

Cleansing Pristina

Author: IWPR

By Gjeraqina Tuhina, just returned from Kosovo (BCR No 16, 5-Apr-99)

After the death of Bayram Klimendi, the human rights lawyer, we heard that several politicians and writers had been executed. We heard the rumours about people being rounded up in the main stadium, but we could see from our apartment that nothing was going on there--though I cannot say for the other two stadia in town.

We knew that people were getting maltreated when they were being expelled, and then their flats were being destroyed. But the biggest problem was that the phone lines were cut, and no one knew about their relatives. So the fear was extreme, and people thought only about staying alive.

Even for ten days, I did not think it would happen. Even after the trains began. The line to Skopje hadn't run for ages, but after the neighbourhood of Dragodan was cleared, all of a sudden they started, and everyone was somehow instructed to head to the station.

We could see them from our window. There was shooting in other parts of town. But here, people were going on foot to the station--in silence, with their heads down, just walking. Thousands of them, for hours and hours, escorted by the police.

The first day we saw it, we thought, "Amazing." The next day, we said, "Oh, here they are again." By the third day, we thought it was normal, and everyone just wanted to know what neighbourhoods the people came from so they could know when it would be their time.

But it didn't become real until they finally came to our house. I had become desperate to leave--I was frightened and wanted to live. But I still had some kind of hope, maybe that it would be temporary. I could never imagine myself and my parents, with our dignity and pride destroyed, just walking like that to the station, losing everything.

It was a "normal," quiet day. By then we had three other families living with us, fifteen people in our small flat, and it was lunchtime. They had come from Dragodan and we got to know each other spontaneously, like family. My mother and the girls were preparing the table, meat and rice, which we still had. Then we heard a commotion on the floor below, and we knew.

I wouldn't say they were polite, but they weren't abusive. We were surprised. There was no shouting, no pointing of machine guns. Four young soldiers in the dark blue uniforms of the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) just knocked hard on the door and said, "You have to go. You have fifteen minutes."

They waited patiently. Everyone quietly moved to pick up some things. The computer was on, so I went over and sent off one last short e-mail to say I couldn't file a story that day: "Pray for me."

When we got to the street, everyone was heading left, to the station, and we headed right. We weren't ready yet. Like the people who had come to our house, we just walked over to some friends in another neighbourhood and said, "We're here."

When we arrived, my host and a friend were having a heated discussion. Our host was clear: "When they kick me out, I'm leaving." His friend did not want to give up his life and become a refugee. He said: "As long as I am not forced, I will not go to the train station." They talked for a long time, while we just staying in the dark, without candles or anything to draw attention.

A day passed. It was horrible feeling, just counting the time. We were disappointed because there weren't even any new NATO air strikes near the town. We discussed ideas for leaving, but nothing seemed safe enough. And I wouldn't take that train: three days in the field, losing all my documentation--never.

Only the day before, I had heard that the authorities had burned all the civil documents, on births, marriages, deaths, etc., and the message was clear. We were to become non-persons.

In those final days, I just gave up emotionally. It wasn't that I was afraid, it was the opposite: I was sure--sure that I wouldn't see my friends anymore, sure that nothing would ever be the same.

At one point, I just had to go out. My brother came with me. We put hats on, kept our heads down and went quickly. By then, the town, which had 300,000 people, was half empty. You could feel the emptiness, like you are the only person in a room breathing. Pristina was dead.

A car stopped in front of us, a Serb, but someone I was friendly with.

"Hey," he said, "you are still around? What the hell are you doing. Don't you know your life's in jeopardy?"

I thanked him for the reminder.

He said he had a way out. Two friends of his were heading to the Macedonian border right now. He promised that it would be safe and they could get me through. They had already left, but if we went straightaway we could catch them. I didn't have time to think about it, but I wanted to believe that he wouldn't harm us. We jumped in.

Some distance down the street we caught the other car. There was a brief exchange and we got in. There were no introductions, and the driver and his friend didn't seem interested. They were Yugoslav customs officers.

As we drove, towards the border at Tetovo, I got a proper view of the city for the first time in ten days. There were too many tanks, too many police. Everywhere. There were armoured vehicles in front of all the government buildings. Except for the shops, the centre itself was not too damaged. Even the street lights were working, though no one stopped at them. But as we passed through other neighbourhoods, especially residential areas, it was all burned. It was strange: I'd lived in Pristina for 23 years but felt like I no longer knew the town.

The route, not two hours, was quiet. I had reported on all the fighting, and many of the villages along the way had already been burned. There wasn't that much more destruction than I'd already seen.

There were a few checkpoints, and some vehicles being stopped by armed civilians, but the roads were basically empty and we sailed through. The officers chatted with each other, complaining about the poor availability of cigarettes in Pristina and the long day ahead of them. They saw I was in no mood to speak.

The border was announced by the line of refugees--10 kilometres long. People in cars, tractors, wagons, and several thousand on foot, lined up to get out of Yugoslavia. There were old people and babies, and it was very cold.

My "driver" took me to the head of the line, and let me out right over the border. I asked if they wanted to see my documentation, and they said no: "Just have a good trip, and good luck." Could it be that they didn't realise I was Albanian? Whatever, I was out of Kosovo, out of Yugoslavia, and out of danger. I felt reborn.

Not everyone was so lucky. In no-man's land, there were several thousand people who had been waiting for days. I saw an old woman who had died. A few men carried her body out into a field, and buried her there. It's a sad place for your parent's grave. There were many children crying, and stampedes whenever milk or bread, usually from some Albanian from Macedonia, arrived.

I had a mobile phone, and after letting my family know I was OK, I became the centre of a mini-stampede as everyone wanted to borrow it. So while we waited, I spoke to many people. They had no idea where they were going or what they would do. "If we get lucky, someone will give us a room," they said. But they had no aim or motive.

There were only a few international agencies. The Macedonian authorities were in no rush to process people, and after eight hours the cars there had not moved at all. Every hour or so, they just singled someone out and said, "Hey, you. You can pass now." And you were through.

By nightfall, it began to rain and get really cold. I was very lucky: I have family in Macedonia, and a relative found a way to come pick me up. But on the other side, a few hundred Albanians, people from western Macedonia, from Tetovo and Gostivar, were standing in the snow and the rain, waiting to pick up strangers with no place to go and take them into their homes.

The thing that we had feared for so long had happened. As we drove away, I was leaving Yugoslavia and the MUP, the fear. But I was also leaving Kosovo, and will have to start my life over again. Still, I think the people will go back. I saw people even right now who want to return. They have this bizarre feeling that they just left, and their homeland is empty. That whether they like it or not, Kosovo, for now, belongs to the Serbs.

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