

Living The Life Of Behgjet

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Behgjet Pacolli, the Kosovo Albanian multi-millionaire who weds Italian pop icon Ana Oxo tomorrow and whose business links with the Kremlin may yet bring down Boris Yeltsin, is living proof that fact can be stranger than fiction.

When Behgjet Pacolli, the Kosovo Albanian at the centre of investigations into bribery in the Kremlin, married Ana Oxo, Italy's most popular singer on September 25, no expense will be spared for what will undoubtedly be the Albanian society wedding of the decade and possibly the century.

The 48-year-old construction tycoon, who is believed to be the richest Albanian in the world, has learned to live well. From what he told Balkans Crisis Report in an extensive interview by phone before his big day, it all sounds a far cry from his humble origins growing up in rural Kosovo in the 1950s.

From his swish, pink marble headquarters in Lugano, Switzerland, Pacolli controls a business empire with interests as far afield as South America, the Middle East and South America as well as in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and annual turn-over somewhere around \$1 billion.

Although generally respected in his native Kosovo, Pacolli is perhaps inevitably a controversial figure. In addition to the on-going investigations into his Russian connections, which are serialised daily in Kosovo's Albanian-language newspapers via translations from foreign press, within Kosovo his name has been linked on occasions with, of all people, Slobodan Milosevic, the Yugoslav President.

Born in 1951 in the village of Marevc, 40 kilometres north-east of Pristina, the young Pacolli was one of 10 children - five boys and five girls - who grew up, like most in Kosovo at the time, without electricity or running water.

Pacolli was a star pupil at the local primary school, getting a modest scholarship to help him attend secondary school in Pristina. There, he spent four years sleeping in a wood storage hut, kindly given to him by a Turkish family, and trudging the 80 kilometre round-trip home twice a week to pick up provisions.

On graduation, his proud father wanted him to become the village's teacher but his mother intervened to help him get to Hamburg, Germany. The 17-year-old Pacolli arrived in Hamburg train station penniless and soon hungry. A Syrian pizzeria owner took him on as a cleaner and paid him in pizza.

The Syrian also helped Pacolli enroll in college, first to learn German and then to study foreign trade. To pay his way, Pacolli worked on the docks, learning enough of every language to ensure that he was always picked for the work ahead of other dockers. After three years he returned to Kosovo more or less fluent in six languages and with a degree.

Back at home, Pacolli found it difficult to get work since nobody believed that he had the degree he said he had. Eventually, he persuaded the then head of the Kosovo League of Communists, Mahmut Bakalli to see him. The two men hit it off and within 48 hours Pacolli was the official interpreter/translator in one of Kosovo's biggest enterprises. Moreover, it was a relationship that would later prove critical to Pacolli and, even today, the two men remain close.

During his military service, Pacolli contacted companies throughout Austria and Germany seeking work

and, soon after his release, he joined an Austrian company, where he worked as a sales representative for Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Poland and Russia. Two years later, he moved to Switzerland and joined a Swiss company he had got to know in Moscow.

In 1980, Pacolli nearly died in a car crash in Ljubljana and spent 29 days in a coma. His address book slipped out of his pocket and onto the floor open. The nurse who picked it up saw Bakalli's entry and phoned the party boss, who was well known throughout Yugoslavia at the time, to inform him of the accident. Bakalli then called his opposite number in Slovenia who saw to it that Slovenia's top surgeon, who the same year had operated on Tito, intervened.

As he neared 40, Pacolli decided to go it alone. At the time, both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were disintegrating and Pacolli believed that he had the business acumen, local expertise and contacts to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. Having heard nothing but praise across the former Soviet Union for a Slovene project design company called Biro 71, Pacolli decided to take it on. He borrowed 600,000 German marks from another Albanian businessman at 25 per cent interest, which he pumped into Biro 71 to help it over the difficult period covering Yugoslavia's break-up.

In return, the company began working exclusively for him. Pacolli's first contract was for a 1,000 square metre conference hall in Siberia in March 1992. In its wake, he became involved in building hospitals, hotels and factories throughout the former Soviet Union and, in 1993, he won the contract to rebuild Moscow's battle shattered White House.

Company turnover in 1994 was \$800 million, and more than \$1 billion in 1995, 1996 and 1997, the year that he completed construction of Kazakhstan's new capital for which he was made an honorary Kazakh citizen.

Since then, in the wake of various investigations into his business operations, and in particular a police raid on his headquarters in January of this year, his fortunes have declined, but Mabetex remains Switzerland's 70th largest company.

Pacolli told IWPR that the investigations were a result of politically motivated attempts to destroy Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and that he had been implicated because, as an outsider, he was an easy scapegoat. Moreover, he insists that he will be cleared of any wrongdoing. Despite months of investigation, no charges have been filed against Mabetex.

As a result of his wealth, Pacolli has inevitably been drawn into Kosovo politics. In addition to his friend Bakalli, he says he knows long-time undisputed leader Ibrahim Rugova well and respects him greatly. He challenges anyone critical of Rugova's pacifism to explain what alternative strategy could have been better.

Pacolli gets on with Jakup Krasniqi, the former KLA spokesman turned minister for reconstruction and development in Kosovo's unrecognised provisional government, but does not know his boss Hashim Thaci personally, though he says that he would like to get to know the charismatic KLA leader.

Pacolli says that he did not directly finance either the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) or FARK, the alternative force set up by former prime minister in exile Bujar Bukoshi. Neither did he set aside three per cent of his income for Rugova's alternative Kosova republic during the 1990s, like other Albanians working abroad. He did, however, employ several thousand Kosovo Albanians on projects across the world who were thus able to contribute to all these causes. And he directly helped many families in need.

Since the end of the war, Pacolli has set up in Lugano, the Foundation for the Organisation and Reconstruction of Kosovo (FORK), through which he has been channeling aid to the province. In time, he

hopes that this body will become some sort of reconstruction project designer, providing a local partner for international agencies. Krasniqi came from Pristina to FORK's inaugural meeting.

During Operation Horseshoe, six of Pacolli's relatives were killed and several more are missing, believed to be held in Serbian jails. However, Pacolli succeeded in evacuating most of his closest family after a sister was deliberately targeted and robbed by Serbian forces on 16 March, about a week before the beginning of the NATO bombing campaign.

Back in 1983 Pacolli built luxury houses for his family, replete with saunas, water purifiers and an electricity generator, in what became an Italian-style village in the southern Pristina suburb of Ajvalija. During the NATO bombing, the Yugoslav Army converted the settlement into a military headquarters looting the entire contents as it withdrew in June.

Despite the losses - both material and human - which Pacolli suffered at the hands of the Yugoslav Army, rumours persist that the tycoon was in cahoots with Milosevic, even that he has a special relationship with the Yugoslav President's brother Borislav, Yugoslavia's ambassador to Moscow.

Pacolli describes the stories as "absurd". The rumours, it seems, stem from Mabetex's original web site which listed the many companies for which its subsidiaries, in particular the Slovene firm Biro 71, had worked, and which featured prominently the Yugoslav holding company Genex.

According to Pacolli, many companies in the former Yugoslavia operated under the aegis of Genex before the country broke up. Moreover, he stresses that he personally has had no dealings with it or, indeed, any other Serbian company since the 1970s.

In December 1998 an article appeared in a Swiss paper, *Le Temps*, alleging that an Albanian-language television station which Pacolli was planning to launch was in fact the extended hand of Milosevic and that Pacolli had close business connections with Borislav Milosevic.

Pacolli is suing *Le Temps* and says that before publication of the article he had not heard of Borislav Milosevic and that even today he has never met him. However, the Yugoslav ambassador to Moscow may have been present at the opening of the Golden Ring hotel, a Mabetex construction, in January of this year, since the entire diplomatic community was invited. Rumours of Pacolli's link to Milosevic spread in Kosovo after the *Le Temps* article was translated and published locally.

By his own admission, Pacolli did meet with Slobodan Milosevic on two occasions on 7 and 8 March in 1998. This, he points out, was an attempt to halt rising violence in the wake of the Drenica killings, while the meeting itself was brokered by Russian associates.

Pacolli flew into Belgrade on his private jet, talked with Milosevic for three hours, before flying on the same day to Pristina for meetings with Rugova's deputy, the late Fehmi Agani and his old friend Bakalli. In the event, Milosevic refused to give any ground and the Albanian leaders were only prepared to negotiate with Belgrade in the presence of a mediator.

Pacolli returned to Belgrade the next day for a three-minute meeting in which he told Milosevic that the Albanian side would not trust him. He says that Milosevic responded by saying that the Albanian leaders could do what they wanted to, but that their people will pay. After a five-hour wait in Belgrade airport, Pacolli flew out.

Pacolli says that he personally has no political ambitions. He, nevertheless, plans to proceed with his

Albanian-language television station that, he hopes, will reach Albania, Kosovo and, via satellite, the Albanian diaspora early next year. He is also hoping to launch an Albanian-language daily newspaper in Lugano next month whose provisional title is Exclusive. And he earlier set up the Zurich-based, Albanian-language weekly Bota Sot.

Despite Pacolli's age, his marriage to 38-year-old Ana Oxo, four-time winner of the San Remo music competition, who is herself of Albanian descent, is his first. That said, he has two daughters, 22 and 13, out of wedlock - the elder the product of an earlier liaison with an Austrian, and the younger with a Slovene.

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