

GUNILLA VON HALL

As a journalist, I try to put a face to conflict

For the past 25 years, Gunilla von Hall has been the foreign correspondent in Geneva for *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of Sweden's leading newspapers. Apart from covering international affairs, she also regularly reports on conflicts in the field, as well as wars, the refugee crisis in Syria and humanitarian catastrophes around the world.

Gunilla wanted to become a journalist since she was 8 years old. When she was 16, her wish came true: she was granted a scholarship to study in the United States. She stepped out into the world and quickly realized that she wanted to become a foreign correspondent. "I knew that this was right. I wanted to get out in the world and see it with my own eyes, and I found Geneva to be the perfect base". With its international organizations, UN agencies, talks, briefings, experts and diplomats, and contacts in the field, Geneva is a favourable environment for peacebuilding and a good base for foreign correspondents.

The power of a story

During her career as a journalist, Gunilla has seen and experienced some difficult moments, such as the genocide in Rwanda and the Bosnian war, where she found herself in the midst of grenade attacks. But her desire to write about what she saw kept her going. Most recently she covered the Syria talks, and to get a better understanding of the issue, she went to report from the field in Damascus and Aleppo, where she met with local families and communities. She tells the story of an eight-year-old girl named Hala, who miraculously survived after her home was destroyed by a bomb. Unfortunately, her



body and her face were severely burnt. "She has undergone face transplants and operations in Turkey to be able to open her eyes and her mouth, but she looks very different from the other children at school, who bully her." Gunilla is following Hala and her family and plans to visit them again and to continue writing their story, hoping that they get a new home and a new life.

"As a journalist, I try to put a face to the conflict", explains Gunilla. Reporting on peace talks in Geneva is important, however, it doesn't have such a great impact on the readers as a personal story, a face and a fate. "I write about lives, families, and fates. This way I bring home the story and people get a better understanding of what is actually going on in the conflict zones". She gets into close contact with families and writes about their daily lives, their struggles - real stories that often get reactions from the readers.

Making a difference

While visiting the refugee camps in Lebanon, Gunilla met Hozafa, a seventeen-

year-old boy who used to live in Idlib, Syria, with his family. When the conflict escalated, his parents fled to Lebanon but he wanted to stay to continue school; he was the best in his class. But one day while walking home from school, a bomb exploded nearby and he was seriously injured. At the hospital he was told that he would be a paraplegic and would never walk again. His mother came and took him from Syria to Lebanon on the back of a donkey through the mountains. They have no legal status and when Gunilla found them, they were living in terrible conditions. A metal plate broke in Hozaifa's back and he was in extreme pain and the family asked for her help. "I am not a doctor and cannot pay for the operation... But I can write a story."

And so she did, and she was amazed by the public's reaction. A broad fundraising initiative started on GoFundMe to sponsor Hozaifa's operation. A Swedish reader wrote that he has a son who is about the same age as Hozaifa, who lives happily in his home in Stockholm and, "It could have been him". With enthusiasm in her voice, Gunilla conveys Hozaifa's joy when he found out that he will be operated in a hospital and be rid of his pain. "As a journalist, it was very satisfying to see that you can make a difference by writing a story." Hence, the success of her stories comes from touching her readers' hearts, and helps them to relate to those who are suffering.

Journalism for peace

In the context of constant change and innovation, Gunilla talks with optimism about the place of journalism in peacebuilding, emphasizing the role of education and awareness among the new generations. Together with *Svenska Dagbladet*, they have created a children's newspaper which explains conflicts in simple ways, in order to help children understand international and national issues.

Moreover, the publication has very quickly adopted the latest digital communication tools. The website is continuously publishing live-updates, stand-ups, field reports, commentaries and short videos, in addition to having a high social media presence. As a professional journalist, Gunilla consistently adapts to new information practices. "There are no more deadlines, you have to be alert and ready to report all the time and react immediately."

She uses techniques like storytelling and trying to "humanize the conflicts", but at the same time, it is not easy to report on unfortunate events all the time. Yet, the conviction that she can make a real difference with her reporting keeps her in pursuit of her mission as a correspondent in Geneva.

Cristina Agrigoroae