

Eqrem Basha.

Les ombres de la nuit et autres récits du Kosovo. Christiane Montécot and Alexandre Zotos, tr.

Paris. Fayard. 1999. 203 pp. ISBN 2-213-60450-9. 98 FRF.

In the spring of 1999, Albanian writers and intellectuals in Prishtina and elsewhere in Kosova were driven out of their homes, herded with the rest of the population like cattle through the streets and packed onto crowded busses and trains to be expelled from the country. These were the lucky ones. The more unfortunate were murdered straight out by Serb paramilitary units. Some writers in Prishtina went into hiding, seeking refuge in cellars and abandoned buildings for weeks on end, and managed to survive in Kosova until liberated by NATO forces in mid-June of that year.

Those who inquired among emigre circles in Skopje and Tetovo as to the fate of writer Eqrem Basha were perplexed. Word had spread there that his family had escaped to Macedonia, but that he himself was staying on in Prishtina "because he wanted to write a novel." While it is true that a modicum of suffering is conducive to artistic creativity, many of his fellow writers in the refugee camps thought he had gone crazy.

What influence the long months of terror will have upon Basha's literary production remains to be seen. In the meantime, a collection of his short stories has appeared in the French translation of Christiane Montécot (Paris) and Alexandre Zotos (St. Etienne). *Les Ombres de la Nuit* contains twelve tales. The majority of the stories were taken from the volume *Marshi i kërmillit* (see WLT 69.1, p. 199), though one dates from 1971 and another one appeared in the journal *Koha* in 1995.

One element many of the tales seem to have in common, not surprisingly, is an atmosphere of oppression and insanity, forebodings no doubt of the war which was to ravage the country in 1998 and 1999. In *Brouillard*, a man out on the street is arrested by the secret police. When asked where he is going in the middle of the night, he insists it is not nighttime at all. His watch indeed proves that it is seven in the morning. A dense fog has blanketed the entire city, not only causing apprehension among its inhabitants, but also throwing time and place out of keel. Only when it lifts do the 'foreign' police recede.

It has been difficult for translators to find publishers willing to take on literary manuscripts from the Albanian, not because of the lack of material, but because of the rather isolated and obscure nature of the Albanian presence in Europe up to now. The last couple of years and, in particular, the terrible destruction wrought upon Kosova in 1999, have seen a dramatic increase in public awareness in and interest for what was once a *terra incognita*. Proof of such interest is the fact that a major French publisher such as Fayard has now, for the first time, shown itself willing to take on a Kosova Albanian author. One can only hope that the discovery of Kosova as a cultural entity and, hopefully, as an emerging nation in its own right, will spark publishing interest in the English-speaking world, too.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim, Germany