

„Traces of the Past at the Door of the Present“

Project presentation – an exhibition of objects from the Homeland War

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this guide about an exhibition "Traces of the Past at the Door of the Present" I will try to give you some new ideas on how students, based on things stored in their basements, attics or storage rooms and with the help of their families, can explain certain historical events in Yugoslavia, at the time of its breakup and creating of new, independent nation states.

"Traces of the Past at the Door of the Present" is an exhibition of objects from the Homeland War the students collected, archived and catalogued on their own. They also designed and implemented the whole exhibition at the Exhibition Hall of the National Museum in Zadar in the Prince's Palace from September 2013 to January 2014.

The students' task was very simple – to bring from home any object that their family, neighbours or acquaintances associate with the time of the war and write a story about it. In this way, many items found its place in the exhibition, from pots and pans for cooking beans, clothes, military equipment, letters from prison, school directories, lamps, parts of aircrafts, transistors, and diary entries to shrapnel shells, photographs and newspaper articles. Each of these items is just a part of countless human destinies that have, unfortunately, felt the horrors of war. Some of them are funny, some sad, tragic, but all of them are witnesses of the times that students are very interested in, but, as they say, nobody wants to talk about them.

You can ask students to bring specific things that are related to the topic you want to cover. You can, for example, explore the concept of migration of the population over a period of history in your city or of families of students in your school. A lot of families migrated for different reasons - from economic and political, to various sociological phenomena and so on. Based on the photos you can follow not only their migrations, but also a way of life, clothing style, what kind of music was popular and so on. All the obtained data can be compared with the world events of the time. The period after World War II until the breakup of Yugoslavia is quite turbulent and interesting. Therefore, through covering certain topics, you and your students will certainly find many interesting facts. The fact that they can talk about the entire period and get a lot of information from their families and neighbours, who were "the living witnesses of the time", contributes to their greater interest. We know that every historian finds such a source invaluable.

Through this project, students did not only learn to analyse historical sources and conduct interviews, but were also able to express themselves through photography and art.

I was inspired for this project by a book by Robert Stradling "Teaching 20th-Century European History" in which he describes a number of methods, but also the perspectives on what

teaching history should look like. It seems to me that in a race with an educational content overload and the reproduction of knowledge we are lost in learning the history of history. With this project, I wanted to teach students the skill of critical reflection on historical events, and to use multiple perspectives, so that students can notice the similarities and differences in the interpretation of historical events based on according to historical source and the witness of time.

Although questions about war in the region are categorized as controversial and sensitive issues in teaching history, they should, however, never be avoided. Unfortunately, students today still feel the effects of the war in their families, and that is why they should talk about them and find answers to the questions they are interested in. More than discovering "great historical truths", I found it more important that students: get answers to questions such as why certain family members behave in a certain way due to the PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder), finally speak with their families on about issues that have been avoided for years, see that history and historical facts and statistics are actually made up of real people with their emotions and life's struggles, and, in addition to historical questions find the answers to many self-imposed psychological and sociological issues.

Although the project itself started only with the collection of objects, ideas started to line up one after the other so that, in the end, the exhibition was supplemented according to students' wishes and ideas. The very items were donated by approximately 400 students, and the project was realized by about 30 students and the same number of exhibition guides. The fact that we made this project during our free time, at weekends and even during the school holidays, is also very interesting.

In this guide I will describe the project and the actual rooms the exhibition was located in, as well as present the main goals of the project, the road to/process of its implementation and the problems we faced. The exhibition opened on 22 January 2014 to mark the "Operation Maslenica '93".



Picture 1 An invitation to the exhibition

2 PREPARING AND CREATING A PROJECT

Before you start with the realization of the project it is necessary to put some things on the paper and prepare a "pitch" for working with students. Although we are all familiar with the stages of the projects, I will mention them here anyways so that you could follow the course of the realization of our exhibition more easily. In most literature, or from the practice itself, project-work teaching can be divided into several stages.

The main stage is to design a topic we want to cover. If you do not have your own ideas, you can always resort to the survey among students or even compile a survey together with pupils and conduct it at your environment. In that way you can find out what area of interest appeals to wider circle of people. For example, our students each year create a calendar for teachers. Every year, the idea for the calendar theme comes as a result of a survey carried out among different age groups in the area of Zadar.

Once you have a topic, it is not difficult to complete the second phase of project work and that is to set the objectives. The main goals of our project were:

- 1 Introduce and explain the course of the war in Zadar area
- 2 Teach students to catalogue, archive and collect materials and written historical sources
- 3 Educate students about techniques for conducting a successful interview
- 4 Help students practice and explore key historical contexts of the past and the present, as well as the concepts of change and continuity with the help of the basis of photographs and historical sources
- 5 Teach students that interpretation is an essential part of history as a science, especially when it comes to modern historiography
- 6 Explain processes of multiperspectivity and analysis of different views of the same event (newspaper article, witness statements, interpretations of politicians, military documents)

Through this project, students examined many documents and books from the Homeland War in order to be able to make panels for every room with the exhibited objects. It often happened that the story of an object had been associated with a newspaper article so they had to compare the statements of witnesses to what is written in the newspapers and mentioned in textbooks. Here I would like to mention a newspaper article about the fall of a village in the Zadar hinterland that mentions the father of one of the students, being one of the last survivors of the event.

Through cooperation with various institutions, from hospitals, the Red Cross, schools, kindergartens, museums and archives, students were able to get the idea that the war is not only what happens on the battlefield, that it does not involve only soldiers, but that it also affects all aspects of civilian life.

However, most importantly, whatever topic you choose, through project teaching it is very important to empower students to become independent, awaken their creativity and, enable them to use self-criticism to independently assess what has been achieved, develop

research skills and problem-solving abilities, but also warn them about the problems of creating stereotypes or generalizations, and indicate the existence of contradictions that need to be further explored. What is very important, especially when it comes to sensitive issues and conflicts in history, is that they will encounter a lot of information which contradict their perceptions or attitudes that they may have developed in their neighbourhood and while talking with their families.

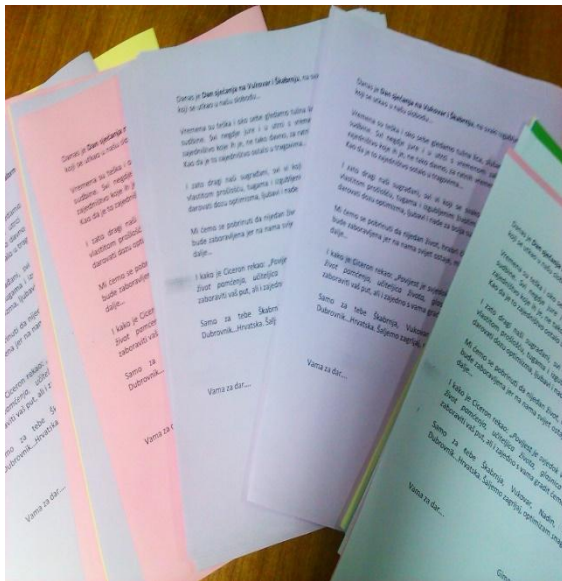
The next phases are the planning and preparation time, implementation of the project and reflections, that is, evaluation of all that you have done with students.

The exhibition was implemented from September 2013 to January 2014, and can be divided into several stages.

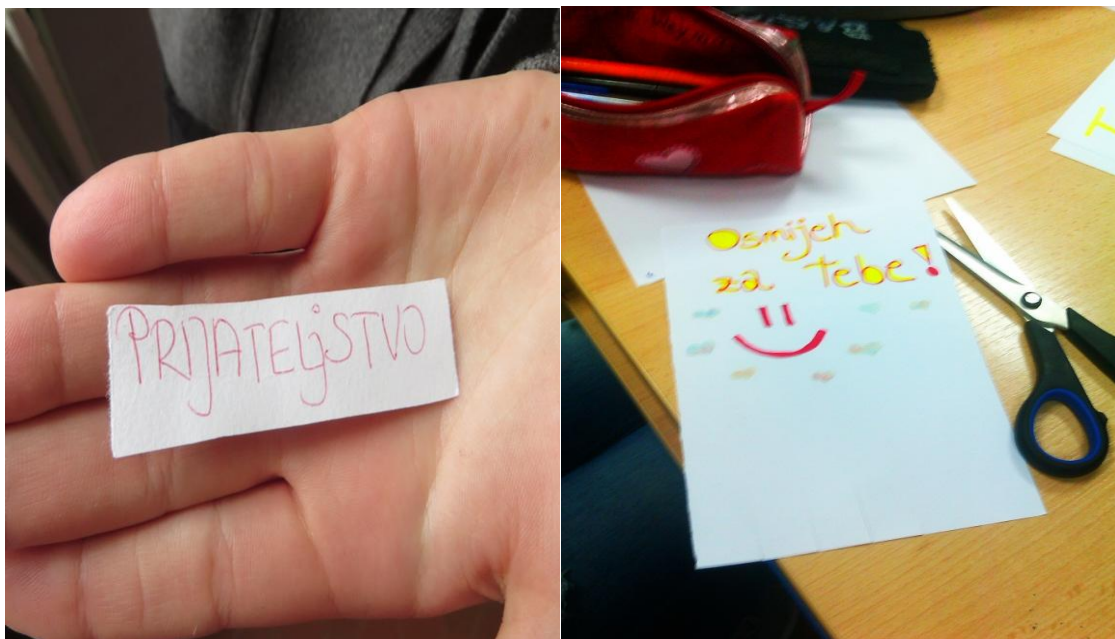
- 1 September - November 2013. Before collecting the items, students visited the State Archives in Zadar, where they were introduced to the ways of archiving, storing and cataloguing the various writings and methods of studying them. The students also had a training on "how to do an interview." After that came the collecting and archiving materials for the exhibition, followed by writing stories.
- 2 November - December 2013. The students were investigating the circumstances of the war in Zadar area and got acquainted with all aspects of civil and military life in this region.
- 3 January 2014. Setting up the exhibition and training for guides in the exhibition space.

During the project, students saw how troubled the adults actually were regarding all they had experienced in the 90ies. They decided to give them letters and messages of hope and optimism on Vukovar and Škabrnja Memorial Day. The letter stated, inter alia: "And as Cicero said: *"History is the witness of time, the light of truth, the life of memory, a teacher of life, voice of antique!"* We will not forget your way, and together with you we will build our own. Just for you, Škabrnja, Vukovar, Nadin, Osijek, Pakrac, Dubrovnik ... Croatia ... we send a hug, optimism, strength, hope...as a gift to you "

In addition to that, students collected money for poor families in Vukovar, a city that still has not recovered from the war times.



Picture 4 Letters students handed out to people on 18 November 2013



Pictures 5 and 6 Messages of hope and optimism for the people

As I have already pointed out, it is important for students to realize that the history is a continuous process. Historical events mustn't negatively affect the lives of the generations to come. Hatred, war and intolerance should never be the basis for new tomorrows.

3 ROLE OF A TEACHER IN THE PROJECT AND POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

The teacher has to be responsible as his/her role is very demanding. Nevertheless, he/she must not by any means be crucial for the realization of the set goals. The teacher should give students enough space to work independently, be available at any time to clarify doubts, but in no way should he/she impose his/her own opinion. While teaching the project work, it is important that the teacher is a part of the team, and that he/she transfers certain information to students. However, students themselves are supposed to reveal new insights, complement their own knowledge and raise additional research questions through research, individual and team work, and by analysing the different materials, and comparing them with previously acquired knowledge.

At the very beginning, in our particular project, I came across the disinterest of the parents. As I later found out, it was too painful for them to talk about war themes. Then I decided to write a letter to the parents in which I explained what their requirements are. Only after that the objects for the exhibition slowly started to arrive. Later on, the people themselves volunteered wishing to contribute to this exhibition.



Picture2 One of the first items brought to school: "This is a shirt that belonged to my uncle Mario, who died of the consequences of the war two years ago. It means a lot to me and my family because it reminds us of him. "

One of the first items that a student brought to school was this shirt. He said that his family said hello to me and that he was grateful because for the first time after many years he had received answers to questions that had bothered him, and which had never been discussed in the family. Although, in the beginning, the collecting of items was slow, I knew that the project was moving in the right direction. At the end, the exhibition had more than 400 items, that not including newspaper articles, photographs and works of art inspired by the verses of Siniša Glavašević, a war reporter from Vukovar.



Picture 3 Newspaper articles about the Homeland War

Students collected numerous newspaper articles published during the 90s. It was interesting to compare the data of different weekly magazines on the same event. What you can do is an exhibition of newspaper articles and newspapers from a certain period before the breakup of Yugoslavia. It could be completed by a series of interviews students would conduct over a period of time by questioning people who lived during that time. It will be interesting to get perspectives of political opponents, workers or intellectuals of the period as well as a child's view of life in 1989. Our students are now conducting a series of interviews for the "Trip of a lifetime" exhibition. The exhibition will comprise a number of interesting life stories of people belonging to different age groups and social classes that talk about their own life experiences and their views on historical events that have affected their lives.

4 THEMATIC AND VISUAL APPEARANCE OF THE EXHIBITION

When you are doing an exhibition, it is very important that its content and visual solutions are clear and accessible to visitors. We adapted our exhibition to the space given to us by courtesy of the National Museum; we thematically divided it into five rooms.

In the first room, the students made panels about the Homeland War in general. Things collected belonged to the civilian and military life of the population. Particularly interesting items were letters of prisoners from the military prison in Knin, which, at the time, was a part of the so-called Republic of Srpska Krajina, to their families in Zadar. It was also interesting to hear the story of a former student of our school who was born in Knin during its occupation, what were life in the former Krajina and moving to Zadar after the "Operation Storm '95" like. Two showcases displayed The Homeland War Memorial Medals and medals for participation in the liberation actions as well as insignia on the uniforms of the Croatian army. Particularly interesting is the part with the objects belonging to the civilian population that evoke memories of the war events as well as shell fragments. There was a story with each item. In the first room we had the "sole survivors"- items from the houses destroyed during the war horrors. The owners of the houses were of different nationalities.

Together with the students you can make an exhibition of objects that meant something to people over a certain period of time and compare them with the objects of today. For example, students can conduct a survey on the habits of people from the period of the former Yugoslavia- products, banks, workers' rights, and number of local factories and so on. Find objects, or at least try to visually present them and compare the objects and phenomena, rights and habits to the current ones. It should be something that is important to people. It only takes a little bit of imagination. With your help, students' research can take you a long way and show different findings.

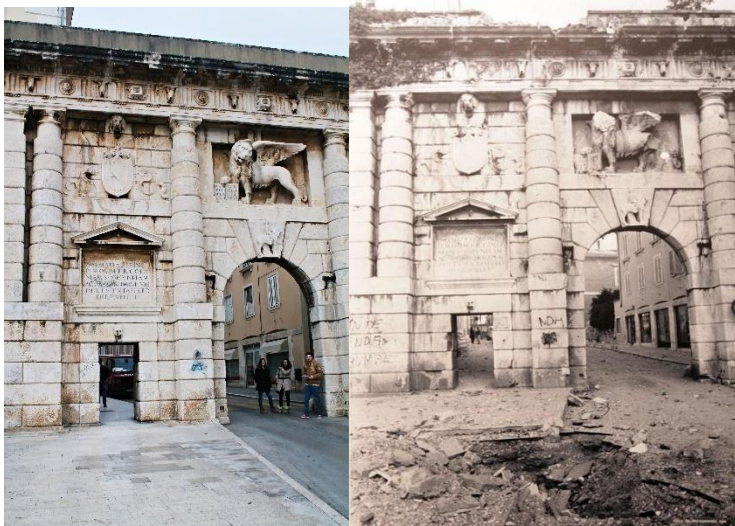


Picture 6 One of the stories in this room: These are fragments of an anti-personnel mine. My father was wounded by them. He was wounded 5 January 1991 in Zemunik. His friend who was with him had died, and my father was lucky to be only wounded. After being wounded, he was in a hospital in Zadar for a long time, and then on crutches. These fragments (shrapnel) were immediately removed in surgery. After a couple of years a piece of (one) shrapnel was removed from his hip. Two years ago, at the hospital in Zagreb he was given an artificial hip.

Object in the second room were dedicated to military life during the war, from military and police equipment, testimony from the diary about the atmosphere and events at the muster point Zadar during the "Operation Storm '95" while the panels showed a historical overview of everything that was going on in the Zadar area, the list of military units before, during and after "Operation Maslenica '93".

In the third room, the students used photographs as historical sources. On the walls of the bird cages there were parallel photos of Zadar during and after the war and photos from today's perspective. In addition, students used photographs to warn about unused buildings of the former military barracks in Zadar, but also about many other destroyed places that have not yet been rebuilt after the war. As an inspiration they also used postcards from the war that were sent around the world to draw attention to the horrors of war, and to the fact that numerous civilian buildings such as the Music School of Blagoje Bersa in Zadar were destroyed in war.

I was personally particularly interested in watching the students explore parts of the city and use the photographs to reveal the visual changes to the city over a certain period of time. Based on the photos, they revealed that some places (such as the place where, during the war, people came to get water from the tanks) have simply disappeared, some were replaced by newly built shopping malls and some remained in ruins. They have also learned the meaning of the word "returnees" and the likes. It is fascinating how far a simple photo can take us as a historical source. Therefore, I recommend the exhibition 'before/after' on the basis of photographs. Find photos of your area, give them to the students and let them do the research. Photos can be from different periods; students will take photographs of the place and in this way get a picture of historical change and continuity of their city.



Picture 8 A photograph of Zadar during and after the war



Picture 9 A photograph warning of disrepair and underutilization of former military facilities in Zadar

The theme of the penultimate room was war seen through children's eyes. It contained the works of art students, as well as the directory of the school year 1991/1992 - the most interesting witness of time for students. Studying it, the students were able to follow chronologically the strongest attacks on Zadar because then classes were interrupted. In addition to that, the higher absenteeism of students who migrated for their own safety to

nearby island was recorded. Together with the directory, the school house rules and instructions for evacuation explaining how to behave during a general threat or aerial attack, which way to take to the shelter, etc ... were exhibited.



Picture 10 War through children's eyes-The display cases contained children's works on the theme of peace and war from 1993, refugee letters. The most frequent object of the exhibition was the radio. It served the adults as an information source, while the children attended the radio school.

The last room was dedicated to all victims of war. In it, we put the pieces of devastating missiles, part of a plane which was used for shelling of the Pag Bridge and a large number of flowers that surrounded the space and symbolized war victims. Several thousand flowers were made by students and their families, but during the exhibition visitors brought their own flowers in memory of their loved ones too. They were all of different ages, professions, nationalities and points of view. This room was a memorial to all the beautiful moments that we remember our loved ones for and memories of them.



Picture 11 Part of the aircraft shot down during the shelling of the Pag Bridge and an article in the newspaper that tells about the incident. Students were able to compare the statements of witnesses about the incident with the news source.



Picture 12 A flower as a memento for all those who are gone because of the horrors of war. Different flowers represent different people that were killed— people of different age, gender, occupation, nationality, each with his/her own life story.

5. CONCLUSION

Talking to students about war is always difficult, especially if you yourself are a witness of that time. However, even though these topics are difficult, they should never be avoided because unresolved or unspoken questions and topics eventually resurface and, greater the silence, the road to answer is more difficult.

When I decided to do this project, I saw myself as a mediator between the witnesses and the students rather than an educator. My goal was that students use their own research work to follow the direction they are interested in and, indeed, that was the case. Some items received more interest, some less.

Usually when we talk about war, everyone is interested in military equipment, strategy, crucial things at the front, the decisions of generals and similar things. This project completely reassured us of that and took us to a completely different direction. Topics of interest were the daily life, how the families were affected during and after the war, human destinies regardless of the fact whether it was a civilian or a military person.

I would like to emphasise that while handling sensitive issues it is important to know how to say "I do not know" or "Let's try to explore and we may come up with an answer ourselves. To me, this is something new, too. "

Working on this project we have also encountered the facts which are certainly not pleasant to talk about, such as war crimes or concealment of unpleasant historical facts, but they certainly should not be ignored.

Through the project, students have said that they understand the term interpretation more clearly and that there can be many responses and views in respect to the same issues and events. Before I even gave them tasks to investigate events from different perspectives, I explained the notion of interpretation in a very simple way. I staged an event in the class and then I asked them to tell me what really happened. The stories weren't told in the same way, but even the event participants each had their version of the story. The same situation happened with a few stories from this project. A newspaper article, a politician and a witness of the time all had similar interpretation of events, but came to different conclusions, especially when their emotions were included.

There are places that still stand divided. Families of different nationalities who have survived the war whose children do not communicate look at each other over the imaginary line of separation. This is not good, nor can it be the basis for a healthy future for generations to come. Future generations cannot be responsible and carry the burden of guilt left as a heritage by their ancestors, and because of that, we need to face the history and talk about it. Let some photos, ordinary attic items, newspaper articles and memories of former times be a step forward to a better tomorrow. Let them open a number of questions, controversial issues and let the future generations build the foundations of their own, quality future without the horrors of war. There is no room for those who make accusations that stirring ghosts of the past leads to a forceful revival of the past.

Those responsible for the horrors of war should be held accountable by their names and surnames. Generations to come who are still preparing for the independent way to achieve life goals mustn't carry their burden.

For me, the most important thing is that students understand how history is not something that remains in the past. History is a continuous and chaotic process. It affects everyday life, while decisions we make affect the flow of time and change human destinies. War is the worst form of human hatred and affects all people, regardless of nationality, age, occupation, skin colour. Life, political and social decisions should be well thought over and, of course, one should leave a mark in the past as a legacy for generations to come. And those responsible for the horrors of war should be held accountable by their names and surnames. Generations to come who are still preparing for the independent way to achieve life goals mustn't carry their burden.