Living Memories

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Segregation – Growing Up in Kosovo

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Abstract: The author gives a personal account of how he experienced the difficult 1990s in Kosovo. In 1990, when Yugoslavia fell apart, he was 12 years old. He grew up in Kosovo’s “parallel school system”. In 1999, when NATO bombed Yugoslavia, the then 20-year-old worked for the newspaper *Koha Ditore* in Pristina. His family’s house in Peja was destroyed, members of his extended family as well as friends and acquaintances murdered. His parents and siblings sought refuge in Montenegro; he himself in North Macedonia. They returned to Peja after the end of the war, and slowly regained their lives.

Keywords: Kosovo, war, personal account

5 July 1990, Early Morning

The latest *Radio Pristina* newscast was being broadcast from our car’s JVC stereo. The Serbian parliament in Belgrade was gathered in an extra-ordinary session. This session came in response to another one held in Pristina by the Kosovo parliament, just three days before, in which the ethnic Albanian members of parliament adopted the Constitutional Declaration for Kosovo as an equal unit of the Yugoslav federation. “What will they do now?!” said my dad Flamur, speaking more to himself than to us, as he was driving the car. Us three kids, cramped in the backseat, were looking at our mom Esma, to see her reaction. We were on our way to Ulcinj, a coastal town in Montenegro, where we traditionally vacationed during the week of 4–7 July, a holiday week in Yugoslavia.

When we arrived in the town of Rozhaje (in Montenegrin Rožaje), a few kilometres into Montenegro, my dad pulled over our car to wait for aunt Drita’s family who were driving behind us. Ali, my aunt’s husband, and my dad discussed the just-announced decision on the radio that the Serbian assembly had declared the Kosovo assembly illegal along with its ruling of three days earlier, and forewarned

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extraordinary measures for the so-called “Kosovo province”. Visibly worried, the adults returned to their cars. A deafening silence ensued as we continued our journey. Only the voice of *Radio Pristina* was to be heard. Suddenly, the loudspeakers produced a strange noise and the broadcasting stopped. “This cannot be normal, something big is happening”, my dad said. After some 30 km we pulled over again by the roadside, in what was then known as Ivangrad, now Berane. As soon as we met my aunt’s family, we reckoned that the same thought prevailed in both cars: “We need to go back. It looks like there’s going to be a war.” My brother Dritëro, 18 at that time, said that he would go fight. I, a 12-year-old, said that we did not even have weapons in our house. Nobody even mentioned the sudden crash of beach time. The brand-new Peugeot 204, just bought by my parents, a status symbol of a promising life ahead for a couple of professionals, was now not heading towards the seaside, the symbol of peace, anymore. It was instead returning towards home and roaming between the mountains, symbols of danger and uncertainty—back towards Kosovo, which was signalling a period filled with anything but peace and prosperity.

5 July 1990, Afternoon

As soon as we returned to Peja (Serbian Peć), Kosovo, we were summoned at my grandmother Zake’s house, in order to have as many family members as possible under one roof. Both *TV Pristina* and *Radio Pristina* ceased the broadcasting signal for several hours. When they returned, an anonymous news anchor—Hajrije Jaha, called “Spikerica”, a name that we learned only later—in broken Albanian tried to communicate what she read in front her, written in Serbian syntax. *Ditari 2*, the evening news edition of *TV Pristina*, reported a perfectly ordinary day, not mentioning a single word about hours before when the police had expelled most Albanian workers from the buildings of Pristina’s radio and television stations. Altogether the message was brutal: nothing was going to be the same again.

Early September 1990, Beginning of the New Schoolyear

We were sitting at my friend’s house. But instead of chatting and listening to music, we were listening to the lecture of our teacher. My friend’s house was serving as our classroom for the week, as were those of other pupils, during specified weeks. The

“Albanian parallel system”—I started hearing the phrase more and more often. A week before I had arrived at my schoolyard, just to see many people outside of the school building. “They are not letting us go in,” my classmate Besnik told me. At one point, one of our teachers approached us and said that the new administration would not let Albanian pupils go back to school, since Albanians did not obey the curricula of the Serbian ministry of education. “If they will not open the doors for us, we will organize our own schools,” the teacher said.

Late September 1990

The comprehensiveness of the exclusion would first become apparent through the media. I remember the caption on the daily newspaper *Politika* from Belgrade which read: *Kosovo. Nacionalisti u organima pravosuđa* (Kosovo. Nationalists in the judicial institutions). My father read his name in Cyrillic letters. It stated therein that he, as the only one from the District Prosecution Office in Peja—but together with 60 other judges and prosecutors throughout Kosovo—was being expelled from work because of “infliction of nationalist views in the Kosovo justice system and commitment to opposition against Serbia”. The latest cause: his solidarity with a day-long boycott of work in Kosovo, on 3 September, as a sign of protest against Belgrade’s discriminatory politics towards Albanians. What a way to communicate the termination of an almost 20-year-long career—through a newspaper article. Some days later, the official letter of termination arrived to him, administered and written in Serbian. It appeared to convey the beginning of a wider cleansing campaign of everything Albanian in Kosovo. My 12-year-old self made a silent promise to himself: “I will never ask my dad for pocket money anymore.” He, during the years to come, made a lot of effort to the contrary.

December 1990

Together with some thousands of people, I attended one of what felt like very many funeral services for Albanians murdered while serving as soldiers in the Yugoslav National Army. The official version was that he had committed suicide. I overheard a dialogue with opposing views between two friends of my dad. One said: “This oppression will end soon. The horse will throw a few more kicks before dying.” The other said: “Well I swear, be ready for a long journey, my friend, maybe 10 years.” I

remember that I was thinking “What an awesome guy this first one. A total loser this other one, a pessimist.” That same evening *Radio Zagreb*—the only independent radio station still broadcasting an Albanian language newscast in Yugoslavia—broadcast news about the very tense situation between Slovenia and Croatia on one side, and Serbia on the other. This might lead to war, the news predicted. I thought: “What if that loser’s prediction comes true, and this crazy situation lasts for 10 years?!”

27 March 1999, Third Day of the NATO Campaign Against Yugoslavia, Afternoon

Our new Peugeot car had been replaced with a used Volkswagen Passat, bought in Germany with money gathered from the small business ventures of my dad and brother, as means to survive after my dad had been expelled from his professional position. Now it was the Passat that drove my family towards Ulcinj in Montenegro. Only this time they drove not towards the seaside and the beach, but towards rescue. In the morning hours of the same day, mixed Serbian police and military units had killed 47 Albanian men in the Dardania neighbourhood of Peja, where my family lived. Others had been expelled from their homes and were told to go to Montenegro or Albania.

Six days prior to that, my uncle Qazim’s son, Ari, was killed by a hand grenade thrown inside the coffee bar *Koha* in Pristina, on a night during which a couple of similar attacks occurred. Just a few days before his murder, Ari had gotten a job with an international humanitarian organisation. On the night of the attack, because of fear and seeking for a safer location for his work jeep to pick him up, he had changed the waiting spot, which had usually been by the near traffic lights. This would prove a deadly decision.

Uncle Qazim had been captured by *TV Pristina*’s video cameras. In 1990, he, a delegate at the Kosovo assembly, had argued with a Serb colleague during the preparatory sessions for Constitutional Declaration. On 2 July, he voted pro changes and on 7 September he was in Kaçanik in southern Kosovo, announcing the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. After this he was forced to live in exile. In 1999, Belgrade—finally returning the debt to him, tapping him where it hurts most—murdered his son. While returning from Pristina’s Dragodan cemetery, where we had parted with Ari, my dad asked me to go back with him to Peja so that the family would stay together “whatever may happen”. I gave him the typical answer of a 20 year-old, in the midst of being an idealist

and naïve: “Some are fighting with weapons; I will stay here in Pristina and fight with my pen.” But, the so-called fighting with my pen would terminate almost simultaneously with the falling of the first NATO bomb over the Golesh mountain southeast of Pristina, on the night of 24 March. That night, Serbian militaries stormed the offices of the *Koha Ditore* newspaper, where I had started working not long before, and destroyed everything, leaving the security guard Baca Rexhë murdered.

2 May 1999

My fighting with a pen would only resume in the town of Tetovo, North Macedonia. I had spent about a month and a half hiding in Pristina with the family of my aunt Lule, in one of the apartment buildings inhabited by un-expelled residents of the Bregu i Diellit (Sunny Hill) neighbourhood. Finally, I decided to take the risk, hoping not to put my aunt’s family in danger, and got myself onto one of the buses that drove towards North Macedonia. In Tetovo, a town in northwestern Macedonia near the border with Kosovo, I met a number of my colleagues who had reunited to bring forth a newspaper project, publishing what was called *Koha Ditore in Exile*. “Another one is with us,” my colleague Agron said. He told me that the big boss, Veton Surroi, was still inside Kosovo, changing places of shelter. Some days later, our neighbour Riza, one of the very few Albanians that managed to stay alive in Peja, wrote this note in his diary: “11 May: Today it was Flamur’s house’s turn to be burned... All valuables were stolen beforehand. It used to be a beautiful house....”

16 June 1999

Together with a journalist of *The New Yorker*, Elisabeth Rubin, and my colleague Garentina Kraja, we succeeded in convincing a cab driver in front of Pristina’s *Grand Hotel* to take us to Peja. Rumours went that the city had been so destroyed that perhaps no reconstruction would be worthwhile. From the other direction, from Montenegro, my mother and father were driving towards Peja, too. When we arrived, we found them in front of the house, or better said in front of what remained of the house. I looked at the burnt house and at the same time thought how this was one of the most beautiful moments in my life. I was smiling. My parents looked at me with surprise. They could not foresee how I would react to

seeing that all that we once possessed—everything personal, books, photos, tape collections—were gone for good. I reckoned: it would be too hard on my parents to deal with me worrying. Earlier we had learned that six other houses of our extended family in Peja had been entirely burned down. “Only one thing matters,” I said to them. “We are alive and we are home again.” Two months later dad gave his oath as the new Chief Prosecutor of the Peja District. Bernard Kouchner, the UN administrator of Kosovo, stood in front of him. The original speech was in English, which my father did not completely comprehend, but what he understood he liked a lot. The day after, he once again read his name in the newspaper. This time, however, the newspaper was in Albanian, and the article was not serving as a road closure because of controversial political actions. Ten years after he had been ousted he returned to his office.

June 2000

My sister Donika gave us an ultimatum. Although long engaged to be married, she had postponed the wedding during the time of war as she did not want one of her most special days taking place under horrifying conditions. She did not want to be a bride who stepped out of a house where we were temporarily sheltered. “Only out of our own house,” she said. The first time, it had taken our parents six years to build their house. This time around, with five contributors to the family budget, they built it five times faster. In June 2000, Donika, a beautiful bride, stepped out of our rebuilt, again beautiful, house.

Post Scriptum, 5 July 2010

I remember how, at the time, the delegates of 2 July and 7 September were shown in documentaries, giving many TV, newspaper and radio interviews. Nowadays, they are acknowledged as the heroes of yesterday’s Kosovo and as models of today’s Kosovo. It was my dad’s last day of work. He retired the way he had always dreamed of—a district Chief Prosecutor of a state called the Republic of Kosovo. It had been a long and hard journey. The media had just reported that the Serbian president, Boris Tadić, attempted to undermine the recognition of the newest state in Europe—two and a half years after the declaration of independence. He had just requested that an extraordinary session of UN Security Council be held urgently, in protest for an incident that occurred in the mostly Serbian inhabited northern

Kosovo. On the same day, my wife Zana gave me the happy news: “Donika has given birth to a baby girl.” Baby Bora brought to five the number of my parents’ grandchildren. They no longer fit altogether on the backseat of one car to be driven to the seaside.

Bionote

Adriatik Kelmendi is a journalist, television host, university lecturer and social activist based in Pristina, Kosovo. He is the author of four books; his main fields of research are media and politics.