Sophie Képès

# The Future of War

> "There is no more war. War, all of it, has been replaced by the child. The twenty-year old child: he took the place of it all, all of the forest, all of earth, he replaced the future of war. War itself is locked in the grave with the body and bones of this child. […] If such things did not exist, there could be no such thing as writing."
> Marguerite Duras, *Death of a Young English Aviator*, 1993

> "Three months before I was born my mother lost her other two children [both girls, one a year old, the other three years old] and I think that came first of all, though I don't know how it worked exactly. I think I started then to be a writer."
> *F. Scott Fitzgerald : Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, Matthew J. Bruccoli, 1981

**One**

As a child I dreamed of war.
I didn't dream of going to war to make myself look good, as did Fitzgerald and Faulkner; no, it was war itself that came to me as I slept.
Once more the Germans are invading France from the northeast, occupying the town in which I grew up. They murder my mother before my eyes, and then they kill me.
I dream of the seconds that follow, I am sucked into a whirlwind of darkness that rocks, that accelerates. I wake up with a start.
I don't tell this to anyone. I have no one to confide in. I bury it with the rest, I try to forget, try to live. I feel I have to live, though I'm not sure why.
In fact, most of the time, I dream of flying. I dream of it by night, by day, constantly. I have wings, I am flying.
Much later I read the eyewitness accounts of those who managed to come back from the nether shore and who, forever cured of their fear of death, reestablished a beachhead on this one. I recognize the dark whirlwind, the out-of-body experience. Yes, that's it exactly.
Arras, in the Sixties. I'm four years old. Symbols are daubed in paint on walls surrounding our house, on lampposts in the public garden. Indelible marks in black and white.
At age five I learn to read and write. Now I know what the symbols stand for: Here, it's V for Victory, there it's the Croix de Lorraine, and over there are three letters: OAS.[1] I've no idea what

[1] OAS, for Organisation Armée Secrète, a group seeking to retain France's Algerian colony

they mean. All around me grownups talk of war. The bombings, the church nearby of which only one wall still stands, the ancient tunnels in which they took refuge. The Occupation.
They talk about it constantly, the people who take care of the three of us, us kids. They are not our parents. These caregivers are old, very old. They are retired miners and their wives, all Polish. All except for one woman, Marcelle, a textile worker who can barely read or write. She comes from Vimy.
Vimy, Notre-Dame de Lorette: the first circles of Hell. On Sundays, to distract us from our bland, TV-deprived lives, Marcelle takes us to tour the trenches. The fenced-off minefields, the shell craters in the woods seem like whole slabs of nature turned upside down, shaken up, moth-eaten. Fossilized sandbags. The war memorials offer dizzying perspectives on the infinite plain. Military cemeteries seem a form of extensive agriculture, though different from growing beets or potatoes. A bumper harvest here of white crosses, a plantation of dead men in every language, from every nation. As if the dead in this place outnumbered the living, as if more people lived under the ground than on it.
Maybe it's the case.
William Faulkner, then unknown, haunted the battlefields of northern France after the First World War. The short stories that came out of his experience are more realistic, more mind-numbing, than the writings of Barbusse or Remarque, who actually participated in the battles. Hence the shock of discovering that Faulkner was never in the war; of discovering the shamanic powers of literature.
Still, I know our mother was in a real war, though she speaks mostly of ration books and black markets. She was in the Free Zone. Free?
In school, we are taught the history of France. “Mom, tell me what it was like when you were in the Hundred Years War,” I ask her. She laughs, everyone laughs. I don't understand their laughter. For me the Great War, World War Two, Algeria, the Iliad, the Thirty Years War, the Hundred Years War, Joan of Arc, the Massacre of Saint-Barthélémy, are all one: they are War. There is only one war and it never stops. One unique and indivisible War that was born with humankind and will die only when humans vanish also.
Case in point, Saint-Barthélémy: it's the name of the village where my mother was born.
I find out that Catholics are the villains of that piece. I'm Protestant, one of a minority. All my schoolmates belong to the Catholic majority. Until now I was convinced the majority was on the side of the Good. I will have to rectify that notion. I do not yet know that I am half-Jewish, on my father's side. I will not fully understand that fact before the age of twenty.
At five years of age I am asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” – “I want to be a writer.” The teacher laughs. I tell my mother the story and ask her, “Why did my teacher laugh?” Now it's my mother's turn to laugh. And she doesn't answer the question. There's a problem here somewhere, there's an issue with this vocation. What is it?
Later I read *Cyrano de Bergerac*. I read it over and over, I read it aloud, I learn it by heart. In this play, which character would I be? Not the pretentious Roxane. I would be Cyrano: “It's far more beautiful when it has no use.” Me in a nutshell. A motto that fits me like a glove.
Let us then do useless things. Let us cock a snook at the Grim Reaper. I shall be a writer.

**Two**

At five years of age I know I will be a writer. I know also that I will bear no children. Why?

"Because it hurts," I say. – "No," replies my mother, "to give life is wonderful." – "It hurts," I tell her, "I know."
As if I already knew.
Whom does it hurt to be born? The mother, the baby? Both?
One son emerged from my mother's womb, my older brother. After that her stomach was occupied by two children who never made it to this shore. They were lost on the voyage, shipwrecked along the way.
I think both were boys, I don't know why. Killed in action. Boys are more delicate than girls, everybody knows that.
Me, I fought my way out. I'm sure I had dark moments of despair; convinced I was beaten, I was ready to let go. Yet I paddled on, under the gaze of eyes hung in the trees above, down this ringed and serpentine stomach-tunnel, this whale's colon, at the end of which shone the light of life. The light of death.
The doctor kept telling my mother, "You'll not bear this child, either."
She did, though. She gave birth to me. Though I think she had got used to the idea of my not making it. I was raised in an atmosphere of doubt as a result: doubt about my right to exist. She made me sorry I ever came into this world.
Then my sister was born, without the slightest difficulty.
I'm ten years old. I read obsessively. My sister plays with dolls; me, never. Writing already is my bastion. It's a boundless domain to which only I have the key, where I can freely roam. My mother, my father, can't get in.
So they try to keep me out, to convince me not to enter. My mother seeks to belittle the domain, suffocate it, wipe it out. My father makes fun of it, pretends it does not exist.
To no avail. Already I have begun to not-belong.
Many years later I return to Arras. I ask the new owner if I can visit my childhood home. My room is on the first floor, and inside, on the door of the adjoining toilet, I notice a russet-colored Maltese cross, the symbol of the German army.
It is only one meter away from the headboard of the bed in which I slept my entire childhood. One meter from my head, from my factory of dreams.
It never used to be there. I ask the owner about it.
"Oh, that cross? They found it when I had the room repainted. The workmen did everything they could to make it disappear. Nothing worked."
Well, obviously, I thought. That's History, it doesn't erase easily. It comes back with the next generation. Or the next.
During the Occupation our house sheltered the *Kommandantur*. We were aware of that. There was a flagpole on our parent's balcony.
But that filthy symbol, the Maltese Cross, it remained hidden, invisible.
Later I challenged my father. "How could you choose to live, to make us live, in that house?" – "I was offered another but I preferred that one." – "You chose the *Kommandantur*'s house? You, a Central European Jew, a refugee from the Nazis?"
No answer.

**Three**

"And war shall come to them all."

Those were the closing words of my first novel which I wrote, while still very young, on the subject of youth. I've often asked myself since then where that sentence came from. We had no reason then to fear war of any kind. We feared unemployment, failure, poverty. Ever since I reached the age of reason the world had seemed to be in dire crisis.

But war?

Yet you could say that I am hounded by young men dying. I am stalked by the death of young men.

Why do boys die all around me? Sadly, it's not the old men who die—not them. Or rather, they only die if they're decent people. It's not the sleazy old men who ogle Suzanne in her bath who kick the bucket. Nor those who hoard their gold. The misers, the vampires. Those old men will survive anything.

The first young man who died was named Olivier. It was AIDS that killed him. At age twenty AIDS sat astride our chests and defied us all. It never left, it's still present, like an evil sea urchin, pricking and ogling us.

AIDS is my generation's war. The ranks thinned quickly around me. I could have fallen too. That I survived is a miracle.

Yes, they are young, the first dead people in my life. Thirty years old, at most.

And so it went on: but finally it was I who sallied forth to find the dead.

I flew to Sarajevo during the siege. I got permission to board a plane chartered by the UN's High Commission for Refugees. I traveled alone, landed the same way. I stayed there for weeks.

Why are you going there? Why you? Why this war, not another? Those were the questions everyone asked, at home and in Sarajevo.

It was my war, my business. I had a thousand reasons, I don't have to go into them again. I've explained them all in my books, my articles. I still believe they were good reasons. I even believe that I and my comrades were, in our collective madness, the Just among Nations. One day, after we're gone, people will understand. Or, maybe they won't.

It took me ten years to write of that experience in *Un café sur la colline [A Coffee on the Hill]*. It was so hard to find the right voice, the right shape. The memory was too raw, and it hid from me. As long as I did not know *how* to do it, I could not even begin.

And then one word surfaced: "Just." Along with a whole rainbow of meanings.

A "just memory:" what exactly does that mean? Since memory is simultaneously the raw material of literary creation, and the filter through which it is extruded, drop by drop.

Is it good writing that single-mindedly tracks down the real story? Is it memory that relentlessly brings justice to those forced into silence?

What exactly does the coroner Ewa Klonowski do in Srebrenica? In Rwanda, what can the writer Jean Hatzfeld achieve?

And what if it was one and the same—to identify the dead, to give them a voice—ethics and esthetics fighting side by side?

Yes. In my case, however, there is another reason, buried even more deeply. A reason that reveals itself only after ten years of writing, at journey's end.

To enter Sarajevo under siege to find what has been silenced and hidden from me. Blindly to relive what the previous generation suffered. Or else, who knows, I will live what they should have lived, what they were denied. Pay off their debts. Return to the past to plug the hidden gaps, to repair, to redress.

The writer is the laundryman of generations, the washerwoman of heritage, the processor of family gray-water. A stagnant creek off the vast river of life: sometimes she, or he, is not given

leave to reproduce.
Which is especially hard when you're a woman.
Yes. But still.
I had a sudden vision, right after the book was finished, of a drawing, a sort of map. It showed Sarajevo surrounded, torn up by internal frontlines, along with the corridor of Mount Igman—the umbilical cord linking the city to the rest of the world, which quite literally nourishes it. And then that risky, uterine road to the bombed-out airport, to the air route which is the route to life if you can manage to fly away—to fly! Or the road to dusty death if a sniper finds you in his sights.
How many people who could have left decided at the last minute to stay on? I know several.
There was mortal danger if you left, mortal danger if you remained. And then there was that notorious secret tunnel dug under the airport runway, with a light shining at the end...
I looked at what I had drawn: there, that's how it was, Sarajevo. I had just revisited the battleground of motherhood.
After all, had my mother not already told me, when I was twenty-six years of age: "You're not my daughter, you just used my womb to be born in?"
Exactly. And it was no easy thing to be born again in Sarajevo. To pay her back.

**Four**

I will always be at home in Sarajevo. They told me that and I believed it. But history doesn't stop there. History, with either a big or a small "h."
One book sometimes is born from another.
That's what happened with *A Coffee on the Hill*. It was not so much a new shoot sprouting from the family tree of literature. Rather, it was the product of a collision in space-time.
My book has just come out. One evening, while surfing the internet, I type in three keywords: "coffee," "hill," and my last name. The search yields an astonishing catch: a blog written by a Bosnian army veteran, started one year earlier.
I am delighted at first—see, even my title was appropriate. For me the mere words "coffee" and "hill" are all it takes to evoke Sarajevo. It makes sense that our modern-day Hermes should lead me back there.
I start reading. I am fascinated, horrified. I e-mail the blogger: I've never read anything like this, though I've read everything that has come out about this war. Is this your war journal, I ask, or someone else's? And why post it ten years after the fact?
Ten years, just like me.
It's midnight, I go to bed.
Two days later, he writes back. Saudin is 34. He comes from Foca, in eastern Bosnia. He goes straight from high school to the trenches, and spends the entire war in and around Sarajevo. He takes notes on a daily basis. He writes for his family, with whom he has no contact, hoping someone will send them his journal after he dies.
And yet he survives without a scratch. It takes him ten years to rebuild his life. Every time he tries to go back to the journal he gives up the effort. It's too hard. He's not a writer. Still, the time has finally come to honor his promise.
What promise?
The promise he made to his best friend on the frontline: Sabrija Kepes, nicknamed Kepa.
"We made stupid bets with each other. Kepa said, if it's you who's killed, I'll produce a film in

your honor. And if you're killed, I tell him, I'll just write a book, seeing as you're younger. But, it was him."
Are you making fun of me? I write. Kepes, that's *my* name.
"I get hundreds of e-mails. I wouldn't have answered you if you didn't have the same name as him."
Aha. So the search engine was right. Hermes makes no mistakes.
Saudin sends me Kepa's photo. A brown-haired eighteen-year-old. Long face, arched eyebrows. A widow's peak, just like mine. The extent to which he looks like my brother as a young man absolutely floors me.
It's then I remember a remark made by a Bosnian commander, in July of '94 in Hrasnica. As he examined my passport he said, "I know some refugees in this sector with the same name as you. Would you like to meet them?"
I only half believed him, but I said yes. The road to Mount Igman was cut that night, and we were fired upon as we returned to the city. I never heard from that commander again.
I tell Saudin this story. He knew the commander. Yes, some of the Kepes family took refuge in that area. His mother is still there.
And Kepa?
He was killed in June of '95, in Breza. He was twenty years old.
Breza was exactly where we were traveling, a year earlier, after I talked to the commander—who was killed as well.
More questions. Did Kepa know his name was Hungarian?
Sure. There is only one Kepes family in Bosnia. They all come from the Rogatica region. "They're different from us, physically and morally too. They are good-looking, tough, very tight-knit, scarily so."
I smile. It all fits.
And yet—what if I were the only one to see the similarities?
I send Saudin a photo of my Uncle Matyas: a high school snapshot taken in Budapest in 1927.
He writes back: "My sister was sitting beside me when I got your photo. I had told her nothing about you. As soon as she looked at the screen she burst into tears. Why are you crying? I asked her. – Because that's Kepa."

**Five**

Saudin had promised to write a book for his friend, not a blog. His blog attracts more readers and comments than any other in the former Yugoslavia. And yet every publishing house rejects *War Journal*. "The war? No way. Nobody wants to hear about it." He decides to raise money to self-publish. I help him find donors in France. Thus does one book give birth to another.
There is not a single Bosnian listed in the acknowledgments. There is, however, one Serbian woman, a medical doctor.
The book is a bestseller.
I read the translated excerpts. It's impossible to read it at one go, the events described are too gut-wrenching. But I am happy because this crucial testimony will be passed on to future generations. It's a way of making up for parents without answers.
I'm happy also for Kepa. The book is dedicated to his memory.
Saudin visits Kepa's mother. She remembers the commander, he came to see her in '94, he talked

about me. He kept his word. I shouldn't have doubted him.
Later, I meet Saudin in Sarajevo. Tall, thin, birdlike, with straw-blond hair and sunken eyes that are intensely blue.
He says of Kepa, "He understood me right from the start, with one look, without even a word passing between us."
He says that his brother, who was interned for a long time in a *Chetnik*[2] camp, doesn't have a single bone left unbroken in his body.
He says: "When I went home, I ran into old schoolmates, I asked them why they did what they did. They avoided answering, I waited, and suddenly everything was as before, as if nothing had happened, they were just the same guys as before, so I left."
Everyone in his neighborhood waves at Saudin. He fought all around this area—a war of neighborhoods. We climb a hill just above the bazaar. In the Martyrs' cemetery, not far from the mausoleum of the country's founding father, stands a white stele engraved with a single lily. No different from dozens of its neighbors.
Very similar to those vast plantations of the dead, those harvests of white crosses in northern France.
A stream chuckles over smooth stones. The town below us seems peaceful. The sky is blue and the grass is green.
Tomb number B59: Sabrija Kepes, son of Dervo, 1975-1995. Arabic characters are carved near the gravestone's apex, followed by words in Latin script that mention Allah. Did Kepa know the Kepes are Jewish?
No, replies Saudin. Just Hungarian.
With the tips of my fingers I brush this white obelisk, and think of a black obelisk in a tiny Jewish cemetery lost in the depths of Transylvania, where our name is carved in Latin script just above an inscription in Hebrew.
White signs, black signs, planted in tight rows around my childhood.
Rust-coloured Maltese crosses, dreams of clotted blood. The scar tissue of History.
But Kepa, buried as a 'Muslim'?
When he is a descendant of Magyar aristocrats, Sabbatarians[3] who converted to Judaism during the seventeenth century.
But Kepa, honored as a 'martyr'?
When during his brief existence he lacked all ability to choose?
With one hand resting on the stele I summon an agnostic's prayer: one that might suit a bloodline so impure, a root system so entangled. His and mine. The root system of Europe.
This is how he becomes my young English aviator. "*The child of twenty years [who] took the place of it all, all of the forest, all of earth… the future of war*."
I have to go. I hug Saudin hard: See you soon, soon.

**Six**

I see Saudin often. We correspond frequently. The more I get to know him, the more I love him. We think up projects to do together. I meet his wife, Sanela.

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[2] Ultranationalist Serbian paramilitary group

[3] Christian followers of an Old Testament cult in Transylvania

Every time I go back to Sarajevo I visit Kepa's tomb. I am happy and I'm in mourning and I'm furious and I'm proud to have known him.
And then. And then. This too I cannot bear.
In 2009, ten days after he finishes correcting proofs for the second volume of *War Journal*, the first symptoms declare themselves. Within four months, Saudin dies of a brain tumor. He is thirty-six years old. He and Sanela were about to start a family.
President Silajdzic and General Divjak both attend the funeral.
The general tells me later, in Paris: "I admire Saudin. He succeeded in doing what I often tried to do but never managed—to write about what we went through together, those four years in the trenches."
That's heroism. No, not to wage war at twenty years of age. The real heroism is to confront such memories and turn them into words.
The only person who proved capable of it was this lanky boy with a thatch of light hair and a raptor's profile. This soldier who survived just long enough to fight another war, one far tougher than the first. Who now lies under the ground, one hill over from his best friend.
My two dead brothers. The future of war.
They say that at the ceremony, when an actor read the passage in *Journal* where Saudin meets Kepa, people in the audience started to cry.
That's something we're all good at. Crying, and making others cry.

*Monday April 4, 2011—Sunday April 10, 2011*

Translated from the French by George Michelsen Foy

Photos : 1. Sabrija Kepes, known as Kepa, circa 1993 - 2. My uncle Matyas, Budapest, 1927 - 3. Saudin presents *War Journal*, 2007 - 4. Kepa's grave in Sarajevo, Bosnia - 5. Gravesite of one of the Kepes in Seini, Romania.

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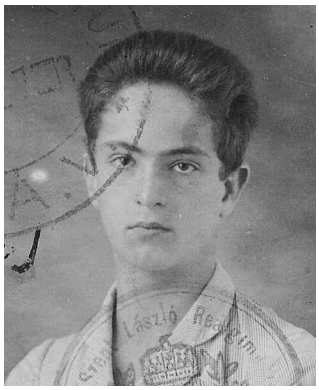

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