

THE LAST ALBANIAN WAITER

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As an Albania specialist, I always enjoy returning to Prishtina in the southern Yugoslav province of Kosovo. It is not the exciting culture shock of Tirana, and possesses none of the beauty and refinement of a European capital, but it does have an atmosphere and charm of its own, in a run-down sort of way.

The Grand Hotel of Prishtina has seen better days. The economic collapse of Kosovo is visible in every corner of the building, which was once the architectural pride of a new Yugoslavia. Five neon stars still shine from the rooftop, although at least four of them should have been removed many years ago. But no matter. I have always felt at home here, and in the venerable Hotel Bozhur.

The Grand Hotel was strangely quiet on my arrival after a six-hour bus ride from ugly Belgrade. My delight, at long last, at being able to speak Albanian was dampened at the reception desk by a polite but quite definitely Serbian *molim?* (Can I help you?) We settled on English.

After a few hours in Prishtina, it all became painfully evident. What I had heard at home in Germany was true. Virtually all the Albanian staff at the hotel had indeed been fired and replaced by Serbs. And not only at the hotel: 115,000 Albanians were out on the street in less than a year after the Serbian government seized power in what had been the Autonomous Region of Kosovo. Should I ask why at the reception desk? Would the question be considered provocative or simply naive? Should I stay at the Grand at all or look for another hotel? The Bozhur would no doubt be the same and I could not envisage a smoky Albanian *han* [inn] in private ownership in downtown Prishtina. You are a foreigner, I reminded myself. Do not meddle in Balkan politics on your first day in Yugoslavia.

The hotel lobby was serene: black leather sofas, plastic plants, a few people drinking at the bar and a businessman reading a newspaper in Cyrillic characters. Much like the lobby of any big hotel. Do they all know? I wondered. And if they do, what do they think? Everything looked so normal. I felt uneasy and decided to go out for a walk to gather my thoughts.

In contrast to the external appearance of the building and its surroundings, the restaurant of the Grand has managed to retain something of its original dignity. Almost romantic lighting, table flowers, even a pianist playing *Strangers in the Night*. Individuals, couples and small groups of well-dressed patrons wining and dining. I could have been out for dinner in Germany or the USA.

I insisted on using Albanian to order my meal and a glass of red Kosovo wine, and managed to make myself understood. As I sat listening to the lull of the music and studying the faces of the guests, it suddenly dawned on me that everyone in the room was speaking Serbian. There was not a single Albanian patron in the restaurant, or anywhere else in the hotel. Were the Albanians, who make up 92% of the population of Kosovo, no longer allowed into their own hotel? Were they perhaps boycotting it? I did not know. My immediate reaction was frustration, fury and helplessness. I would not have patronised a restaurant which refused to cater to Blacks or Jews. By this time, I was so upset that I could not eat the meal placed in front of me. This was, after all, 1992, not 1935. The spectre of Nazi Germany arose before me as I watched the guests laughing, joking and enjoying their meals, seemingly oblivious to the injustice. I pictured myself in the 1930s in an elegant restaurant in Berlin. Music, fashionable patrons dining by candlelight without a care in the world in a hotel recently made *judenfrei* (free of Jews).

The next evening I was served by an Albanian-speaking waiter, the last one. Fatmir was in his mid-twenties and had worked at the restaurant of the Grand Hotel for several years. While the other waiters were busy in the kitchen for a moment I asked him how it had all taken place and why. Almost all the Albanians have been thrown out, he whispered. What can we do? They are hiring Serbs with no qualifications at all. Now they have introduced new uniforms with the Serbian cross on them. And what will you do? I asked. We are Muslims, he shrugged, giving an embarrassed smile. We have a crescent and a star, you know, but not a cross. The Orthodox, the Serbs, have the cross. But perhaps they won't do it after all. They seem to change the regulations daily. It was at this point, when I was filled with a mixture of indignation and confusion, that my eyes became fixed upon the crosses which had been discreetly embroidered into the waiters' jackets; I had noticed the cross for the first time on nationalist posters in Belgrade and later seen it sprayed black on walls and in the hotel elevator.

Since the Serbian government seized power in mid-1990, the population of Kosovo has been cast into limbo to starve in what is already the poorhouse of the European continent. Only those families who have a relative abroad, in Germany or Switzerland, can survive. A few of the 115,000 victims of power politics had the consolation of a polite lie that they were redundant; but most of them were told the truth, You are Albanian.

One afternoon I talked to Professor Zenel Kelmendi, a leading Kosovo surgeon. After 27 years of teaching at the Faculty of Medicine, he was dragged out of the university building one morning in August 1990 in handcuffs. What did his Serbian colleagues say, with whom he had worked for so many years in the same operating theatre? You don't know Kosovo, he replied. They were the ones who called the militia.

Virtually all the Albanian hospital staff have now been replaced by Serbs, exceptions being made only in cases where no qualified replacement could be found. In the maternity ward in Prishtina, where 40-50 children used to be born every day, only three to five women have dared to give birth there this year.

I also learned that in the first six months of 1991, Albanian schoolteachers had received no salaries. Their Serbian colleagues, who often teach in the same school buildings, have had their salaries doubled and tripled during this period. The excuse is parity with Serbian teachers in Belgrade, where wages are higher. Why do the Albanian teachers continue working? If we don't, they will close down the school. That's what they're aiming at, a high school teacher from Prizren told me.

Serbs and Albanians have been living together on the Plain of the Blackbirds for centuries, and history has made them enemies as it has of the Jews and Arabs in Israel, and the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. After the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Serbia was awarded Kosovo, which it had coveted for centuries as the cradle of Serbian civilisation. The inclusion of the province in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes left almost half the Albanian population outside their Albanian homeland.

The Kosovo Albanians, who now make up the second largest language community in Yugoslavia (after Serbo-Croatian), did not fare much better under their Serbian rulers than they had under the Sultans. Hundreds of thousands of Albanians were forcibly expelled to Turkey up to 1960 under the pretext that they were Turks; Serbian colonists settled the newly vacated farmlands. The memorandum of the Expulsion of the Albanians and the colonisation of Kosovo, prepared by noted Serbian historian Vasa Cubrilovic (1897-1990) and presented to the Belgrade government on 7 March 1937, reads like a watered-down version of the minutes of the Wannsee Conference in Germany of 1942.

The systematic persecution of the Albanians in early post-war Yugoslavia was finally ended by the overthrow of Tito's Vice-President, Aleksandar Rankovic (1909-1983), in July

1966. Yugoslav-Albanian relations improved in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and full diplomatic ties between the two countries were established in February 1971. This brought about a political thaw for the Kosovo Albanians. In 1968, they had won the right to fly their national flag, and in November 1969 the University of Prishtina, the only Albanian-language institution of higher education in Yugoslavia, was opened. Full cultural autonomy was first achieved after much delay under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution.

The semblance of autonomy and freedom which the Albanians enjoyed in the 1970s was brought to an abrupt end in 1981. The popular demand for republic status and equality with the other peoples of the Yugoslav federation, a demand supported by over 90% of the population of Kosovo, was met with tanks and automatic rifles.

Throughout the 1980s, the political and economic situation in the province deteriorated and inter-communal relations took a drastic turn for the worse. It was a harbinger of what was to come for all of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Serbian military invasion of Kosovo in the summer of 1990 brought the province to the verge of civil war. The elected parliament and government of Kosovo were deposed, the only Albanian-language daily newspaper, *Rilindja*, was banned, and all Albanian language radio and television broadcasting was shut down. Since then, emergency legislation has facilitated the direct takeover of all Kosovo's industry and the firing not only of Albanian management but of all employees of the 'inferior' race. Nowhere since the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania have human rights in Europe been so flagrantly and so systematically violated as in Kosovo.

Fatmir, the last Albanian waiter at the Grand Hotel, disappeared, no doubt to join the swelling ranks of hungry and angry young Albanians. On my last day in Prishtina I ventured to ask the other waiters what had become of him. He is on his holidays, one of them answered with a smile.

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