

## Testimonies of the Nurses from Lipik of the Homeland War

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The story “Testimonies of the Nurses from Lipik of the Homeland War” was created according to archive photographs collected by war cameramen whose materials were used to write historical documentation for the town of Lipik. The aim was to authentically show the city’s tragedy, sufferings of civilians, the supernatural efforts of the defenders of Lipik, human destinies and all the other horrors only war can bring. The destruction and revival of the city with a great historical heritage was witnessed by nurses participating in those war events. Before the Homeland War, Lipik was a beautiful town known for its thermal water, health resort, hundred-year-old park, beautiful promenades, horses, dance halls, pools and everything that can help a healthy person feel healthier and the sick to get the care they need. In the early morning of a summer day an aerial bombing attack broke off all the beauty of life in Lipik. It was August the 19<sup>th</sup> 1991, 5 a.m. The children’s home, hospital, school, church, stables and civilian objects were all devastated by the falling grenades. How they felt, what they were thinking, what they were doing, how they organized and what was most difficult is told by the surviving nurses who bravely participated and aided defenders and people in the war. After the liberation of Lipik on December 6<sup>th</sup> 1991, the city returned to life bit by bit. The contribution of nurses will remain permanently recorded in the history of Lipik and the Republic of Croatia in connection with the organization of palliative care in the country and the Society of Nurses of the Homeland War of the Croatian Association of the Croatian Association of Nurses.

Lipik has always been a rehabilitation facility known for the healing capabilities of the thermo-mineral water, the Lipican horses and other beauties since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and today is a Special hospital for medical rehabilitation - The Hot Springs of Lipik.

The Homeland war began on August 19<sup>th</sup> 1991 with the shell attack on the city of Lipik and the city of Pakrac. The first assignment was to evacuate the sick from the hospital to other facilities that were not subjected to direct attacks. Until the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 1991 all the patients have been evacuated from the hospital and taken to Kutina and the Krapina Hot Springs. Additional to patients, wounded civilians and refugees began arriving who also needed medical assistance. The nurses from Lipik took care of approximately 150 wounded from the invaded areas where they were stationed. In the war, on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1991, Nurse Ivan Miko Klaić was killed while going to place a catheter to a patient in his home. Nurse Ivana Komberec from Pakrac was wounded while going to work. On November 28<sup>th</sup> 1991, Lipik was almost entirely occupied, and on St. Nicholas Day, 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1991 it has been liberated again.

At the beginning of the following year, precisely on 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1992, a war ambulance clinic has been established in the hospital in Lipik, having a doctor, nurses and an emergency vehicle driver that cared for the wounded, for the civilians and dislocated people that had been left in Lipik. Little by little, life began to return to Lipik and rebuilding of the city began. The hospital in Lipik became the center for all care: accommodation, food, hygiene... safety. I should mention Mirjana Cahun, as an example, a nurse who has spent most of her time in Lipik and organized the large number of activities in the area for nurses and more. Medical nurses, except from being brave soldiers and partakers in the care for the wounded and civilians were also an important connection to many in the difficult moments and times of aggression, and support in times after the liberation, trying to minimize the consequences of war and organize again the Special Hospital for Medical Rehabilitation in Lipik and bring back life into the city of Lipik.

The word “WAR” for whoever experienced one has a different meaning than for those who had the luxury of never participating in it. Twenty-first Century around the World has moments and places that have been marked by wars, terrorism, floods, earthquakes, fires, lost and killed and missing people... Anyone who experienced some of these events does not simply see the information as bad news. They are a constant reminder of their own experience. One that cannot be erased easily from memory.

We tend to develop empathy and compassion, a desire to help, but also there are times when a thought “At least is not happening to us” appears. Unfortunately, every end of a war paves way for another somewhere. Territorial expansion need for power and human greed continue to tear the World and almost every generation will experience war in one way or another. War changes perception. Death becomes everyday occurrence as well as the fear of death.

Nurses have frequently been faced with a situation in which they have to inform on somebodies passing. It was very difficult to say that someone died, to lose a battle for a person’s life and accept the fact that someone’s been captured, tortured, killed or maimed. Those were our comrades, friends, soldiers, colleagues. To end up captured in war frequently meant to lose one’s life or one’s dignity - facing possible rape or death, feeling fear of coming to an end. Some never returned their whereabouts unknown. Imagine, a mother searching for her child, wife looking for her husband, friend, father... still, today, hoping to find them. And still, no sign and no trace of them. Only a brief possibility of finding their remains.

The role of medical staff in the Homeland War in Croatia, especially nurses, was of utmost importance. More than 2,000 of them have been very active, on the front lines, offering help and providing support to soldiers. Active participation has exposed them to traumatic experiences that have most surely left a mark on their mental and physical health. Nurses today also relive those experiences, a constant re-traumatization while being there for veterans, working and helping them recover. This makes nurses a vulnerable group, opened to developing certain health issues, weakening their health constantly.

Despite the recommendations of World's lead health organizations; Croatian health system rarely uses questionnaires on quality of life in collecting the data on overall health well-being. Due to the fact that there is no systematic care, the nurses are exposed to higher risk of burn-out syndrome, which is in most cases responsible for development of a number of physical and emotional issues. According to a number of researches those are: emotional exhaustion, chronic fatigue, cardiovascular diseases, tumor development, pain in the lower back.

There were no data and no research on health status of medical staff that has been active during the war. We wanted to check quality of life and health of nurses. For the needs of this research, we have used self-report inventories for health status, health habits, BDI-II test for measuring the severity of depression, social support questionnaire and SF-36 health survey questionnaire. 132 nurses participated in the research (99 female nurses and 33 male nurses), with average age of 52 (41 – 64) between January and May 2017.

Only seven of the participants have a status of a veteran. Even though that they were exposed to highly stressful and traumatic events, none of the participants has diagnosed PTSD, we cannot conclude that medical staff indeed does not have PTSD. The fact is that these participants have never asked for psychological assistance, dealing with their eventual difficulties in number of other ways.

Results have shown that the quality of life is lower for the participants that were younger during the Homeland War. Given results are in concordance with research of younger people exposed to traumatic events being more vulnerable to develop emotional disorders and PTSD.

Participants show a significant sense of loneliness, have poor health habits, report on a feeling of inadequate social support (their families are supportive, but society not so much).

Furthermore, nurses show depression (minor to mild intensity). Their physical function is impaired, with physical ailments present, psychological health - disrupted, social functioning - difficult, inadequate or reduced. Overall, they estimate their health status and quality of their life as unsatisfactory. Despite the fact that more than 90% estimate that there are certain mental disorders, 99% of participants never looked for psychological help?

Even though medical staff was the target of this research, 55% of participants smoke an average of 20 cigarettes per day and only 11% exercise an average of 30 minutes per day, and more than 70% have insufficient physical activity. The fact that approximately 60% indicate sleeping disorders may point to existence of weariness and chronic fatigue that is a common ground for developing a number of illnesses.

We can argue that the given results are devastating and require necessary measures because the medical staffs is still under great stress and duress due to their work demands, exposed to frequent re-traumatization, that can break ego strengths and form many physical and psychological disorders. Neglecting the emotional wellbeing and forming physical disorders additionally ruin the quality of life of nurses, making them a vulnerable population prone to develop chronic illness. Therefore, it is much needed to provide psychological support to medical staff, show the importance of caring for one's health and quality of life. This research should be just a beginning of systematic and thorough quality of life assessment. It would form the basis for a program for emotional and psychological well-being, in particular for those who have survived the war.

Homeland War has left many consequences. In Croatia, on average nine to eleven veterans die every day, with average age of 51 and mostly of oncological illness. Nurses are also a part of that population group and have a meaningful role in their care. They can work as coordinators or participate in direct care in an institution, hospital etc. Education on communication and other additional skills is much needed and therefore constant. The Society of Nurses of Homeland War of the Croatian Nursing Association organizes activities of nurses who have experienced war misfortunes, with the aim of teaching young generations from their experiences as well as gathering historical material and creating records that will endure testimony of courage, humanity and ethics of people who have been risking their lives staying with their patients. It communicates with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Veterans and Defence Ministry in establishing a proper status of nurses who were involved in the war. By the end of 2018, the Society will publish a book on testimonies of nurses of the homeland war. Since 2016, a symposium - "Never forget the nineties - Ivan Klaić-Miko" is organized every year in another city where war events took place (Lipik - 2016, Karlovac - 2017, Dubrovnik - 2018). Memorials are being placed in institutions as a gratitude to nurses who contributed to the Homeland War... Nurses of Lipik and their contribution will remain permanently recorded in the history of Lipik and Croatia.

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