The first years

Shocking reports from the war in former Yugoslavia told that destruction of monuments was part of the warfare. As I remember it, we were three who met in 1994 at the Swedish Heritage office to discuss the possibilities to organize aid to the heritage of former Yugoslavia. The three of us were beside me: Ing-Mari Beck, art critic and Jan Krister Boman, architect and organizer of the exhibition Warchitecture from Sarajevo. In my mind was also Zoran Filipovic’s moving photo exhibition “A season in hell”, documenting Sarajevo during the siege.

At the same time Margareta Biörnstad (former head of the Swedish Heritage administration) had organized an international UNESCO seminar in Stockholm to discuss how information could be a tool to save heritage In war. The seminar became a meeting ground for experts in heritage, civil rights, journalistic and also representatives of the military who had been engaged in UN’s mission in Bosnia. It became very clear that the knowledge of the Hague Convention needed to be spread and that Swedish media had ignored the vast destruction of heritage in the Balkan war. From ICOMOS a proposal to initiate an international organization for the protection of heritage in distress was launched. The results of the seminar were published in the Swedish Unesco council’s report 4/1994.

When Margareta Biörnstad joined the above mentioned loosely organized group as its chairperson things began to move. We decided to create a foundation called Cultural Heritage without Borders with the purpose to offer concrete help to heritage in danger. We thought that international organizations so far offered talk but not much action. Instead we wanted to do actual rescue work on the ground.

Already from the start the working group’s ambition was to create a broad public back up for its ambitions. This was realized by engaging many as founders but also by formulating the statutes in a way that granted direct connections to other institutions responsible for the heritage. Thus the chairperson of the Swedish Red Cross, the Princess Christina accepted to be the first among the founders, which showed a connection between CHwB and the broader humanitarian work. The political sphere was represented by three former ministers of culture while the Director of the Swedish Heritage, the chairperson of the Swedish UNESCO council, the bishop of Stockholm, the heads of learned academies and the chairpersons of ICOM, ICOMOS, the Secretary General of the architect’s organization represented other interests in the Swedish society. Finally the organization group also vol-
unteered as founders.

A crucial question was how to formulate the goal of the organization. Should the future work only be directed towards Bosnia and Herzegovina or should it be formulated more broadly? The answer was that CHwB should go further safeguarding cultural property in conflict zones, when catastrophes of other sorts occur and in situations of acute threats.

The official inauguration of CHwB took place on the 19th of April 1995 at the Royal Academy of fine Arts. It was now time to spread knowledge about the new foundation and create economic resources. The Swedish Heritage administration, UNESCO and the Royal Academy of Letters had donated some resources to start with and during the first year we also received support from the insurance company Skandia, Cementa Ltd, Electrolux and the Government which all enabled us to create a platform for future work.

The same year I met in Paris with the Bosnian minister of education and the head of the Bosnian Heritage administration. They had escaped from Sarajevo via the tunnel under the airport to take part in a meeting with the Council of Europe. This gave a firsthand insight in the horrors of the Balkan war and its consequences for the heritage.

When finally a peace agreement in former Yugoslavia was settled in October 1995 international organizations could initiate massive reconstruction efforts. Those were mostly focused towards housing and infrastructure. Sweden belonged to the countries who were most active in the region and CHwB initiated in an early stage discussions with Sida if not reconstruction of the heritage should be included in the disaster relief. In fact the Dayton peace agreement had included paragraphs on heritage protection.

When the then Swedish minister of Culture visited Sarajevo in February 1996, on the occasion of a solidarity action by Swedish actors and performers, I could accompany her as an expert in heritage preservation. In a city dominated by shelled and burnt buildings, destroyed cars and trams and a myriad of international military vehicles the minister devoted much time to discuss with the government and other heritage partners their need for support. For CHwB this trip enabled important meetings. Afterwards we could inspire the department of culture to support a summer course in preservation initiated by UNESCO.

The next step for CHwB was to send Mats Edström (member of the board) and me to a fact finding mission in Bosnia. The mission was supported by the Swedish Institute and we concentrated our efforts to the Tuzla region were Sweden was active. A great help was offered by Björn Mossberg, head of the local Sida office. We visited Travnik, Maglaj and Gradacac and of course Sarajevo, all badly hurt. Despite the misbelieve of the Swedish Ambassador we found that the local mayors showed great interest in aid to reconstruct the destroyed heritage. In Maglaj we found objects that seemed feasible for a first rescue action. The town is situated on the brinks of the river Bosna and has a medieval city center with traditional buildings climbing a hillside crowned by the ruins of a Turkish fortress.

Maglaj was the offer of a violent siege from Serb forces – a siege that was as intensive as that of Sarajevo. During the siege the old mosque was the target for heavy shelling. The minaret was crippled and the stones made dangerous holes in the cupola. An unexploded grenade was stuck in a column base in the portico. Close to the mosque was burnt out buildings – one of them a 100 year old guest house, a “konak” in traditional Bosnian style but without roof which someone had tried to cover with plastic sheets. We concluded that the mosque and the konak could be saved with limited means and that this might help the local administration to abandon existing plans of a total modernization of the city.

The former central heritage institute in Sarajevo had escaped from its old premises and
resettled in a couple of rooms in a freezing apartment building in the outskirts of the city. Hear we met with a small group of architects and ingenieurs with no pay and no resources. We concluded that the most important aid would be to offer the institute cooperation in actual restoration projects. In order to facilitate future communication we were able to donate a fax machine.

With the experiences from the mission in 1996 we could turn to Sida with concrete proposals for a first aid to the built heritage in Maglaj. Sida set aside a sum of 160,000 Euro as a pilot scheme and we could recruit an experienced project leader, the Finish restoration architect Tulla Rauma who had been trained at the restoration course at Royal School of Art and Architecture in Stockholm. She had undertaken restoration work in Finland under tough condition and was thus well suited to work in Bosnia. As lone woman in a hard and male environment she had to fight to claim the necessary authority but managed to guide the institute in producing correct plans and material for tenders.

Our guiding principles were that the restorations should be carried out according to local traditions and authentic techniques. In our deal with the institute we stated that the decisions were up to the institute but we would not finance actions that in our belief would jeopardize the heritage. This paved the ground for a fruitful cooperation through many years.

After having covered the roofs of the Maglaj buildings the first stage of the restoration works could start in mid June 1997 with mending of the small cupolas to the portico of the Mosque. Next stage was to repair the central dome and re-erect the missing part of the minaret and change a badly damaged column in the portico. This work was from our side led by Pål Anders Stensson, our new project leader, who was supported in his task by volunteers of Swedish experts in architecture, stone conservation and the art of working in lead. A special challenge was to find the right stones to complete the minaret. In the end Stenson had to reopen an old quarry were the original stones once had been found.

In order to demonstrate the principles we believed would be useful to our partners we invited members of the institute and teachers at Sarajevo’s faculty of architecture to visit Stockholm and current restoration projects. After that we organized an open course in Sarajevo in restoration techniques and ethics led by Ove Hidemark.

Thanks to expanding support from Sida the initial efforts were followed by several initiatives in Republica Srpska, and Serbia both regarding buildings and museology. Among these were the saving of the mediaeval orthodox cloister church in Zavala with the help of specialists in foundations from Skanska and advice from Krister Berggren consultant in
constructions. This work was led by our project leader from the fourth season Tina Wik in close cooperation with the Serb heritage Institute in Banja Luka. Tina Wik was also elected as a member of the national so-called Dayton commission on the protection of Heritage monuments.

In Mostar international focus was in reconstructing the old bridge. An unexpected US donation helped us to undertake a reconstruction of a couple of burnt bazaar buildings close to the bridge as a help to revitalize the commercial center of Mostar.

In the spring of 2001 the European Agency for reconstruction in Kosovo asked CHwB to undertake the reconstruction of five Albanian so-called Kulla buildings, which had been the victim of ethnic cleansing during the liberation struggle. Thanks to guarantees from Sida we could accept the offer and send our forth project leader, Dick Sandberg, to Pristhina. Dick set up a special office for the task and managed to successfully finish the task. At the same time we were able to support the Agency with an assistant head of the local heritage institute during six months. Also here Sida provided the finance. Kerstin Berggren, who took on the original challenge, had a hard time trying to reform the Institutes agenda and start a process of writing an adequate heritage law. Dick Sandberg’s project office has since developed into a more or less independent and successfully working organization, with a great impact on the Kosovar society.

Thanks to a series of generous donations CHwB could expand its work already during the first years. Many museums as well as the National Heritage Board have sent experts to the field. A row of companies have donated material mostly to Zemaljski Muzej where our board member Per Kåks orchestrated the aid. Our foremost financier was however Sida who also financed a cooperation with a German organization in Tibet where Tina Wik, our project leader for several years in Sarajevo, could take part in the saving of a cloister.

Essential for our efforts is that members of the board have worked in many projects on a voluntary basis. From the beginning the heaviest burden was carried by Margareta Börnstad who took on the administration, later on assisted by Sven Erik Köhlin and myself. In 1999 Susanne Wik was our first employee. In 2002 we could engage our first secretary general, Madeleine Sjöstedt – a great relief.