

One More Chapter Closed in the Balkans Madness

Death Came Upon the One Who Was Lost for Some Time

Story by Dita Dauti-Heilman

Photos by Bobby Wright

ANOTHER UNUSUALLY WARM DAY WAS spreading its wings over still sleepy Austin. It was March 11, 2006. Spring Break was ahead of us. But this time I knew I was going to be very limited in my outdoor activities.

I fell and broke my right leg on February 1st. My bed became my refuge, our porch overlooking the UT tower my dreaming place, and my working space was the big black leather chair in our living room from where I could watch the TV, use the phone and look out toward the Wild Basin Preserve from the western side of our home in Westlake

Hills. I couldn't think that I had many reasons to complain. Everything was running smoothly with help from Stefan, our boys, my parents, sister and friends who took turns aiding me.

It was 7:45 a.m., Stefan left for his morning bike run. On the way back he came with a bag of fresh pastries from La Madeleine, the morning paper and he made a fresh pot of coffee. By that time I was already waiting for him in my comfortable spot. Croissant was flaky and coffee was playing with my taste buds. I was welcoming and enjoying another day, my 14th spring

in Texas. Clouds were slowly taking different direction, and I opened the morning paper to see what was going on around us. Dubai port deal, Governor Richards showing us her brave face, letters to the editors, and the weather was promising loads of sunshine for our upcoming week in Port Aransas. Then I turned the TV on for a moment, which I don't usually do in the early mornings.

CNN - channel 46, story about the American Christian hostage found shot in the head in the streets of Baghdad. My heart flew to his loved ones. Then next

was the defiant face of Slobodan Milosevic. I felt that my coffee was not going to taste as good, my croissant may not be finished. Christiane Amanpour and Richard Holbrook were talking about him. I heard CNN anchor Fredericka Whitfield's words, "Balkans Butcher found dead in his prison cell," and all I could think of was the fact that this man robbed me of my dreams when I was in my early 20s. This man robbed the dreams of his own family. This man robbed the entire Yugoslavia, and its multiethnic population of their dreams. He prepared himself to

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pursue, recruit, realize, and achieve his own sick dreams. He was found dead in his cell. How? What? When? Those were perhaps other words that were coming from the TV screen that I couldn't hear.

I was born in the early '60s. Tito was known as a strong Yugoslavia's leader, one of the most prosperous socialist countries created after the Second World War. There were certain problems with different ethnic groups off and on. I learned to speak my own mother tongue, Albanian and also Serbo-Croatian at the same time. I had many friends, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians, Croatians, a few Slovenians, Macedonians and Gypsies and still do. After Tito's death in May of 1980, winds of change became stronger.

I am thinking about the days when Milosevic, as president of Serbia, started his Dreary March. On a hot June day in 1989, hundreds of thousands of Serbs gathered from every corner of then-Yugoslavia in the open Fields of Kosova to commemorate the Lost Battle of Kosova fought 600 years before in the same place. Milosevic introduced himself as protector of all Serbs, and revoked the Autonomy of the Albanian Kosovars. It was hard to believe that other Yugoslav Republics were allowing such a thing. Were they all in a state of shock? Did they think that his politics would fade? Voices of resistance did not resonate far.

Milosevic's Yugoslav regime made it possible that in Kosova from late 1989 more than 400,000 Albanians, who were 92% of the majority, were to be fired from their jobs. Albanian schools of all levels started to be shut down; people were being denied their

basic rights. A reign of fear, massive degradation and human rights abuses continued to be orchestrated by his twisted mind.

I felt the madness firsthand in May of 1992; I became another name in the long list of fired Albanians. I was working at the Electric Power Plant, "Kosova-B." My services were not needed any longer since the official language was only Serbian by then, and they would no longer need translated paperwork from and in the Albanian language.

I just happen to have been born in the wrong place, in the wrong time as a member of the unwanted ethnic group. I stopped being a human being thanks to his opportunist leadership. My dreams were shattered. Little did I know how many more people were going to be hurt, tortured, raped, held in the concentration camps, expelled and murdered in brutal ways not seen after the Second World War. Where were the voices of reason? Where were other countries to stop his march?

Milosevic started his Balkan Wars after Yugoslav Republics started declaring their independence. He briefly attacked Slovenia in early 1991. By mid-1991 he moved the Yugoslav National army against Croatia. We all witnessed what happened with the beautiful city of Vukovar and its residents in Croatia.

By early 1992 he moved toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. We all saw what happened in Bjelina, Sanski Most, Sarajevo and Srebrenica. We all saw what Karadic, Mladic, Babic, Arkan and other paramilitary leaders were doing. It was all done with his approval. He made many people really believe that he was one of the greatest Serbian leaders that ever lived. How sad!



The front entrance of the Sultan Murat I Tomb where his blood was spilled and where he died, until his remains were sent back to Turkey a few centuries later. Sultan himself couldn't enjoy the victory over the defendant army led by Serbian Prince Lazar in 1389.

In mid-July of 1992, love brought me to Austin following my American-born husband whom I met in Prishtina. Still shaken with what was happening in my country, I volunteered for the refugee resettlement agency helping others that had to flee their homelands in similar situations. I felt closer to all of them. I hoped that the bloodshed would stop. I hoped that I would never have to resettle anyone from Yugoslavia as a result of this madness because I hoped it would be stopped before that happened.

But, it happened very quickly. First refugees arrived from Bosnia by mid-1993. I heard firsthand what Milosevic's soldiers and paramilitary troops did in Croatia and Bosnia. It was heart-wrenching to hear stories from a survivor of the concentration camp in Bosnia. He was tortured, starved and de-

nied human rights for many months. It was hardly a few months later when I welcomed and saw the hurt face of the woman held by Serbian soldiers (her former neighbors), just because she was Bosnian Muslim. Many others followed from other parts of Yugoslavia. Madness was reigning.

How to process and comprehend all of that? I believed that the camps were closed for good with the fall of Nazi Germany. I thought that we would all remember Auschwitz and other camps so we could learn that freedom is a right for every human being. I hoped that trains carrying expelled people would stay in the history books from then on. Was I wrong?

But, voices of reason rose and got Milosevic to stop the war in Bosnia. In 1995 President Clinton sent Richard
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Holbrooke as a special envoy to broker a peace accord with Milosevic in Dayton, OH. I briefly met Mr. Holbrooke while having my birthday lunch with my friends at the Four Seasons hotel in Austin in 2003. I introduced myself as a former Yugoslav Kosovar and he told me he wished that Milosevic was stopped for good back then.

Deep down I knew that Milosevic was not going to stop as long as Kosova was not completely controlled by his army. The world watched him launch his open attack on Kosova in 1998. We saw the streams of more than 800,000, Kosovar Albanian refugees fleeing to the neighboring countries in the early spring of 1999 from the terror of the unleashed troops, led by his orders. We saw people being rushed in trains, buses and walking on foot toward Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. This time, they were my own Kosovars, my friends, neighbors and my family.

My only sister Ilirjana, her two children and her husband were among them. Leaving on the bus to Skopje, capital of Macedonia, my sister and our childhood friend Ariana were on the same bus. Ilirjana had to decide which of her two children would be seated with her, and which one was going to stay with our friend in case the paramilitary units stopped the bus. *Sophie's Choice* was playing in the real life of my sister. A few days later

How can I forget Vera's still stunningly beautiful face when she was telling me about this when we met in Prishtina this past November while I was visiting Trepca School in Kosova? She was as strong as many other women survivors of torture that I spoke to over the years. She told me they were not going to destroy her because she had three children left to care for. Her daughter was holding her hand. My eyes were holding back tears.

I saw the faces of my brother-in-law and my nephew briefly on CNN as they were transported by bus to the Skopje airport to leave for America. I thought that those were the scenes we would see in the movies but not in real life. Nightmares were engulfing my soul. This time I had to welcome my own family members as refugees. This time I had to hear war stories from my sister's experience. Her never-ending fears about an uncertain trip toward safety and a future. My uncle and his family followed. They were given two minutes to leave everything behind. His house is in the northern side of Mitrovica, a



Dita Dauti-Heilman poses in front of the Gazimestan Monument where the Battle of Kosova was fought many centuries ago.

city still divided by the river Ibri. How did I bear this pain?

We saw on television the bodies of the executed, innocent people in Racak. In Gjakova, my father's hometown, they tortured my father's first cousin in front of his house and took him away. They killed the husband, brother-in-law, his two sons and the father-in-law of my cousin while hold-

front of the Parliament House in Prishtina. They were somebody's husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and friends. My father's lost cousin, Fehmi Dauti, were one of them. Milosevic robbed Fehmi's family of a father, a soft-spoken intellectual in his prime years who had so much to give to his family and his community.

Dreams were shattered in the Balkans. They became nightmares since

ing a knife under her chin. How can I forget Vera's still stunningly beautiful face when she was telling me about this when we met in Prishtina this past November while I was visiting Trepca School in Kosova? She was as strong as many other women survivors of torture that I spoke to over the years. She told me they were not going to destroy her because she had three children left to care for. Her daughter was holding her hand. My eyes were holding back tears.

I saw the wall with pictures of still missing men from Dukagjini, western region in Kosova, lining the fence in

the late '80s. Dreams need to be restored by looking forward. Life has many more great stories in store for us. It is sad that Milosevic didn't live long enough to see himself locked-up for the rest of his life. I just hope that his victims will find the path toward healing and restoration of their lives.

Tomorrow is a better day. The future awaits us. Chapters of peace in the Balkans need to be written. Trepca's students in Stanterg are waiting for me to visit them next fall. My children are learning that you must do the work in order to learn how to forget and forgive. ★