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**SPIRITUAL COMPONENT AS A PEACEBUILDING FORCE –
EXAMPLE AND LEGACY OF LJILJANA GEHRECKE**

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Introduction

In periods of warfare and war operations, the voices of peace activists are often suppressed and silenced, or simply overheard amidst the clamour of war and cannonades (either from weapons, hatred, or war propaganda). As past experiences show, in the aftermath of war, there is a special vow of muteness, silence, or even belittling and a lack of knowledge, used in the attempt to dampen peacebuilding activities and their effects. This is further substantiated by the disappearance of many civic groups and civil society organisations from the Croatian civic scene in the first decade of the 21st century, and this particularly applies to peacebuilding contributions and endeavours of women. Earlier research has confirmed the hypotheses that society undervalues peacebuilding work (especially that of women) and that there is no collective memory of the peacebuilding work and its contributions. Similarly, peacebuilding and reconciliation endeavours, as well as the efforts to restore peace, remain the unused heritage for future generations which should be further analysed and made available, particularly because the prospective young activists and groups opting for peacebuilding work lack real role models. With the help of such role models, it would be easier for activists to gain new field-specific knowledge for implementing nonviolence and promoting peace, so that each new group would not have to learn everything from the start.¹ Therefore, the peacebuilding domain provides a vast potential for research, with the expected results including awareness about the importance of role models and the significance of symbolism, and about the importance of successful civic and personal peacebuilding initiatives for peace in general. This is particularly relevant for the transfer of knowledge to others and to future peacemakers. Ljiljana Gehrecke is an example of such a role model, hence this study of her work is a contribution to the validation of the peacebuilding scene at large and her own work in particular.

The hypothesis of this paper is that the incorporation of spiritual values (or a spiritual approach) into peacebuilding activities contributes to a better distribution and quality of its results, as well as to its sustainability within the community. Therefore, the effects of the peacebuilding work of activists who rely on the spiritual approach are remembered and imprinted in the work of next generations. Gehrecke's work is characterised by such an

¹ A study conducted in 2017 by Šura Dumanić, published in the book "Mogućnost mira – vukovarski poučak (The Possibility of Peace - Example of Vukovar)", ShuraPublikacije, Opatija 2020.

approach, as evident in the aftermath of the armed conflicts and war in Vukovar in the 1990s where she contributed to the restoration of peace and reconciliation within her local community by relying on humanistic, general educational, and spiritual (religious, Christian) values and principles.

In this paper, her work will be analysed from the aspect of synthesis of two components necessary for successful peacebuilding work: 1. (active) peace policy, and 2. spiritual transformation (generally referred to as “personal growth work”), i.e., the development of personal and community awareness.

This paper examines her mode of work, achieved results and her peacebuilding legacy within her local community. The validation of Ljiljana Gehrecke’s peacebuilding activism may contribute to spreading her mission and empowering peace activists and the entire community. In accomplishing this, the paper aims to demonstrate how her legacy is manifested and used today, which new insights and community work skills persist and which are forgotten over time, what should be rescued from oblivion, and how to implement these findings in the future.

Methodology

In reconstructing Ljiljana Gehrecke’s peacebuilding work, the following has been applied in this paper:

- Feminist approach
- Case study
- Qualitative research²
- Content analysis (of documents and archives of the European House Vukovar (EHVU) analysis of texts available on websites, speeches available on websites)
- In-depth interview

² “Qualitative human-ecological research always derives from the analysis of a single case in order to formulate hypotheses and general theories about the observed phenomenon. The basic procedure in a case study involves looking at all the major aspects of a particular phenomenon or situation, taking one of the following as the unit of analysis: an individual, family, enterprise, local community or culture. Each of these units is observed as a separate unit or entity which may or may not be correlated with other entities” (Halmi and Crnoja, 2003).

In order to shed some light on grassroots peacebuilding, other research and theoretical sources were used.

Who is Ljiljana Gehrecke?

“We not only believe in the possibility of a peaceful coexistence but also in the possibility of genuine togetherness in Vukovar.” (Ljiljana Gehrecke 10/12/2013).³

Ljiljana Gehrecke was born in the village of Vorkapić Selo. She finished elementary school and grammar school in Vukovar. She studied and worked in Belgrade, in Karlsruhe (Germany) and Vukovar. She graduated from the Faculty of Economics in 1960 (University of Belgrade), attained her Master’s degree in economic sciences (Faculty of Economics, University of Belgrade) in 1973, and her doctoral degree in technical sciences (Faculty of Organisational Sciences, University of Belgrade) in 1987. In 1990, she completed the International Professional Management Seminar (Megatrend Business School, Planex – Belgrade). For many years, she worked as a professor at various higher education institutions. In 1996, she returned with her family to the war-ravaged city of Vukovar, where she embarked on her long-term social activism, realising that the starting point of any kind of work was to restore people’s trust, especially their trust in each other and the possibility of their peaceful co-existence in the aftermath of war. Profoundly moved by the fate of the people and the city of Vukovar, upon her return Gehrecke initiated the founding of the European House Vukovar (EHVU), on the Europe Day celebrated on 9 May 2020. In a community that had suffered the worst hardships of war, and with nothing but opposition from the city government, it was no small feat to gather fifteen citizens of Vukovar not only of different ethnicity, but also of different political beliefs, religion, age, education, and profession – a group of people who seemed to have so little in common. However, they were all united in one goal – to help the city of Vukovar heal its war-inflicted wounds and become a European city of spiritual and economic prosperity.⁴

Her activism and efforts to bridge the divide in the city of Vukovar contributed to improving the quality of life of its inhabitants. Through various programmes and work with

³ <http://www.panon.eu/tekst/hr/43/Geh%20mem.pdf>. Accessed on 19/11/2020.

⁴ From the rationale for awarding her the peace prize “Krunoslav Šukić”, Osijek, December 2011.

individuals and groups within the community, she embodied positive energy and a true desire for peace, persistently advocating sustainable, socially sensitive and empowered togetherness.⁵ Her legacy includes the European House Vukovar, “Ekosana” programme, groups of young peacemakers, numerous successful projects, while the forums and conferences organised by the European House Vukovar became a place of numerous encounters, trainings and dialogues between the citizens of different beliefs and affiliations.

Through the EHVU, she implemented a series of projects related to the restoration of the community, addressing the issues of trauma and stress, overcoming suffering and hatred, fighting for peace, freedom, democracy and tolerance, always led by the same belief, which she often verbalised: *People are not evil, they are merely unhappy*. Gehrecke’s words demonstrate how profoundly she understood the essence of a human being, both as a result of her own spiritual growth and personal improvement and due to the constant expansion of her knowledge in the field of science and spirituality, which will be presented later on in the paper.

Such dedicated work, learning and self-development transformed Ljiljana Gehrecke into a person whose attributes included wisdom, expertise, and kindness, as often emphasised by her associates. Even if there were an easy answer to the question of how someone acquires expertise, there is most certainly no easy answer to the question - how does someone become wise? Or how does someone become good? Undoubtedly, Ljiljana Gehrecke primarily

⁵ She received many awards and recognitions for her work:

2002 - **“Europski krug”** prize awarded by the European Movement Croatia – Within the celebration of the Europe Day in 2002, the president of the European House Vukovar Ljiljana Gehrecke, PhD, received an award for her achievements in the domain of civil rights protection and her outstanding contribution to the affirmation of European values in Croatia and the Croatian diaspora in the domain of civil rights.

2009 - **Award from the German Embassy**, recognition for outstanding personal contribution to the strengthening and deepening of Croatian and German relations.

2011 - **Prize and recognition for promoting peacebuilding**, non-violence and human rights “Krunoslav Sukić”, awarded by the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights in Osijek.

2013 - **Prize for volunteering endeavours**, Volonterski centar Osijek (Volunteering Centre – VCOS) awarded the volunteering prizes under the slogan “Making the invisible visible”.

25 June 2015 - President of the FR Germany, Joachim Gauck, awarded her with a decoration – **Cross of Merits on a Riband of the Order of Merit** – “for her outstanding contribution to the people and the country”.

2016 - **“Diana Obexer Budisavljević” prize** (Serbian National Council – SNV Zagreb) for humanity and integrity was posthumously awarded to Prof. Ljiljana Gehrecke, the honorary president and founder of the European House Vukovar, who had carried out numerous projects related to the restoration of community, addressing the issues of trauma and stress, overcoming suffering and hatred. The award was received on her behalf by her son Aleksandar.

2016 - **Municipality of Borovo** posthumously awarded a plaque to Prof. Ljiljana Gehrecke, PhD for her outstanding contribution to overcoming the problems of peaceful reintegration, advancing interpersonal relations and respecting fundamental human rights, and for her work on raising awareness among the citizens about the need for medical self-care by organising and managing the workshop EKOSANA.

worked on her personal improvement, and then used the acquired knowledge to help others (introspection and interaction).

By changing ourselves, we help others (and perhaps only then), because no one is born an expert, or wise or kind. We acquire wisdom, acceptance and tolerance through education and self-development. This is a lesson we can all learn from the peacebuilding and humanitarian work of Ljiljana Gehrecke.

Even though the results of Gehrecke's peacebuilding work, to which she wholeheartedly dedicated two decades of her life, are still visible, well-founded and sustainable, she left only a small body of systematically written or published texts. The documentation comprises projects, correspondence, analyses and documents pertaining to organisational management. Her primary focus was obviously to work with people and for the people; she detected and immediately addressed the needs of the community by employing all her knowledge, energy and imagination. People were the main focus of her work – the citizens of Vukovar she worked with on a daily basis. In this sense, this documentation in a way testifies to and provides insight only into her main line of work, and the best way to understand this approach from the present-day perspective is through her own words that: *the houses are restored, but the people are not*.

When the peace of a community was at stake, she realised that it was necessary to develop awareness of the correlation of our personal, internal peace, and the peace conditioned by the external circumstances. There can be no external peace if we do not achieve internal peace. However, we should simultaneously work on both levels – personal and collective – because they are interdependent (external circumstances also affect our internal peace).⁶

⁶ In order to substantiate this claim, we opted for the definition of peace as provided by Hrvatska enciklopedija (Croatian Encyclopaedia), which encompasses both external and internal peace. "Peace, a condition of harmonious relations based on collaboration and integration amongst people, societal groups, nations and countries; safety bereft of disputes and conflicts which are resolved by violent means; the absence of war in international relations. As one of the utmost values and preconditions for the development and prosperity of humankind, peace was advocated by many religions, philosophers and secular political movements. In ancient civilisations (e.g., Mesopotamian or Egyptian), the concept of peace included external safety as a precondition for prosperity. Similar interpretations can be found in the *Old Testament*, which states that the world will experience peace only when Jehovah triumphs, because "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares", and "the wolf and the lamb shall graze together". A much more universal message can be found in the *New Testament*, where the commandment "love your enemies" implies peace between God and all people, regardless of their affiliation or beliefs. In the modern age, the concept of peace has moved away from its eschatological meaning and refers mostly to political and societal relations. Among the numerous thinkers who advocated the idea of permanent peace among the nations, we should mention H. Grotius and his work *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625), in which he viewed war as a violation of the natural law, and in the 18th century, W. Penn, an English Quaker, and philosophers J.J. Rousseau and I. Kant, who advocated the formation of a world federation of states in his essay

Gehrecke's activities and projects are based on these principles, and all aspects of the community, which mutually support and complement each other, are intertwined within them. She turned her ideas into action by actively listening to the real problems of people in her local community and by studying various sources (scientific, religious or alternative sources) on topics ranging from ecology, global crisis (and crisis management) to initiatives related to education, employment of the youth etc. She generated a considerable body of correspondence with numerous authorities in the field of science, spirituality, religion, literature, medicine and health care, pedagogy, organisational management, and other disciplines. She incorporated all the acquired knowledge and sources into her work, showing a fundamental understanding of the humankind and the society.

She officially started her work by designing the "Ekosana" programme, which dealt with the recovery and healing of individuals, and continued to expand her activism and programmes onto other areas by gaining insight into the main problems of the city and its inhabitants. Based on her insights into the needs of the community and building on the analysis of various sources and the experiences of other nations (especially post-war Germany), she designed programmes and projects, organised civic groups and supported associations from various domains ranging from health care to peacebuilding initiatives (European House Vukovar, "Ekosana" and other activities and initiatives). She particularly worked on restoring the religious dialogue between three different religions or denominations co-existing in Vukovar and the Vukovar-Srijem County – the Orthodox, Catholic and Islamic – by organising regular meetings and presentations by local religious leaders.

A concise and articulate text about the biography and work of Ljiljana Gehrecke can be found on the website of the Panon organisation, of which she was a member.⁷

Projects and activities

Ljiljana Gehrecke channelled her efforts to improve the lives of the people of Vukovar through a series of projects and activities that can be subsumed under a common denominator

Perpetual Peace (1795)." *Hrvatska enciklopedija, online edition.* Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography, 2020. Accessed on 21/11/2020. <<http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=41105>>.
⁷<http://www.panon.eu/tekst/hr/43/Geh%20mem.pdf>. Accessed on 19/11/2020.

- integral and holistic approach. The projects and activities organised and led by Ljiljana Gehrecke in this manner are listed below.

The first activities of the *European House Vukovar* (EHVU) included organised group sessions for healing and recovery and medical self-care, within which the participants enhanced their personal defence mechanisms, developed their ability to self-heal and gained a more profound understanding of reality by learning, relaxing, working on their emotions and engaging in physical and mental exercises. Experience has shown that this kind of work helps overcome war traumas and unpleasant emotions (especially anxiety, fear and hatred) and restore personal balance and self-esteem, as well as people's trust in peaceful and productive co-existence within the community. Motivated by the results of Ljiljana Gehrecke's activism, the activists of EHVU continue to organise numerous activities aimed at promoting dialogue, meetings, joint activities and lectures, projects for the development of intense and sustainable operative economic activities within the region, carrying forward her work in the field of informing and educating wide circles of the population, as well as other activities. Forums organised by the European House Vukovar, as well as the conference based on these forums which is organised every year mid-January in Vukovar and focuses on the issue of Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region, have left an indelible mark in the community.

In relation to the topics mentioned above, Ljiljana Gehrecke left a valuable body of documentation, projects, correspondence, literature, professional papers, and other argumentative works. All these projects can be further developed and implemented in present-day circumstances, because they are based on universal principles, which shall be further addressed later on in the analysis.

“Ekosana”, as the name suggests, is a project and a group focused on the healing and recovery of both individuals and the community at large. Gehrecke warned us about the *invisible consequences of war*, which, in her opinion, were *much more horrific, painful, complex, persistent, and long-term*. Through her long-lasting programme “Ekosana”, she managed to help many people face their traumas and find the internal strength for the future by processing negative emotions.

*“Everybody who knew Ljiljana was graced by her wisdom, expertise and kindness that will be our eternal inspiration in our future personal and socially engaged work.”*⁸

Ljiljana Gehrecke organised ecumenical meetings and interreligious dialogues in Vukovar, as she profoundly understood these different religions and the sensitive nature of their interrelation in the post-war period. EHVU manages these projects independently or in collaboration with national or international non-governmental organisations and the local self-government. This is, basically, the essence of the reports on the activities of the European House Vukovar. However, if we delve deeper into the core of their work, we will gain a rather complex and detailed insight: in her theses prepared for the round table titled “Kršćanske vrijednosti kao temelj obnove zajedništva” (Christian values as a foundation for restoring togetherness), Gehrecke wrote about two dimensions of a person - physical (striving for material possessions) and spiritual (striving for spiritual fulfilment): *“The more you distance yourself from God, the more you get attached to material things”*, and she concluded: *“Alienation generates a feeling of ever-growing fear...This is how your life loses all meaning”*.⁹

We will address the importance of her text later in the paper.

Forums and conferences founded by Ljiljana Gehrecke are intended for community work. One such conference was held every year in June, and for the three past years in September. It articulated the most significant subjects for establishing dialogue within the community by granting space to different approaches and experts (both female and male). This is a continuation of the conference held in 2006 titled *Vukovarska konferencija* (The Conference of Vukovar), which was resumed as a cycle of conferences with the main aim to establish dialogue between the citizens of Vukovar and the region. Wishing to make the work of the first president of EHVU Prof. Ljiljana Gehrecke, PhD, permanently remembered by the wider public, at the conference within the cycle in 2018, the EHVU started an initiative with their long-term partner, the German Friedrich Ebert Fund, to establish an institute for

⁸ Katarina Kruhonja in her speech on the occasion of awarding the peace prize “Krunoslav Sukić” to Ljiljana Gehrecke, Osijek, December 2011; Source: krunoslav-sukic.centar-za-mir.hr/2011_Materijali. Accessed on 19/11/2020.

⁹ Two sources support this statement: 1. The official note from the 7th meeting of the representatives of religious communities active in the Vukovar area (note made by Ljiljana Gehrecke), in Vukovar 26/10/2006 – EHVU archives; 2. Round Table “Kršćanske vrijednosti kao temelj obnove zajedništva” (Christian values as a foundation for restoring togetherness) (programme brochure – unsigned), EHVU archives. Source: <http://www.edvu.org/spip/spip.php?article54Vukovar> 16/3/2009. Accessed on 21/11/2020.

peacebuilding education and the culture of dialogue. This was another way of continuing the work and mission of Ljiljana Gehrecke.

Lectures and meetings represent an important element of community work. Gehrecke personally held numerous lectures for the citizens of Vukovar, and she frequently invited various experts in the field of medicine, ecology, psychology, literature, and other relevant fields to speak and communicate with the citizens, with the aim of raising awareness and broadening horizons, which was essential for the restoration of the community and for peaceful co-existence. Some of the speakers she invited were Živorad Kovačević, the former mayor of Belgrade and the president of the European Movement Serbia, who held a lecture in in the crowded Pastoral Centre in Vukovar, the writer Vesna Krmpotić, and many others.¹⁰

Her projects and activities are the result of research, analysis and profound understanding of the circumstances and the needs of the local people of Vukovar. Hence, each of her projects was integrally designed to fit with the overall activities of peacebuilding endeavours.

The holistic approach¹¹ mentioned is reflected in Ljiljana Gehrecke's work in at least three aspects:

¹⁰ Katarina Kruhonja in her speech on the occasion of awarding the peace prize "Krunoslav Sukić" to Ljiljana Gehrecke, Osijek, December 2011; Source: krunoslav-sukic.centar-za-mir.hr/2011_Materijali.

¹¹ "Holism (from the Greek word *ὅλος*: whole, complete, entire). In sociology, the principle according to which societal phenomena are observed as a reality which precedes the actions of individuals and determines them. Societal norms and values, institutions, organisations, social stratification, social movements and other forms of united action are not a sum of individual interests and actions, but a separate and comprehensive unit whose parts are closely connected and interdependent. Social theoreticians of various orientations advocate Holism as a valid approach: A. Comte and the theory of social order, K. Marx and the theory of class determinism, H. Spencer and the theory of society as an organism, É. Durkheim and the theory of social solidarity, T. Parsons and the theory of social systems, N. Elias and the figuration theory. They share a common understanding that the values of modern individualism and competition reflect the demands of the industrial society, in the same way the collectivism and collaboration reflect the demands of the pre-industrial or agricultural society. In both cases, people primarily act in favour of sustaining a specific type of society or societal relations, and secondly in favour of their own interests. As a result, Holism is not only a methodological but also a theoretical and ethical principle in social sciences. Today, it is mostly applied in social and deep ecology as a postulate about the uniqueness and universal balance of the natural and social world, hence the ideas and practices jeopardising the holistic principle of universal balance are critically evaluated from that aspect." *Hrvatska enciklopedija, online edition*. Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography, 2020<<http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=25947>>. Accessed on 19/11/2020.

- Gehrecke started her work at the European House Vukovar by organising workshops and interviewing citizens of Vukovar as victims of war in order to help them overcome their traumas and recover from them. Soon, she noticed the connection between the individual and the community, so she expanded her activities and programmes to include community work (conferences, ecumenical meetings, and other activities) and defined the self-care and recovery programme through the “Ekosana” project.

- The second aspect of her work refers to the fundamental concept underlying all programmes and projects – healing and recovery of individuals and the community, restoration of the community and of peaceful co-existence of different individuals and groups within the community.

- The third aspect of her work refers to the synthesis of knowledge she acquired and later implemented: scientific (especially in the field of communications and psychology), spiritual (from Christianity), including the techniques originating from the Far East (Reiki, Feng-Shui, meditation), but most of all the perception of a person as a complex physical, spiritual, and social (energetic) being.

Hence, in her work “Ekosana – priručnik za pomoć žrtvama rata” (Eng. Ekosana – a Guide for Helping the Victims of War), she initially reflected on war, and then continued with 200 pages of lessons about the health of the “body and mind”, concluding with the following remark:

“Nothing is permanently given, as everything is susceptible to change. Therefore, we must constantly keep track of the developments in the field of science and other segments of life. We stop growing the moment we become attached exclusively to one operative method or technique, relinquishing all other. We should always bear in mind that an average human at the current stage of development is unable to grasp the exceptional complexity of reality, hence he/she is destined for life-long learning...”¹²

This is a completely innovative approach to peacebuilding that relies on value scales in working with people and for the people (and the community). It remains as an important part

¹² Ljiljana Gehrecke, “Ekosana – priručnik za pomoć žrtvama rata” (Eng. “Ekosana” – a Guide for Helping the Victims of War) - unpublished; EHVU archives.

of Gehrecke's heritage and a method to be applied in the future. Since Ljiljana Gehrecke wrote down the principles of her work in the guide and many other bodies of writing and project documentation, we are able to reconstruct the methodology of her work for future use.

The essence of her approach revolves around the development of a person (and the community) by raising awareness and gaining insight. She tried to pass on the approach she applied herself to others. Therefore, the focus of her work is not politics or a political agenda but the dissemination of spirituality and self-development, which she referred to as self-responsibility or a self-care method. This method leads to a healthy life and, subsequently, to a functional and a relatively harmonious community. Politics and political concepts play no role here, other than within the holistic approach concerned, in cases where it is necessary for them to be included (e.g., through conferences and public forums). This process takes place at the individual, group and collective level.

Unfortunately, not all stakeholders within the social community understood the methods that Gehrecke used, so she received the least amount of recognition from the institutions in the city of Vukovar. Similarly, her work was not recognised by national institutions in Croatia, either, and her peacebuilding activism was not well-received by everyone, as confirmed by the statement cited below:

“Even the priest of the St. Philip and Jacob parish from Vukovar, friar Ivica Jagodić (born in 1967), spoke negatively to me about non-governmental or minority organisations. As he pointed out: - To be honest, I don't even know anything about these minority organisations. No one has seen them or heard from them. But they are very crafty when it comes to procuring financial funds. I think that their main goal is to get some money out of it”. Friar Jagodić was particularly displeased with the European House, one of the leading organisations in Vukovar, and their honorary president and founder Ljiljana Gehrecke.”¹³

Principles of Ljiljana Gehrecke's activism

Gehrecke's activism is based on an approach that is primarily centred around the human, i.e., her own genuine humaneness: people are not evil, they are merely unhappy. She

¹³ Darko Hudelist: Vukovar, grad velikog straha (Vukovar, the city of great fear), Globus 15/11/2013; the text is available on the following link: <http://www.darkohudelist.eu/det.php?id=8>; Accessed on 17/11/2020.

deems every person, every citizen of Vukovar, as a friend. She exhibits a genuine understanding for the feelings of fear and hatred as consequences of warfare. She seeks to help people overcome fear and hatred through workshops aimed at healing war-inflicted traumas and providing medical self-care advice and information, helping people to see the perspective of the “opposing side” and evaluate their own role in the conflict. Thus, Gehrecke opens the door to reconciliation in a city whose spiritual and emotional wounds have yet to heal completely, where national and religious barriers have not been overcome, and she does so even in situations which seem unresolvable. While she devotedly and persistently contributes to this ray of hope, she acts in a modest and humble way.

In line with her holistic approach, it could be concluded that she ultimately perceived war as a disease - i.e., a consequence of poor communication (propaganda, stereotypes, especially those about enemies, archetypal imagery) and seclusion into one’s own interpretative and sensory world, and the consequential decrease in levels of tolerance. She spoke on this subject at a lecture held in Vukovar in 2008 under the title “Tolerancija kao temelj zajedništva” (Tolerance as a foundation for togetherness). The hypotheses and insights presented here are based on the lecture in question and help its interpretation within the scope of this paper.¹⁴

In her presentation, Gehrecke referred to the community as an essential necessity of all human beings. According to her, war is a disorder with certain causes and repercussions, which is manifested on three levels: the level of communication, the interpretative level and the level of tolerance.

The arguments she puts forward range from scientific and professional (medical) to religious (mostly Christian), as well as those based on other concepts of spirituality.

These three aspects of human life within a community are manifested and intertwined across all activities, projects and programmes conducted by Ljiljana Gehrecke in Vukovar.

By understanding the essence of human beings, and all the ways in which our health, i.e., our balance and vital energy can be disturbed, Gehrecke designed projects and organised workshops leading to the restoration of balance, health, and peace. Even though they seem to be a product of her intuitiveness, this is not the case. Her activities result

¹⁴ Ljiljana Gehrecke: “Tolerancija kao temelj zajedništva” (Tolerance as a foundation for togetherness), text of the lecture, Vukovar 2008, EHVU archives.

from her profound empathy, deep-seated spirituality and thoroughly acquired body of knowledge, and from the basic understanding of human beings and the community. Thus, as she argued – *every human being is entitled to his/her own community, as they are inseparable entities*. Within the presentation on “Tolerance as a foundation for togetherness” referred to above, Gehrecke said:

“And particularly this need for togetherness - during the war, in addition to other disintegrative factors - led to the dissolution of the old Vukovar community and the establishment of smaller monolithic communities where people felt safe because they were among “their kind”. In the circumstances of warfare and its immediate aftermath, this was not only understandable but also quite justifiable. But life goes on. The laws of growth and development require larger spaces and togetherness within wider frameworks... Therefore, the disintegration of the old community... became the main obstacle for the further development of the City”.

She continued: *“In the circumstances of expansive development of globalisation, a small community can no longer satisfy the basic human need for safety...”*¹⁵

As she designed numerous projects based on these foundations, only one from each domain will be presented for the purposes of this paper.

Under **Communication**, we primarily refer to the establishment of a dialogue and discussion (which are part of the political, professional, and scientific realm). She designed a series of programmes in this domain, ranging from individual work, workshops, meetings to conferences. However, those who follow her work seem to agree that the conference titled “Mirna reintegracija hrvatskog Podunavlja” (Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region) deserves to be emphasised as the pinnacle of her efforts in this direction.

When speaking at the Pastoral Centre in Vukovar in 2000, in a lecture under the title “Vukovare, oprosti!” (Vukovar, please forgive us!), Živorad Kovačević, the former mayor of

¹⁵ A similar claim is made by the philosopher Ivan Illich in his book “Pravo na zajedništvo” (The Right to Togetherness), as well as other thinkers – a person is a social being (member of a community), Belgrade 1973.

Belgrade, expressed his regret and offered an apology to the war-ravaged city and its citizens. In this relation, Gehrecke regularly organised conferences focusing on the development of dialogue, e.g., “Koliko čujemo i razumijemo jedni druge?” (How much do we really hear and understand each other?), which served as platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue about the past and the joint future of all people of Vukovar and their city. She encouraged ecumenism by organising concerts of spiritual music with the participation of the choirs and individuals from different religious communities of Vukovar. Ljiljana Gehrecke, together with the participants of the meetings she organised along with her associates from EHVU, sent clear messages of peace, non-violence, and righteousness.

Interpretation in this context implies working on one’s personal growth, on understanding of oneself and the world around us. “Ekosana” is a programme and a group that is still active today, five years after the death of Ljiljana Gehrecke. The programme, which includes practical exercises, enables a person to expand their own body of knowledge, to overcome personal traumas and escape the narrow-minded perspective in order to gain a better understanding of others and the world around them.

Tolerance is exemplified by ecumenical meetings initiated by Gehrecke which are of substantial significance for the community disrupted by the war. In one of the programmes that she designed and conducted, there is a written agenda – a series of meetings for organising inter-religious encounters, a concert of spiritual music (including the performance of choirs from all religious communities), and thematic lectures: 1. Fundamental Christian values as a foundation for a more humane life in Vukovar, 2. Hatred and forgiveness, 3. Platform for perpetual peace in Vukovar, 4. Reconciliation. Embracing your fellow humans. She also organised lectures by priests from all religious communities, working towards a better understanding of all sides, as well as numerous ecumenical meetings and round tables covering current topics.¹⁶

All aspects mentioned above have a common underlying intention - to raise awareness of the people, as she confirmed in her lecture “Križa kao priprema za skok na višu razinu postojanja” (Crisis as a preparation for the leap onto a higher level of being) (2011):

¹⁶ See, e.g., Reconciliation. Embracing your fellow humans <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gxOU-5HwAI-> Accessed on 19/11/2020.

“The transition into a new era of civilisation ahead of us cannot be achieved by minor remedies of the previous way of life because it requires a structural change of the foundations on which our industrial civilisation lies. Such structural changes can only be made by those who have reached a certain level of awareness.”¹⁷

Values

What do we believe in? What is our guiding force in life and our life-related decisions, how do we make decisions, what do we strive for? We can get certain answers only by analysing the work (and actions) of a single person. It is quite easy to sign a peace petition against war. However, when a person dedicates their entire life, life-long learning and improvement, i.e., their life path, to peacebuilding, it shows that they have attained peace as the ultimate value imbued with a profound faith and hope which serves as a foundation for their life, work and activism. As Gehrecke reveals, peace is both a human and a divine value - peace, which makes the heart of a community, is the ultimate goal worth fighting one's way to, through the ruins of a war-ravaged city and the wounded souls of its citizens. When speaking about her own activism, she said: *“Everything good that I have done in my life so far is actually God's work...”*¹⁸

These are the values that she manifests in her work and the values that she tries to pass on and instil into others: empathy, compassion, mercy, love, tolerance, acceptance, trust, peaceful co-existence. In a project she started in 2005 under the title “Europski horizonti” (European Horizons), which gathered ten organisations from eastern Slavonija, she especially emphasised that values represent man's personal fundamental beliefs. Within this project, she expanded the system of values to include civic values and European values focusing on human and civil rights.

The path that leads to the attainment of these values and their implementation in a person's life and the community is a process of developing awareness.

¹⁷ Lecture “Križa kao priprema za skok na višu razinu postojanja (Crisis as a preparation for the leap onto the higher level of being)”, EHVU archives.

¹⁸ Ljiljana Gehrecke, a very nice lady from Vukovar, whose heart and soul are built into her peacebuilding mission, once said: “Everything good that I have done in my life so far is actually God's work. I continually pray for him to entrust me with the most challenging tasks and I am incredibly grateful because I really feel that the Lord answers my prayers. Every one of us who is entrusted with any kind of task by God is a very lucky person”. Vladimir Pšenko (The Church of Christ in Croatia): <http://siont.net/wap/mag/go.php?pg=http://siont.net/magazin/arh/090/04.php>; Accessed on 17/11/2020.

In this part, we will refer to Gehrecke's work on promoting and implementing spiritual (Christian) values mentioned above. In fact, alienation and the distancing from God (resulting in the sensation of fear, loneliness and loss of life's meaning) and becoming addicted to material possessions can be overcome and conquered only by developing personal awareness (as a scientific, secular and spiritual teaching); the awareness that all things in life are interconnected; the awareness that by harming others we ultimately harm ourselves; the awareness that peace and love are the fundamental postulates of Christianity. Ljiljana Gehrecke continuously worked on such development of awareness and incorporated it in her peacebuilding activism.¹⁹

There is a clearly visible pattern: when Gehrecke identifies a problem and designs the programme, she uses rational, scientific and professional methods and findings, and when she tries to solve the problem, she implements spiritual findings about humans, society and the world rooted in the faith in Goodness.²⁰

¹⁹ Gehrecke emphasised the key significance of the development of awareness upon which she based her faith in progress in a statement after Vesna Krmpotić's lecture in Vukovar in March 2012; on that occasion, she addressed her fellow citizens: "On the one end, there is a fragmented and deeply divided world, and, on the other end, there is a vision of unity, life in harmony... A road from one end to the other leads through the development of awareness. At this point, we are merely aware of our small community or our immediate family... At a higher level of awareness, we tend to include more people into our life, and we don't do it just nominally but we genuinely start liking them. As Vesna put it nicely, if you truly love your mother, then you love all mothers, because you see fragments of your mother in every woman. But if you are at a low level of awareness, you are simply incapable of that. That is why we need to keep developing awareness. As history shows, our awareness inevitably develops, albeit non-linearly as we encounter personal crises and problems, yet we always manage to find our way back to the higher level of awareness.

A similar process can be found in religion, as Prof. Ivančić said: The more you distance yourself from God, or as Vesna said – your divine essence – the greater sense of fear you experience. It is only when we become one with God, or our own self, that we can truly feel His divine presence, and all our fears disappear as the love in our hearts grows. The more you distance yourself from God, the more frightened you become because of this loneliness, and, as a result, you will first start closing yourself within the confines of the nation, and then the circle will only get smaller and smaller... and that is how people develop the gravest forms of diseases."

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9dCRrWOHjY>; Accessed on 21/11/2020.

²⁰ Fragmentation referred to by Gehrecke at this convention, which should be overcome by developing awareness and connecting with God (oneself and others), is found in Judith Butler's rejection of individualism in her most recent book "The Force of Non-Violence". She rejects the conceptual foundations of the fictional individualist paradigm: Hobbs's myth that we come into the world as autonomous, independent, and selfish individuals with all entailing effects and consequences that eventually lead to conflict and violence. According to Butler, as long as we exist as isolated individuals, non-violence could only be an act – contractual or passive – but never a normalised social condition.

Judith Butler: *The Force of Non-Violence*, Verso, NY/London 2020.

Source: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/04/19/book-review-the-force-of-non-violence-by-judith-butler/>; Accessed on 21/11/2020.

The following words of Ljiljana Gehrecke, as she received the honour awarded to her by the President of the FR Germany, deeply reflect her professional calling and the essence of her work:

“I want everyone here to take with them a fragment of this medal as a spark, and I wish for that spark to ignite the light of courage and love in your hearts. Let this light then create an ever-growing flame that will burn all suffering and turn our little community into a unique, harmonious, and efficient entity.”

And, as a final note, here is her message from three months before she passed away:

“The majority of Croats in Vukovar still believe that I advocate the interests of the Serbian national minority and that I benefit their interests, while, at the same time, the Serbs in Vukovar claim that I advocate the interests of the Croatian national majority. None of that is true. I do not see Croats or Serbs in Vukovar, or members of different political affiliations or national minorities. All I see in Vukovar are people. And not for who they are right now, but who they are deep down in their core, created in the image of their Creator. From my perspective, they are all perfect. (...) War sufferings have suppressed the true nature of people and their kindness, philanthropy, humaneness... These values have been replaced by destructive emotions such as animosity, fear, hatred. I hereby plead with all people of Vukovar to muster all their strength and take a leap of faith to rebuild mutual trust, compassion and love so that we can all create a solidary, harmonious, and efficient community together. (25/6/2015) <http://www.panon.eu/tekst/hr/43/Geh%20mem.pdf>

It is, therefore, no surprise that some journalists referred to Gehrecke as a Croatian Gandhi:

“Ljiljana Gehrecke had many similar traits to Gandhi; her mere presence personified non-violence: she was frail as porcelain, yet she had this rare Gandhi-like strength which was, despite her physical frailty, substantially compensated by her fierce character that superseded any raw physical strength. Graceful in her communication, she carefully enunciated every single syllable taking full accountability for her words, which demonstrated her ability to maintain profound and perpetual concentration and revealed her focused, dedicated and well-intended mind. She was as rare as they get, and she decided to devote her

life to the impossible – to contradict the glorification of suffering in Vukovar and take the only possible route that she considered reasonable: to help people rebuild their own self and conquer their own suffering... War traumas are not medals of honour, they are an undeserved punishment. They are not an award but a burden. They are not a merit but a curse. They should not be glorified but cured. This is what we learned from the unacknowledged peacemaker Ljiljana Gehrecke, the president of the European House Vukovar, who died on 7 October, with her death mentioned only by her closest associates and a few journalists.”²¹

Conclusion

The entire work of Ljiljana Gehrecke (as well as that of Krunoslav Sukić²² and other peacemakers) belongs to the domain referred to as “the philosophy of peace activism”²³, which was, hopefully, properly outlined in this paper based on the insight into the work and endeavours of this peacemaker from Vukovar. Faith was, undoubtedly, the main guiding force throughout her entire life calling. However, faith not in the sense of a particular institution, a set of rules, but a profound faith in Goodness as the ultimate justice.²⁴

²¹ Boris Pavelić, “Gandhi iz Vukovara” (Eng. Gandhi from Vukovar); Novi list, 15/10/2015.

²² Krunoslav Sukić, peace activist and one of the founders of the institution Centar za mir, nenasilje i ljudska prava (Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights), Osijek. He was born in Osijek on 15 June 1952. He finished elementary school and grammar school in Osijek. In 1976, he completed the studies of comparative philosophy in Zagreb. He was a man of vast encyclopaedic knowledge. He died in a car crash on 3 October 2008. In his memory and out of respect for his contributions to peacebuilding, Centar za mir i ljudska prava Osijek established the annual peace prize “Krunoslav Sukić”. Link <http://krunoslav-sukic.centar-za-mir.hr/> - Accessed on 17/11/2020.

²³ The philosophy of peace activism implies a “responsibility towards the community”, other people, and a holistic approach to life. It was founded by Albert Schweitzer, a theologian and philosopher, who was engaged in social and peace movements in 1950s and is remembered by his persistent promotion of a holistic understanding of the concept of “life” which serves as a basis for his specific ethical conception based on care and responsibility. Some of his best-known works include “A Declaration of Conscience” (1957) and a text “Peace or Atomic War?” (1958).

Ivana Zagorac: Albert Schweitzer - Filozof mira (A Philosopher of Peace), Znakovi vremena (1512-549116) 17(2014.), 63; 33-44.

Source <https://www.bib.irb.hr/707221>; Accessed on 21/11/2020.

²⁴ Sometimes this approach can be expressed through art, as evident from the poetry of Darija Žilić.

Faith

Its tongue is a tentacle with
a thousand senses. It can detect
even the slightest irregularity, a toxic substance
or a superfluous chemical.

We rely on it and its sense of justice:

it recognises the face of a hypocrite, the words of a passer-by,
the voice of a random passenger and the fraudulent smile of a housewife.

During summer evenings, behind closed windows,
it breathes heavily and measures time, extending

Her second guiding force was the awareness of the destructive power of violence and arms built by the modern society, and non-violence as the only tool more powerful than them. As Gehrecke said in her speech at the ceremony where she was awarded the “Krunoslav Sukić” prize:

“Today, not only in our country but in the entire world, there is no task more pressing than to build peace. The entire world is currently on the verge of an abyss, and it can be sent into a downward spiral by only a single reckless move of a person in power. The only thing that can save us from this imminent catastrophe is to abstain from any kind of violence and try to find a peaceful resolution for all our pending issues. As far as Vukovar is concerned, I won’t say that I merely hope, but rather that I am deeply convinced that the pain and suffering of the Vukovar people during and after the war will serve as a guiding force for their leap onto the higher level of awareness, which will enable a better understanding of the past and the construction of a healthy, efficient community in the future.”²⁵

In view of the above, the initial hypothesis of this research is evidently confirmed, which is further substantiated by the people who closely collaborated with Ljiljana Gehrecke.

“She implemented many projects through the European House Vukovar related to restoring the community, resolving the issues of trauma and stress, overcoming suffering and hatred, fighting for peace, freedom, democracy and tolerance. With her intellect, knowledge and personal qualities, and her profound desire for peace through various programmes and her work with individuals and communities, she insisted on sustainable, socially sensitive and empowered togetherness. Through years of her work, she passed on her positive energy to many people of Vukovar, especially her associates at the European House Vukovar. We are grateful for being given the opportunity to know her and work closely with her. She left an indelible mark in this community, and she will continue to be our eternal inspiration throughout our personal and professional work.”²⁶

from Saturday morning, and reveals a long lifeline...

Yet, we rely on it and its sense of justice and reconciliation.

Zagreb, 2015. <https://radiogornjigrad.wordpress.com/2015/07/23/darija-zilic-vjera/>; Accessed 17/11/2020.

²⁵ [http://krunoslav-sukic.centar-za-](http://krunoslav-sukic.centar-za-mir.hr/uploads/documents/2019_materijali/kultura_mira_broj_12_godina_18.pdf)

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²⁶ Katarina Kruhonja in her eulogy after the death of Ljiljana Gehrecke; Osijek 8/10/2015.

The life of Ljiljana Gehrecke is an example of how a woman, equipped with knowledge and a high level of awareness of the needs of the community and its people, managed to leave such a valuable legacy in the form of the European House Vukovar, programmes and groups such as “Ekosana”, the cycles of Vukovar conferences, but also a vast circle of people who followed her teaching – non-violence and peace, peaceful co-existence and collaboration within the community – and continued her work in the culture of peace and non-violence. The sources of her strength and inspiration were not overtly conspicuous, which is usually the case with people who operate from the perspective of ideology and dogmatic inspirations. By observing her, it was impossible to determine whether she was even a “believer”. That was the original inspiration behind this research. She applied the spiritual and moral principles, which she gained and patiently nurtured, in a simple way – in leading by example. She left an indelible mark in the modern history of the city of Vukovar and Croatia which may serve as a good basis for future research.

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