for participants and helps to develop the desired group dynamics. It is a well-known fact that such stabilized groups have a greater retaining strength than open groups do. At the beginning of a training session series, together with group members we always determined the number and hours of acceptable absences. (This was mostly determined to be 10%).

### **Participants**

The most serious challenge presented itself in the selection of participants. According to our experience, the planned activity did not provide serious motivation for members of the political elite. Parliament representatives in many cases used national differences for their own political purposes and through their remarks sharpened conflicts between Slovaks and Hungarians in manipulative ways. Playing the nationality card became an accepted element of parliamentary debates in Slovakia. Representatives belonging to the majority Slovak nation excelled in this game above all others, but

occasionally minority Hungarian representatives also made similar contributions to enhancing rivalries and conflicts between nationality groups.

However, based on our analyses, it seemed that there still was a well-defined group that is truly interested in easing national conflicts. This group was composed of opinion leaders from mixed territories inhabited by both Slovaks and Hungarians. From our survey it turned out that intellectuals living on territories with mixed inhabitation (Southern Slovak region), independently from their ethnic affiliation, are much more motivated to ease ethnic conflicts than the rest of the country's citizens. It is a priority for mayors, priests, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen living on territories with mixed population to be able to carry out their work normally, in peace and under quiet circumstances. These people form the opinions of their own milieu to a great extent; therefore, they have a large effect on what kind of opinion and attitude is formed about people of other nationalities in villages and cities with mixed inhabitants.

At first, we decided to approach local opinion leaders. We agreed that the most effective form of approach was personal contact. When the final version of the trainings was prepared, we went around villages and towns with mixed inhabitants and visited opinion leaders. Since Slovakia is a small country with a small population, we were able to arrange many meetings.

In the summer of 1996, we were able to launch our trainings with groups of 15-15 persons each. Each group operated under the guidance of one trainer and one co-trainer. We carried out the work on weekends (from Friday afternoon until Sunday afternoon). Between sessions, we took two-week intervals so participants could process the acquired experiences and new awarenesses. As I mentioned, the content of each weekend was given in advance, but individual experiences prevailed within group sessions.

Moreno had already called attention to how dangerous it can be if the individual uses certain 'cultural worldviews' instead of his/her own thoughts and ideas. According to cultural conserve, our nation is always perfect, always wants only good, always knows the truth, and never hurts anyone. According to the same conserve, the rest (others) are in this world only to hurt our nation.

Since we knew about these worldviews well in advance, we increasingly paid attention so participants brought into the exercise as few of these elements as possible. We also used techniques in which participants were supposed to show some cultural stereotypes of their own nation to group members of other nationalities, however we always encouraged players to bring into the exercise their own personal experiences and ideas.

As a result, there were some prepared techniques, such as 'family photo', imaginary talk with my father/mother, my favorite tree, etc., but even during these techniques group members brought into the group their own observations, positive or negative experiences, and under the guidance of trainers we tried to play them over and over again in a psycho-dramatic way. During the sharing phase, we discussed it together.

We often used regressive techniques, during which we 'returned' to the past of group members, all the way to early childhood. With this technique we were able to discover the roots of many negative stereotypes and prejudices. These kinds of realizations had a truly cathartic and transformative effect on group members in many cases.

## **Practical issues**

In Slovakia, we launched the trainings organized by the Sandor Marai Foundation in the summer of 1996. At the beginning, opinion leaders formed the backbone of the group, but later many young people, students, and artists joined our work. The press provided great help in the propagation of our

work, so the trainings were well received even abroad. Thanks to this reaction, our activity became popular and more and more colorful groups were created.

We were careful to keep the balance between Slovak and Hungarian participants. We also tried to keep the balance between women and men, although of course, this effort was not always fully successful.

Officially, these activities were called interethnic trainings, but naturally, this did not rule out the recalling and dramatizing of events with personal topics.

At first, we generally started with exercises focused on personal experiences that did not have ethno-specific character. The protagonists raised a personal problem which they could not solve in their lives, such as work-related issues, family quarrels, conscience crises, etc. With the help of assistants, they played the scene, which was followed by thorough discussions and mutual sharings of related experiences. During the 100-hour training each group member was given the opportunity to become a protagonist at least three or four times and to work with his/her own experience material in the self-knowledge exercise.

On several occasions, we played parts from the Bible or events known from world history by asking the participants not to stick only to historical facts, but to bring their own feelings and ideas into the exercise as well. Later on, we created a Slovak and Hungarian sub-group within the entire group which was participating at that time. The task of the small groups was to play some important events from their own life for the rest of the group. We had them play events that already had some ethno-specific character. For instance, members of a Hungarian sub-group showed what a Hungarian wedding, birthday, funeral, etc. looks like. After this, Slovaks did the same. Following this exercise, the group discussed and commented on the performances, noting differences between members of different nationalities. It was typical that during such exercises, various rituals played an important role. The more tense the exercise became the more important was the protecting role of these rituals. These rituals representing old traditions often limited the freedom of players; nevertheless, in certain situations players preferred the grids of the ritual (for inner security) instead of dangerous freedom and responsibility that goes with it.

In such cases their communication changed and instead of first person singular they began to talk in first person plural. For example: "we Hungarians used to do this in such cases...or we Slovaks have a tradition, etc."

This change in communication was even more conspicuous when we worked with people with low self-esteem or with low-status minorities. Women quite often used this communication approach (we women, for us women, etc.), especially when they arrived at an insoluble task in their own woman's role. Frustrated Gypsies also preferred to communicate in first person plural as opposed to using sentences with 'I.'

Years later I met with a similar phenomenon during my Israeli training where communication of Palestinian women was characterized by using the first person plural. These people (low status, frustrated) preferred long verbalization instead of action (they preferred to only talk about solutions).

Communication in first person plural was gladly used by another group – the so-called delegated people. The delegated person also spoke in the name of his/her own community, but the feeling of vocation and selection dominated. Delegated people often behaved in the group as if they were prophets chosen by God. Thus, during our work we trainers often witnessed delegation of ethnic or religious character. With delegated people we could only achieve progress through detailed and lengthy work. At times we witnessed shocking changes, especially when these people played counter-roles, during which they realized all the absurdities of their delegated nature.

As the groups progressed and learned lessons of empathy, tolerance and understanding, we aimed at more sensitive topics. For instance, we had members play historical events that proved to be extremely sensitive both for Slovaks and Hungarians. We played the given event in several variations and used alternatives, in which the role of a well-known Slovak historical figure was played by a Hungarian group member.

By the end of the training, we got to the point where we had the participants perform anti-roles. For example, the deeply religious priest had to play an immoral prostitute; the shy, small teacher had to play a brutal butcher; the handsome, successful mayor performed the role of a mentally retarded homeless person.

Later, we increased tension further. The Hungarian minority representative received a task to perform the role of a Slovak nationalist politician as authentically as possible, while the loyal Slovak teacher had to play the role of a passionate Hungarian poet in a situation made up by the group. While the protagonist was preparing for his/her role in another room, the other group members created a story that the returning protagonist had to step into, playing the role according to the outlined script.

In this phase of the training participants were fully engaged in the work and took it seriously. In the heat of the exercise, the group member forgot that as a Hungarian he/she played a Slovak role and basically he represented views in contrast with his/her earlier private opinions.

During the sharing phase, protagonists often talked about how they lived in worked themselves into their roles and under this influence they significantly changed their opinion about certain questions.

For example, there was one energetic, young mayor, who during the introduction talked at length about his main role, which was to clean up the begging and dirty Gypsies from his city. His anti-role was to play a miserable, 80-year old beggar Gypsy woman whom the other group members rudely ridiculed and humiliated. The drama play was so authentic that in the end everyone cried, even the mayor burst out sobbing and loudly scolded himself for his previous views.

In the drama play besides the mentioned role changes, there are several technical tricks which help the protagonists to get to know themselves better. Therefore we facilitate the process of self-opening through interviews, monologues, images, inner voice and the technique of doubling. Most of these technical tricks are provided by other group members observing the protagonist's play - they continuously live and breathe together with the protagonist and follow his/her inner actions with much attention and empathy. Under the guidance of the director, group members may step into the play.

In ethnically and religiously mixed groups this task often puts a special burden on assistants of different origins from that of the protagonist. However, the magic of the exercise and the feeling of interdependence create in a short time a strong connection and solidarity between the protagonist and assistant(s). This connection is a cohesive force in the group. Many times there are truly staggering discussions that we hold during the last training day. Some participants admit that they formed closer connections with group members than with their closest relatives.

In the introduction I have already mentioned that during the training we also use Carl Rogers' client-centered psychotherapy and special communication exercises. I will not write about these in detail due to lack of space, but I would like to point out that Rogers' technique of active attention and silence, as well as the method of reframing and empathic mirror gets a special role in the last part of the training.

In the last phase of the training we also engage in several methods of conflict management. So during the last weekend the participants receive a few hours of theoretical training on the most modern conflict management methods, and then we practice conflict management through concrete examples. At first, we practice conflict resolution on pre-composed scenes, and then participants 'bring into the group' conflicts experienced in real life.

## **Benefits of the training**

During this conflict resolution we truly benefit from the described self-knowledge training. As a result of the self-knowledge work, participants not only get to know themselves, but their empathic ability towards others increases, too. In conflict situations they do not only see legal, political, social, or economic problem, but they also see the persons behind them. They realize that there is a flesh and blood person sitting on the other side of the table, who also has his/her own desires, goals and feelings about the world.

Under the influence of the training they are able to decode better the communication of the person participating in a conflict, and they do not consider him/her as the enemy. They do their best to identify and understand his/her motivational background and value system. They no longer experience conflict situations as competitions that they have to win, but rather they are looking for possibilities of cooperation.

Communication training provides tremendous help because participants not only acquire the rules of well-articulated, clear and precisely interpretable verbal messages, but also acquire awareness about important elements of body language and non-verbal communications. During discussions on conflict situations participants analyze and evaluate along with the verbal content their partners' mimic reactions, eye contact or 'contemplations', changes of tone, amplitudes of breathing, gesticulations, trembling of fingers, movements of legs, changes of body and position.

As a result of Rogers' client-centered training, participants learn to watch the partner's communication continuously and are able to point out the most important elements. These observations are repeated by the speaking partners in the ways they were interpreted by their mirroring partners and thus decrease the danger of misunderstandings and 'interferences.'

## **Special focus on the Roma**

In 1998, we began to engage intensively in the problems of the Roma living in Slovakia. Forty percent of the Roma population lives in relatively segregated Roma districts or totally isolated Roma settlements. We established two kinds of training programs for these people.

The first type of trainings was held in those towns or villages where, although the Roma live together with Slovaks or Hungarians, there is a sharp borderline between them and there is hardly any cooperation with the majority nation. In these places we organized cooperation trainings aimed at improvement of Roma-Slovak or Roma-Hungarian cooperation. The structure of these trainings was similar to the already described training work. We created groups with mixed nationalities and involved local Slovak, Hungarian and Roma opinion leaders. More than five hundred local Roma activists participated in these training sessions, together with Slovak and Hungarian local opinion leaders.

The second training group was formed in those settlements where the Roma population lives. In these villages we put emphasis on training of Roma assistants. Participants were provided basic training in self-knowledge, communication, and conflict management. After this, they received even longer, 250-hour special training during which they acquired knowledge in the basics of pedagogical, health, public order, self-governing, social, and cultural work. These trainings lasted for more than seven months and ended with an exam. We trained more than 50 Roma professionals in ghetto-like circumstances, apart from Slovaks and Hungarians. We proposed a parliamentary bill that had as its aim the creation and recognition of the category of Roma assistants in the Slovak Republic. The spirit of the proposed law was a kind of affirmative action. Roma volunteers, who were already trained in specific skills, such as teachers, doctors, and police assistants, as well as assistants in the various departments of City Hall, acted as bridges between the majority and Roma ethnic groups. We thought that Roma assistants can later form the basis of the local Roma middle class. Our opinion was that without the

involvement and active participation of the Roma, problems in education, healthcare, social sphere, crime prevention, local autonomy, and minority culture could not be solved. Unfortunately this proposed bill was not adopted by Parliament.

The experiences obtained during the trainings and participants' feedback are described in more detailed in our books (Bordas-Huncik; Huncik el. al).

## **Foreign experiences**

Since 2000, we have also been engaged in training of Roma youth in Hungary. Seventeen-year old students of the Gandhi high school for Roma youth, the Piarist high school in Kecskemet, and the Karolina high school in Szeged have participated in our trainings. During this time more than 120 young people attended our training before graduation examinations. We worked with them on the basis of the above-outlined 100-hour training program.

We formed so-called training of trainers' groups for our Czech and Polish colleagues. We shared our experiences with them so they were able to hold similar trainings in their countries.

Our colleagues from Romania also participated in our training. We traveled to Cluj where we presented our work to a multinational group. Besides Romanians and Hungarians there were also some Armenian, Greek, German and Jewish participants. According to our information, our Romanian colleagues incorporated many elements of our training into their work.

Since 2003, we have worked with at least one group of more than fifty participants in Belarus. These trainings have been held in Minsk, the capital city of Belarus, as well as in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. Program changes were necessary due to the fact that the Belarusian organizers put special emphasis on communication training, mainly on appearance in electronic media. This could have only been achieved in Bratislava because we were not given the opportunity in Minsk to practice in TV studios.

In 2005, we received an invitation from Israel where a local NGO, the Shatil Foundation, organized training for Jewish and Palestinian participants. The Israeli training placed a special burden on both trainers and participants. The reason for this was that the training took place in the period when the country leaders decided to withdraw from the occupied Gaza zone. The Israeli society reacted with huge emotional outbursts which we had to face from the first moment of our arrival. Orange, blue-white-blue flags flying on cars, protesters shaking their fists blocked the main intersections and busy highways, with burning tires and burned cars reflecting the enormous tension within the Jewish community.

It was surprising for us that on the Palestinian side we experienced certain indifference and even apathy in connection with the process then in progress. In the opinion of Palestinian intellectuals, the withdrawal was a 'Jewish internal affair' and they did not wish to actively participate in this process.

The local Shatil Foundation organized two groups for us. The organizers requested that we hold a demonstration training over two 20-hour periods. This duration was very challenging, but we did our best to condense the structure of the training so that participants at least got a taste of the essential process of our interethnic trainings.

Both groups were ethnically mixed. During the first training we worked exclusively with women activists. The second group was composed of women and men. Both groups had a high number of 'delegated' people who tried to reason and represent their truth on behalf of the Jewish or Palestinian community. In the process of psychodrama exercises, participants had to face themselves on several occasions and thus, we lived through several cathartic scenes.

It was interesting to meet with the characteristic 'declining mechanism' in both groups, the essence of which was that group members kept blaming the authorities when talking about responsibility for the phenomenon of brutal violence in the country. This was meant to unambiguously show that it is not they, the simple people who are responsible for violence, but those who pursue 'dirty things' on a professional level – people with political functions or members of groups other than their own.

The typical sign of defenselessness and frustration was that some participants – mostly Palestinian women – were difficult to engage in active situations even during psychodrama. Rather than engage in the process, they showed their defenselessness through lengthy and detailed verbal communication. (In this, they were similar to Roma women in Slovakia).

Suspicion and distrust were present in both groups to such extent that sometimes it seriously hindered the participants' spontaneity and creativity. One of the characteristic examples of this was clearly demonstrated during the final exercise in the mixed group. The task was that participants had to characterize each other in an exclusively positive way. Our goal was to conclude the training with a positive message from each participant. The essence of this exercise is that one member of the group sits down on a chair placed out of the circle formed by the group. The participants are supposed to gossip about this member in a 'positive way.' They are supposed to say only positive things and impressions about the group member sitting outside. (This exercise was carried out at about 6:00 pm, after participants had worked together for three days).

At first, a young Jewish man stood up, indignant. He was followed by a Palestinian boy. They evaluated this exercise as 'ridiculous and artificial' and said that 'it is impossible to collect relevant information about someone in such a short time in order to form a realistic positive opinion', therefore, they left the group.

Thank God the majority did not follow their example. At first, a Jewish man with quite radical opinions sat out in the 'gossip chair.' The first positive opinion about him was provided by a radically oriented Palestinian boy who said the following: "He is a very pleasant person. During breaks we talked a lot. He said interesting things about his life and family." After this, more and more human gossips followed without any disturbances.

To sum up, it can be stated that the women's group was more cooperative than the mixed group. However, women were much more withdrawn in this group. The only exception was a lady who participated in the training as the partner of the above mentioned Jewish man. After the man left the group, the lady decided after short vacillation that she would stay.

### **Validation of the inter-ethnic training methods**

The effectiveness of our trainings has been assessed in two ways. At the first and last day of the training we carried out an examination with the help of an internationally standardized test battery which examines the real and idealized self-image, empathic abilities, communication skills, tolerance level, cooperation and conflict-resolution abilities. From the comparison of the before and after assessments we received a picture about how the training affected the psychic functions of participants.

At our trainings in Slovakia we also use another method. One year after the training we invite participants to a half-day informal meeting during which we ask them how they utilize their knowledge obtained during the training in their everyday life. The majority of reports are positive. Participants say that their self-evaluation and confidence has improved, they are able to communicate more effectively, they orientate better in the private and community sphere, and they are able to orientate and act better in conflict situations than before the training.

## **Problems and difficulties**

Participants in our trainings are voluntary citizens, people who feel and know that they need to do something to improve interethnic coexistence. Radically oriented people belonging to the so-called 'tough seed' can hardly be won over to participate in the training. An exception to the latter was the Hungarian high school students: many of the radicals only participated due to betting that nobody could change them. Most of them lost the bet because more than once a love relationship formed between Hungarians and Roma youth.

The training is extremely time-demanding; therefore, it is difficult to recruit participants who are willing to attend the training session for five weekends.

The training is also costly because accommodation and meals have to be ensured for all participants.

I would like to emphasize again the role of the press in the organization of trainings. In Slovakia, the press followed our work with sympathy, therefore thanks to their positive news features, interest in our work has rapidly increased.

## **Summary**

After ten years of work we can state, in retrospect, that the method of self-knowledge-communication-conflict resolution works well even in ethnically and religiously mixed groups. During this period more than 1,200 citizens of Slovak and Hungarian nationality participated in these trainings.

The majority of participants in the training were local opinion leaders. Teachers comprised the majority of participants. In the course of recent years more and more young high school and university students have participated in the training as well. The number of businessmen has also increased, since they realized that if they lack these abilities they will hardly succeed in the ever increasing competition battles. A year later most of the participants reported positive outcomes as a result of the training. We believe that this kind of training could have a domino effect and would contribute to reducing conflicts and potential conflicts between individuals, ethnic groups and nations.

Comment: As the Sandor Marai Foundation is not able to carry out this task any more, since 2003 the Civic Communication and Conflict Prevention Group (CCCPG) has taken over all organizational tasks regarding the trainings.

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