

Bread and Roses in Zagreb

by Nina Czegledy

Dans cet article, on découvre l'Infoteka des femmes, un organisme fondé par les femmes du Zagreb en Croatie. Les activités de l'Infoteka des femmes englobent publications,

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participation aux conférences, réseau de communications électroniques et présentations de séminaires et d'ateliers.

"We choose the name *Bread and Roses* because we want to express our connection with the history of the international women's movement and we want both bread and roses to become our reality" stated the information magazine of the Women's *Infoteka* in Zagreb.

Since the war in former Yugoslavia started we have been experiencing international women's solidarity in many different ways. We have, however, often lacked the time and space to deal with our own issues in our own language. *Bread and Roses* provides a space for women to raise their voices to address the domestic public. Women write about their own experience, as survivors, activists, writers, artists, in a way which changes the order of priorities usually set by a male dominated media. *Bread and Roses* looks into the future; without this opportunity to develop women's vision we may lose our place in it.

On a hot August morning in 1994 in the bright offices of the Women's *Infoteka*, I was told that "this is the first time a women's documentary center has been established in Croatia." I had arrived in Zagreb the previous day to participate in the Mediascape International Video Conference and hardly recognized the city. In barely two years many of the downtown buildings had been renovated, expensive new boutiques lined the streets and the numerous outdoor cafes were packed with tourists and well-to-do locals. Apart from a contingency of UN soldiers at the railway station, the war seemed distant. Zagreb's thousands of refugees—whether in the nearby camps or scattered around the city—were out of sight.

I was introduced to Durda Knezevic, Mica Mladineo, and Tanja Calic of *Infoteka* by my friend, Sanja Ivekovic. A video artist with an international reputation and a gifted graphic designer, Sanja, had been active in the organization and had also been responsible for the design of *Infoteka's* publications including the quarterly *Bread and Roses*. On that summer morning, sheltered from the blistering heat by the high-ceilinged space of the recently renovated office, we discussed the Croatian women's movement and *Infoteka's* aims and achievements.

In Zagreb feminism first emerged in the mid sixties. The movement faded, however, after three or four years and resurfaced in the mid seventies. Women became more politicized in those years and some of them recognized that due to the cultural conditioning in patriarchal society they were not taking advantage of their legal rights. They also became aware that throughout the region women were under-represented in important government positions as well as in the Party leadership. It was hoped that changes in education would lead to reforms. Woman and Society, a group of feminist scholars, started to meet regularly. They held discussions, lectures, and seminars which offered a new approach to women's issues. Long standing traditions were identified and the role of women in Yugoslavia was discussed. In addition to the seminars, the group also produced publications on feminist topics. A generation of women were thus educated.

In the mid to late eighties, with the emergence of a new generation, the academic focus of the feminist movement evolved into something more pragmatic. The Women's Group established an SOS phone line for battered women and child victims of violence. In 1989, Women's Aid Now, a branch of the Women's Group established—by squatting in a city owned apartment—the first shelter for abused women in the region. There were a number of other women's groups that were set up to achieve specific goals. They included the Autonomous Women's House (currently operating the women's shelter), the feminist magazine *Kareta*, the female division of of LIGMA (Lesbian and Gay Men Action), the Independent Alliance of Women, Zagreb Women's Lobby and the Centre for Women War Victims. *Infoteka* was established in December 1992 to support a broad range of activities. First and foremost, *Infoteka* offered regular public hours, maintained contacts with other women's groups in the former Yugoslavia and made information available on a wide range of topics including education, disability, and current events. From the beginning *Infoteka* participated in the organization of several international conferences in Zagreb as well as abroad and co-operated with similar centers throughout Europe and beyond the continent.



According to the *Infoteka* brochure, the main activities of the center focus on the development of the women's movement in Croatia, while preserving "herstory" in the region. "The basic function of *Women's Infoteka* is to make women

and their achievements and accomplishments visible and present. Our goal is to make the official figures which are usually called "grey" [women are invisible] "bright red." Some of *Infoteka's* main projects include the maintenance of the archive, database, library and the publication of its quarterly magazine, *Bread and Roses*. The archive documents women's initiatives and the development of feminist groups in Croatia, while the database offers information on the current social, political, economical, and cultural status of women in the region. This includes international overviews on women's groups as well as domestic statistics and demographic data. Information is also available on education, particularly women's studies, conferences, as well as on women's networks and the various international foundations which support and finance women's projects.

In Croatia (as well as in the former Yugoslavia) there is no officially recognized tradition for the study and research of women's issues. With the support of *Infoteka* and through an independent educational centre, plans were made to establish a series of interdisciplinary "women's studies" courses. The topics include: women's identity; feminism and linguistics; feminist criticism; women's search for answers to the global crisis; ecofeminism and deep ecology; video art by women; and a feminist approach to violence against women.

Infoteka's library offers a computerized list of over 600 titles, covering history, women's literature, feminist theory, violence against women, lesbians, psychology, and sociology of gender. The *Infoteka* brochure advertises the availability of a reading room offering international feminist magazines, periodicals, and information on a variety of events and activities. In addition to its information activities, *Infoteka* "offers help and support to new women's projects as well as to existing women's groups. Its space and equipment have been partially used by the Zagreb Women's Lobby, the Autonomous Women's House in Zagreb, and the Centre for Women War Victims."

"The war is always present," I was told by Mica and Durda. The distinction between the time "before the war" and "after the war" is always articulated and maintained. War is not just a battle. A society starts to change. All kinds of issues popped up which shook the women's movement. In the former Yugoslavia there is no tradition of street demonstrations, especially for women's issues. Protests only began in the early eighties and generally consisted of the signing of petitions, the presentation of public lectures, and active lobbying on various topics, for example on the issue violence against women. With the onset of war everything acquired a new meaning. At a certain point "to go to the streets" was counterproductive. All of a sudden a great number of women were involved in underground activities—collecting food and clothes, looking after refugees. This was accomplished for the most part on volunteer basis. The official estimate of refugees in 1994 was about 300,000 but it might have been as many as 400,000 or more. In addition there were the displaced and refugees in transit. Some of the women's groups did not want to declare themselves, but many were involved in helping prisoners and in other humanitarian projects. Women had to learn how to deal with the media, how to raise public awareness, and how to avoid being manipulated. Many of the local groups felt that the media distorted the situation in Croatia which resulted in an invasion by sensation seeking journalists and women from abroad. This was resented by some of the local activists.

Infoteka's special projects include Fe-Mail, an electronic communication network of women activists. "This will restore the links, severed by the war, enabling women to co-ordinate activities, share expenses and provide cost-effective access to international databanks," states the *Infoteka* pamphlet. The goal of the *Druga* project, is to establish an independent women's publishing house, the first of its kind in Croatia. "The word *Druga* means "the Other" in Croatian," explains Sanja Ivekovic. "While the majority of the planned publications will be translated titles, it will be very important for us to publish these texts

in our own Croatian language." *Druga* is organized into various sections. A special series, for example, will be concerned with the presentation of important works in peace studies and studies promoting the values of civil society. In addition to textbooks, handbooks, and manuals *Druga* plans the publication of support material for various activities such as work with refugees, women's shelters, self-help groups, peace and environmentalist workshops for children and adults, education for a culture of non-violence, sexual education for children, and health education for women. To quote the *Druga* pamphlet:

"Before the change-over 20 to 30 per cent of the management were women which has been reduced to two to three per cent in the nineties. Women keep working but are not managing."

Sharing the best tradition of democratic and women's liberation movement in our country, born in the moment when general values of humanism and democracy are being challenged from day to day by vicissitudes of war and transition, *Druga's* point of departure is the imperative to build a new culture in this part of the world, the culture of non-violence, of peace and partnership, confronting and counterposing the more and more dominant tendencies of force, of political, ethnic, religious, and gender intolerance. The orientation toward women's issues is a result of the recent social, political, and cultural trends fostered even more by traditional patriarchal and war-culture mentality. In this framework the main intention of *Druga* is to cultivate the gender-sensitive, but gender-holistic view on all levels—from individual to social awareness and ethics of men, women, and community.

Bread and Roses, a quarterly magazine, is published in Croatian with English summaries. In the 1993 autumn issue, for example, various Croatian women's organizations were described in detail, reports were published on international conferences related to women's issues, and programs were discussed relating to the status of women war victims such as *Suncokret*, a program for psychological assistance to refugee and displaced women in Croatia. A sampling from the 1994 spring issue featured articles by noted feminist scholars such as Vesna Kesic. Her paper, initially presented at the conference on Gender, Nationalism and Democratization held in Washington, D.C. in 1993, was entitled "From Respect to Rape, or from Mother Homeland to Croatia Fallen Woman," and looked at the "reconceptualization of the socialist image of women." In "We Versus I" Durda Knezevic examines "the problem

of identity in the feminist/women's movement in Croatia," a paper first presented at the WISE seminar "Traveling Through Feminism in Europe: Cultural and Political Practices" held in Paris in 1993. On the domestic front, articles described the establishment of the first Women's Mobile Clinics, the Women's Peace Workshop in Rijeka and the establishment of B.a.B.e. Women's Human Rights Group, a new initiative of the Zagreb Women's Lobby.

Over the last few years there has been a major shift in Croatian politics. The conservative, right-wing government which was defeated only recently, tried openly to undermine the abortion issue by publishing editorials voicing their views. A "Ministry of Restoration" was established to revive "spiritual" and "demographic" aims. In the proposed new constitution the same conservative forces tried to force a "popular" move towards the "protection of unborn life." "Sublime motherhood" was promoted to "purify the minds of our people against communist pollutions," I was told in *Infoteka*. For the past few years an anonymous war has been waged and the changing of the abortion law is one of the issues involved in this fight. After initial attacks the government wized up, avoided public discussions, and tried to find ways to make the change surreptitiously.

An excerpt from a document entitled "The Concept of Demographic Restoration" (of which I received a copy in English) proclaims under the heading "preventing the permanent birth decrease in Croatia" that the state must stop the dying out of the population by well thought out policies, laws, and funds. The fight against abortion must involve the medical, ethical, and humane education of the nation as well as ensure that women's economic and social needs are being met so that there will be no reason to have an abortion. Another section entitled "fight against the anti-life mentality" advocates that emergency measures are required to throw out the anti-life mentality from medicine, schoolbooks, TV, and newspapers. In addition the document supports the "fight against bachelorhood" to boost "the profession of mothering, the most sublime profession in Croatia."

"These official policies and recommendations," *Infoteka* comments "might offer a possible explanation why the representation of women in politics remains very low. In 1994 there were eleven women out of 275 in Parliament—and these eleven women advocated party goals, not women's issues. Before the change-over 20 to 30 per cent of the management were women which has been reduced to two to three per cent in the nineties. Women keep working but are not managing."

"Since the beginning in the war in Croatia," wrote Durda and Mica in the 1993 autumn issue of *Bread and Roses*:

Feminism has undergone a fundamental crisis of identity partially due to the war, but also to the difficulties inherent in feminism. In the current moment, a time of neither war nor peace, some of the

rights achieved by women are jeopardized. The lack of democratic principles in the construction of the state is most radically manifested through the restriction of independent media, increased conservatism, revival of patriarchal values (numerous attempts to restrict abortion being the most obvious examples), with the war situation often used as justification. Repercussions on the economic and social status of women are enormous.

These repercussions are blatantly evident through the whole of central Europe in 1995. The spread of market based economies resulted in high unemployment figures and few retraining opportunities for women. Due to the political flux, economic instability, and the neo-conservative attitudes in central Europe, the work of women activists continues to be fraught with difficulties. This very word or definition of "feminism" or "woman's issues" is misunderstood and carries with it a stigma. Despite these setbacks the women's movement continues to grow throughout the region. This is especially true for Croatia where the movement has a time-honoured tradition. It is also due to remarkable individuals and dedicated groups of women that the movement is slowly gaining ground.

The Women's *Infoteka* continues its activities. Sanja Ivekovic is deeply involved in a number of publishing projects, various art program's, and proposals for a women's art center in Zagreb. Together we plan to develop a series of touring Women's Art Projects in central Europe.

An independent videomaker, Nina Czegeledy has curated and organized more than a dozen cultural exchange programs between North America and Europe. Vista and Shifting Paradigms/Modeles Mouvants, the touring compilations of Canadian Videoart by Women, was curated and exhibited by Czegeledy in twelve countries across Europe. A regular contributor to the Hungarian Art Today magazine, Czegeledy edited a special issue on Artists Speak on Central Europe for the New York based New Observations.

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