

The Bridge between me and you

A project for children and youth in Mostar

Languages as a cultural heritage and as a tool for ethnic division

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Languages are signs of a definite cultural identity. In my paper, I will discuss two different cases explaining how languages are dealt on the one hand as a cultural treasure and on the other as a tool for ethnic division. The topic, I would like to focus on in my essay, is the radio project “Mother Language-Multilingualism” in which pupils from more than six countries took part and represented their native languages.

The other project concerning cultural heritage, but in a different context, is titled “The Bridge between me and you”. It describes the situation in ethnically divided Mostar. By means of the radio, young inhabitants of Herzegovinian city could exchange their experience concerning the living situation in Mostar.

Discovering own past

Our radio program involved beside some modern European languages such as: Slovenian, Bulgarian, Czech and German also ones in danger of extinction for instance Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) - a language spoken by the old generation of Jews living in South Europe so called Sephardi Jews. Sephardim came to the Balkans from Spain in the 14th century pursued by the Spanish Monarchy. Currently, only the old generation can speak Ladino - the young Bulgarian Jews focus on Hebrew and English – on the languages which they need for their studies in Israel and USA. Therefore, Ladino is a language of nostalgia for the lost homeland - Spain. Now, you will listen to some students from Dimcho Debeljanov - a Hebrew high school in Sofia:

Hello my name is Dimitar Stancev, I study at the High School for Hebrew and English “Dimcho Debeljanov” in Sofia.

Hello, my name is Alice, I am 14 years old and I am really glad to be a part of the big family of Israel.

The great grandparents of both of these young people were expelled from Spain in the 15th century due to practicing different religion and cultivating their own traditions. Many of those who had to leave Spain settled down in the Ottoman Empire, which encompassed the region of present-day Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Turkey. The Ottoman ruler allowed the Spanish Jews, known as the Sephardim, which is a Hebrew word for “Spanish”, to settle in the Empire. The families of Sofi Danon and Beka Lasarova originally descended from Spain and have been living in Bulgaria for centuries. These two ladies speak a language, which is hardly spoken worldwide, Ladino or Djudeo-Espanyol.

Ladino is a dialect of Old Spanish deriving from the 15th century mixed with some Hebrew, Greek, Turkish and Arabic vocabularies. This mixture is an outcome of a long voyage of Jews who passed through many countries heading to the Balkans. The Sephardi Jews settled down in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia. Sofi Danon living nowadays in Sofia is one of the Ladino native speakers. Despite her age, she works on a Ladino text book because, as she explains, she wishes to preserve Ladino for the young generation.

Sofi Danon

My name is Dr. Sofi Danon, I am 86 years old and I am retiree. I can speak Hebrew and Ladino which is also called Judeo-Espaniol. The young generation is not very interested in studying the Ladino language. My generation speaks Ladino, but today the young people learn English and Hebrew because they need it if they would like to study in Isreal or America. Besides, people of Jewish origins speak the Hebrew language all around the world. Ladino is the language of nostalgia, of 15th century Spain. And everybody should know that it is not Spanish but the language of the expelled Jews. Therefore, it is called Djudeo-Espaniol.

Beka Lazarova

My parents spoke Ladino as they wanted to keep things secret.

I remember a proverb in Ladino that my grandparents were repeating to me and my brother: *Vivas crescas en grandescas, con madres, con padres, con paniades*. That means: **Grow healthy and happily with your mother and relatives.**

Beka Lazarova, a headmaster of the Hebrew High School in Sofia, is 55 years old. She relates that some young people are interested not only in Ladino but also in the newly written Ladino text books.

The young people are concentrated on studying English and Hebrew, for them there is no advantage in learning an old forgotten language. However, Ladino has survived in some songs and poems and stirs up the young people and causes this tradition will exist in their heart. Cultivating customs, nevertheless, can be used to awake some negative emotions towards each other and to convert the neighbors into enemies.

Cultural heritage as dividing factor

In the course of the Mostar topic we will be researching two divided cultures sharing, however, many similarities. Mostar is a city located in the Herzegovinian area. Geographically seen it is divided into western and eastern part by the Neretva River. However, in ethnic terms the borderline between the Bosnian and Croatian inhabitants is the Boulevard which was also a front line during the war waged in early 90's.

Unfortunately, three languages – Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian - are spoken in the Herzegovinian cities which intensifies the cultural division of the local society in Mostar. Because the Serbs are a very small minority, they usually join one of the stronger groups.

Now I would move on to my topic: the different languages and religions affecting the living situation in Mostar today as the consequence of the civil war that occurred almost 16 years ago.

Mostar used to be a city of sports, friendship and fun, Franjo Dzidzic, a football coach of the Croatian youth football team, told me. Nowadays, the citizens of Mostar are not satisfied with their living conditions, the previously existing fun and friendship have been replaced with corruption and ethnic segregation. On the one hand a number of people complain about the ethnic segregation as a factor slowing down the economic development. But on the other, almost everybody participates in establishing the invisible borders.

Mostar as a city of paradoxes

In Mostar not only the security and peace but also freedom of movement exists for its citizens. The buildings and streets are renovated, at first sight atmosphere of breakthrough dominates. But these appearances are misleading. The system of education is organized according to the principle of ethnic segregation. Although the concerned pupils will never accept it, they are not able to counteract this conjuncture. Youth of Mostar, who work on the projects in the area of education, report that only the return of the Serbo-Croatian language could unify the education system. The problem is that none of the present ethnic groups wants the old situation with a unified language back. Even all reconciliation efforts conducted by NGOs and work groups fail because of the different languages principle. Even one of the Mostar high schools, which is believed to be progressive, functions according to the principle: Two schools under one roof. It is also organized in two different school systems: one for Croatian pupils and the other for Bosnian ones, the Serbian pupils usually join one of the two groups.

Also for such school subjects like sport and music the classes of the Croats and Bosnians are divided.

"In the course of the history lessons we are confronted with distinctive Chauvinism" Croatian pupils from the Fra Grga Martić High School report who live on the west side of the river Neretva.

The historical books are written in a biased way, they consist of prejudices pointed at the distinct religions and cultures. The text books are infiltrated with nationalistic slogans as well, the pupils from Mostar complain.

Furthermore, the current history concerning the last civil war in Mostar remains a taboo for the inhabitants. A pupil from the Mostar high school states that it is forbidden to openly say at his school who destroyed the Stari Most (Old Bridge) of Mostar. At this point, we can ask a question about the transparency of the past, can it exist if the people are still constrained to believe in taboos? The priest at the Franciscan church Mate Dragicević believes that the lack of trust among the people living in Mostar is the reason why there are so many taboos and borders in communication between the Croatian and Bosnian residents. The people are afraid to discuss the current history. Yet, it is obvious that the trust cannot develop if it is too hard to communicate with each other. However, there are some organizations and institutions striving at the multiethnic dialog.

Building bridges

Even the reconciliation projects carried out by NGOs cannot break this vicious circle. Despite the failures, there are different organizations striving at restoring friendly relationships between divided citizens and one of them is the Radio X. The radio station is located in the eastern part of the city. Its founder is Dario Terzic who told me about the radio project produced with some contributions from the pupils of the Croatian and Bosnian sides. This project was a series of some radio reports which were broadcast within three years. At the beginning, the project was supported by OSZE. The radio project has the title ***Generazija nullta or generation zero***. The founder of the radio x, Dario Terzic created it. Actually, Dario's aim was cooperation with pupils on the topics regarding the current situation of Mostar's society, then he conceived the idea of making a documentary about streets and memorials in both of the city sides. The pupils, who Dario trained how to work with a microphone, were thirteen years old. Every Saturday, the young reporters walked the streets of Mostar to report to the listeners about new street names assigned to them after the last civil war and also about the memorials at squares and about typical identification marks of the streets. In the course of the preparation of his project, Dario Terzic noticed that there are a lot of children from the Croatian side who have no idea about the Old Bridge or even about the old city of Mostar- about the city quarters where the Bosnians live.

Dario Terzic has been working for 13 years on programs for young listeners. 13 years ago he founded the Radio X with the aim to get a station which would broadcast for the whole city and for all ethnic groups beyond the existing divisions. Dario Terzic's colleague is Elvedin Nezirovic who explained to me that the fourth elementary school, where he teaches, has a long-term cooperation with the elementary school at the west side.

The Bosnian school was also involved in many different projects, organized by the Nancen Dialogue Center and sponsored by the Norwegia. Despite all efforts and projects, the main problem remains - the linguistic division. The families of the Croatian children keep living on the west side also because the Croatian schools are located there. The Bosnian families keep living on the east side. The distance between west and east side increases constantly. The young generation is not interested in terms and definitions. Boris from the High school Fra Grga Matic emphasizes:

Boris: Why don't they build more parks and create more public space intended as cultural meeting points? Instead of it, they have erected 50 mosques and a plenty of churches so far. These shrines are meaningless. I live between a church and a mosque and I cannot escape.

Ante: Our historical books are really, really funny. They say that the Muslims are bad and the Croats are good.

Boris: I read about the history not only from ours (Croatian) but also from Bosnian books. And there is written the same about us – we are the bad guys and the Bosnian are the good ones. Nobody really cares about the content of our historical books, the pupils don't care what is written there and the new generation is being educated as the previous one.

Boris: Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia that are again just icons. I don't really care how it would be named. We can call it also Disneyland, if my life is fulfilled. We don't need anything to name if we have nothing to name.

Living in Mostar

The origins of the fact, that young people do not live together in Mostar nowadays, needs to be sought in its history and not only in the events that occurred within the last 20 years but in the whole past century. It is often recalled by the nationalistic parties that use it for achieving their political goals. Mostar is also a good example for the clash of cultures. A load of mosques opposed to the big crosses, two competing bus companies and universities are the result of this confrontation. The only places where the divided inhabitants can meet are the Abrashevic Youth Center, few playgrounds and some communication places.

In the past, one sport teacher recalls, Mostar used to be a city of fun and friendship, today the only value that counts in Mostar is politics. Despite this difficult situation, the young people in the Herzegovinian city make an effort to build bridges between each other. Pupils from the sixth grade told me they would destroy the borders between the inhabitants of the both city sides.

Currently, if young people from the Croatian side meet young Bosnians in the street they ask each other which language should be spoken: Bosnian, Croatian or "ours"?

Our radio project which was also broadcast by the Radio X in Mostar enabled people to listen and to learn about different persons from the both sides of Mostar. It was a radio bridge between different generations and religious groups. Experiencing more about each other - that was the target of the radio program.

A businessman wanted to buy a house and found one located on the east side, his owner was Croat. For buying the house he sold the flat on the west side, the buyer was a Croatian family. His flat bought the Bosnian businessman after the war and it was sold by a Serbian family, who removed to Belgrad. This process of selling and buying is happening every day like this, the businessman emphasized.

The only neutral site in Mostar is a small area called the Aleksa Santic Street that is located near the boulevard which is the formal front line of the war. Here one can find the Abrashevic Youth Center and the office of one of the NGO's namely Nancen Dialogue Network. The Abrashevic Center is the only politically independent place in the city dedicated to culture, music, film, literature and theater. People of different religions gather there and some of them hold concerts and broadcast a web radio. Here are coming people from different religions. The Abrashevic Youth Center is a meeting point for young people but not for children.

The City Department of Youth and Sports supports sport games and competitions, the schools and pupils are very interested in this subject. In course of these competitions the young people from the Bosnian and Croatian cultures can meet each other. Yet, the others who spend their spare time in some different ways are hindered to make an acquaintance of each other.

Conclusions

The way to peace between different languages and cultures in Mostar could last very long. Reconciliation can be if the young generation concentrates on the economic problems which currently stop the development of the whole society. The establishment of languages is a good sign, but it could not be exploited for the nationalistic targets. Speaking a language of “the others” should become a common habit and not any big act.

In the case of the Ladino language we can see that this language is hardly spoken but it is a cultural treasure of the past. And it continues its life in the poetry and music of the old generation of Jews expelled from Spain.

The establishment of different languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina deepens the ethnic segregation in the society, which is used as an instrument for creating divisions and conflicts. However, both of the languages are very similar and there is little attention paid to the choice of the language spoken to communicate in the streets or cafes. Creating a deep but artificial difference between languages resulted in building a difference between the people who belong to the one and the same society in fact.