Special Media Review

Children's Images of Trauma: Terezín, Cambodia, Israel, El Salvador, West Bank and Gaza, South Africa, and Washington, DC.


A friend of mine, a German-minority Yugoslav woman born in the Serbian province of Vojvodina, spent 1944 to 1948 in Tito's concentration camps. Images from present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina have revived her own childhood memories, including some unexpected and dreamlike apparitions.

She recalls dusk at the far edge of the flat, frigid plain beyond the camp, where a row of hundreds of strange, exotic birds suddenly appeared and floated soundlessly toward her. Silhouetted against sky, they looked to the 9-year-old like magical storks, skinny-legged, elongated by towering birdcages they carried on their backs. A fellow survivor, an adult at that time, has verified the memory and explained that these actually were women prisoners returning from forced labor with bundles of firewood.

We can marvel at the capacity of children to transform horrible landscapes. We can wonder whether our selective attention to such extraordinary re-creations represents our own need as outsiders to find meaning in the meaningless, imagination in the unimaginable. We adults can look at the art products of children and philosophize, idealize, intellectualize, analyze, categorize, pathologize. Some of us even politicize. What remains fundamental, however, is the child's artistic representation when it is free of adult commentary.

A number of books present the art and writing of children who have lived through diverse catastrophes. Unlike clinical publications about post-traumatic art whose focus tends to be interpretive, the following collections claim no psychological authority. They merely present the images, thereby freeing us to respond directly to their emotion.

I Never Saw Another Butterfly is a classic in this genre. Newly expanded, it contains over 100 drawings and poems made by children at Terezín concentration camp in Czechoslovakia between 1942 and 1944. Many of the compositions were created during classes organized by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, another prisoner. On the basis of her analysis of the artwork, she formulated ideas about the children's current states of mind, and tried to use the drawing lessons for their psychological rehabilitation as well as art education.