

Interpreting the silences

Telling one man's story of torture in Congo

By Judith A. Weinstein

I first met Paul in the winter of 2005, on my first day volunteering as a French-English interpreter at the Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture.

Paul (not his real name) is a survivor of the second war in the Congo (formerly Zaire)—the bloodiest conflict since World War II.

It was during his initial evaluation that I heard Paul's torture history, told to a social worker in the space of a few short meetings. Though I am familiar with African tragedy told in the broadest terms, I had never experienced such a story told by a survivor.

During intake—a process to assess why trauma survivors left their country and how they've been feeling since—I would come to learn not only the details of Paul's torture, but of his life before the war—before the end of the world, as he put it.

Before the war, which began in 1998 and officially ended in 2003, Paul lived happily as a merchant. One day rebels came to his house, on a rampage. Paul watched helplessly as his wife and child were taken. He was beaten, then left for dead. He searched for his family for

months as he continued to flee the violence. During his last attempt to find his family, he was captured, imprisoned and tortured. He knew that if he didn't save himself, there would be no one left in his family.

The story of Paul's escape had the elements of so many others: a bribe, a serendipitous encounter, a kindhearted stranger and pure luck. His story ended—and began—in his treacherous passage out of the Congo in the hold of a cargo ship heading to New York. Eventually he made his way to Chicago, and to this North Side center, part of the Heartland Alliance.

Awkward at first

The only reason I know all this is that I speak French. At the beginning it certainly felt awkward. What right did I have to be there? I'm not a therapist or a social worker. Yet I also felt a duty to help Paul tell his story.

After the third and last intake session, we said our goodbyes. Paul touched his heart with his hand. "This will stay with me forever," he said. I didn't expect to see him ever again.

But later that winter, a Kovler caseworker called. Would I be willing to interpret for a Congolese client who has signed up for psychotherapy, one of the treat-



Judith A. Weinstein interpreted for a Congolese client who had signed up for psychotherapy on the North Side at the Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture.

Tribune photo by Bonnie Traflet

ment options offered to trauma survivors after intake? It was Paul, and I was touched that he had taken this step toward reclaiming his life.

Before we began, I talked with Vienna, his therapist. She had never conducted therapy through an interpreter.

"You must translate everything, even the pauses," she instructed me. "I don't understand a word of French. I need you to interpret the 'ums,' and the 'ers.'" She wanted me to interpret the spaces as well as the words.

How does one interpret a silence?

I went to greet Paul in the waiting room. He smiled broadly upon seeing me again.

We joined Vienna in a small

consultation room. The air was musty and heavy. A broken clock, forever stuck on 1:30, rested on a table. Next to it was a dusty globe with Zaire still on it.

As a key member of this triad, I was there and I was not there. I was part of the treatment team, yet I did not have my own voice. Vienna acknowledged this inherent awkwardness and told Paul that although he would be speaking through me, he should address her directly.

Vienna asked Paul what he would like to talk about that day. "De quoi veux-tu discuter aujourd'hui?" I interpreted, and Paul responded, "C'est elle qui décide." He had said "She is the one who decides," instead of "You are the one who decides." I debated for an instant whether

to change the pronoun, then interpreted the sentence literally.

Vienna smiled. "No, you decide what happens here."

Psychotherapy is much more free-form than intake, and I realized I was not quite fluent in its language.

But as I grew more confident, I found myself making suggestions to Vienna, even anticipating her words. I heard myself naturally imitating my two clients, reflecting the lilting phrases of Paul's French and the quiet monotone of Vienna's comments and questions—and the silences as well. I paused when Vienna paused, laughed awkwardly when Paul did. I was the ears and mouth for two other people.

Sometimes it was hard to in-

terpret for Paul when his sing-song French was reduced to a muffled mumbling, reflective of his own description of himself as *engourdi*—numbed—by the events of his life.

One day in the waiting room, I asked Paul what his first language was. Lingala, he told me. But he said he no longer wanted to speak or even think in his mother tongue. I wondered if Lingala would reveal his unspoken thoughts.

Believing in destiny

At our last session, in a break from our usual format, Vienna asked us to share our feelings about each other. Vienna told Paul how honored she had been to be his therapist, and how much she admired his strength. Paul said he would never forget us and that we would be part of him forever. He believed destiny brought him to us.

In French, in my own voice this time, I told Paul what I had been thinking all along: how much I admired him, how fortunate I felt to have known him, and how I wished him much success. I repeated this to Vienna in English.

What I did not say was how sorry I was about the circumstances that brought us together, and how I never thought that my gift of language would be used in this way. This I would tell Vienna in private.

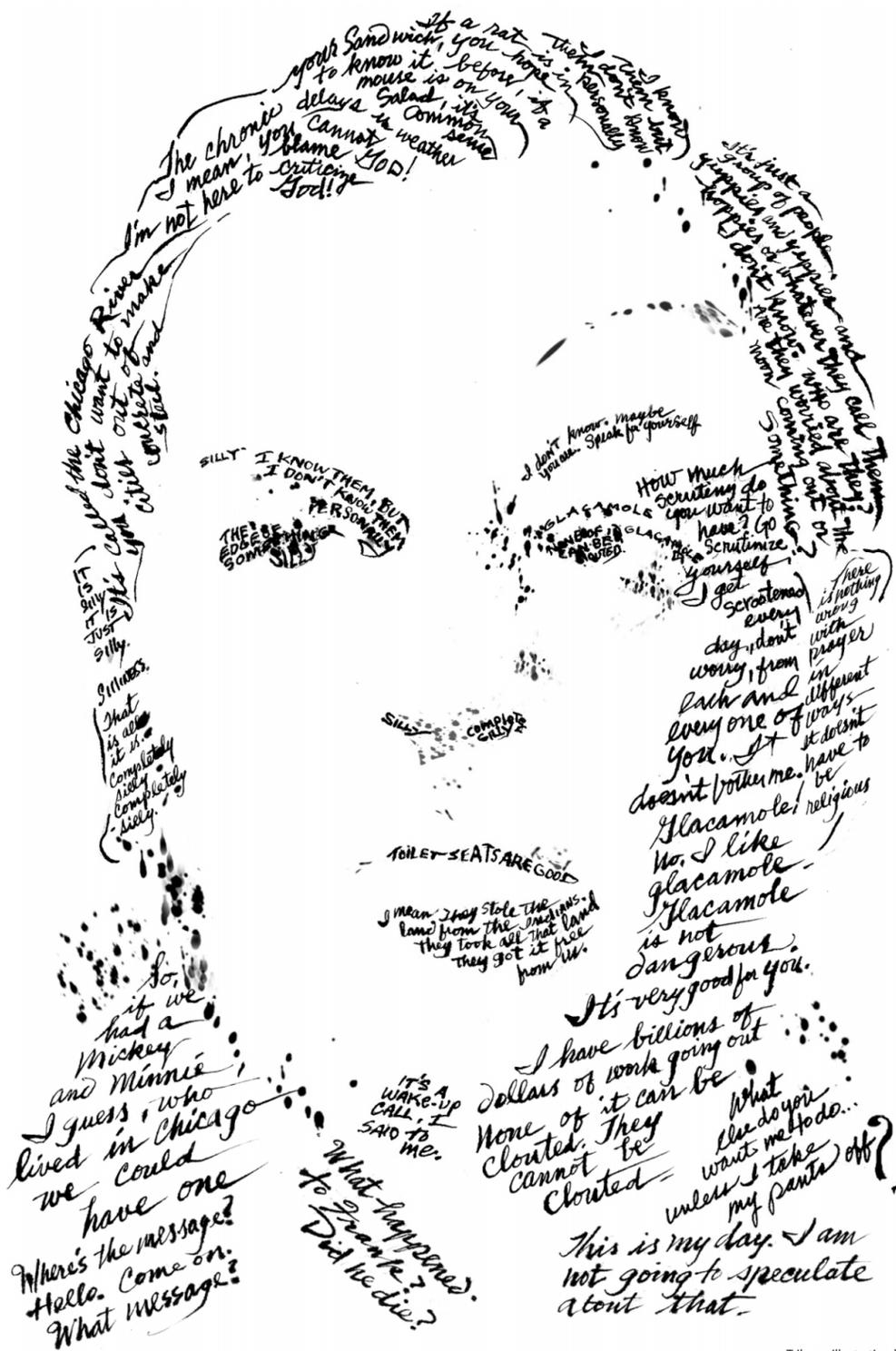
After we had all shared our thoughts, we sat for a few moments in silence. There was no need for interpretation.

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WORTH REPEATING

With his election to a 6th term, Mayor Richard Daley is poised to make political history by serving longer than his legendary father. Both Daleys have made linguistic history of sorts.

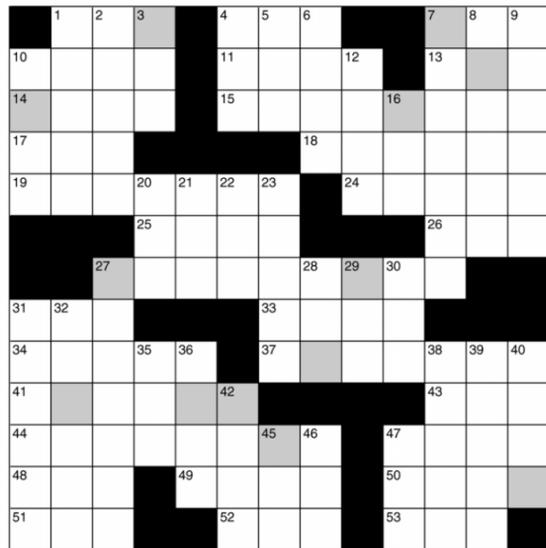
Here is a selection of Daley-isms from the current mayor:



Tribune illustration by Dennis Odom

CROSSWEEK By Mike Selinker

Crossweek is no ordinary crossword. Most of the clues are based on the news of the past week, with an emphasis on local events, and a newsmaker's name can be found reading across the shaded squares. Find the solution on page 5.



ACROSS

- 1 Toward the back of our endangered Viking ship, say
- 4 It says it needs \$100 million to renovate the Blue Line
- 7 Corddry of Fox's show "The Winner," debuting Sunday
- 10 "___ the Goalie" (nickname for recently injured Washington Capitals goalie Olaf Kolzig)
- 11 4th Ward's Ald. Preckwinkle
- 13 Continental abbr.
- 14 One from ComEd may contain a massive increase
- 15 Cubs hero denied entrance to the Hall of Fame yet again
- 17 Native: Suffix
- 18 Bears GM Jerry, who got an extension through 2013 on Wednesday
- 19 Climatic nickname of local radio star Roy "Big Daddy Woo Woo" Little, who died Feb. 22
- 24 What your car might be, if you ignore winter parking rules
- 25 Prayer word
- 26 UFO pilots
- 27 Like Mayor Daley, five times
- 31 Be in debt
- 33 WGN-TV's channel number
- 34 Show that gave cattle rancher Brad Hook a temporary anchorage last week
- 37 Its last year of repairs looks to be quite a tie-up
- 41 South Sider Jennifer, who just got an Oscar for playing Effie in "Dreamgirls"
- 43 Michigan ___
- 44 Either Nicholas or Gypsy, who will soon be the last of their species to leave their McHenry County farm
- 47 On Feb. 24, one errantly sprayed snow and ice that damaged 14 cars and injured eight people
- 48 Abbreviations for Pershing and Pulaski, e.g.
- 49 Some on the Mag Mile are burned out
- 50 15-Across had 2,254
- 51 Rest

- 52 Purchase at Mesa's HoHoKam Park
- 53 Actress Roscioli, who plays Elphaba in the Chicago production of "Wicked"

DOWN

- 1 NU's Jessica Phillips will clerk for this Supreme Court justice
- 2 Secretary, sometimes
- 3 ___ Aviv (site of an attempted suicide bombing last month)
- 4 HQ, briefly
- 5 Also
- 6 First name in lurid court cases these days
- 7 Like Lovie Smith's contract
- 8 Gurnee Mills store, perhaps
- 9 Gets mopey
- 10 Story about historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. last week
- 12 Common contraction
- 16 Past
- 20 Scottish negative
- 21 Soul, in Paris
- 22 Incoming Cook County Clerk Miguel ___ Valle
- 23 Upright, as shelved books
- 27 Most like a rare entrée at Larry's
- 28 Org. at the center of the Scooter Libby trial
- 29 It's now Spike TV
- 30 Poetic contraction
- 31 "They," often
- 32 Phrase of incredulous gratitude
- 35 Poisonous snake
- 36 Disney song subtitled "A Pirate's Life for Me"
- 38 George or Hillary, educationally
- 39 Give ___ of confidence, as the Italian Senate did for Prime Minister Romano Prodi
- 40 Tribune feature
- 42 DEA agent, colloquially
- 45 The Bulls are 1/30th of it
- 46 Recipe amt.
- 47 U. of C. offering

MOST E-MAILED

Sorority boots overweight and non-white members at DePauw

A sorority's attempt to clean house intrigued readers, making this the most e-mailed story of the week at chicagotribune.com. Following is an excerpt:

New York Times News Service GREENCASTLE, Ind. — When a psychology professor at DePauw University surveyed students, they described one sorority as "Daddy's little princesses" and another as "offbeat hippies." The Delta Zetas were seen as "socially awkward." Worried that a negative stereo-

type of the sorority was contributing to a decline in membership, Delta Zeta's national officers interviewed 35 DePauw members in November, quizzing them about their dedication to increasing recruitment. They judged 23 of them insufficiently committed and told them to vacate the sorority house.

The 23 members included every woman who was overweight. They also included the only black, Korean and Vietnamese members. The dozen students allowed to stay were slender and popular with fraternity men—women who could attract new recruits. Six of the 12 were so infuriated they quit.