Dominika Ćosić

BALKAN EXPRESS

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A COUNTRY
ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A COUNTRY

Translated by Edward Laycock
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I.</td>
<td>April 1997</td>
<td>Train journey from Cracow to Budapest to Novi Sad</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II.</td>
<td>May 1998</td>
<td>The bus from Cracow to Belgrade</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III.</td>
<td>August 1998</td>
<td>From Cracow to Budapest to Belgrade</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV.</td>
<td>November 1999</td>
<td>Warsaw – Skopje</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V.</td>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>From Cracow to Zagreb (via Budapest)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VI.</td>
<td>October 2002</td>
<td>Belgrade</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VII.</td>
<td>October 2003</td>
<td>From Cracow to Belgrade (via Budapest)</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VIII.</td>
<td>November 2003</td>
<td>From Cracow to Belgrade (via Vienna)</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IX.</td>
<td>May 2004</td>
<td>Cracow, Vienna, Sarajevo</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter X.</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>Brussels to Sarajevo (via Ljubljana)</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter XI.</td>
<td>April 2008</td>
<td>From Brussels to Belgrade</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter XII.</td>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>Brussels to Belgrade</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter XIII.</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>From Brussels to Belgrade</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter XIV.</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>From Brussels to Podgorica (via Istanbul)</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter XV.</td>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>From Brussels to Zagreb (via Warsaw)</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Founded by Margaret Thatcher in 2009 as the intellectual hub of European Conservatism, New Direction has established academic networks across Europe and research partnerships throughout the world.
Prologue
When I was a child I never had difficulty answering the question “who are you?” “I’m half Polish and half Yugoslav,” I would reply. Obviously, because of my upbringing, my family situation and the place where I lived, it was really the first (Polish) half of me that defined me, the second (Yugoslav) half being an exotic extra that made me different from other children. That extra half of me would swell with pride when I saw Yugoslavs on the TV (at the turn of the 70s and 80s it tended to be folk musicians or sportsmen) and I would cry out joyfully “Those are my brothers!” They were all my brothers. I didn’t divide them up according to which Yugoslav nation they belonged to, especially since I had only lived in Yugoslavia till I was barely three years old. I knew there were Yugoslavs in Belgrade – like my Dad and my Gran – but also in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje, Titograd and Ljubljana. My Yugoslav brothers stirred up real emotions inside me. I felt for them. They made me feel I belonged to the world of the South. My feelings for them grew and grew, fed by holiday visits to Dad and Gran.

Just to be clear about this, my Gran was a real Yugoslav. She had spent the whole of her youth and the whole of the war with the partisans in the forest. She was one of Tito’s last followers, who continued believing in him to the very end, even when everyone else had seen through him. She met him during the war and her most precious relic was a gold watch with an engraved dedication from comrade Josip Broz Tito. Gran taught me to salute the Marshall when he appeared on TV and in her home she kept a bust and several portraits of him. In her mind he was a true deity. Gran was a beautiful woman, a tall brunette with a clear complexion and green eyes framed by dark lashes. As far as her character was concerned, she was a rather untypical woman. She had three great loves and three great passions: politics, football and Yugoslavia. Every day after work she would go to party meetings, after which she would go home and watch or listen to the news and programmes about politics on the radio or the TV. When Partisan Belgrade were playing this normally calm, standoffish woman would change beyond recognition. She was a total fan. She also aspired to the communist ideal of being honest, modest and hard-working. While her communist party friends would use their party membership to gain financial benefit and social status, Gran believed in the purity of communism, Tito and Yugoslavia, and lived in near
Spartan conditions. As a true communist she didn’t go into the cemetery to attend her father’s burial because there was an Orthodox priest at the funeral. She stood to attention on the other side of the street. The same thing happened at my christening in Cracow. Gran was standing to attention opposite the church. And apparently she saluted too. Curiously she got on really well with my Mum. She told her once: you, Elizabeth, have your Catholic God, and I have mine, Tito. You have religion and I have communism, so we both believe in something and we both have principles. Dobrila had first encountered communism as a twenty-year-old, just after the war started. Communism and Yugoslav patriotism went together in her worldview. Sometimes I think how difficult it must have been for her to die knowing that everything she had believed in had turned out to be an illusion. She died in October 1993, when the Yugoslav wars were raging in Croatia and in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Yugoslavia had been reduced to a rump state, the mafia and hyperinflation had taken over in Serbia, and many people were already calling Tito a tyrant and a fraudster. The Tito myth shattered, and Yugoslavia, the cause to which she had devoted her life, ceased to exist. I would like to think that by some miracle the awareness of its collapse never dawned on her.

My Dad was different. He was less ideologically fervent than his Mum and though he considered himself a Yugoslav he didn’t profess communism. He worked for the Yugoslav army as a ballistics specialist, so no doubt felt himself to be a Yugoslav by a professional sense of duty as well as by upbringing. For his 18th birthday my Gran gave him the biggest present she was capable of giving him: a party membership booklet and a recommendation of his services to her comrades. My Dad tore up the party membership booklet, saying: “The party took my Mother from me and I will never join it!” And he kept his word. Officially, he worked for Yugoslav TV, and unofficially for the Military Institute of Technology. When I used to ask him what he did at work he would always be very dismissive, saying that he just made the coffee. I never found out what he really did at work until his funeral. He was one of the wisest and cleverest people I’ve ever known. And one of the most unappreciated.

In Tito’s twilight years, Yugoslavia was known not without cause as “little America”. It delighted me and other people from Poland with its fragrant, delicate toilet paper, its bananas, its oranges, its chocolates, Coca-Cola, western sports shoes, Barbie dolls, beautifully and colourfully designed children’s books, luxury motor cars (by the standards of the day) and by the multitude of gifts showered upon me by close friends and distant acquaintances alike. And above all by the freedom to travel bestowed on the Yugoslavs by their famous red passports. They could visit the West, go shopping in Italy and see Paris and London. The contrast with Poland couldn’t have been greater.

My childhood was marked by two events linked to Yugoslavia. In May 1980, Marshal Tito died. I didn’t really understand the coverage I saw on Polish TV, but Tito’s face on all the photos and the pomp of his funeral, attended by dignitaries from all over the world, combined with the sight of people in tears on the streets, made a profound and lasting impression on me. I had a sense that something irreversible had happened. This funeral of a communist leader had been one of the most regal in Europe, on the grandest scale imaginable. Over 120 countries had sent official delegations to Belgrade to attend it. Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Jasir Arafat, Leonid Brezhnev, Saddam Hussein, Nicolae Ceausescu, Helmut Schmidt, Kim Ir Sen, the mother of US president Jimmy Carter, kings, first secretaries and presidents all came to pay personal tribute to Tito. There were politicians from Africa, Asia and Europe. This was a spectacular demonstration of Yugoslavia’s special position in global politics as the leader of the non-aligned movement. It should be noted that towards the end of the 1980s Yugoslavia’s accession negotiations with the European Economic Community had already progressed quite far. Tito’s funeral was also the famous Blue Train that carried Tito’s coffin (which was actually empty, because his body had been flown by military helicopter) from Ljubljana, where he died, to Belgrade. At every station where the train stopped thousands gathered to bid him farewell with flowers and genuine tears. I watched all these scenes as a child and cried my own tears for the great leader’s passing. After all, Gran had instructed me in the cult of Tito. The crowds of weeping mourners left their mark on me. I didn’t realise at the time that we were mourning the death of Yugoslavia, though perhaps some of the mourners secretly felt that way already.

Four years later, in 1984, Sarajevo hosted the winter Olympics. Again, the power and the splendour of Yugoslavia was on display, even
though without Tito, and with inflation, it was starting to wobble, but that was all the more reason to put on a show. It was the biggest winter Olympics ever, with the largest number of participants. Sarajevo had to build the necessary sports infrastructure almost from nothing. And the state coffers were already almost empty. So the inhabitants of the town collected money for the games. And Yugoslavia did it again, enjoying a second moment of glory, basking in the admiration of the whole world.

A new stadium and new hotels appeared. Sports reporters from all over the world stayed in the newly built Holiday Inn during the games. A few years later, the hotel would again be full of reporters from all over the world, but this time they would be war correspondents. And the stadium would be a cemetery. Gran sent me the mascot of the Sarajevo Olympics – a wolf cub – in a parcel. But the games were to be Yugoslavia's swan song.

Then, finally, 1991 came. Several days of fighting in Slovenia, and then in Croatia. I was taking my high school entrance exams when it dawned on me that there were no Yugoslavs any more. Instead, there were Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Slovenes, Macedonians and Montenegrins. The world of my childhood had ceased to exist. My Dad stopped being a mythical Yugoslav too, and became a Serb. To be honest I couldn't say how this shift in my Dad's identity took place. We never found the time to talk about it. As the war spread through the whole of Yugoslavia I watched the nightmare unfold with incredulity, failing to comprehend how people who had spent their whole lives together peacefully were now killing each other. My Gran died in 1993. We knew she had terminal cancer and we managed to send her a card with some forget-me-nots. Dad said she died holding the forget-me-nots in her hand. Two years later, I got into university and chose to study Serbian and Croatian in Cracow, in the hope of gaining an insight into why Yugoslavia had fallen apart through a knowledge of its history, its literature and the mentality of its people. I started going there, first to Belgrade and Novy Sad, then to other towns and other former Yugoslav republics. I started writing articles about the Balkans for the Polish press. I learnt about the history of Yugoslavia in parallel with the individual stories of people I met from there. In 1999 the NATO air raids on Belgrade took place, one of the Alliance's biggest mistakes to date in my opinion. By 2008, when Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, I was already in Brussels. I witnessed from close quarters the unavailing struggle against this decision and the unstoppable mechanics of the decision-making machine.

This book is not an academic work, nor is it the journal of a war correspondent. It's a very personal account of my travels through what was once Yugoslavia.

Recently I've been comparing how the situations in Poland and Yugoslavia changed over the years. In 1980 “Solidarity” started the process of change in Poland and its liberation from the Soviet yoke. At the same time in Yugoslavia, Tito's death was heralding the country's demise. In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, and Poland held its first partially free elections. In the same year in Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic transformed himself from communist apparatchik to nationalist on the site of the medieval Battle of Kosovo, and the whole of the former Yugoslavia started sliding with gathering speed into war. In 1999, NATO launched its air strikes against Yugoslavia. A few days before, Poland had just joined the Alliance. In 2008, when Poland had already become an EU member, Serbia had the cradle of its nationhood taken away from it. Twenty years earlier, Yugoslav citizens had been travelling around the world like kings on their red passports, whereas Poles had been stuck at home without the right to any travel. Twenty years was all it took to turn the situation around. Twenty years later, it was the Poles who were travelling around the globe and the Serbs who needed visas and invitations even to get to Bulgaria, Romania or Hungary. I'm sure there are even more parallels one could draw. My travels have helped me to understand more and to find out more. But I still can't reconcile myself with the fact that during our lifetime, with the experience of the Second World War safely behind us, a country in the very heart of Europe has gone through multiple agonies and ceased to exist before our very eyes.
Chapter I.

April 1997
Train journey from Cracow to Budapest to Novi Sad
During my second year at university I finally got another chance to travel to Yugoslavia, for a two-week scholarship in Novi Sad. After nine years’ absence I went back there with mixed feelings. I felt anxious about what I might find, but also curious. There was some joy in me too at the prospect of returning. Over the nine years since I had last been there (last summer holidays with Gran, 1988), too many things had changed. I had still been a child then, but now I was an adult. Gran had died, and so had Auntie Natasha, who had been a rock and a refuge. (One of the most beautiful childhood memories I have is picking peaches from the tree in her garden.) Yugoslavia, or what was left of it, had changed even more than I had. I knew I was no longer going to the rich land I had visited as a child, but I had no idea what had taken its place.

The journey to Budapest was an ordinary journey in a night train, bereft of anything exciting or surprising. At Keleti station in Budapest we waited for the train to Novi Sad. For me, Keleti Station was a symbolic border where one left Central Europe and crossed into the Balkans. I felt moved as I crossed the Hungarian-Yugoslav border. The last time I had crossed it had been in a previous era.

We finally arrived. In Novi Sad, the second biggest Serbian city, an employee of the local university was waiting for us at the station. We had been supposed to spend the night in a hall of residence, but because of a general state of confusion we were sent to a three-star hotel in a convoy of taxis. Taxis and hotels tend to look the same wherever one goes, and in any case I was too tired to take in much. Only our excursion the following day opened my eyes to the changes that had taken place.

There had been no obvious or striking change. There had been no natural disaster no earthquake. No mosques or palaces had suddenly sprouted up out of the ground. But somehow it wasn’t the same city as it had been before. Since 1988 the buildings seemed to have grown smaller and greyer, the cars older, the streets shabbier and passers-by scruffier. Even the university struck me as being down at heel. What had once seemed smart and modern – the tower blocks – now made it all look very provincial. The tower blocks were grey, dirty and derelict. They seemed low and squat. The cars parked around them looked similarly lacklustre. Old models in poor condition. The streets were less colourful, the neon signs less bright. In comparison with Poland there were far fewer clubs,
restaurants, elegant boutiques, modern hotels and smart offices. There was a general air of neglect and dilapidation.

But the people had changed even more than the city. From my childhood, I remembered fashionable passers-by in expensive designer clothes which would have aroused great envy in Poland. Now I saw people who had just put on whatever they still had to wear, and that wasn’t much. Very few people could afford to buy a pair of shoes in a smart shop in the centre of town for the price of several months’ salary. So the men mostly wore tracksuits and other sports gear, and the women dressed modestly, often in tracksuits as well. The young people did admittedly look much like young people in any country, but rather like young people in communist Poland they owed their youthful chic more to their own inventiveness than to any kind of affluence. War invalids had also made their appearance on the streets of Novi Sad. Young war invalids. The sight of the first boy I saw with an amputated arm was a shock for me, as was the sight of another with an amputated leg. I ended up getting used to it. It turned out that some of them had come back from Bosnia, others from Croatia – students were sent to the front too. Some of them even volunteered to go. Nobody in Yugoslavia paid any attention to young men mutilated by war. Unlike in Poland or in Western Europe, war invalids here were not only associated with the Second World War.

Not far from the university halls of residence, in one of the suburbs on the edge of town, there was something that looked like a rubbish dump. It was a group of colourless makeshift shelters made of corrugated iron and plywood, buried in piles of rubbish, adorned here and there with the rusty wreck of a washing machine or a car. I found out this was where refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina lived, along with Serbs and Gypsies resettled from the Krajina region as part of operation “Storm”. They had no running water, gas or electricity. They had been vegetating for years in conditions beneath human dignity. They were the unlucky ones. They had no well-to-do friends or relatives who could take them in. Nobody really worried about them, or about any of the other refugees and resettled people for that matter. International organisations weren’t particularly interested in Serbian refugees, and Yugoslav institutions either lacked the staff or the money to help them.

During my scholarship studies we enjoyed complete freedom in our free time. We only had to turn up for meals at the right time. Meals… Eating in the student canteen didn’t offer much variety. It was just an endless procession of cabbage. First came an unidentified liquid of undefinable colour, taste and consistency, and made from unknown ingredients, which we assumed to be cabbage soup. That was followed by bones or lard immersed in a greyish mass of peas and pickled cabbage. For afters there was cabbage. The worst thing was that the students queued up for their cabbage obediently and uncomplainingly. When I finally notices this I felt ashamed of the pseudo-intellectual jokes I had been making about the lack of variety in the menu. One of our friends, Goran, was from Bosnia. He was a typical Bosnian Serb, with an Orthodox crucifix around his neck and strongly rooted convictions. He had managed to escape war and conscription, but not poverty. He wore a threadbare overcoat whose buttons didn’t match. When we visited him in his room in the hall of residence, he got out everything he had to eat: melted cheese, a piece of bread roll, a yoghurt. I felt bad eating his last few meagre provisions, but at the same time, it would have been much worse to refuse his hospitality, which would have smacked of contempt. Goran had a friend called Jelena, a very nice girl born in Osijek. Because Jelena’s parents had stayed in Osijek in Croatia and now had Croatian citizenship and Jelena lived in Novi Sad and had a Yugoslav passport, their family meetings had to take place in Budapest. At the time it was still difficult for Serbs to get Croatian visas and for Croats to get Yugoslav visas, so many families separated by the new border had to meet in Hungary.

Two outings to places just outside Novi Sad made a particular impression on me: one to Sremske Karlovce and the other to Fruska Gora. Sremske Karlovce had been the seat of the Serbian Metropolitan in the eighteenth century and was famous for the peace treaty concluded by the Turks and the Austrians here in 1699 as well as for the school built there shortly after that date. The school’s corridors were festooned with portraits of various worthies from down the centuries. There was a beautiful park next door. The town itself was not very big, but it was neat and tidy and left a good impression on visitors. Fruska Gora was not far from Sremske Karlovce. In the sixteenth century Orthodox monks had
founded several monasteries there and the town had come to be known as the “Serbian Athos”, a reference to Mount Athos in Greece and the many monasteries around it, including a Serbian monastery Hilandar, the repository of many religious and cultural treasures, which unfortunately burnt down a few years ago. It was Good Friday in the calendar of the Catholic church when we visited Fruska Gora. Some monks from one of the orders there offered to be our guides, opening wide the doors of their monastery for us. My attention was drawn to one of them in particular, a handsome man with brown hair. Tall, statuesque, bearded, with piercing black eyes, long hair and a haunting expression, he perfectly matched my image of Petar Petrović-Njegos, the Montenegrin ruler, monk and romantic poet, who apparently achieved more for Montenegro during his trysts with the wives of European dignitaries than during his official political encounters... It turned out that this particular monk had just arrived from Australia, where his parents had emigrated years ago. As an adult he had decided to return to the country of his ancestors and to seek fulfilment in a monastic life. His parents had actually been atheists. He explained that his rebellion against his parents’ atheism had set him on this path. He showed us round the outbuildings, the cattle shed, the stables and a few bits of field. But the most interesting place we visited was the room where the monks worked on their icons. There were a number of wooden benches, as in a school classroom, where grown men were mixing paint and applying it to wooden tablets, all of them intent on their work. There was an almost tangible sense of being somewhere extraordinary, somewhere sacred. The visit was rounded off sociably, the prior inviting us to enjoy a traditional coffee and a glass of the pear raki distilled in the monastery. By three in the afternoon a storm had broken. We waited in the pouring rain for a clapped-out bus to come and pick us up.

One thing hadn’t changed - Novi Sad was still a conglomerate of many different ethnicities. As elsewhere in the Voyvodina, there were still Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Albanians, Roma and even Cincars, a Romance ethnic group native to the Balkans. Orthodox, catholic and protestant churches rubbed shoulders with each other without there ever being any vandalism. Hungarian and Slovak were spoken on the streets. The town had not succumbed to the madness of nationalism. Many inhabitants of the Voyvodina had a strong sense of local identity. They would protest when the Voyvodina was described as “Serbian”. Pressure for greater local autonomy was growing. One day I was talking to a friend on the bus and said the words “Here in Serbia”. An old man came up to me and, turning to my friend, asked him to tell “the girl” that “there’s no Serbia here, only Voyvodina”. Unfortunately my friend was a keen Serbophile and started explaining Serbia’s right to the Voyvodina to the old man. An argument started and began to warm up. We had to get off at the next stop. Otherwise I fear the two might even have come to blows.

The old man was not alone in his strong feeling of local patriotism. Separatist tendencies had been growing for several years already. The locals increasingly stressed their cultural separateness and insisted that they belonged to Central Europe, “Mitteleuropa”, and not, perish the thought, to “the Balkans”. They wanted to break their economic ties to Yugoslavia and regain some of the autonomy Milosevic had taken away from them. In 1989, as the President of Serbia, Milosevic had considerably curtailed (though not removed altogether, as is sometimes claimed) the powers of two autonomous regions: Kosovo and Voyvodina. In Kosovo this led to violent protests by the Albanians and to a boycott of state institutions and schools. This in turn led to the creation of a “shadow state”, an alternative to the official government system of administration and education, and even to the emergence of a “shadow cabinet” to run the shadow state. In the Voyvodina there were no riots or boycotts. Perhaps because of the special nature of the region their frustrated aspiration to autonomy didn’t degenerate into aggressive nationalism. The whole episode just resulted in the creation of more groups calling for greater autonomy for “the granary of Yugoslavia”, as they liked to refer to the Voyvodina. The Voyvodina was better off and economically more developed than the rest of Yugoslavia and some of its inhabitants were reluctant to keep propping up Yugoslavia’s poorer regions.

Not so long ago Yugoslavia and Hungary had lain on the silk road of enterprising Polish traders. I recall an amusing incident in a hotel once when a chambermaid asked us one morning what we had brought with us. Unaware why she was asking this, we simply answered that we hadn’t brought anything, apart from our own things. She then started asking us how much our cosmetics cost, to which we replied they were for our
own use, and not for sale. She couldn’t believe us. How could this be, she marvelled, Polish sportsmen had stayed in their hotel and had always sold them Nivea creams, lipstick, leather gloves and sheepskin coats. And now we had turned up with nothing to sell? So why had we come at all?

The hotel was full of medallion men with hair slicked back and hairy chests bared in leather jackets, white socks and pointed mocassins or designer sports shoes. They were glued to their mobile phones. The car park was full of fancy cars fitted with the latest sound systems. They were the only kind of businessmen who could afford to spend the equivalent of a month’s salary (60-100 Deutschmarks) on a night in a hotel. We were lucky enough to meet such a specimen once when we were hitchhiking. The brand new Peugeot, the tracksuit and the shiny hair and gold chains immediately told us everything we needed to know about the driver.

Mirko told us proudly that he had been a student once too: of physical education, but he had given up after two weeks because it was boring. He had no regrets looking back. By giving up his studies, he had been able to go into business and start making money. His current line of business was buying genuine sports shoes in Italy (not the fake ones everyone in Serbia wore) and tracksuits in Belgrade and selling them in Novi Sad, where he owned a disco and a pub on the edge of town. We saw the place ourselves. It was where the local jeunesse dorée met. They were the children of the old guard, who were still doing nicely under the new system. Tracksuit-clad, the girls wore an excess of makeup and the boys an excess of hair gel. Loudspeakers were blasting out gems from the “turbo folk” repertoire such as “Ja i Ti u jednoj sobi” (Me and You in One Room). After one Coca-Cola we left.

Many sociologists have written about turbo folk, and it was indeed a social phenomenon worthy of study. Balkan folk music at the disco. A thumping beat, synthesizers and texts that brought tears to the eyes of the critics. The main exponents were masters of the art of cheap and cheerful kitsch. They tottered on sky-high stilettos in slinky multi-coloured latex outfits, adorned with chains, leather, gold and inches-thick makeup and hair gel. Breasts bulged with silicon implants. Trousers bulged with equally artificial endowments. The most famous stars of this genre sold millions of CDs, in spite of the general impoverishment of the population. People came in droves to worship their idols at concerts where rows of loudspeakers belted out the hits at full volume. But the most interesting thing about turbo folk was that it was popular everywhere, in all the former Yugoslav republics. The stars were universal Yugoslav stars. The unchallenged queen of the genre was and is Ceca, a raven-haired Barbie doll stuffed with Botox and silicon, often seen floating on an inflatable swan in a swimming pool. In spite of being the widow of the gangster and war criminal Arkan, Ceca is adored everywhere, even, ironically, in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

One day I saw a poster in town advertising a concert by a group called “Eva Braun”. I was surprised at the thought that the Polish alternative punk band of that name had come all the way from Wroclaw to the Balkans to give a concert. A friend confirmed that there was going to be a concert by a band called Eva Braun. I was even more surprised to see Eva Braun CDs in a local shop and bought one out of Polish patriotism, only to find on opening it when I got back to my hotel that it was by a Serbian jazz band who had chosen the same name.

Belgrade

Wherever I went in Yugoslavia I was constantly comparing the shabbiness of the present day with the opulence of days gone by. When I went to Belgrade for a day, that didn’t stop – quite the opposite in fact. No doubt I had idealised the old Belgrade and forgotten about the ugly parts of it. The new Belgrade repelled me with row upon row of almost identical dreary grey tower blocks and very little greenery in between. Initially I was amused by the totally dilapidated buses. There were holes in the floors and the passengers and the driver were arguing all the time. Whenever the driver stood on the brakes, the passengers would tumble head over heels and colourful insults would be exchanged, both vegetable-based (“Tomato!” “Potato!”) and of the more vulgar variety (e.g. the universal “jebem Ti”). These scenes were funny and sad at the same time. Yugoslavia was full of holes that had been inadequately patched up.

One of the few parts of Belgrade where time had stood still was where my Gran had lived. Gran lived in Vracar, near Kalenic Pijace and its bustling market. I found the old familiar passageway to Gran’s
and Gran's old flat, where some new tenants had moved in. Then I saw how much Belgrade had changed. An era had come to an end. Most of Gran's old neighbours had died or moved out. There were only a handful of them left. I could still remember the summer holidays I had spent there, sitting on benches outside with the neighbours, enjoying peaches, grapes and rakia, or coffee made in a cezve. There were always some banana-flavoured chocolates waiting for me. They had soft centres and were the kind of sweets that children dreamed of during the declining years of communism in Poland. Usually my Gran stayed away from cooking, but in my honour she would always prepare some baklava. Friends and neighbours congregated. The really special thing about visits to my Gran's was the genuine sense of community among the neighbours I encountered: they shared everything with each other, their problems, their sorrows and their joys. During the day my brother and I would go out with Gran to buy things at the market. The smells of summer filled the air. The smells of ripe peaches and fresh watermelons mingled with the aroma of roasted coffee, the scent of flowers and the smoke from cigarettes. On hot days we made our way to the Sava along the boulevards. Gran's flat in a pre-war building from before the days of communism filled me with a sense of peace and calm. Not finding any of my old friends here and just feeling a sense of death and absence – of Gran, of Yugoslavia, of everything – made me regret I had come.

That feeling of regret made me hesitant to visit Auntie Natasha's house, which had once stood for all the best things in life for me. It was a white one-storey house in the colonial style, surrounded with columns and trees, on Janek Veselinovic street near the French church and the ambassador's residence. The best thing about it was the terrace, which we sat on until late at night in the summer. Auntie Natasha always received guests in the traditional Serbian way – coffee in fine porcelain on a brass tray, with water in crystal glasses and slatko, a fantastically sweet wild strawberry jam. You had to take each small spoonful of the jam with a sip of water from the crystal. The darkened rooms where old family portraits hung, the piano with its yellowed keys, the round walnut tables bedecked with hand-embroidered serviettes, the old candlesticks, the bookcase full of books and the multitude of brass and china trinkets all put my imagination into overdrive. Gran's flat clearly belonged to an earlier period, but Auntie's house had been transported in time from the turn of the century. I remembered Auntie Natasha's stories. One day she had gone to the Adriatic coast with her parents. While bathing in the sea Natasha's mother – a real lady- had lost a precious gold bracelet. No-one had been able to find it. Years later, Natasha had returned to the same place as an adult, with her husband and son. One day something got tangled around her leg. It was the bracelet her mother had lost years before. 1988 was the last year we went to Auntie Natasha's. She was already very ill by then. Since her husband Cika Obrad and her son, still childless, had died, she had been in constant mourning. She was only really waiting for her own death. But she remained elegant and distinguished to the last. Our last meeting with her also turned out to be my last meeting with Gran, who died five years later.

**Novi Sad – Budapest – Cracow**

The train from Istanbul to Budapest had been a favourite haunt of smugglers of all shapes, sizes and nationalities for years. It was a night train, so under cover of darkness they tried smuggling all manner of things – drugs, gold jewellery, dollars, electronics and tracksuits. Experienced tourists distributed chains to their fellow travellers, so they could lock their compartments from inside at night. This was a valiant but mostly unsuccessful way of trying to prevent theft and robbery, the bane of travellers on that route. Fortunately we were lucky enough to get home without incident.
Family photo: the first on the left at the back is my Gran Dobril; next to her are her nephew and her brother; at the front with the children are her nephew’s wife and her niece.

The late beloved Dobrilja Ćosić, my Gran, on holiday in Rovinj.

An icon of Saint Nicholas, who is the patron saint of my Serbian family.

My parents’ wedding invitation.

My cousin Ivana’s CD.
Chapter II.

May 1998
The bus from Cracow to Belgrade
Good ideas usually don’t do me any good. That was certainly the case this time. I had had a brainwave. I wasn’t going to slum it on the train and change in Budapest in the middle of the night. I was going to travel directly from Cracow to Belgrade – on the bus. It sounded like an elegantly simple solution, but it didn’t turn out as I had expected.

I got on the bus from Warsaw to Sofia. Most of the passengers were Romanians and Bulgarians. There was a young Roma woman in front of me, and an old Turkish man behind me. I was on the bus for 26 hours, and all that time the girl in front of me never even said a word. She spent the whole time scratching her head and prising out some dark stuff from under her fingernails. When she finished scratching her head she moved on to the rest of her body, scratching with equal vigour. When I leant back in my chair I felt someone touch my shoulder. It was the old Turk. “Hey, young lady, have you ever been to Varna?” he asked. I immediately caught the smell of sausage and garlic on his breath. “No,” I replied. “Well then, go there! It’s lovely in Varna. You’ve got to see the Black Sea.” Every half an hour the same question and the same recommendation were repeated, with the same whiff of sausage and garlic wafting my way. After a few hours on the bus I felt the call of nature. The driver didn’t seem to have any plans to stop, so I approached the co-pilot. She didn’t respond to my request, expressed in as many languages as I could muster – first in Polish, then in English, German, Serbian, Russian and French. She just took on an air of ever more offended dignity. After another three hours I simply couldn’t hold out any longer and I approached the driver directly, asking him to stop the bus. He asked what I was getting so worked up about and carried on driving. But after another half hour he did manage to find a petrol station where he could stop. Before we even got to Belgrade I was fed up with the journey and the other people on the bus and promised myself I would never do the journey this way again.

Dad was waiting for me in Belgrade, in his old orange Yugo. The engine only misfired once on the way. I decided not to stay in his flat, but at a friend’s. Dad’s flat was small, and since he and my stepmother smoked a lot, it reeked of smoke, and my eyes always started watering only a few minutes after going in there.
My friend was from a good family, long established in Belgrade. It was a spacious flat furnished in the pre-war style in the town centre, and it reminded me of Auntie Natasha’s. It was a meeting place where discussions went on long into the night, and not only about politics. Ana’s older brother Mark was a film director, and very good-looking. Their father had been in TV, and their mother was a university professor. After the war broke out in Bosnia and after she had finished her studies, Ana had left home to work in Cyprus for a year as a waitress. When she came back, she started writing for one of the opposition newspapers. We got to know each other through working on Kosovo together.

Ana introduced me to day-to-day politics in Belgrade. One day we went to a meeting at the Swedish ambassador’s residence. The Swedish foreign minister, Lena Hjelm-Wallen, was meeting some representatives of the Kosovo Albanians. It was one of the many “last chance meetings”. Since February, the situation in Kosovo had been getting steadily worse. Every day there were new incidents of armed conflict. There were more and more Serbian soldiers, police, paramilitaries and partisans there, but also more and more Kosovo Liberation Army fighters. Casualties were mounting. The news was starting to filter through to the rest of Europe that the wars in the Balkans were not over yet. The meeting was boycotted by the Serbian delegation, and unfortunately nobody had anything to declare after it. But I did get to meet the famous Kosovo Albanian leader Adema Demachi face-to-face, who I’d only spoken to on the phone before. Elderly, stocky and grey-haired, he spoke indistinctly. Under communism, he had been a dissident and had been tortured in prison. Now, as a political representative of the Kosovo Liberation Army, he was one of the most ardent champions of an independent Kosovo, ruled by Albanians. He was allegedly assassinated a few months after we met. I say allegedly because neither the body nor the assassins were ever found. Later it turned out that the news of his assassination had been a piece of fake news. He actually died 20 years later. N.B. It took me a year to find out that an acquaintance of mine, Enver Maloku, head of the information centre in Pristina, had been shot dead in broad daylight in front of his home in central Pristina. He was probably killed by some Serbian soldiers. At the meeting in the Swedish ambassador’s residence there were young Albanians too, leaders of the student resistance movement. At first glance they looked just like their Serbian fellow students. Both groups were fighting the Milosevic regime, but a huge, unbridgeable divide separated one group from the other.

A few days later I was actually lucky enough to meet one of the leaders of the Serbian student opposition movement from Belgrade. It was at the birthday party of a writer friend of mine rejoicing in the name of Branislav Pipovic. Pipovic was fascinated by the life and work of Dostoyevski. At the age of forty, marriage had turned him into a “retired philanderer” (his own words), who had been forced to confine himself to seduction on a theoretical level only. He was a musician by training, but his real love was writing. He looked like a slightly younger version of Goran Bregovic. He treated his art very seriously, but was by no means short of a sense of humour and had considerable personal charm. The birthday party was taking place in his ninth-floor flat in the city centre. The large balcony afforded a magnificent view of Belgrade. Yugoslavia had just won the world basketball championship that evening, and thousands of people had come out onto the streets to celebrate. The party was full of educated and independent-minded young artists, journalists and politicians from Yugoslavia. The guest of honour was Cedomir Antic, leader of the legendary student opposition group “Otpor” (“Resistance”). Tall, slim and brown-haired, Cedo still looked like a teenager. He had been organising student protests with his friends for years. Several times he had ended up in police custody, including in the famous winter protests of 1997, when thousands of protesters – not only students – had taken to the streets with whistles, loudly expressing their disapproval of the regime at that time. The students had been joined by the “grown-up” opposition then. Vuk Drashkovic, the controversial, charismatic, slightly unhinged writer, had been there, as had Vesna Pesic and Zoran Dindic, the businessman, liberal politician and mayor of Belgrade who became prime minister after Milosevic was toppled, only to be shot dead by Mafiosi in the city centre in 2003. A year had passed since the protests of the winter of 1997, and Cedo had almost become a cult figure in opposition circles in Belgrade. When he decided to be christened – after several decades of atheism in Yugoslavia, people are still returning to the Orthodox Church – the Serbian patriarch himself came forward to perform the rite. Girls and young women wore t-shirts saying “Cedo,
marry me!”, but he didn’t take up any of their offers, as he was already engaged to an actress from the National Theatre. Apparently, he is now a press spokesperson for one of the worthies of the former opposition.

Ana also invited me several times to the offices of the newspaper she worked for at the time, “Demokratija”. They were in a building called – oddly enough – “Palata Albania”, in the centre of the city. The thing that surprised me most of all was how young the journalists were. Most of them were my age or a few years older than me. The management were young too. Age was one of the differences between pro-government media such as the Belgrade-based “Politika” and the opposition media. The state newspapers were full of older journalists in their fifties who sympathised with the authorities and weren’t taken in by the opposition’s blandishments. Ana’s future mother-in-law, a charming lady by the name of Mila, worked for “Politika”. The two women got on well with each other and didn’t talk about politics outside their working lives. Ana helped me to meet representatives of the opposition, while her mother-in-law and my Dad helped me make contact with politicians of the older generation.

There was a sense of unease in Belgrade. It was a hot and stormy month of May, and the impending war in Kosovo hung heavy in the air. The TV news was dominated by descriptions of the situation in Kosovo: the movements of the Serbian army, the Albanian rebels’ offensive, rioting, but also a dash of patriotic music and some scenic shots of ancient Serbian monasteries and churches in Kosovo, just to make sure the spirit of the nation was kept alive. In a TV interview, a Serbian general said that every day the army’s operations in Kosovo were costing the taxpayer a million deutschmarks. At the time, the average wage in Yugoslavia was about a hundred deutschmarks a month. Pensions and benefits were even lower. The tension in Belgrade was growing by the day. It was getting hard to find food in the shops, and petrol was becoming an expensive luxury commodity. People could only talk about politics and price increases. Everyone was wondering when NATO was finally going to intervene.

One day my cousin Ivana took me to radio Republika. She had just recorded her second record and was supposed to give an interview there. Obrad, a young man with a sharp expression, worked there. He had left, or rather escaped from, Bosnia a year earlier, where he had been fighting on the Serb side. “After I left school I had to do my military service. I had two great friends in the army, a Bosnian Muslim and a Croat. They were from Sarajevo too. We celebrated all the religious festivals together: Orthodox and Catholic Christmas and Muslim Badram. The fact that we belonged to different faiths didn’t get in the way of our friendship at all. I got on better with them than with many of the Serbs I’ve known in my time. We were friends. Then the war started. It turned out we were supposed to hate each other. It was like having to deny myself and where I had come from, my traditions, my family, my soul.” All this he recounted in between letting out puffs of smoke. But he wasn’t willing to talk about the war itself. Ana’s brother Marko had had a similar experience. Her husband too. Marko had been born in 1964 and remembered his time in the Yugoslav army as one of the best times in his life. He had had fantastic friends, and the discipline in the army hadn’t cramped their style too much. The food had been decent, and for the first time in his life he hadn’t been skinny. But the world was different then, before Yugoslavia fell apart.

The Belgrade I saw in 1998 seemed more attractive than the one I had seen the year before. It wasn’t because the city had undergone any great changes. It was just because I had got used to its new face. Towards the end of my stay I discovered that some people were not doing badly at all in the new Belgrade. Goran Bregovic invited me to a party in his house. He lived in a specially designed villa in the most exclusive and upmarket part of Belgrade, Dedinje. Marshal Tito’s residence had been in the same part of town, on Uzicka street. Dedinje was home to distinguished members of Serbian society, famous artists and sportsmen, joined more recently by business executives. Bregovic was born into a Serb-Croat family in Sarajevo and shot to fame as a young man in the rock band Bijelo Dugme. Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s he started writing music for the cinema and working with another great creative artist, Emir Kusturica. After the war broke out, Bregovic found himself in Paris, where he managed to continue his film work. He steered clear of politics and was considered the tsar of all the former Yugoslav republics. But his music studio was in Belgrade, not Paris. His villa was a reminder of the fact that not everyone in Serbia was hard up. My father’s friend
Ciro, my first platonic love, was at the other end of the spectrum. He was an extraordinarily handsome and intelligent photographer, from a good family. His parents were Croatian Serbs. He lost everything. First of all his wife left him. Then his father and his disabled brother had to get out of Croatia, giving up the family home. Ciro lost his job in television. He ended up homeless, with no family, no money and no career. He died an early death. There were many other stories like his. For most people, the war and all the social upheavals that went with it meant the end of the status they had enjoyed until then, and the end of any sense of security.

The bus back to Cracow

I was on a Bulgarian bus again. Once again, the other passengers were Bulgarians and Gypsies. I thought about Marko, Obrad and their friends, about Bregovic and Ana, about close friends of mine. And about the war that was just around the corner.

At the Czech-Polish border, I felt as I had felt several years earlier at the German border. Except that this time I was on the other side, on the better side of the divide. The Polish customs officers told the Bulgarians to get off the bus. Only the Polish passengers were allowed to use the toilet inside the building. The others had to relieve themselves outside. Some of the Bulgarians were sent packing and ordered back to Bulgaria. They obviously didn’t have the visa or the residence permit they needed. Others were smuggling cigarettes, pirated computer games, CDs, alcohol. They were deported too. But the worst thing was the contempt with which they were treated, as if they were sub-human.
Chapter III.

August 1998

From Cracow to Budapest to Belgrade
This time I was going to the Macedonian Language and Literature Summer School in Ohrid, near the border with Albania, with Ania, my friend from university. I hadn’t made any precise travel plans, recklessly trusting in the Balkan transport network. I had rashly assumed that as long as I had booked my journey as far as Belgrade (via Budapest) there would be no problem travelling on directly from there to Ohrid.

As usual, things started getting interesting after we crossed the border from Hungary to Yugoslavia. In Novi Sad a number of Partisan Belgrade supporters entered our compartment in a state of intoxication. They lost no time in making themselves feel at home in our compartment, stretching out their legs and taking out some cigarettes and some beers. One of them seemed to be the leader of the group and he was the main one who talked to us. He had gaps in his teeth and obviously hadn’t been to the dentist’s for some time. The rest of the group chimed in every now and then with a burst of raucous laughter, as if they were providing the audience soundtrack for a sitcom. Slowly, a proper conversation began to take shape between us. The suntanned young man in sports gear opposite me was Goran, 19 or 20 years old at the most. He was wearing an Orthodox crucifix, quite conspicuously. “If we had to I would drop everything and go and fight in Kosovo,” he declared. “I’d volunteer to go, it’s our duty. Kosovo is our cradle, our past, our tradition. It’s who we are, it’s what it means to be a Serb. We must fight for it. We can’t just give it away to the Albanians.” Milan, sitting next to him, kept quiet. The group leader with the gaps in his teeth also said he would go to fight.

Once we had arrived in Belgrade and we were waiting in the bus station waiting room, Milan got out his picture of Kosovo. It was after midnight. Unluckily, he had had to do his military service there. “That’s Lake Shkodra,” he said, pointing at some photos. “Once a mate of ours was swimming in the lake and had the idea of trying to swim over to the Albanian side, just for a laugh. He wanted to see how the Albanians would react. They started shooting, so we fired back. Our mate went home in a coffin.” That wasn’t the only incident of its kind. As Milan explained, sometimes the incidents were the result of a deliberate provocation. Other times they blew up out of nothing, out of somebody’s stupid prank. Sometimes the Serbian soldiers were attacked by Kosovo Liberation Army fighters; other times the Serbian soldiers were sent out to fight...
with them. Sometimes men on both sides would be shot by smugglers or drug dealers. The borderlands of Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia were the territory of the Kosovo mafia. Young Serbian fell like flies. They had to be buried secretly, under cover of darkness. Because you weren’t allowed to own up to any losses on your own side. Only the closest family of the dead men would receive an official letter, some time later, informing them that their sons had died in action. The dead were buried in haste, shamefully, as if they had been criminals. “That’s Yugoslavia and Serbia for you. Loud and proud in life, quiet as mice in death. Lots of flag waving and fighting talk about Kosovo, but when you die fighting for it, it’s as if you hadn’t even existed,” Milan told us.

So it was around midnight when we got to Belgrade, and our new friends moved on to some Saturday night parties, leaving us looking a bit stupid, as there wasn’t another train to Macedonia until five o’clock in the morning. All the pubs, bars and cafés around the station were closed for some reason, so we went to the left luggage office. We left our luggage there with a man whose face could only be described as surreal. We were treated to a turbo folk hit called “My Unknown Love” (Moja nepoznata ljubav) and a series of jokes about the difference between an aeroplane and a penis (I can’t remember any of the punch lines). Then we went outside and sat on some park benches, where we were attacked by some bloodthirsty mosquitoes.

From Belgrade to Tabanovtse and on to Skopje

At five in the morning, our train finally rolled up. At first, we were on our own in our compartment, but we were soon joined by some other passengers, a family of gypsies with five children. They were going to Tabanovtse, where the father, a dark-skinned man with a moustache, worked in a factory. He couldn’t help dreaming about a life in the West. “Switzerland would be the place for me,” he mused. “I have a cousin there. He’s got two cars and a nice house, and he earns thousands of deutschmarks every month. He’s not short of anything. That’s what I call a life. And me, what have I got here? I can’t even feed my own children, because I’m treated like dirt here. They think Gypsies are inferior beings. And now there’s a war coming and things will get even worse. They’ll sign me up for the army, because when cannon fodder’s needed Gypsies are just the ticket. And what’ll happen to my wife and children then?” His obese, prematurely aged wife was breastfeeding the youngest child. I stared out of the window. In the distance, columns of Yugoslav tanks were going past, on their way to Kosovo. The war seemed even closer and more imminent now than it had been in May.

The train never got as far as its stated destination. It pulled up at a dusty, grimy station in the middle of the fields. Behind the dust covering the signs we were able to make out its name. We were in Tabanovtse, 20km from the border. We asked when the next train would be. In five or six hours, came the answer. I was already fed up with the whole journey. Ania was even more fed up than me. The airless forty-degree heat was unbearable, stifling. I had no desire to continue the journey. We had left Cracow on Friday evening and it was already noon on Sunday. We didn’t even have any mineral water, because there was nowhere you could buy any. A guard came up to us, so I asked about the train again. “Where do you want to get to?” he inquired. “Ohrid, ultimately.” “We’ll take you as far as Skopje then,” he replied obligingly. We looked at each other in surprise. Was this a ghost train, or a new kind of hitchhiking? No, it was just Macedonia and the Balkans in all their splendour, where the timetable, the usual order of things and even time itself counted for nothing. Full of trepidation, we boarded the empty train, a train that did not exist on any timetable. The only other people on it were the railway staff. The gentlemen in the compartment next to ours were celebrating someone’s birthday. The guard kept on coming into our compartment every hour with a bottle of raki, telling us that Poland was part of the West now, and that Macedonians would soon need a visa to travel there. He became more cheerful and loquacious with every visit. “You see, you’re on the other side of the wall now, and we’re stuck on this side. You’re the West, and we’re on the slippery slope,” he nodded.

From Skopje to Kichevo, and on to Ohrid

We actually got to Skopje without any problem. But then it turned out there was no direct connection from there to Ohrid. So we got on a train to Kichevo, a town in the west of the country, inhabited mostly by Albanians. Slowly but surely, we were edging closer to our destination.
This time, our fellow passengers were Albanian women draped with headscarves and capacious black garments, in spite of the heat. They were coming back from a wedding. One of them was a young woman of 20 at the most. Her name was Luna (what a beautiful name). She was dressed in the European way and spoke pretty decent Serbian. She had been married for three years but hadn’t had any children yet. She and her many wrinkled and toothless aunts couldn’t get over the fact that the two of us were travelling abroad on our own. “How can you be travelling on your own, without any man? Has someone given you permission to do it? My husband wouldn’t even allow me to go to the next town on my own. I always have to travel with other women from the family. I mean, it’s dangerous to travel on your own if you’re a woman.” At the end she concluded: “You must be German or American women, because I’ve heard they’re not afraid of traveling on their own.” Her aunts had initially looked at us askance, with mistrust and a little distaste, but after an hour we were getting on with each other so well that they offered to put us up for the night if we failed to get to Ohrid before nightfall.

But for once we were in luck. The bus to Ohrid was leaving in half an hour. It had definitely seen better days, and was groaning at the seams with all the passengers eager to get to Ohrid, laden with all kinds of baggage. We were kept entertained throughout the journey by a relentlessly inquisitive toddler who kept hailing the driver as “majstore” and showering him with dozens of questions. We were longing to get to some water source, wash ourselves and get to sleep.

Contrary to my rather absurd expectations, Ohrid was not a one-horse town with a single guesthouse and a university. It was a tourist resort of forty thousand souls with a dozen or so hotels, but no university. Unfortunately, I had no idea where we were supposed to be staying. None of the passers-by we stopped had ever heard of any Slav studies summer school or school of language and literature. The police couldn’t help us either. But Fortune occasionally favours the completely clueless. By a great stroke of luck, one woman I approached took us to the Grand Hotel, where there were bookings in our names. By then it was already after midnight.

Ohrid is a typical tourist town, but its many historic Orthodox churches, adorned with beautiful icons, bear witness to its long and distinguished past. Cyril and Methodius founded the first Slav university in Ohrid, in the ninth century. In its heyday, three thousand people pursued their studies here. Spectacular mosaics, covered with sand for protection, are part of the legacy of Ohrid’s past. I will never forget the vigil on the eve of St Clement’s day, in the Orthodox church bearing his name. Clement was a disciple of Cyril and Methodius. I followed the crowd of people carrying torches up the hill, to St Clement’s church. It was like being transported back in time. In the church, a nun distributed consecrated cotton wool that was believed to bring wealth and good health.

There is no shortage of places to stay in Ohrid, with its dozen or so hotels, plus the many guesthouses and private rooms rented out to tourists. For many inhabitants of Ohrid and the surrounding area summer tourism is the only source of income. The national unemployment rate is 20 percent, there is no industry and farming is difficult, so people live off the money they earn from the tourist trade in the summer. The exceptionally beautiful town of Ohrid suffered badly from the bloodstained implosion of Yugoslavia, which scared away foreign tourists. Neither the lake, nor the historic churches, nor the cultural festival were able to lure them back in the same numbers after that.

The threat of conflict had also thinned out the ranks of students at the summer school. The Czechs had taken fright and called off their trip to Macedonia. Those who came in spite of the danger were a motley crew. The most interesting person was probably an American of Wallachian origin, Galina, who we called the “American squaw”. She was a powerful woman of impressive proportions who took on the air of a Viking when she plaited her hair into pigtails like Pippy Longstocking’s. She had a very loud laugh and smoked some strange herbs she had bought in an Indian reservation. The waiters in the hotel restaurant lived in fear of her. She spoke proudly of her Wallachian roots. They were the reason for her regular visits to the Balkans. On one of her previous visits she had been baptised into the Orthodox Church, and had practised Orthodoxy since then. She spoke in a bizarre mixture of Macedonian, Serbian, Russian and English. Among the other curios at the summer school were a Russian professor from Moscow (the spitting image of a famous Polish actor),
Emre, an eternal student, a Turkish playboy, an elderly Scottish couple who had fallen in love with the Balkans so badly that they had passed on their passion to their only son, Dusko, a local journalist who was the spitting image of a famous Polish pianist, and Tolo. Tolo was a university employee who had spent his childhood and adolescence in Poland after his parents had fled there from Greece at the beginning of the 1960s. A lot of Macedonians had left Greece at that time. Tolo could still perfectly reproduce Polish folk songs, while reminiscing fondly about the time he had spent in Poland. And there was the charming Professor Pianka, an eminent Slavicist of Polish descent, who had been living and teaching in Vienna for many years.

The hotel waiters were a good source of information about the situation in the country. Most of them came either from Ohrid itself, or from the nearby towns. In the tourist season they could earn 200 marks a month as waiters, the equivalent of two good salaries. But they had to put a lot of it on one side to see themselves through the other months of the year. The general standard of living in Macedonia was low. University employees took home 150 marks a month. People fought for the few jobs that were available. When the first (mostly Greek) hypermarkets opened in that year (1998), half of the people applying for jobs in them had university degrees. A lot of the taxi drivers had professional qualifications but had been unable to find employment in the profession they had trained for. Most of the cars on the streets were Eastern bloc cars. Western cars tended to belong to people engaged in shady dealings of various kinds, because they were the only ones who could afford them.

War was getting so close you felt you could almost touch it. Military helicopters were constantly circling over the town and there were a surprising number of UN vehicles on the streets. Macedonia couldn’t really rely on its own army to defend itself. The army was small and its weapons were outdated. The American detachments stationed here gave one a greater feeling of safety. But people were still afraid. “If war breaks out in Kosovo, it’ll spill over into Macedonia very quickly,” they kept saying.

One obvious cause for concern was the potentially explosive mix of ethnicities in Macedonia. According to official statistics, inhabitants of Albanian origin made up about fifteen percent of the two-million-strong population of Macedonia. Unofficial estimates put the proportion of Albanians a lot higher, especially since many of them were not registered at all with any authorities. In Ohrid itself there were plenty of Albanians, but there were even more of them in and around Gostivar, Tetovo and Kumanovo. For years there has been talk of a Greater Albania based on a triangle with its corners at Tirana, Pristina and Tetovo, and not without reason. What the Macedonian authorities feared the most at the time was an armed uprising aimed at secession by the local Albanian population in the western part of the country, along the lines of what was happening in Kosovo. There are also many Serbs, Montenegrins and Greeks living in Macedonia, not to mention the Macedonians struggling to eke out a living in Albania, Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria. But that is a quite separate problem. (Translator’s note: for Western readers, the French expression “macédoine de fruits”, meaning “fruit salad”, may be called to mind at this point.)

Macedonia is divided from Albania by Lake Ohrid. The lake is the hero of Macedonian director Antonio Mitrikeski’s 1997 film “Across the Lake”. The film tells the difficult story of two lovers, an Albanian woman and a Macedonian man, who are prevented from seeing each other for years because of the political situation. They are separated by the lake not just in a literal, physical sense. Antonio is a graduate of the Polish film school in Lodz and gave the main female role, that of the Albanian woman, to a Polish actress, Agnieszka Wagner. I saw the film in the local cinema. The director complained about the lack of funding for films in Macedonia. The country could only produce a handful of films a year at best. Cinemas were few and far between. If Macedonians took the momentous decision of going to the cinema they would usually opt for a Hollywood production. The only chance of success for Macedonian filmmakers was to enter into a coproduction with a foreign partner. As for earning a living, people in the film business sought a stable income from activities unrelated to cinema.

The few Macedonian films that did make it onto the silver screen were however greatly appreciated in the wider world. The best example is Milcho Manchevski’s spectacularly successful 1994 film “Before the Rain”. The film is full of symbolism and deals with the troubled and complicated history of relations between Albanians and Macedonians on an almost metaphysical level. The motifs are love, fate, revenge, and
ancient conflicts re-emerging as the cause of modern tragedies. But the most striking thing about the film is its airless, oppressive atmosphere, the impression of a gathering storm about to break loose. Vlatko Stefanovski’s poetic tale of the lives of local Gypsies, “Gypsy Magic”, could not complain of a lack of success either. But the hopeless situation of the Macedonian cultural sector and the apparent absence of any future for him in the country made him take the decision of emigrating to Australia.

**Ohrid, Bitola, Krushevo, Resen, and Skopje**

At the end of the course the organisers took us on a trip around Macedonia.

Bitola has its roots in antiquity and is one of the largest and wealthiest towns in Macedonia. Its main architectural adornment is the Roman theatre, and its main natural attraction the lake.

Further to the north, Krushevo is the country’s winter sports capital. Sportsmen and sportswomen gather here all year round to train. We noticed their presence when we visited the town. On a hill outside the town stands a monumental relic of Communism, resembling a heart fed by veins and feeding arteries. It is a monument to those who died in the Macedonian struggle for independence at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Resen is a small town mainly known for the huge “Agroplod” factory, which supplies half of the Balkans with processed agricultural products. In the middle of the 1970s, a rather odd monument to this processed food giant was erected in the town centre: a large orange apple sitting atop a column. The entrance to the factory harks back to Communist times. In the gatekeeper’s lodge, a portrait of Marshal Tito hangs next to photos of scantily clad young women. The management’s proud pronouncements about prosperity, growth and progress ring hollow in this grubby town, where packs of stray dogs and bored children roam the dusty streets.

Skopje is also quite a depressing sight. Half a million souls huddled in a concrete jungle. The town is surrounded by hills, and divided into two halves: the old town and the new town. The station clock still shows the time at which a disastrous earthquake occurred, on July 26, 1963. According to official statistics, over a thousand people died and three times as many were injured. The old Skopje, with all its charm, was wiped off the surface of the earth. A café in some old railway wagons commemorates the pre-quake glories of Skopje. The ugly, filthy station casts an oppressive greyness over the town. Unfortunately, Skopje is not the most charming of towns today. The buildings put up after the earthquake offend the eye by their lack of character, of taste and of any kind of distinction. One such building is the Gotse Delchev Hall of Residence, in which we were put up for the night. It is a horrific multi-storey monstrosity. Its façade is punctuated by dirty, grey windows, their curtains stiff with dirt. In contrast to the monumental proportions of the whole, the individual rooms are poky and claustrophobic. The bathrooms were even pokier, and at night were invaded by rampant hordes of various insect species. The menu and the interior decoration of the canteen on the ground floor were very much like those of the university canteen in Novi Sad.

But in spite of the poverty, the dirt and the backwardness of Macedonia, which had already been the poorest republic in Yugoslav times, people from the neighbouring republics were jealous of it. It was the only Yugoslav republic that achieved independence without any bloodshed. Yugoslavia’s own velvet revolution. The decision to allow Macedonian independence was taken after the now historic Thirteenth Congress of the Yugoslav Communist Party, in 1989, when Slovenia and Croatia also asked for their independence. A year later, on the seventh of September, a referendum on breaking away from Yugoslavia was held in Macedonia.

“I was in the centre of Skopje at the time,” Snezhana, our teacher from the language school told us. “Even though it was night-time, thousands of people gathered in front of the parliament to hear the announcement of the results. When Kiro Gligorov finally appeared on the balcony and told us that our nation had chosen the path of independence, everyone was caught up in the general euphoria.” Later on, things became less romantic. The grey realities of everyday life returned, bringing with them a host of problems, not just economic ones.

As soon as the new republic had declared its independence, the Greeks protested. They accused the new state of usurping a historic name it had no entitlement to. Greece refused to recognise Macedonian independence for many years because of the name dispute. The dispute
was temporarily patched up by the use of an official name worthy of Heath Robinson: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (the name was later changed to the Republic of North Macedonia, under the 2019 Athens Agreement). In 1995 the fledgling state was shaken again by an attempt on the life of its president, Kiro Gligorov. By a miracle, Gligorov survived. The perpetrators were never found. People say that Macedonia would have ceased to exist as an independent state if Gligorov had died. It is still not known who planted the bomb in Gligorov’s car.

Many Albanians lived in Skopje as well, in the old Turkish commercial quarter. Small market stalls, little shops hidden away in interior courtyards, narrow, winding streets, buyers and sellers haggling loudly – it all felt like somewhere in the Middle East. You could buy anything here, from ancient washing machines and pre-war radios to the latest gadgets, plus live poultry, and the best Balkan delicacies.

In this part of town, the Old Bazaar, we met some local Albanians. They were three brothers, traders, pleased to be making money out of naïve tourists, and happy to enter into conversation. They had stuck a picture of Kassandra, heroine of the immensely popular Venezuelan telenovela of that name, on the window of their mini-shop. There was going to be a Kassandra lookalike competition in the next few days. Apparently, some girls had signed up for plastic surgery to improve their chances of winning. “We’re doing alright,” the brothers told us. “We have our own business. But other people aren’t happy. They have nothing, and they’re being treated badly. We can’t even study in our own language, even though there are more and more of us. But we’re getting stronger, and in two or three years there’ll be an Albanian uprising, like in Kosovo. We’ll get our independence. But first of all we have to wait for things to quieten down in Kosovo.” I recalled this conversation a few years later, when there were actually riots, which you could have called a kind of uprising, in Macedonia.

Skopje to Belgrade

After two days in Skopje, I couldn’t bear the company of cockroaches any more, and I decided to go to Belgrade. Pero, a friend from the local radio station who looked remarkably like Hannibal Lecter, carried my rucksack to the station for me. The local menfolk looked at him with scorn and disdain. In the Balkans, women usually carry luggage for men, and not the other way round. People were taken aback, and even slightly indignant, at this reversal of the normal roles.

This time, the other passengers in my compartment on the train weren’t particularly interesting. Some young people and a middle-aged woman, none of them very talkative. Caslav, the guard, was the most inclined to talk. He spoke to me in French, as he had worked as a waiter for several years in France. He had saved up a bit of money and returned to Nis, a city in the south of Serbia, near the border with Bulgaria. There, he had married a local girl. Things became more interesting when we reached Kumanovo, around midnight. This was a town with a large Albanian population. A band of gypsy musicians, on their way back from a wedding, got on the train. They walked along the corridors, playing on trumpets, singing and jostling each other. It was like a scene from a Kusturica movie. I had to give up the two seats next to me, which I had stretched my legs out on. A wrinkled old gypsy carrying a plant in a flowerpot, with an impressive amount of facial hair for a woman, sat down next to me. She must have been the capo di tutti capi, because everyone fell silent and listened when she began to talk in her low, gravelly voice.

We reached Belgrade in the morning. I decided to stay there for two days. The city had not had time to change in the three months since I had last visited it. Only there were more cassettes with songs like “Kosovo is Serbian and will always be Serbian” on the souvenir stalls in the city centre. People were talking more about Kosovo. Milosevic’s rhetoric was becoming more and more confrontational, and the threat of air strikes was becoming more and more real. The Albanian sweet shops, which had been a part of the city for years, suddenly became empty. Their Serbian customers went there less and less often, either as a gesture of disapproval, or out of fear of eating poisoned Albanian sweets. The distrust and hostility between the two communities was growing.
But as Belgrade became poorer, Western film producers started arriving there. By chance, I found myself at a reception being given in one of the better Belgrade hotels in honour of the American actor Dennis Quaid. He was starring in an American-Italian production that was being filmed in Serbia. He was surrounded by hordes of female admirers. The next day, a dream came true for me when I met Emir Kusturica, the director of my favourite films. Kusturica had a film studio in the Perlovo Brdo district of Belgrade, where he was currently working on an advert. The inconspicuous low grey building didn’t stand out from its surroundings at all, and certainly didn’t conjure up any images from “Underground” or “Arizona Dream”. The artist himself had a more interesting appearance. Tall, long-haired and bearded, he had a wild look in his eyes that made him look like a war criminal on the run, wanted by the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague. My father was well known for his odd sense of humour, and used to joke that there was only one man on earth uglier than him, and that it was Emir Kusturica. Unlike the smooth charmer Bregovic, Kusturica doesn’t try to make you like him. He made no effort to conceal his strongly pro-Serbian (and unfortunately also pro-Russian) views either. Kusturica is one of the last true artists, for whom cinema is an art, a medium for emotions, but also for conveying a message. My father always said Kusturica was the Balkans’ Fellini. Our paths crossed again a year later, when Kusturica came to Poland to promote his film “Black Cat, White Cat” and to perform with his punk band Zabranjeno Pusenje. I was his interpreter.

From Belgrade to Budapest and back to Cracow

The train to Budapest was leaving early in the morning and my friend and I nearly missed it by waking up too late. We rushed out of the house, not even having the time to say goodbye to my father, let alone have breakfast. We got on the train at the very last minute, just as it was leaving. We didn’t even have time to buy any bread rolls. That was the first time in my life when I experienced true hunger. We were sharing a compartment with a tarted-up young lady and an older, obese lady. Her ankles were swollen, and she looked very unhealthy. She was dressed in black and had a black scarf on her head. She wore spectacles with very thick lenses. Our train was going on from Budapest to Vienna, where the old lady was returning to her grandson. Two years earlier, her son and daughter-in-law had died in a car accident, and she was still wearing black in mourning for them. All that was left of her family was her eighteen-year-old grandson, who hadn’t wanted to stay in Yugoslavia. She moved to Vienna to be with him. But she hadn’t been able to find her feet in Austria. She knew no German, she told us. She wasn’t able to acquire a taste for Austrian food, the people were cold, and she hadn’t been able to make friends with them. She spent hours on end on her own, waiting for her grandson to come home. Her only pleasures in life now were her occasional visits to Belgrade, when she could meet “our own folk” again. She must have been able to read our minds, because she gave us some bread, and nothing had tasted so good to me for ages.

We arrived in Budapest in the early afternoon. I was almost robbed by a young gypsy woman in the local Macdonald’s. I was saved by my friend’s watchfulness, keeping an eye on my rucksack. At last, I was able to eat my fill, and I even bought a pair of shoes (yet another) in the nearby shopping centre. As we fought our way towards the train for Cracow, we came across the members of some sect on a largely fruitless recruitment drive. We got back to Cracow without further incident.
Chapter IV.

November 1999
Warsaw – Skopje
This trip came out of the blue. It was a flying visit. I owe my participation in it to the kindness of Pawel Dobrowolski, Polish Foreign Ministry press spokesman at the time, who chose me as one of three journalists to accompany Minister Bronislaw Geremek on his trip to the Balkans. The other two journalists were Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy and Ryszard Bilski. An agreement had been signed in Kumanovo, as a result of which NATO air strikes on Yugoslavia had ended and some Polish commandos had been stationed in Kosovo. Geremek was to meet some Kosovar and Macedonian politicians. It was the first visit by a Polish politician to Kosovo since the air strikes. After a very bumpy ride in the plane, which lasted two hours, we landed in Skopje.

We went straight from the airport to the town centre. We drove through torrential rain to the Foreign Ministry. The press conference after Geremek’s meeting with his counterpart was to take place there, in an ugly, low, grey building. The head of the Macedonian diplomatic service was a poet who had not yet reached the age of thirty (he was perhaps not best suited to his job). There were a surprising number of journalists there, given the small population of Macedonia. While we waited for the press conference to start, I engaged some individuals in conversation who looked more like Mafiosi than gentlemen of the press or government officials. They wore the inevitable black leather jackets and had cigarettes permanently clenched in their teeth. They started boasting that they were working for Boris Trajkovski, the Foreign Minister at the time, who was also running for President of Macedonia. The first round of voting had already taken place, and Trajkovski was expected to be elected President in a few weeks’ time. They gave me some lighters and notebooks adorned with some of Trajkovski’s electoral slogans. “He’s a clever guy,” the oldest bodyguard told me. “There are plenty of idiots here who don’t trust him because he’s a protestant, and they’re jealous of him because he’s done well in life. I met him when he was still a businessman, before he went into politics. He hasn’t changed a bit.” (Trajkovski only employed people he had known earlier as bodyguards. Often they were members of his party. He was afraid of attempts on his life and didn’t want to take any risks. In the event, he came to a different, but equally tragic end. He died in a plane crash in 2004.) Finally, Trajkovski himself
appeared in the doorway. In spite of the suit and the immaculate haircut, he looked more like a businessman engaged in shady dealings than a politician. And at long last the senior diplomats came out too, proffered some platitudes about working towards closer relations, and that was it. That was all we got.

The Polish government delegation was invited to an official reception somewhere, and Ryszard Bilski and I, having some time on our hands, drove through the wet streets of Skopje to the Hotel Ambassador, not far from the Polish embassy, where we were booked to stay. Our taxi driver, a stocky, lively thirty-year-old, was very talkative. A bit too much so in fact, because when he got onto the subject of politics he got so carried away that he kept letting go of the steering wheel and turning round to look at us. There were many things that annoyed him. “Trajkovski’s just a conman. He bought the Albanians’ votes by promising them mountains of gold!” He actually thought Trajkovski was a “Shqiptar” himself – a term they used to refer disparagingly to an Albanian – and that his much vaunted Protestantism was just a smokescreen to conceal his true origins. There were no genuine protestants in the Balkans after all. Our driver had ample cause to be discontented, because he hadn’t had a holiday for six years – he just been sending his wife and children away to stay in the countryside every summer – and had been toiling away relentlessly all that time, without having anything to show for it.

We arrived at the hotel. It was small ad spotless, like a miniature replica of the White House. A lady whose main occupation was filing her nails sat at the reception, seeming to regard contacts with hotel guests as a tedious but necessary evil.

The rain kept on falling in Skopje, harder and harder. The two of us, Ryszard Bilski and I, went to the Polish embassy, where some friendly ladies helped me to send a fax to the editors. It was scrutinised by a junior diplomat who clearly thought he was already ambassador. In the evening, we made for the town centre. It was pouring down by now. We were on the lookout for Balkan delicacies, and we were not disappointed. The baklava was excellent, as were the cheese and meat burek and the coffee made in a cezve.

The first round of the presidential elections had just taken place, and the lampposts were festooned with likenesses of the two frontrunners: the grey-haired Tito Petkovski and the much younger Borin Trajkovski, born in 1956 and belonging to a different generation from Petkovski. Trajkovski’s picture had had the eyes gouged out and Petkovski’s picture had been daubed with red paint. Obituaries with photos of the recently deceased hung in between the electoral posters, in keeping with the old Balkan tradition. The electoral campaign was quite tough. In the first elections, it had been a foregone conclusion that Kiro Gligorov – the only really suitable candidate – would win, but this time opinions were strongly divided. The opposing camps stopped at nothing to score electoral points, dredging up as much information of a personal and highly intimate nature as they could to discredit the other side’s candidate. Trajkovski’s Protestantism inevitably came under fire, and for some time it was even claimed that he was a protestant minister. Graffiti on walls described him as a heretic and called on him to get baptised. This kind of graffiti was often put there by people who had never darkened the door of any kind of church in their whole lives. Although the majority of Macedonians declared themselves to be Orthodox Christians, only a few of them actually practised the religion. Trajkovski was also branded a “Shqiptar” because of his pro-Albanian sympathies, and since he had been running his own businesses for years, he was also branded a thief and a conman. There were also rumours about him having links to the Mafia. Petkovski, on the other hand, was branded a communist and a stooge of Milosevic, completely at the beck and call of Belgrade. Trajkovski wanted closer ties to the West and to Albania, whereas Petkovski made no secret of his pro-Serb and pro-Russian leanings. In the second round of voting on November 14, the two candidates were neck and neck. After all the votes had been counted, it turned out that Trajkovski had a wafer-thin majority. When the state electoral commission announced the initial results, thousands of people took to the streets, shouting “Tito for President!” This was their amusing but not unambiguous way of calling for new elections. Macedonians were indignant at reports of electoral fraud on TV, of the votes of people who had died being used in the election. But when all the fuss had died down, Trajkovski was sworn in as President.

I was struck by the larger number of beggars, and at the same time by the larger number of expensive cars on the streets of Skopje. Inequality
in Macedonian society had increased since my last visit 18 months before. I was witness to an argument between two young ladies in a bar whose differences of opinion were identical to those between the two presidential candidates. One of them was very attached to Yugoslavia, and thought that Macedonian independence and Macedonia’s European aspirations were a mistake. The other thought that staying in Yugoslavia would hold back Macedonia’s development. Both of them complained about price increases and growing poverty.

The recent NATO air strikes on Yugoslavia had added to an already wobbly situation in Macedonia. At the height of the crisis, Macedonia was host to 220,000 Albanian and Serb refugees from Kosovo. In spite of foreign aid, looking after all these refugees still used up quite a large chunk of the Macedonian budget. But that wasn’t the only problem. Yugoslavia was Macedonia’s main economic partner. The economic partnership with Yugoslavia collapsed because of the Kosovo war, and on top of that, a lot of the factories owned by Macedonian firms were on Yugoslav territory, so the economic crash in Macedonia came as no surprise. The flood of Albanian refugees also threatened to upset the delicate ethnic balance in Macedonia. Even though the Macedonians’ worst nightmare of the Albanian refugees all staying in Macedonia didn’t come true the time bomb was still ticking. When the international forces entered Kosovo the problem still wasn’t over, because although most of the Albanian refugees went back to Kosovo their places were taken by Serb and Gypsy refugees coming the other way.

Relations between Albanians and Macedonians became even tenser. The Albanians’ self-confidence grew, and the Macedonians’ fear of the Albanians grew with it. Everyone was afraid of Albanisation, Islamisation and a Greater Albania, but no one more so than the Macedonians, who were aware how small their country was, and how few friends it could count on in the wider world. The growing demands of the Albanians in the western part of the country only served to strengthen this fear. They demanded teaching in Albanian in schools in the west of Macedonia, the recognition of Albanian as the country’s second official language, and the creation of an Albanian university in Tetovo. Tetovo and Gostivar were already plastered with posters sporting slogans in Albanian such as “Shqipëria” and the emblems of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Just a few years before most Albanians had been reluctant to admit to their ethnicity, but now it had suddenly become something to be proud of. The native Macedonian population was also horrified by the rate at which the Albanian population was growing. In terms of fertility, Albanian women in Kosovo were not to be outdone by any other women in the world, except those in Palestine and Nigeria. Just as the demographic balance between Serbs and Albanians had tipped towards the Albanians in Kosovo, the same was happening now between Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia.

Skopje, Stari Kacanik and Gracanica

The alarm in my telephone went off at 5am, and I dragged myself out of bed. An hour later, at six, we set out for Kosovo in a military convoy. We were back with the official part of the Polish delegation and were being escorted by members of the Polish military stationed in Kosovo. The journey was pleasant, in spite of the rather tedious landscapes that passed by outside the window. I was with Beata, who was accompanying the Polish delegation to interpret between Polish and Macedonian (even though, according to the Bulgarians, there is no such language as Macedonian). We listened to the soldiers’ tales. We crossed the border between Macedonia and Kosovo without showing any passports, visas or papers of any kind.

Kosovo had already become a kind of state within the state in Serbia, with its own laws, its own administration, and even its own currency (at the time it was the deutschmark; now it is the euro). There were fields, adorned by the occasional tree, on both sides of the motorway. There were houses too. Some had come through the war unscathed; others had been bombed, or burnt by neighbours. Most of the newly built houses were large detached houses with luxury cars parked in the driveway. The cars had foreign registrations, mostly Swiss or German. Since the Serbs had left Kosovo, Albanians from the West had started returning to Kosovo in large numbers, bringing with them the money they had earned.

Suddenly, a few children appeared, as if out of nowhere. On seeing our convoy, they started waving at us joyfully and saluting us. We couldn’t hear what they were shouting. For small boys who love playing soldiers,
the sight of soldiers with rifles was a very exciting change from their grey everyday lives, even though the war was still going on. I didn’t find all the KFOR jeeps, the armed men in uniform and the helicopters and planes whizzing past over our heads very reassuring, but no one else seemed bothered by all the weaponry that was on view. There was a gun in nearly every household here, and being able to use a gun was perhaps a more useful and more common skill than being able to read or write. The years of war and hatred had taken their toll, bleeding people dry of their emotions.

“One day, they shot one of the Kosovo Liberation Army warlords,” the soldiers told us. “We went to go and get his wife to identify the body. She looked at the dead man with total indifference, as if he were a bin bag. Her eyes were completely glazed over and empty.” Another time a group of young people were on their way to the disco and one of the boys stepped on a landmine, which blew him to pieces. The girls stopped and stared for a while at what was left of him, then carried on to the disco. They had lots of other such chilling tales to tell.

We drove on. More fields, muddy fields. The only thing breaking the monotony of the landscape were large piles of rubbish, elongated piles, like rivers of trash. They were made of scrap metal, the remains of cars, rusty washing machines and fridges, heaps of paper and plastic. No-one could be bothered to tidy any of it up. The same rivers of trash accompanied us on all our journeys through Kosovo, as a constant reminder of the destructive power of war and hatred, and the general apathy following in their wake.

Another, much more obvious, symbol of war and hatred were the charred remains of people’s homes, both Serb and Albanian. The Serbs started the burning, setting their Albanian neighbours’ houses on fire, then the Albanians took over, doing the same to the Serbs’ houses. One of the soldiers told us that on one particular night, 350 Serb houses had gone up in flames. There was no way of putting even some of the fires out. They had only been able to watch helplessly while the fires lit up the night. Now, there were fewer fires. Most of the houses that could be destroyed had already burnt to the ground. All the other houses were only just being built.

We were getting near Stari Kacanik. The Polish commandos from Bielsko-Biała in the south of Poland were stationed there. “This is one of the most dangerous stretches of road in the whole of Kosovo,” the soldiers warned us. “The Albanian mafia takes over here at night. The lorries on this road at night aren’t carrying humanitarian aid, unless drugs and guns count as aid. It’s better not to venture out, even in groups of several men.”

We came across yet another symbol of hatred. The “Heroes’ Cemetery”, not far from Stari Kacanik. According to one of the best-known Polish war correspondents, this cemetery was the resting place of thousands of innocent Albanians butchered by Serbs. The bodies here were indeed the bodies of Albanians, but an international commission established that there were only 80 bodies – or rather as many as 80. One should always write “as many as” where the loss of human lives is being quantified. But journalists riding the wave of anti-Serb hatred had willingly bumped the figure up to sell the story. This reminded me of a terrible joke. Hundreds of Albanian bodies had been found in a wood in Kosovo. An international commission of enquiry was questioning Milosevic to establish what had happened. “Ah yes, those were Albanians. They died from eating poisonous mushrooms in the wood.” “So why do some of them have bullet holes in their skulls?” “Those are the ones who refused to eat the mushrooms.” The cemetery was like any other, but our attention was caught by the shiny black plastic bags on the graves. The Kosovo Albanians had covered the flowers they had put on the graves in black, according to their custom.

Finally, we got to Stari Kacanik. We were met by Father Marek Strzelecki, who came from the same part of Poland as me and whom I had met many years ago on a military base in Poland. (Just a few years after this meeting, Father Marek, a magnificent human being who had been on so many dangerous military missions, died tragically in a car accident not far from his family home in Poland.) He was an accomplished parachutist and had done thousands of jumps. We ate breakfast in a huge tent. I felt guilty eating ham which the soldiers, who probably weren’t fed very well, could have eaten themselves. After the meal Geremek had a brief meeting with the soldiers. The minister, the Polish commander Roman Polko and the chaplain all seemed to be in very good spirits and traded jokes and anecdotes with each other. The Poles were popular in Kosovo. Their impartiality was appreciated. The Albanians didn’t trust
the Russians or the Ukrainians. The Serbs mistrusted the Americans. Neither of the sides in the conflict had any reservations about the Poles. But some of the Poles were starting to get fed up with the conditions here. A very pleasant army doctor from Cracow told us how difficult he found it to put up with the constant atmosphere of fear and hatred. On top of being away from home and family. The Poles were paid a pittance, less than the Ukrainians even, and no amount of money could have made up for the fear and the homesickness anyway. A few weeks after our visit one of the Polish soldiers was killed by a landmine.

Gracanica was to be the next staging point on our journey. One of the places symbolic of the centuries-old Serbian presence in Kosovo. There was a medieval monastery here. Its walls were adorned with thirteenth and fourteenth-century frescoes of extraordinary beauty. It was also the resting place of the mortal remains of several Serbian kings and saints, including those of King Stefan Milutin and his wife. In 2006 the monastery was put on the list of endangered World Heritage Sites. When we visited Gracanica the monastery was one of the few remaining enclaves still held by Serbs in Kosovo. It was protected on all sides by international forces. There were not only monks there, but also some civilians from the neighbouring villages and 22 Serbian nuns. At the entrance to the monastery, a withered old nun wrapped up in black was selling devotional articles. Pilgrims and tourists had once bought hundreds of souvenirs, icons and brochures here every day, especially with images of Prince Lazar of Serbia. In 1389, Lazar had led the coalition of Christian forces against the army of Sultan Murad I in the Battle of Kosovo. But now, virtually no-one visited the monastery from the outside world. No-one left the monastery either to go somewhere else. “We live in complete isolation,” the nun said. “We have a small field for growing things and a few animals. We try to be self-sufficient. We are’t allowed to leave, but we don’t need to go out. Of course we’re afraid, but so far the Albanians have left us alone. They seem able to respect this holy place.”

But dozens of other Orthodox sites in Kosovo hadn’t been so lucky. They had been attacked and burnt by supposedly unknown assailants. It was depressing to see the fearful faces of the uncomplaining old people, their features carved as if out of wood. There was no escape for them. The monastery felt more like a concentration camp than a sacred place or a historic monument. Gracanica wasn’t the only such enclave in Kosovo where people who left were found dead or disappeared completely before they reached their destination. Politicians from Belgrade liked to visit. Fearing the inevitable, they tried to save what could be saved among the icons and medieval manuscripts and bring them back to Serbia. They feared that when this enclave finally fell, like many others before it, into Albanian hands, the monastery would be set on fire. But the trip to Gracanica could also be used as a kind of marketing ploy to score political points in Belgrade.

It was in this monastery that Prof. Geremek met some local Serb leaders, as well as Bishop Sava of Belgrade. Momo Trajkovic, a grizzled, middle-aged man, was one of the Serb representatives. Both he and the bishop disliked Milosevic. Trajkovic used the same argument as some Albanians were using: “Slobodan Milosevic has thrown away the cradle of Serbian statehood and will go down in history as the creator of the state of Kosovo. His policy is responsible for the separation of Kosovo from Serbia.” There were also some harsh words addressed to the international community and to NATO. “What on earth was the point of the NATO intervention? All it achieved was to drive 200,000 Serb and Gypsy refugees out of Kosovo and to lead to the murder of one thousand Serbs and the burning of Serb homes and churches,” Trajkovic protested. “We had to intervene to stop the genocide,” Geremek replied. “That's not how things were, Minister. The reports of Serb atrocities were massively exaggerated. Of course there were some degenerates in paramilitary units who did murder Albanians. They should be judged and punished. But the scale of the purges was far smaller than was reported in the international media,” the bishop pointed out. There is an excellent BBC documentary called “The Death of Yugoslavia” in which a Kosovo Albanian partisan describes how the Albanians deliberately provoked the Serbs during the 1998 ceasefire to hasten the NATO intervention. It was not difficult to provoke them. Trajkovic spoke clearly, without beating about the bush. The red-haired bishop, an intellectual who spoke perfect English, chose his words carefully and diplomatically. I fopud myself drawn into the conversation unexpectedly at one point as an interpreter, translating first from Serbian into Polish and then from Polish into Serbian. Geremek was quite a difficult speaker to interpret. His sentences were
complex and he had a habit of correcting his interpreters. But thanks to my newfound role I was able to interview Trajkovic after the formal part of the meeting was over. Both sides left feeling disappointed. The Serbs had been hoping for more support and stronger security guarantees. The Polish delegation had been hoping for an easier partner.

From Gracanica to Pristina

So we set off for Pristina. The Polish soldiers warned me not to speak Serbian on any account. They said it was better not to speak Polish or Russian too. Ideally I should speak Albanian, or failing that, some neutral language, such as English. That would be safest. A few days earlier, an American of Bulgarian descent had asked someone the way in Bulgarian. To the Albanians, who speak a non-Slav language in a category of its own within the Indo-European family, Bulgarian sounds very much like Serbian. Somebody stabbed the American in the back. He died instantly, and the perpetrator was never found. I took the warning to heart.

The first shock for me was Pristina itself. The city suddenly popped up out of nowhere. There was no transition zone between the countryside and the city. We moved abruptly from the garbage-strewn fields to streets of 1980s tower blocks. In between the blocks were low, dilapidated buildings and the occasional mosque. I looked carefully at the writing on the street signs, the advertisements and the shop windows. Everything was in Albanian, sometimes with a bit of English thrown in for the benefit of foreigners. All the writing in Serbian had been painstakingly painted over, even on the signposts. Some overzealous painters had got carried away and had painted over writing in Albanian by mistake. The only Serbs left in Pristina lived and worked in the UN building in the city centre.

“What’s the big deal?” Safet, the man at the newspaper stall, said in broken English. “Kosovo is Albanian, so all writing Albanian. We didn’t attack Serbs, we just defending ourselves. The Serbs they always treat us like no humans. We had to do all dirtiest jobs with worst pay. Then they start murder our people, cutting out their eyes and their hearts, I swear!” I had been trying to find someone I could talk to in a neutral language, and at the sixth newspaper stall, I had finally found someone who understood English. I bought some cigarettes from Safet. There was a black eagle on a red background on the packet, and the brand name was “Albania”, unsurprisingly. They cost one mark. They had been made in Bulgaria and smuggled across the border. By some unknown legal artifice, the deutschmark had become Kosovo’s official currency and all transactions were conducted in it. Few people remembered the Yugoslav dinar, and even US dollars weren’t particularly useful.

The inhabitants of Pristina were out walking. The contrasts among them were striking and typically Balkan. Fashionable young people in Western clothes rubbed shoulders with toothless geriatrics in traditional caps and leather slippers. Europe and Asia. Urban sophistication and rural folklore. As in all other Eastern bloc countries, there were only two social classes: rich and poor. The rich drove around in luxury foreign cars, talked loudly on their cell phones, built themselves multi-storey villas and, in accordance with the proofs of prosperity accepted locally, were dripping with gold. The poor often could not even afford to buy themselves bread, lived in condemned housing and dressed in whatever rags they could lay their hands on. Many of them did not now how to read or write. When they smiled, their toothless gums were revealed. Members of both classes carried a gun appropriate to their social status. The poor had been exploited by the Serbs, and now they were being exploited by their own people. Politicians often took advantage of them. It was easy to whip up strong feelings among the poor and bring them out onto the streets in noisy demonstrations.

Albanians who refused to go with the tide of nationalism sweeping through the populace received threats from their fellow Albanians (the same happened with the Serbs and Croats who were less receptive to nationalist tub-thumping). In a time of war and hatred, reason and moderation are generally not welcomed. Veton Surroi, editor-in-chief of the largest Kosovo Albanian-language newspaper, “Koha Ditore” (“The Daily Times”), was on the receiving end of multiple threats. He is a lawyer by training, the son of a diplomat, and speaks several languages. He learned to live with the threats, as did Ibrahim Rugova, one of the most liberal Kosovo Albanian political leaders, recognised and respected outside Kosovo. He became President of Kosovo and died in 2006. A few days prior to our arrival in Pristina, two of Rugova’s close personal aides had been murdered under mysterious circumstances. It was also said...
that Rugova himself was supposed to have been in an Italian plane that had crashed in Kosovo a few weeks before our visit. It had probably been shot down. Another moderate Albanian had been given the key to his Serbian neighbours’ flat before they fled Kosovo. He looked after the flat for them as if it were his own. But one day some men in KLA uniforms knocked on his door. They demanded the keys to the Serbs’ flat, and when he refused, they beat him senseless, cursing him as a traitor. The Serbs’ flat was ransacked anyway, soon after the incident.

Life in the capital was apparently returning to normal. People were going to work, children were going to school again, and damaged buildings were being repaired one by one, albeit very slowly. Local elections were planned for the spring. The problems with getting hold of basic necessities were no longer so acute, but there were still frequent power cuts, so many people were dreading the winter, as they had no heating in their flats. The only thing that felt abnormal in Pristina was its apparently homogeneous Albanian-ness. It was hard to believe that, after so many centuries of Serb presence in Kosovo, all traces of Serbian influence had been completely wiped out and erased from the collective memory. Albanians lived in flats once occupied by Serbs. On the streets, Albanian was the only language one could hear.

The meeting between Geremek and Rugova took place in one of the tower blocks in the city centre. After their tête-à-tête, the two came out to talk to the journalists. Rugova, slim and bespectacled, with his customary polish and distinction, addressed us in very decent French. He also spoke perfect Serbian, but refrained from using it as a matter of principle. He approached all language-related issues with great attention to principle. While I was standing in front of the building, Hashim Thaçi came out, once leader of the KLA, but now a politician recognised by the international community. He was immaculately dressed, with not a hair out of place. One might have mistaken him for a European gentleman, had it not been for the unpleasant expression on his face and the resemblance of his features to those of a gangster in a film about the Mafia.

Not long after that, I decided to slip away from our escort and try to engage some more newspaper sellers in conversation. I soon realised my limited Albanian was adequate as far as finding out the number of killed and wounded was concerned, or asking where the latest fighting was going on, but when it came to buying anything, or conducting even the most basic conversation, I was hopelessly out of my depth. At the umpteenth newspaper stall I tried, I finally gave up trying to engage the locals in conversation in a neutral language and in desperation started speaking Serbian. To my surprise, the man at the stall answered me in Serbian, in hushed tones. We talked for a while about living conditions, about how expensive everything had become, and about the general atmosphere of fear. All of a sudden, a group of men who looked rather threatening appeared, as if out of nowhere. They had their eyes on us, so, mindful of the warnings the Polish soldiers had given me, I hastily finished our conversation and politely said goodbye to the man in Albanian as I went away. I was a bit disturbed by the look of surprise on the faces of the approaching group of men. Later, I found out that what I thought meant “goodbye” in Albanian actually meant “you look good”.

Pristina was the place where I first felt real fear from just walking along the street. It wasn’t because of the local drivers, whose favourite trick was to step on the gas as soon as they saw a pedestrian crossing the street in front of them, but because of the other people passing by. If it is possible for a place to emanate physical aggression, that was what was happening here, in the capital of Kosovo. I felt hatred and aggression in the faces of passers-by, in their eyes and in the way they looked at me. The general feeling of unease was amplified by the constant noise of army helicopters circling overhead.

From Pristina back to Warsaw

We said goodbye to the Polish soldiers and got into the helicopter. We had to go back via Istanbul, because an international summit meeting was just starting there, which Geremek was to take part in. We were allowed to wait in the VIP waiting room at Istanbul airport. The aeroplane of the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, landed next to our army helicopter, making it look like a child’s toy in comparison. When Madeleine Albright’s plane touched down and came to rest next to our modest conveyance, we felt even smaller. When we finally landed in Warsaw it was past midnight, and snow was falling.
On the bridge in Kosovska Mitrovica, 2011

Prof. Bronislaw Jeremie and Major Roman Polko, Kosovo, 1999

Somewhere in Kosovo, 1999

Polish KFOR military base, 1999

Me and some friends from the University of Cracow, Petrovaradin, Novi Sad, 1997

With my friend from faculty, Ania in Bitola, Macedonia, 1998

Nun in Cetinje, Montenegro

On the bridge in Kosovska Mitrovica, 2011
Chapter V.

November 2000

From Cracow to Zagreb (via Budapest)
I was supposed to go to Bosnia for the elections, as an OSCE observer. But on the day of my departure they phoned me to tell me the number of observers had been cut back drastically and that my services were no longer required. I wasn’t going to give up so easily. In my mind I was already on my way to the Balkans, and I already had a ticket to Zagreb, via Budapest. So I set off, without any clear idea of what I was going to do when I got there.

I spent part of the night journey on the train talking to the very personable sleeping car attendant, who knew some astrology and was interested in paranormal phenomena. He had been in Kosovo recently. The train had been laid on to take Polish soldiers to Kosovo. Apparently, the last stretch of the journey, across no-man’s land, always left the passengers with an uncomfortable feeling.

Once I got to Budapest, my train to Zagreb pulled into the station almost immediately. The clean and tidy interior looked very inviting. This time my fellow passengers were some elderly Slovaks and a Polish woman married to a Slovak. They were modestly dressed and on their way to Zagreb to trade. These kind of private commercial trips were quite commonplace until not so long ago. They had taken with them an odd assortment of things, whatever they could afford to buy: skirts, scarves, an iron, hair clips, some lingerie and some cheap jewellery. Some neighbours had told them that they could get several times more money for such things in Zagreb than they could get in Slovakia. It was their first expedition. I wrote some essential phrases in Croatian on a piece of paper for them. At the Hungarian-Croatian border, a Croatian customs officer with a very unpleasant expression on his face came into our compartment and ordered the Slovaks to open their luggage. They showed him all their bags, explaining that the things in them were presents. They told him how many days they would be staying, where they would be sleeping, and how much money they had brought with them. But the customs officer wasn’t having any of it. He became ruder and ruder, and eventually called three of his colleagues to help him. Together they pronounced judgement on the terrified Slovaks and told them to get off and go back home on the first available train. The Slovaks obeyed, struggling to fight back their tears.

I was to be met off the train in Zagreb by a friend of a friend of a friend from Cracow. I was supposed to be staying in the house of an architect,
Josip, who was now living in Vienna, and who was a good friend of my close friend Dominika from Cracow. However, because Josip didn’t live in Zagreb any more, I was to be met by his neighbour, whom I had never seen before (I had never seen Josip either for that matter). Fortunately, there were not many people travelling that day, and we managed to recognise each other.

We set off for the suburbs. It took us about half an hour to get to our destination, and in that time I found out almost everything I needed to know from Darko. Franjo Tudman, the first president of the newly independent Croatia, had died a few months before my visit. “Now that Tudman has died, all the sharks’ shady dealings are coming to the surface,” Darko told me. “While the standard of living has been falling and unemployment has been increasing, the sharks (Tudman’s cronies) have been embezzling public funds and salting them away in their Swiss bank accounts.” Some very smart cars whizzed past us. “Those are smugglers and gangsters,” Darko commented. “Ordinary people can’t afford cars like those.” He told me how three years earlier he had visited his mother’s family in a small village in Hercegovina. He remembered the poverty and the ramshackle wooden houses. People’s eyes had almost popped out of their heads at the sight of his old Renault. He had been back there recently and seen the whole village transformed, as if in a fairy tale. The old wooden houses had been replaced by posh new villas, and the streets were full of swanky Western cars. The locals owed their economic miracle to smuggling, on a smaller and a larger scale. Prices in Hercegovina were several times lower than in Croatia, so people scurried between the two countries like ants, buying and selling at a profit. Small-scale smugglers bought and sold whatever they could lay their hands on; the big players dealt in cigarettes, drugs, and sometimes guns.

We reached our destination. I was surprised by the large number of wayside chapels. Darko explained that they were due to a Croatia custom: in spring and summer, when the weather was warmer, mass was often said outdoors, by wayside chapels. He wasn’t fond of this custom himself. He found it hard to concentrate and pray when he was surrounded by gossips, who had only come to see who else had turned up and how they were dressed, and to exchange gossip.

We reached Josip’s house. It looked interesting. Josip had designed it himself. It had two floors and was situated at a distance of several hundred metres from the surrounding houses. The prospect of spending the night here gave me a very slight shudder. I felt slightly uneasy on the way to the kitchen, which was in the cellar. I lay awake listening to the many sounds of the house at night, the ticking clocks, the creaking timbers. All the horror movies I had watched came back to haunt me. But there was a nice view from the windows, as the house was perched on a hill, and I could see the lights of all the other houses twinkling in the darkness below me.

The next day, I decided to go to Belgrade. I rang the Yugoslav Embassy to make sure I could apply for a tourist visa in Zagreb (in Warsaw I had been told that I could only go there on a press visa). It took me 20 minutes to get to the bus station, partly because my sense of direction in Zagreb was extremely unreliable. On the way, I admired the beautiful views of the mountains and the pretty houses enveloped in greenery. It was surprisingly warm for the time of year: mid November, and over fifteen degrees. I got some kunas from the local pub, which was called “Rondo”. The bus took me to the centre of Zagreb, and from there I got a taxi to the embassy. There was quite a long queue in front of the building. The people in the queue were mostly Serbs with Croatian passports. I got my visa straight away, without any fuss. But the sight of Serbs queuing up in front of the Yugoslav embassy in Zagreb really symbolised the collapse of Yugoslavia for me.

One could get to like Zagreb. The city is nicely laid out, the architecture is very nice, and its clean and tidy streets would do even the fussiest of Swiss towns proud. It has a Mitteleuropa feel to it. The prices were considerably higher than in Poland.

Long ago, in the days of Yugoslavia, Slovenia and Croatia had been the most industrialised and wealthiest parts of the country. They were also the most Western parts, in every sense of the word, and especially in the case of Slovenia were loath to be associated with the Balkan rough and tumble on their doorsteps. There used to be a funny comparison of Yugoslavia to a train. Slovenia was the locomotive at the front, followed by Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Hercegovina and Macedonia. The people of Kosovo claimed credit for being at the tail end of the train, because they slowed the whole thing down and kept it from flying off the tracks with excessive speed.
In 1991, Slovenia was the first republic to decide to leave Yugoslavia. There were only a few days of fighting. Croatian secession, which began shortly afterwards, turned into a full-blown war. Croatia was attacked by the Yugoslav army. Each side still accuses the other of starting the conflict. In the final analysis, Croatia won the war hands down. Germany came to its assistance, with diplomatic recognition and money. The Vatican was also one of the first states to recognise Croatia. The final act of the war was played out in August 1995, when several hundred thousand Serbs were driven out of the Krajina border region between Serbia and Croatia as part of Operation Storm. The newly created Croatian state was far from being a monolith. Even disregarding its ethnic minorities, the major differences between the north of the country (around Zagreb) and its southern coastal regions were palpable. Mediterranean influences dominated in the south, Mitteleuropa in the north. This translated into differences in mentality and even in language between people in the north and the south.

I went to the offices of the newspaper “Vecernij list”. I had a friend who was a journalist there. He was a very kind man and gave me the contact details of some of his friends in Belgrade. Talking to this man, who was my father’s age, I felt I was dealing with someone who was still a Yugoslav at heart, like many of his contemporaries. His generation, born just after the Second World War, had grown up in a prosperous and cosmopolitan Yugoslavia. There had been many mixed marriages. This generation and the generation of their parents, the partisans, had found it hardest to accept the collapse of Yugoslavia and the emergence of the new national identities. He had no hesitation in defining himself as a Yugoslav when asked.

Zagreb was where Dubravka Ugresic, the most famous “widow of Yugoslavia”, as she somewhat ironically described herself, lived and worked for years. She is half Bulgarian and half Croatian, and did not identify with the new Croatia when it was created. She was critical of President Franjo Tudman and the tendency to dictate things to the people from above. She exposed the new regime in columns she wrote for the press, with her characteristically cutting tone. The upshot of it all was that she was branded one of the “witches of Zagreb” by the regime and chased out of Croatia along with her fellow witches: female lecturers, writers and essayists. She took up residence in Amsterdam (where she still lives). Ugresic’s work was actually the subject of my Masters’ thesis.

In the evening, I went around the cathedral, lingering by the grave of the famous cardinal Aloysius Stepinac. There were very few other figures who aroused as much controversy and as many strong feelings as Stepinac. He was unfortunate enough to be at the head of the Catholic Church in Croatia during the Second World War. The Serbs and communist propaganda accused him of collaborating with the fascist regime of Ante Pavelic (the Ustashe). Less outspoken detractors criticised him for failing to stand up to Pavelic, whereas his supporters pointed to the large numbers of Serbs and Jews he had saved by arranging false Catholic certificates of baptism for them. After the war, he refused to obey the new communist authorities and was sent to prison by them. Because of his uncompromising stance he came to be seen as a defender of Croatian independence and nationhood. The process of his beatification began just after the collapse of communism. After Croatia (re)gained independence (there are various interpretations of what exactly happened), Stepinac became one of the symbols of Croatian identity. He was entombed in a sarcophagus in the cathedral, not far from the altar. From the many portraits of him in the cathedral, a strong and resolute face looked down on the beholder. A booklet about him entitled “Our holy martyr” was being sold, and his sarcophagus was surrounded by fresh bouquets of flowers.

The cult of Stepinac in Croatia reminded me a little of the role played by the Orthodox Church in Serbia. In Tito’s day, Serbs and Croats alike had been secularised in more or less equal measure, like most inhabitants of Yugoslavia. Religion was of no importance to them. When Tito died, Yugoslavia fell apart and new states came into being. A process of making people feel different from each other, steered from above, began. The Croats began to distance themselves from any links with the Serbs. They began drawing attention to their alleged Persian descent, which the presence of a chessboard in the Croatian coat of arms was supposed to prove. If chess came from Persia, the argument went, Croats must come from the same place. The language spoken by Croats changed to make it different from the language spoken by Serbs. Suddenly, there was a plethora of neologisms, which the authorities
claimed were “authentically Croatian” words. The neologisms replaced words that were used by both Serbs and Croats. Many linguists cheered their support from the side-lines. Religion was also used to make Croats feel different from their neighbours. Croats were Catholics, whereas Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians were Orthodox. Unfortunately, in most cases there was no religious revival, just a crude attempt to use religion for political purposes. This often gave rise to comical situations. The famous writer and politician Vuk Draskovic was one of the fresh converts to Orthodoxy on the Serbian side. When one of the religious services he attended was broadcast on TV, viewers could see the extent of his religious fervour as he sat in the church with his legs crossed and a cigarette in his hand. There were similar figures on the Croatian side, who started going to church but treated it as if they were going to the theatre, obviously having no idea about the liturgy and what it stood for.

O my way back to Josip’s house, late in the evening, I listened to some young people talking to each other on the bus. They were on their way home from work and were complaining about the cost of living and poor living conditions. But this was not the kind of poverty I had encountered in Serbia or Macedonia. I got off the bus at the bus terminus and took fright at the almost complete blackness outside. The darkness engulfed me. It took me 40 very tense minutes to get back to the house. The houses were far apart, and the path to Josip’s house wound its way steeply up the hillside, brushing against various precipices. My imagination went into overdrive and produced a large number of possible death scenarios. I suddenly thought nobody would hear my screams – or find my dead body afterwards – if I was set upon by a mass murderer with an axe. I was lucky enough to meet a man who didn’t look like a murderer. I told him the address of the house, and he took me there. The number of the house and the street name both matched the address I had been given. The house looked slightly different from how I remembered it, but I had only really seen it once. I started trying to unlock the door. The key didn’t fit. My efforts to open the door became more and more strenuous until suddenly the door opened from inside and a man emerged, threatening to call the police. It turned out that I was on the right street, at the right number – but in the wrong village. In the darkness, I had taken the wrong route from the terminus and ended up in a completely different place. By a stroke of luck, the owner of the house I had been trying to break into happened to know Josip’s house and took me there.

I knocked on the door of Josip’s neighbours and they very kindly invited me in for dinner. It was already late in the evening. The lady of the house, Ana, a brunette in her forties who had seen better days, had put out everything she had on the kitchen table: ham, sausages, some burek and a cake. There were other guests, and the evening was already in full swing. The master of ceremonies was Ana’s husband, a blind man whose face showed the signs of a difficult life. There were three other men in the kitchen where we were sitting. All of them looked like wanted murderers from the last chance saloon. But their intimidating outward appearance contrasted sharply with the warmth and hospitality they were radiating at this gathering. They started telling anecdotes, and then they began to sing. A guitar appeared from somewhere. There was wine on the table to start with, and then its place was taken by some excellent homemade raki. The atmosphere became ecstatic, then tearful. Somehow, the conversation had come around to the war. The trauma of war sits deep in all those who have experienced it, and when the floodgates of emotion are opened, on some occasion like this one, it comes back to the surface again. On the Croatian side, there had not only been young conscripts fighting, but also older men like Mirko, one of the men at the table. “It comes back to me in my dreams,” he said. “Sometimes I’m afraid to fall asleep, because I see it all over again.” Another of the men, Rastko, was constantly having his leg pulled by the others, who called him “Russki”. His father had apparently been a Serb of Russian origin. They teased him with lines like “You seem to hang around with the Serbs a lot, you could be Orthodox for all we know,” but Rastko took it all in good part. I was surprised how little resentment they felt towards the Serbs. “The war was no use to us, or to the Serbs. We beat the stuffing out of each other, and what has anybody got to show for it? Dead bodies, cripples, houses in ruins, misery and poverty. We could have fought the Bosnian Muslims or the Albanians instead of fighting the Serbs. They’re Orthodox, yes, but they’re Christians and Slavs like we are. Now you can’t trust a Bosniak, because you never know when he’s going to stab you in the back. They’re a different race and a different religion. The world will find out soon enough what the Bosniaks are like, and then they’ll...
realise that they’re not as meek and mild as they thought they were,” Ana’s husband said, and the others nodded their approval. The Slovenes weren’t popular around the table either, as in Croatia as a whole. They looked with disfavour on their rich neighbours to the north. “They’re not proper Slavs like us,” the gentlemen chorused, “they’re more German than Slav, real cold fish.” That evening we came very close to singing “Jugoslavija” together.

From Zagreb to Belgrade

The train was clean and on time, again. I was curious to see what kind of people would be travelling on this route. On the platform, there was a group of modestly dressed men and women laden with heavy bags. I ended up in a compartment with some people from Dugo Selo, a town in Croatia not far from Zagreb. They were neighbours. They were talking about their families and their houses, and about the problems they were having with their children. One of the women had a son who had died his hair blond, to the dismay of both his mother and his teachers. When they had got out at Dugo Selo, I started talking to a thin elderly gentleman whose moustache, tidiness and upright bearing made me think he might have a military background. I was not mistaken. He turned out to be a retired general. He was a Serb himself, but his wife had been a Croat. He now lived in Belgrade, while his children lived in Zagreb. He was 82 years old, though did not look it. He was quite willing to talk about the war, but the most recent one. His war was the Second World War, in which he had fought as one of Tito’s partisans. At that time, he explained, it was clear who was friend and who was foe, who was good and who bad. They had not felt any fear. Maybe it was the folly of youth. What brave people he had come across then. His comrades in arms were courageous and honest. It was a golden generation, he said. After the war, he had been promoted and had made the army his career. They had moved him from place to place, as was the custom at that time. Maybe that was the reason why he didn’t feel strongly attached to any one place. He was a real Yugoslav. He had been stationed in Bosnia, Croatia and Macedonia, but people everywhere were the same, except in Slovenia, where the standard of living was higher. And then, all of a sudden, borders, passports and customs officers had appeared to divide people, and with them the poison of hostility. What he was describing took concrete form when we reached the border between Croatia and Yugoslavia and a young customs officer barked at us to get out of the carriage and find somewhere else to sit. Those were the new rules apparently. We went through in the restaurant car, where the atmosphere was one of Balkan machismo: tracksuits, hair gel, gold chains and vulgar language.

In my new compartment, I found another travelling companion, Tanja. She had an air of neglect about her. She was wearing a baggy jumper and threadbare jeans. Her hair was slightly greasy. She was a few years older than me. She lived in Rijeka but also had a Macedonian passport, as she was of mixed Croatian-Macedonian parentage. She had studied biology but had been unable to find work as a biologist. She lived off occasional casual jobs. She gave me some freshly picked madarines. She also had some olive oil with her, which she had pressed herself. She worried about not having a steady job and not being able to find a husband. An hour before we arrived in Belgrade, four middle-aged women entered our compartment. They reeked of tobacco smoke. Their voices were hoarse and their faces lined. They took no notice of us and began to discuss the hardship of life in Belgrade in quite vulgar terms. The power stations had begun cutting off the supply of electricity to large parts of the city. Since the NATO air strikes, electricity had been in short supply and power cuts had become a part of everyday life. Through the window, I watched the ramshackle housing pass by, lit only by the occasional solitary light bulb. Here and there, a few ancient cars were rusting away.

Belgrade

I reached New Belgrade by bus, squashed against the other passengers in conditions unworthy of human beings. The people looked even poorer than last time, the holes in the buses even bigger, and the tower blocks of New Belgrade greyer and more oppressive than ever. In spite of their circumstances, Liliana, my father’s wife, had prepared a three-course meal and had even baked a cake for dessert.

But there was one thing that surprised me. People were still embittered and humiliated, worn out by war and poverty, but they had
found a glimmer of hope to hang on to: Vojislav Kostunica had come to power after the September elections, and Milosevic had finally been removed from office. My visit came only a few weeks after these changes, so the euphoria was still palpable.

The opposition, till then beset by its own internal squabbles, had managed to set aside its internal disputes for long enough to present a single candidate at the elections. He was a modest doctor of the law, from a good Belgrade family, and his hands were clean. Kostunica had been one of the founders of the Democratic Party at the beginning of the nineties. After a few years, however, he became disillusioned with the direction Zoran Dindic (prime minister from 2001 to 2003) was taking the party in and left to found a party of his own: the Serbian Democratic Party. Dindic was drifting towards cosmopolitan liberalism, whereas Kostunica was a conservative, with right-wing sympathies. There were no holds barred in the electoral contest between Milosevic and Kostunica. Slobo’s supporters branded Kostunica a traitor (he had been in Montenegro during the NATO bombing of Belgrade). They dug up a picture of him posing with a Kalashnikov in Kosovo from somewhere. They even claimed he was not a real man, because he had no children. In spite of all the slurs and all the invective, Kostunica still won the election. But Milosevic refused to concede defeat and demanded a recount. Thousands of each candidate’s supporters took to the streets. Serbia came very close to serious unrest, even civil war. During a memorable demonstration in the centre of Belgrade, Kostunica addressed the turbulent crowd from a balcony and managed to calm them down. International and domestic pressure finally persuaded Milosevic to recognise the results of the elections. There were a few more uneasy nights, and then normality returned. Kostunica became the man of the moment. I was fascinated by the various folk legends that attached to him. People said he was descended from the war hero Zivojin Misic, and even from the bravest of Serbian knights Milos Obilic, who fought in the Battle of Kosovo and killed Sultan Murad I. According to national tradition, it was believed by some that Obilic would reappear in Serbia’s hour of greatest need and save the nation from destruction. Another popular name for the new President was “apajorun” (the Serbian equivalent of valerian).

An awful lot of good will was required to dare to hope for a better future in the dire straits Serbia was in. Everyone spoke incessantly of the poverty they were enduring, and it was obvious for anyone to see that the situation was indeed desperate. Inflation turned into hyperinflation. As usual, the only thing that remained relatively cheap was alcohol. The price of cigarettes rocketed, which was a real problem for the inhabitants of Yugoslavia, as most of them smoked two packs a day (and my father even smoked four packs a day, I was once told). The gap between rich and poor gaped even wider: luxury restaurants became even more luxurious, and perfume shops and designer boutiques were frequented by people who looked as if they had just stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine.

In the afternoon, I met up with someone I had known for two years, but only through telephone conversations. Boris Tadic was a Democratic Party politician. We arranged to meet in a crowded café near the university. Unfortunately, I still had no idea what he looked like. I started looking around for a corpulent middle-aged dignitary with a large moustache in an old-fashioned suit. This seemed to me to be the most logical course of action under the circumstances. I was surprised to find he resembled George Clooney more than the mental image I had had of him. At the last minute I managed to avoid saying “You’re much better looking than I expected” and said instead that he was much younger than I had expected. Tadic was a doctor of psychology by training and had been an Olympic water polo champion in his youth. He was intelligent, humorous and quick-witted. He knew Polish history well and surprised me by asking about the success of the Polish historical epic “By Fire and the Sword” in the cinemas. In Yugoslavia, if seven million people had turned out to see a new film it would have been a cosmic achievement. We talked about politics, films and life in general, in a typical Balkan kind of conversation. Boris told me that as a minister in the federal government he was earning the equivalent of 200 marks a month (twice the average wage). A car came with the job, but he had to pay for petrol himself. His father was a university professor and his parents had fortunately left him a flat, which he was renting out. I had no idea he had been made a minister. I joked that I wouldn’t know whether to address him as “Doctor” or “Minister” now. In my surprise I also blurted out a word I subsequently regretted – “kurac” - which resembled a mild
expletive in Polish but was actually a gross insult in Serbian. Such are the pitfalls of bilingualism. He looked very taken aback. I carried on talking. Eventually he suggested I should just call him Boris, but he also asked why I had called him a “kurac”. “Why not? Do you object?” I replied, still unaware of the gaffe I had committed. But as the words came out of my mouth and I again saw the look of complete astonishment on his face, I suddenly realised what I had actually said in Serbian, as opposed to what I intended to say. I became as red as a beetroot and garbled some excuse about differences of terminology between Polish and Serbian until I finally managed to explain myself. In this way, Boris Tadic, who was elected President of Serbia a few years after our meeting, became the first and so far the only political leader I have addressed in such a robust manner face-to-face.

Tadic was the first person to tell me something I subsequently heard several times, from different people: that Yugoslavia was in the same situation in 2000 as Poland had been in in 1989. Freedom was within reach, but the economy was in a disastrous state. The opposition, no longer held together by a common enemy, was beginning to be torn apart by internal squabbles. People's initial hopes of a better life were turning into frustration. But there was one big difference – fortunately for Poland, the last war had been less recent. It was the Second World War.

On the same day, I managed to visit Ana as well. Tall and slim, with her hair tied back in a ponytail, she joyfully showed me her beautiful one-year-old daughter. She and her husband were living with her parents now. She showed a souvenir of the air raids: some fragments of an American F-16 shot down by the Serbs. Many Serbs kept such souvenirs proudly in their homes, as if they were trophies. In Kosovo, on the other hand, Albanians treasured fragments of Serbian planes and tanks destroyed by NATO forces. All these military memorabilia were unfortunately contaminated by low-grade uranium, it was later realised. During the war, Ana’s husband Obrad had been mobilised and sent to the south of Serbia. As an employee of state TV he had been assigned to a radiolocating unit. He tried to tell us about the air raids in a humorous way. The Serbs had led their NATO opponents astray by various cunning ruses. They laid out rows of large black sheets in empty fields, which were then mistaken for motorways and bombed by NATO forces. The Serbs also set up fake military bases, again in empty fields, when they knew the NATO forces were on their way. The NATO aircraft would bomb the fake base while the real base, hidden away somewhere inconspicuous, would escape unscathed. It was like a game of cat and mouse.

I remembered the tales about the fantastic concerts that were held in Belgrade on nearly every evening of the air raids. Thousands of people danced to the music of the most popular bands, night after night. Various anti-American jokes were doing the rounds, many of them sexist too. Why did NATO finally decide to bomb Yugoslavia? Because Madeleine Albright had rung Milosevic and issued him with an ultimatum: “Slobo, you choose: it's either love – or war.” Bill Clinton wasn’t spared either. There were posters where Serbs had written: “Monica (Lewinsky), get back to the White House!” or “Bill, Yugoslavia is not Monica!” Favourite hit songs were re-recorded, with lyrics that were both anti-American and anti-Milosevic at the same time. A good example is the beautiful ballad “The Story of Vasi Ladackom”, written by the Novi Sad singer and songwriter Djordje Balasevic. In the new version, Balasevic made Milosevic the hero/villain of the song. All this made the NATO air raids sound more like a crazy cultural event than a real war. However, the humorous effect was spoiled by the sight of ruined government buildings, ploughed through by missiles, in the city centre, and hospitals and TV stations deliberately razed to the ground. There were thousands of victims, some who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and others who were deliberately targeted. The NATO “surgical strikes” destroyed hospitals, buses, bridges, convoys of refugees, churches, homes and schools. But humour was always the best way of coping with the fear.

In the evening, I set off on my travels again, this time to Podgorica, formerly known as Titograd, the capital of Montenegro.
From Belgrade to Podgorica

The train was hideous, dirty and grey, enveloped in a thick fog. It looked like a ghost train which would take us off to some unknown, evil place. It was full to bursting with people. Eventually, I managed to force my way through to the sleeping car with the couchettes. My travelling companions were two girls of my age and their two male friends, who were ten years older. They were all on their way to Montenegro to work there. They were going to work as educators at a camp for young people from all the former Yugoslav republics. Such camps were a new departure. In spite of the painful events of recent history, people still felt bound in some way to each other. We travelled in darkness, as there were power cuts again, and told each other jokes. Caki, a former TV presenter and now a teacher, was the life and soul of the party. Indeed, he would have been the ideal travelling companion, had it not been for the fact that in the course of the journey he got through three packs of cigarettes. But his jollity was only skin deep. Serbs used to go to Montenegro on holiday, with money in their pockets. Now they were going there in search of gainful employment, because the pay was better than in Belgrade. I had never heard, and have never heard since, such paeans of praise for Kostunica as I heard then. He was their one and only hope. At the border between Serbia and Montenegro, which hadn’t formally come into existence yet, some gentlemen in uniform boarded the train. They asked the men for their military service books and left the women alone. The creation of an official border between the two republics seemed to be only a matter of time. As the sun rose, I looked out of the window and saw towering, craggy mountains, through which the railway tracks wound like a thin line, flirting with precipices. That was the first time I realised that there is such a thing as beauty that delights and terrifies at the same time.

We arrived in Podgorica at around seven in the morning. I had no idea where to find a place to stay, or where there were hotels or private rooms to rent. I had a preference for the latter, as staying in private rooms was a better way to get to know the locals. My only Montenegrin friend was abroad at the time, so I started asking the taxi drivers in front of the station about places to stay. They recommended someone who lived 15km out of town and rented rooms out to visitors. I took their advice and headed for Gornja Gorica. It was an imposing, two-storey house, clean but somehow sad-looking, and without character. Anyway, 50 marks a night seemed like a good price to me.

After I had unpacked, I decided to fulfil a lifelong dream and go to Cetinje, the former capital of Montenegro, a holy city of rulers and monks nestling at the foot of the mountains. The ancient bus wound around steep roads, tottering over precipices, threatening to fall apart at any moment. It was a high adrenaline experience. It was in Cetinje monastery that the rulers of the prince-bishopric of Montenegro and leaders of the autocephalous Orthodox Church were crowned. The prince-bishop and poet Petar Petrovic Njegos wrote about Cetinje, and even illiterate Montenegrins know the words of his poem and play Gorski vijenac (“The Mountain Wreath”) off by heart. Today, Cetinje is a neat and tidy small town that has a more Central European than Balkan feel. The white stone monastery also seems small. In the souvenir shop there was an old and ugly, but very kind, nun. Since I was the only tourist, she left the shop and spent an hour showing me around the monastery. I followed her example by kneeling and crossing myself nearly every three minutes, as we first passed the resting place of Saint Peter of Montenegro, then the tomb of another saint, then some wonderful icon on the wall. It’s difficult to describe everything one feels when visiting a place so steeped in history, tradition and mystique, especially when one does so in near silence. The nun told me that the presence of the relics of saints and of the icons had saved Montenegro from destruction during the NATO air raids and other disasters that had been visited upon the region. I spent the whole of the rest of the day exploring the town and bought an icon of St Peter of Montenegro.

In the evening, when I was on my way back to Podgorica, a violent storm broke out, accompanied by torrential rain. It was nearly a repeat performance of my experience in Zagreb. In complete darkness and in the pouring rain, I couldn’t find my way back to where I was staying and wandered around hopelessly for almost an hour. But this time I found the right house, though I arrived soaked to the skin. I went to the kitchen to get a hot drink. The mother and the wife of the taxi driver who owned the house were sitting there. It turned out that the taxi driver’s wife, Violetta,
was only a year older than I was, but already had three children and a streak of grey in her hair. She worked as a nurse in a hospital. Her mother-in-law’s face was swollen and she looked unwell and tired out by her life. She was putting compresses on her legs. “It’ll come to no good if we leave Yugoslavia,” Violetta was saying. “Montenegro is only the mountains and the sea. We have no industry or farming. If we leave Yugoslavia, we’ll have to import everything from abroad, from Italy, Croatia or Serbia. We won’t stand to gain from it. I’m no fan of the Serbs: they dragged us into all the wars and into the NATO air strikes. They scared all our tourists away. We used to get Germans and Swiss coming here for their holidays. I even had an American woman once. Now all we get is Serbs, with hardly any money to spend. Both of us have to work for us to even stand a chance of having a half-decent life. The money all goes on the children, the house and the two cars we have to keep running. There’s nothing left for any little luxuries.” As she was speaking, she kept trying to hush her three noisy small boys. The mother-in-law hardly spoke a word. The situation was the exact opposite of the Balkan stereotype, according to which the mother-in-law is second only to God Himself in the order of things, and is even allowed to administer corporal punishment to her daughter-in-law, who is subordinate to her. Normally a Balkan mother-in-law does all the talking, and the daughter-in-law keeps stumm, but here it was the other way round. The master of the house returned just before midnight. The children suddenly calmed down, as if by magic, and marched obediently into the bathroom. After a few words of greeting to her son, the mother-in-law retired to her room, and in silence, Violetta hastily began preparing something to eat. The master of the house was heavily built, broad-shouldered and dark-skinned, with uncompromising facial features. He could have been a junior Mafioso. I suspected that he didn’t shrink from using physical force to show who was in charge here.

The next day I visited Podgorica again, which had the air of a provincial town rather than a capital: a cluster of tower blocks and a few nice houses, mostly one-storey, in the centre, surrounded on all sides by mountains, mountains which made up for the shortcomings of the rest of the view. Podgorica’s architecture definitely couldn’t compete with the beauty of its natural setting. Lunch was a nice surprise, only ten marks for an exceptionally good three-course meal. As in Kosovo, by some miracle the deutschmark had taken over in Montenegro too. Before my train left in the evening, I went to the station bistro for a drink. I was the only woman there. I was clearly not on the lookout for any company, and to cap it all, I was drinking beer. The dismayed and disapproving staring of the local machos – policemen and tracksuit-clad hoodlums – helped to lift my spirits.

From Podgorica to Belgrade

I shivered in the cold while I waited for the train to pull in to the grubby, dusty platform. It finally rolled up. There were three other people in my compartment: a girl a little older than me; her uncle, and a middle-aged blond woman. The man’s bearing and general appearance reminded me of my colleague Ryszard Bilski. The two women looked sympathetic as well. They were taking food to Serbia. They were returning from visits to relatives in Montenegro and were laden with food, because it was much easier to come by at an affordable price in Montenegro than in Serbia. The girl quoted a popular anecdote: the best way to get rid of unwanted elderly people was to give them two hundred marks, which they would spend on meat and sausages, after which they would die of overeating. “What do you know about life, child?” the older passengers retorted. “The old people would give the money to their children straight away!” We spent the whole journey talking around the subject of food in one way or another. The blond lady kept offering us delicious cakes and dumplings stuffed with meat. She talked of her greatest gastronomic pleasures, with eyelids half closed in rapture: midnight feasts in the kitchen, gorging oneself on baklava and smoking cigarettes at the same time. Her eloquence almost drew us into her private ecstasy. I thought of my Mum, who enjoyed similar pleasures and still apparently managed to remain slim. During the night, a customs officer came in and asked to see our papers. As soon as I took out my Polish passport, he became a zealous investigator, bombarding me with questions. Why had I been in Montenegro? Why was I going to Yugoslavia? What had I been doing in Croatia? And in Serbia? Did I have a camera? What was my occupation? Did I have anything to declare? Was I transporting any icons, guns or alcohol? As usual, I denied that I was carrying some raki. I explained that
I was following a Slav studies course (I had actually finished my course a few months earlier, but let’s not quibble) and that I had been collecting research material in Yugoslavia. He didn’t believe me and ordered me to unpack my bag. I was obeyed but was furious with him and told him he would have to put everything back in the bag for me. The raki was right at the bottom of my bag and he didn’t notice it. My camera was in my handbag, which he forgot about. I felt like a spy and a smuggler rolled into one. In the end he gave up, and the episode came to a fortunate end. He actually even put my things back in my bag for me, but as he left, he eyed me rather unpleasantly and said through clenched teeth: “I still don’t believe you”.

Belgrade

By morning, I was back in Belgrade. I wandered around the town and met some friends, then I went with my Dad to Gran’s grave in the cemetery. The graves in Belgrade are rather strange to behold. They are made in a different way and in a very different style from the ones we are accustomed to in Poland. Instead of the black and white oval-shaped porcelain portrait of the deceased that we have on gravestones in Poland, the Serbs have a huge, almost life-size colour portrait carved on a vertical slab. The gravestones of Mafiosi are particularly striking. They usually bear a depiction of a young man clutching a Kalashnikov and very often a cigarette and/or alcoholic beverage to boot. If one is in doubt about their underworld credentials, reading the epitaph usually clinches it: “beloved brother/son/husband Jovan, died in tragic circumstances” or even just simply “shot dead”. Apart from the predominant Orthodox crucifixes in Belgrade’s cemeteries, there is also the occasional Catholic crucifix or Star of David, but there are also the graves of atheists, bereft of any religious symbols, and sometimes adorned with the communist red star. As we were leaving the cemetery, we passed my Dad’s neighbour. Her son had been shot dead in broad daylight, in the centre of Belgrade, a chance, innocent victim of a gunfight. He had been her only son. She visited his grave in the cemetery every day. People said she had lost her mind.

In the evening, I got on a train again. Needless to say, I was going back to Podgorica.

Belgrade to Podgorica again

This time I was unlucky. My travelling companions were some middle-aged women, who were constantly smoking foul-smelling cigarettes in a no-smoking compartment and raucously exchanging salacious items of gossip, seasoned with a generous helping of obscenities. Typical market traders.

Having arrived in Podgorica in the morning, I crossed over form the station to the nearby “Evropa” hotel. In my experience, places in the vicinity of a main railway station sporting the names “Grand” or “Europa”, whether in Cracow, Budapest, Podgorica or Paris, are invariably shady establishments of highly dubious repute. The “Evropa”, however, was clean and very reasonably priced, and it even had cable TV.

Fortunately, my local connection, who was editor-in-chief of a Montenegrin newspaper, had returned from his trip abroad, so I was able to visit him in the newspaper’s offices. Vladan was the image of a typical Montenegrin: tall and well-built, with black hair, a black beard and a booming, stentorian voice. He was most unstinting in his praise of the President, Milo Đukanovic. The president was intelligent, politically astute and quick-witted, I was told. I listened somewhat sceptically so much praise being heaped on a man who had repeatedly been accused of links with the Italian and Montenegrin mafias, and whose brother was allegedly one of the top mafia bosses presiding over massive cigarette-smuggling operations. Even if there had not been any such accusations, the president’s unctuous slickness would have made one suspect something was not quite right about him anyway.

Vladan was a great help to me when it came to getting accredited for the summit meeting of Balkan leaders in Zagreb and another international meeting in Budapest. He also asked one of his journalists to take me to the parliament. It was in a smallish building next to the presidential palace. Predrag, or Pedja for short (an unfortunate abbreviation to Polish ears), took me to the journalists’ gallery. I was certain, for some reason, that the gallery would be separated from the plenary chamber by soundproof tinted glass, and that the parliamentarians would not be able to see us or hear us. So I was not too bothered by the noise I made by accidentally slamming the door behind me on entering the gallery in the
middle of a parliamentary debate. I wasn’t too perturbed either when I tripped over someone’s feet, knocked over some chairs and landed on a fellow journalist. I simply apologised to the colleague and put the chairs back in their places before finally settling down in my place, with my nose pressed against the glass at the front of the gallery. I was a little surprised to see all the parliamentarians looking in our direction, as I assumed they could neither hear nor see us. I looked at them for a while and then remarked to my companion Predrag that Montenegro had much better-looking parliamentarians than Poland. The laughter, smiles and applause that followed this remark persuaded me that the parliamentarians could actually see us and hear us quite clearly. I became as red as a beetroot with embarrassment, but then found that I had unexpectedly become very popular. We ate a very good lunch in the canteen and the parliamentarians were extremely nice and hospitable towards me. I had a great time, but mindful of my professional obligations, I did also manage to get an interview with Djukanovic's right-hand man. He explained to me that the issue of outright secession had not yet been settled, but that the introduction of the deutschmark as the official currency had created a new reality, and that a gradual separation from Serbia was in any case proceeding on both a political and an economic level.

The marriage with Serbia had indeed been feeling more claustrophobic for the last few years in Montenegro. They had many things in common that had held them together: language, religion, history, mentality (to many Serbs, Montenegrins were one of the tribes of Serbia) and common enemies. When Yugoslavia had fallen apart, the two republics of Serbia and Montenegro had formed a federation. But Serbia had been the dominant partner in this couple, with ten times the population and several times the area of Montenegro. As long as Momir Bulatovic, a communist friend and stooge of Milosevic, was in power in Montenegro, the federation more or less held together. Things changed in 1998, when Milo Djukanovic, a young businessman with no links to the old regime, won the presidential elections in Montenegro. He was barely thirty years old at the time. In a vain gesture, Bulatovic said he would boycott Djukanovic's investiture. But Djukanovic was still sworn into office, Bulatovic became the political opposition, and Montenegro began to drift away from Serbia’s stifling embrace. Djukanovic loosened ties with Serbia and sought greater autonomy for Montenegro, which Milosevic refused to recognise. There was a strange new tension in the relation between Podgorica and Belgrade, which occasionally surfaced in the form of open disagreements. This was most evident on the question of Kosovo. Milosevic was determined to keep the rebel province in Serbia and sent police, military and paramilitary units there. Djukanovic refused to become involved in the Serbian-Albanian conflict or to send his soldiers to Kosovo. He even condemned Milosevic’s actions. When NATO intervened in Yugoslavia, Montenegro escaped relatively unscathed from the bombing. It protested against the air strikes, especially those against targets in Montenegro, because it did feel itself to be a party to the Kosovo conflict. The threats to secede from Yugoslavia or to hold an independence referendum became more frequent. In the end, Montenegro introduced the deutschmark as its official currency, thereby leaving the monetary union with Serbia. It already had control over its own foreign policy and internal security issues.

Milosevic’s departure didn’t solve the problem. Kostunica was just as intransigent on the question of secession, and on the Montenegrin side, Djukanovic refused to recognise the new Yugoslav authorities. The conflict grew, and complete emancipation of the republic of six hundred thousand Montenegrins seemed within reach. A macabre joke started doing the rounds in Yugoslavia: Ibrahim Rugova comes to see Milosevic and says “Slobo, there are only six hundred thousand Montenegrins and they have their own republic, but there are nearly two million of us and we don’t even have regional autonomy”, to which Slobo replies “Alright, come and see me again when there are only six hundred thousand of you left”.

I still found it difficult to imagine this small republic, which had no industry or agriculture and only a fairly primitive tourist sector, existing as an independent state. In terms of tourist infrastructure, it could in no way compete with neighbouring Croatia. Indeed, the country was surrounded on all sides by stronger neighbours. The Montenegrins themselves were divided on the issue, and in the streets there were posters both for and against independence. Older people, who remembered Yugoslavia in its heyday, tended to be against independence. They regarded secession as an unacceptable act of political suicide and a fatal blow to the cherished
ideal of a Yugoslav state. Many young people, on the other hand, were tempted by the idea of the financial gains which independence might lead to. They expected that an independent Montenegro would be protected by richer countries out of pure self-interest. There were large Bosniak and Albanian minorities in Montenegro, and the Albanian minority in particular posed a potential separatist threat. The West was aware of these dangers and was keeping a close eye on Montenegro and its neighbourhood, or at least that is what many Montenegrins believed. Those with an even less realistic perspective hoped that, once freed of its Yugoslav fetters, Montenegro would become a tourist mecca and earthly paradise. Finally, there were some Montenegrins who just wanted to cut all ties with Serbia because they felt no psychological affinity whatsoever with the Serbs. On the other side, there were also Serbs who didn’t care for the Montenegrins either, envying their better financial and political situation while mocking their legendary idleness and raging about the wave of new Montenegrin arrivals in Belgrade. According to the popular Serbian joke, upon waking up in the morning a Montenegrin tosses a coin: if it is heads, he will spend all day drinking; if it is tails, he will sleep all day; and if it lands on its side, he will go to work (but that doesn’t mean that he will actually work).

After a night in the Hotel Evropa, where I could hear tracksuit-clad revellers partying in the room next to mine, I went to the airport. Flying back from Podgorica to Belgrade

Podgorica airport is small, but it nestles delightfully among high mountains. The flight lasted less than an hour, so I didn’t have the time to make friends with anyone during the flight. Afterwards, however, in the bus from the airport to the city I made the acquaintance of a female Montenegrin member of parliament active in various women’s rights organisations. She talked about the need to create a strong lobby to defend the interests of women, who had been discriminated against until then. She wanted to start by setting up a parliamentary women’s group, something that had never been tried before. She quizzed me about the situation in Poland, about women’s rights and the gender pay gap. I came to the conclusion while talking to her that women are a very privileged group in Polish society, at least when compared to their Balkan counterparts.

Belgrade

This time I stayed with my Aunt Roksanda in Belgrade, whom I hadn’t seen for twelve years. My Aunt was a distant relative of my Dad’s. She had been a witness at my parents’ wedding, and then she had become friends with my Mum. I could still remember the last time we had met, during my summer holidays in 1988. We had gone on a walk one evening to Skadarlija, one of the nicest neighbourhoods in Belgrade. We ate game in a smart restaurant, where guests were entertained by a poet in a black cloak and a bowler hat. In spite of my Mum’s and my Aunt’s warnings, I ate two chili peppers to prove how brave I was. Although I felt I was about to die, I didn’t give in and didn’t spit the peppers out. It was nice to meet her again after so many years. She hadn’t changed much. She still had the same classic bob cut and matching coat and skirt. We went to the National Theatre, where they were playing David Albahari’s *Mamac*. I was very pleasantly surprised to see that the auditorium was almost full. I hadn’t expected that people in a country stricken with poverty would still be interested in going to the theatre. In the play, Albahari, who has lived for many years in Canada, returned to his Jewish roots, his home and his parents. But there was no shortage of veiled references to the present day. The phrase “We are a strange nation” was repeated over and over again. I felt that in this case it was not just a worn-out platitude. After all, how else can one describe a nation that is primarily guided by pride, rather than by reason, that looks back to the past more than ahead to the future, and that allows a hated individual to retain power simply because it cannot bear to admit its own mistake? We are a strange nation – I had heard the same phrase in the mouths of many of my Belgrade acquaintances. My Dad was first an atheist (he was never christened because my Gran was a communist), then an agnostic, but he would add to this observation: “We are the only nation on earth who curses God, and we’ve been punished for it.” The Serbs do indeed have a rich assortment of curses, the most repulsive of which are directed at the Almighty Himself.
On our way back from the theatre, we bought some sweets in a night shop.

The Belgrade Press Centre, which I went to the following day, was offering a fairly decent package for 20 marks a day: unlimited use of the computers, the internet and the telephone for local calls, plus the right to attend and participate in their press conferences.

The guests at the press conference on that day were representing UNESCO. They were asked, “Why aren’t you protecting the historic monuments in Kosovo? Why are you allowing priceless churches, monasteries and icons to go up in smoke? When will you give us the money we need to repair the damage? When will you send a commission to assess the level of damage?” Their answers were extremely non-committal. They merely gave their sincere assurances that they would acquaint themselves (sic!) with the difficult situation in Kosovo and try to find a solution for it.

After the conference, I met Ana’s husband Obrad, who was now working for one of the commercial TV channels. He told me that Ana’s brother Marko was starting to make films for young people. Unfortunately, he had been unable to get any funds for his most ambitious projects. He had had to compromise in order to be able to make his much dreamt-of cinema debut.

In the afternoon, I went to Kostunica’s party’s headquarters. I had made an appointment for an interview with Kostunica’s closest advisor, Milorad Jovanovic. He also made the comparison between what was happening in Serbia now and Poland in 1989. “Only you hadn’t just emerged from a series of internecine wars which had permanently ruined the country and permanently scarred its people. But, like you back then, we’re also facing years of difficult economic changes, which for ordinary people will just mean years of belt-tightening. We have to re-enter the European fold and prove that we are a civilized nation and a respectable member of the international community again. We still have to solve the Montenegrin question and some other issues too (at that time another Albanian paramilitary group was causing trouble around Presevo and Bujanovac in southern Serbia), and Kosovo remains an open wound which still has to be healed. Will we survive? Will people be able to put up with yet more austerity?”

I asked myself the same questions. I also wondered whether, once the euphoria at having finally got rid of Milosevic had died down, people would turn against Kostunica and Djindjic and blame them for all the poverty and unemployment.

After the interview, I met Dad again and then went to Aunt Roksanda’s to pack.

From Belgrade to Zagreb

An international summit meeting was taking place in Zagreb, which I had accreditation for, so I got the night train, in order to be there by morning. The platform was thronged by Gypsies laden with exaggerated amounts of luggage, shouting at each other in their hoarse and raucous voices. A train to Macedonia was due to leave immediately after the one to Zagreb.

Our train was almost empty. A tall young woman with a slightly threatening air was sitting opposite me. For the first half hour of the journey, there was silence. Out of curiosity, I glanced at my fellow traveller. She had short hair, good posture and was dressed like a sportswoman. She could have been a professional basketball or volleyball player. In any case, she didn’t look like a woman given to idle chatter. Somehow, however, we struck up a conversation. Her name was Sanja and she worked as a prison guard in Sremska Mitrovica, where there had been some quite violent prison riots recently. She was five years older than I was. After two hours on the train together, she told me she had just had a miscarriage and had split up with her boyfriend. She had been unable to forgive him for not being happy about her pregnancy, for even being displeased by it. Subconsciously, she was blaming the miscarriage on him, and he was fed up with her moodiness. Inevitably, we got around to talking about life in Serbia. It turned out that her brother had been sent to fight in Bosnia several years ago and had come back completely changed. He shied away from all forms of human contact. He refused to talk about his experiences fighting in Bosnia. He refused to do any work or to make any kinds of plan for the future. He kept disappearing from home for the entire day. Nobody knew what he was doing. His parents had already written him off, with broken hearts. “When Tito
was alive, everything was so good. We had passports, money, somewhere to live, holidays, peace. We lost it all. What was the point of destroying Yugoslavia? What was the point of all the wars? All we’ve got from them is poverty, and nightmares. Our generation is the one that has come out of it the worst. We have no hope, no future. Our prospects were destroyed while we were still young, by war and poverty. Can you imagine what it’s like to be starting your adult life in a country where nothing works normally, where there are no rules, and where war could break out again at any moment? You live from one day to the next. I’m still young, but I’m already tired of life. There is no joy left in me. Every day I ask myself what will my life be like a few decades from now, if I live to be that old? Maybe it was better that I had a miscarriage. What kind of life could I have given my child?” she asked herself, looking at the tips of her training shoes. I couldn’t find any words to comfort her.

Our conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door of our compartment. A drunken and very garrulous customs officer came in, or rather rolled in. Being incapable of holding my tongue, I got caught up in a discussion about President Tudjman quite unnecessarily, and gave my own frank opinion of him: that he was the Croatian Milosevic, and that he shared equal responsibility with Milosevic for all the bloodshed there had been. I pointed out how many similarities there were between the biographies of Tudjman and Milosevic, in particular regarding their childhoods and their teenage years. Milosevic’s parents had both been active communist party members, and had both committed suicide, first Milosevic’s father, and then his mother, ten years later. Tudjman had also lost his mother when he was a child. The customs officer muttered something inaudible under his breath and staggered out of our compartment.

Sanja got off the train at Sremska Mitrovica, and I continued my journey to Zagreb. There were no other passengers left in the whole carriage. I felt a little strange being the only passenger. I locked the compartment from inside with some chains and went to sleep. When I was getting off the train the next morning, the customs officer, visibly more sober than he had been the night before, squinted at me through half-closed eyes and gabbled: “You’ve no idea what you’re talking about. I’m a Bosnian Croat, and I know how much we owe our late President, God rest his soul. Franjo Tudjman was a real genius. We should all get down on our knees and pray to him.”

Zagreb

Once in Zagreb, I went as planned to the conference, which was taking place under the auspices of the European Union and the Council of Europe. The city was enjoying its five minutes of fame. Many leaders, not just those from the neighbouring states, were in attendance. While I was still in Montenegro, I had found out that the Croatian right-wing parties had been protesting against Kostunica’s participation in the meeting. They expected the President of Yugoslavia to apologise on behalf of the Yugoslav state, officially and in public, to the Croatian nation for all the Serb war crimes and for the whole war. They thought he should not be allowed to enter Croatian territory before doing so. Demonstrations against the incumbent President of Croatia, Stjepan “Stipe” Mesic, had also been announced. He was deemed to be insufficiently patriotic by the extreme right. In Zagreb, however, the streets were relatively calm. The security forces had been well prepared and the conference was well organised. Although the demonstrations were not attended by huge numbers of people, they succeeded in conveying the message that Kostunica was not the most welcome of guests in Croatia. In what was a slight political gaffe, the President of Montenegro also appeared at the conference as the head of an independent state, even though Montenegro was still formally a part of Yugoslavia. The conference itself, like most events of its kind, did not yield any concrete results, apart from the usual plethora of handshakes and high-sounding declarations. The Croatians had reason to be content, however, as they had managed to host the foreign dignitaries for the whole day without any organisational hiccups.

From Zagreb to Katowice, via Budapest

Joining the retinue of the (un)crowned heads of Europe, I followed the leaders to Budapest the next day. There was to be another big meeting here, for which I had also been accredited: the Central European Initiative
summit. I stood on the platform in the early morning in Zagreb station, waiting for the train to Budapest. It was raining, and I was getting wet. A large group of gentlemen were standing on the same platform, waiting for a train that was heading south, for Bosnia. They were going there for the elections which I was initially supposed to have been an observer for.

I got to Budapest after a few hours’ train journey. At the station there, I met a man who had waylaid me a couple of weeks previously, when I had been on my way from Poland to Zagreb. He had offered me a cheap place to stay for the night, but I had politely refused. To my surprise, he recognised me. His name was Ryszard, he was Polish, and he had been living in Hungary for several years, I found out, specialising in tourist accommodation, principally for Polish tourists. Ryszard was a mine of information about Budapest, about getting around the city, public transport, currency exchange and all other things essential for a successful stay. Thanks to his advice, I managed to avoid being cheated in the *bureau de change* and I saved money by getting the metro instead of a taxi. When I had no choice but to get a taxi, I managed to avoid being ripped off by the driver, again thanks to Ryszard’s advice. He chuckled about the way his fellow countrymen spurned his services on their arrival in Budapest, only to come a cropper just a few minutes later. “When I try to get their attention, they turn away, pretending they don’t understand Polish. Then I hear the same Poles cursing after they’ve been ripped off at the *bureau de change*, or in a shop.” Before leaving me, Ryszard did me a quick sketch of the city centre on a piece of paper.

I took the metro to the beautiful central area of Budapest, where a press conference was being held in the Hilton. I was surprised to be able to stroll into the building off the street without any formalities at all. I didn’t have to show my badge, and there was no security check either. I only had to give my name. There were a lot of journalists, and quite a few politicians too, but the ones whose arrival here was most eagerly awaited (unlike in Zagreb) – Kostunica and Djukanovic – didn’t turn up. The prime minister of Albania suffered the most at the journalists’ hands. He was constantly being asked when he was finally going to clamp down on the Albanian mafia and the huge smuggling rackets that were still going on. There was an embarrassed silence for a while, after which the Albanian prime minister started talking about the disastrous financial situation of his country. Poland was being represented by Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek at this summit.

Noticing Buzek, I had a bold but ingenious idea. Why should I spend another night in a train getting back to Poland when I could hitch a lift in the Polish government plane instead? I wasn’t a member of the official Polish delegation, and my name didn’t figure on the list of journalists accompanying the PM, but I didn’t think any of this would represent an insuperable obstacle to my plan. I introduced myself to the head of the Government Information Centre, Andrzej Papierz, and explained my plan to him. He looked at me in astonishment and explained that the plane was for the government delegation, and didn’t take hitchhikers. When I phoned him two hours later, however, he told me the prime minister was inviting me to join him on the plane and that I should go forthwith to the Memorial to Jozef Bem (a national hero in both Poland and Hungary) to join the delegation. I rushed back to the left luggage office to get my things and then got a taxi to the Bem Memorial. The driver resembled Anthony Hopkins in appearance, but could speak nothing but Hungarian. He drove as fast as he could, but, by the time we got to the Bem Memorial, the Polish delegation had already left, Mr Papierz had his phone switched off, and I couldn’t remember for the life of me what the next stop on the Polish delegation’s itinerary was supposed to be. In view of all this, there was only one solution: find the delegation’s convoy of vehicles and overtake it. Some police officers gestured to us, showing what direction the delegation had gone off in. The taxi driver probably thought I was either a lunatic or a terrorist, but he didn’t seem particularly perturbed by either possibility, as he kept laughing and tapping his forehead. By some miracle, we found the Polish delegation as it was visiting the old town, and I was able to join it. Later, we got in a minibus and went to the airport, where our luggage wasn’t checked in the normal way. The Polish government security people did ask me whether after spending so much time in the Wild Western Balkans I was bringing back any guns, alcohol or drugs with me. In a moment of panic, I confessed to having a few bottles of raki wrapped in articles of clothing. In the final reckoning, it turned out that I was carrying seven or eight litres of the stuff. Only then did I notice the mirth my confession had occasioned among the security guards, who had only been pulling
my leg. (Several months later, a colleague asked what I had done with all that raki, which had become the object of a minor legend.) On the flight, the PM didn’t hold himself artificially aloof and spoke to everyone in the delegation. We landed in Katowice, and I managed to get a train from there to Cracow. I had been in the Balkans for three weeks, and I had spent three consecutive nights on trains, trying to get back home. When I finally did get back home, I could have kissed the ground with joy.
Chapter VI.

October 2002

Belgrade
On this trip, I had planned just to visit Belgrade, and nowhere else. My reason for the trip was the second round of the presidential elections. The first round had taken place at the end of September and had been indecisive. Two weeks had passed since then, and everyone was hoping that the second round would yield a clear winner. In line with a new tradition I had established, I stayed at Roksanda’s. On Sunday, I went to the Democratic Party of Serbia’s electoral evening. Their candidate, Kostunica, had the better chance of winning. Inside there were hordes of people. Journalists mingled with politicians. But there weren’t just journalists and politicians. At one point, I noticed a tall man with long grey hair. He had a black leather jacket, jeans and army boots. An Orthodox cross hung around his neck, resting on his chest. He reminded me of someone. Then, as I was passing by him, it suddenly came to me. “Excuse me, are you Bora Djordjevic?” I ventured. “Yes, that’s me,” he replied. “Who’s asking?” Bora Djordjevic was the frontman of the Serbian rock band Riblja Corba (“Fish Stew”), my favourite band. I knew the words of nearly all their songs off by heart. “It’s amazing that I’ve finally got to meet you!” I raved. He listened politely, and was gratified to hear that even in Poland there were people who loved his songs. It was no matter of chance that he was there for the electoral evening. For years, he had been supporting politicians with patriotic views and proudly displaying how Serbian he was. As the evening progressed, the mood darkened. It was becoming clear that, if Kostunica won, it would be an empty victory, because the turnout was so low that the election would be declared invalid. I managed to get Kostunica himself to agree to an interview, having failed many times to do so through his press spokespersons and, even worse, his secretaries. He instructed his secretary to schedule me for an interview at whatever time I asked for. I decided to leave the interview until a later date, because an alternative plan had occurred to me.

From Belgrade to Vukovar, via Zagreb

I was off to Zagreb again, this time to see my friend Ivica. He was waiting for me at the station. “What are you planning?” he asked. “I want to go to Vukovar,” I replied. “So let’s go,” he said, and we set off straight away.
Until 1991, Vukovar was famous for its eighteenth-century architecture. It was the cultural and industrial capital of Slavonia. Over one third of its original inhabitants were Serbs, and Serbs also lived in the outlying villages around Vukovar. The ethnic mixture in Slavonia was a recipe for disaster. One of the few people who tried to stop the disaster happening was the Croatian chief of police from Osijek, Josip Reihl-Kir. He attempted to reconcile Serbs and Croats. He was lured into a trap and killed by his own people in July 1991. Unfortunately, it suited a number of politicians to have a war. In the autumn of 1991, Vukovar was surrounded by Serb forces made up of both regular Yugoslav army detachments and paramilitary groups. It was an unequal struggle for the inhabitants of Vukovar, and seven and a half thousand of them died. The local hospital suffered a terrible fate that later became a symbol of the whole hopeless struggle. Chetniks killed some of the staff and patients in the hospital itself, and the rest were loaded onto lorries and taken off to an unknown destination. The eyewitness account of a survivor of the ordeal later confirmed that the people taken away by lorry were also shot. Further proof came a few years later, when the remains of 250 hospital patients and staff were discovered. This was the Vukovar I wanted to see. By all accounts, not much was left of the vibrant Vukovar that had existed prior to that fateful year. Bullet holes were still visible on many of the buildings. They were left there to serve as a reminder of the horrors of war, just like the damage done to buildings in Belgrade by the NATO air strikes. But here there were also some new buildings, many of them sporting signs that showed they had been put up with the help of EU subsidies. The bullet holes were not only in the walls of houses, but also in gravestones. The local cemetery was a particularly disturbing place. In one row of three graves, I noticed that the one on the left had some slight damage from bullets, while the one on the right was new. The gravestone was granite, adorned with gilded lettering and fresh flowers. The gravestone in the middle had been smashed. When I knelt down by it, I noticed the coffin had also been vandalised and human bones were protruding from it. The headstone had been removed, as had the cross. This was probably a Serb grave, which no one had wanted to restore. The cemetery was the last resting place of Serbs and Croats alike, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, but also of atheists, and it had become a testimony to sectarian hatred and a complete disregard for any kind of rules or basic decency. Churches, hospitals and cemeteries are normally considered inviolable sanctuaries, off bounds for acts of hostility. But in Vukovar there had been no sanctuaries. The hospital had been the scene of a war crime, and the churches and cemeteries the scene of gunfights.

We went to a local café for some tea. In the half-light, I tried to strike up a conversation with some of the locals, but without any great success. As we were about to get up and leave, an older man came and sat at our table. “Where are you from?” he asked. “From Poland,” I replied. “In that case, you probably don’t know the whole truth about this place,” he said. “You probably think that we Serbs are criminals and barbarians. But some of us were murdered too, or driven out of here, and this land is ours as well, it doesn’t just belong to the Croats. Borovo Naselje is almost a suburb of Vukovar. There used to be a big factory there, and quite a few Serbs lived around it. When the war began, in 1991, the Croats started driving us away. Either the local Croats, or ones who came here from outside. Serbs were murdered here too, remember that.” So saying, he left us. “He’s a Serb. He’s not telling the truth. He’s just trying to make excuses for the Serbs,” Ivica commented. In the evening, we went back to Zagreb.

**Banja Luka**

The next morning, I decided to go somewhere else, but I didn’t know where. Ivica took me to the station, and I told him I had to go back to Belgrade. Once he had gone, I took a look at the station timetable. The next train was going to Banja Luka. Great, I thought to myself, I’ve never been there before. It was only once I was already on the train that I realised Banja Luka was actually formally a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that I didn’t have a visa. Fortunately though, it was October and you could still travel without a visa until the end of the month under the rules that applied during the extended holiday period. The conductor came into my compartment and immediately took an interest in why I was going to Banja Luka. Some older people in the compartment took up the same theme. I couldn’t tell them I was going because I had just taken the first train leaving the station, I thought. That might appear
suspicious to them. So I told them I was going to see a (male) friend. “A boyfriend, or just a friend?” the conductor asked. A friend, I answered, a friend from years back. “Do you know where he lives?” he went on. No, I said, not really, I lost contact with him a long time ago. “Don’t worry,” the conductor said, “I’m finishing work in Banja Luka. I’ll take you to the post office. We might be able to find his number there, and if we don’t, I’ll invite you to lunch.” My neighbours in the compartment had meanwhile started talking about a young Catholic priest in a village near Banja Luka who had been murdered in cold blood by some chetniks. They had killed his parents too. The war kept coming up in conversations. Not enough years had passed since the end of hostilities.

When we got to Banja Luka, the conductor, true to his word, took me to the post office. Unfortunately, our arrival aroused a lot of interest, as there happened to be only one customer in the post office at the time, and several ladies on hand behind the counters. A girl had come all the way from Poland to find her long lost friend! It had to be true love! In my panic at their overreaction, it suddenly occurred to me that I had once met a young man from Banja Luka several years ago. His name also came to me in a flash. “Milorad Jovanovic! That’s my friend’s name!” I exclaimed triumphantly, hoping at the same time that his name would not be in the phone book. After all, how was I going to explain to him that I had suddenly remembered he existed after so many years and had even turned up in Banja Luka to see him? “Found him!” a young lady with short curly hair yelped joyfully, and, without asking me for my opinion, she proceeded to dial his number straight away. “Hello, I’m calling from the post office for Mr Jovanovic,” she announced. “A young lady from Poland is here and wishes to meet him. Aha, he’s at work. Who am I talking to? His wife?!” At this point, the mood changed among my team of helpers. The lady on the phone had gone pale. He’s married? The swine, he’s has been lying to you! After their initial outrage, they began trying to comfort me. You poor thing, you’ve come all the way from Poland for this! Men are like that, you know, you shouldn’t trust them...The conductor joined in, renewing his invitation to lunch, but all I could think about in horror was the ordeal I had just inflicted on a completely unsuspecting and innocent casual acquaintance by my own flippancy. Milorad was going to get it in the neck from his wife when he got home from work that day. The worst thing was, the ladies at the post office weren’t going to let the matter drop. In spite of my protests, they were already ringing his number at work. “Mr Jovanovic, a young lady from Poland is here and would like to speak to you,” they announced. They put me on the phone. “Hi Milorad, this is Dominika from Cracow,” I blustered, aware that the conductor and the post office ladies were all eavesdropping unashamedly, open-mouthed in anticipation. “We met on a student exchange a few years ago, do you remember me? Yes, that’s right, that’s me. I’m in Banja Luka. I was in Zagreb and I decided to come here.” Poor Milorad. He had somehow managed to dredge me up out of the depths of his memory, but he couldn’t for the life of him understand why I had suddenly popped up in his home town out of nowhere, causing a considerable stir. Somehow, I managed to keep the conversation going and was relieved to discover that he would be unable to get away from his work to meet me. I promised to give him more advance warning the next time and left it at that. At this, the post office ladies came out from behind their counters and gathered around me to offer more comfort to a young girl they saw as an innocent victim of shameless seduction and abandonment. “I have a daughter who’s your age,” one of them said. “If you wait a couple of hours, you can come home with me and stay the night with us. We’ll show you around the town.” Another said, “I have a son. Maybe you’ll take a fancy to each other. Come and have lunch with us!” The whole situation was pretty ludicrous. It had all come out of me fabricating a story about why I was going to Banja Luka. But it did show a side of people in the Balkans that hadn’t been changed by the war: their warm-heartedness, openness and spontaneity. In the end, I didn’t take up any of their invitations. I just said I needed to be alone and went off to look at one of the street markets. I bought the inevitable CDs with local music, a bottle of raki and some pictures of saints there. I tried the local čevapčići in a restaurant and found out that they were indeed the best in the world. I arrived back in Zagreb in the evening and got on the night train to Belgrade.
Belgrade

In Belgrade, I decided to arrange a meeting with Boris Tadic. We met in a café in the centre of town. When I arrived he was still sitting with his colleagues. He laughed when he saw me. “I must introduce you to Dominika,” he said. “She’s the only person, who...” His voice tailed off, and we both knew the incident he was thinking of, when I had accidentally called him something unspeakable to his face. I went as red as a beetroot, but he changed course deftly and went on: “…who is half Serb and half Polish. She is living proof of the fact that mixed parentage yields the best fruit! Her Dad is a Serb from Belgrade, and her Mum is a Pole from Cracow.” I gave a sigh of relief, and his colleagues smiled. Tadic had mixed feelings about the two years that had gone by since the removal of Milosevic. In the absence of a common enemy, former allies had fallen out with each other quite quickly. In his opinion, Djindjic and his party were more-forward looking and wanted to bring Serbia into the European fold, whereas Kostunica was more attached to the past.

In Belgrade, I unexpectedly ran into Michel Raineri, the French Consul in Cracow. He had come to Belgrade to attend a meeting for diplomats organised by the French foreign ministry. In the evening, we had dinner together in the “Ruski Tsar” bistro. Michel wanted to know what the best beer in Serbia was, but I managed to persuade him that he should take the opportunity of being in Serbia to drink some raki, because beer was a drink he could drink anywhere. It was the first time in my life that I had tried a kind of raki they called “hot raki”. It didn’t seem to be too strong, but it had honey in, which partially concealed the taste of the alcohol. After three glasses, it was clear that it was much stronger than we had bargained for. I had difficulty getting up again, and even more difficulty walking straight. Michel looked unsteadier on his feet than I was, but I managed to bundle him into a taxi. I walked home, in the hope that a bit of fresh air would help to avert the calamity of a hangover the next morning.
October 2003

From Cracow to Belgrade (via Budapest)
This was another working trip to the Balkans, to write some pieces for the Polish-language weekly magazine “Wprost”. My first destination was Belgrade, so in time-honoured fashion I took the night train to Budapest and another train from there to Belgrade. On my journey, I met Barbara, a lady who had married a Yugoslav in the 1960s and had moved to Belgrade to live with him. She had nonetheless tried to keep in touch with Polish culture by becoming active in the local community of Polish émigrés. A lot of them were Polish women like her who had married Yugoslav men years ago. After the air strikes, some of them were considering going back to Poland.

I stayed with my Aunt Roksanda again. On the day after my arrival, we decided to enter the lions’ den and visit my Gran’s flat, which my Dad had been renting out to tenants for years. The tenants weren’t in, so we knocked on the nearest neighbour’s door. Her name was Javorka. A dozen or so people were sitting around the table in Javorka’s flat. Food and drink was laid out on the table, and there were two photos on it too, one of Javorka’s late husband, Predrag, and the other of…my Gran. Then I realised that it was the tenth anniversary of my Gran’s death on that very day. Predrag had died the day after Gran. “This is our little Dominika,” Javorka said, introducing me. I recognised several of Gran’s neighbours among the people who started to embrace me. I hadn’t seen some of them for fifteen years. It was all too much for me. I was unable to hold back the tears. I felt as if I had been transported back to my childhood, to the same places and people, the same tastes and smells. But on the other hand, everything was utterly and irrevocably changed. Gran was no longer there, nor was my other Gran from Cracow, or my Auntie Natasha. The old Yugoslavia had gone forever. It felt as if a whole age had gone by, not just fifteen years. I very much appreciated the Serbian custom of remembering the departed in a cheerful way by telling anecdotes about them and recalling amusing situations with them. It almost brought them back to life. I remembered Gran as a very calm and self-controlled woman, even a little bit distant sometimes, but in the tales about her, a fanatical supporter of Partisan Belgrade emerged, as well as the calm Dobrila I was already familiar with.

On the next day I visited Dad, and we went together to see some of his closest friends. The visit to Tanja and Miki’s would have been
wonderful if it had not been for the clouds of cigarette smoke. They both smoked at least as much as my Dad, which meant that after two hours I was forced to leave to avoid suffocating. But before I left I was party to a very interesting political discussion. All of them – Dad, Tanja and Miki – shared a declared lack of interest in politics and an aversion to politicians, but it was clear Dad was more of a patriotic conservative, while Tanja and Miki had more liberal views. They saw Serbia’s future in membership of the European Union and NATO. They dreamt of a secular, cosmopolitan Serbia, with open borders, and passports that enabled you to travel anywhere, like in the good old days. Basically, they wanted the old Yugoslavia back, but without the communism. The thing that saddened them the most was the fact that, unlike themselves at the same age, their daughters were unable to travel abroad. They lamented this lost generation of young Serbs who were growing up in isolation from the rest of the world, not knowing the West, not knowing any other European countries. Nonetheless, Tanja and Miki had gone to great lengths to make sure that their daughters learnt at least two foreign languages and that they had at least some theoretical knowledge of the outside world. Their complaints were well founded, because statistics showed that two thirds of young Serbs had never been abroad because of the almost universal visa requirements. As we were leaving Tanja and Miki’s building, we bumped into Bora Djordjevic, the frontman of the rock band Riblja Corba, who lived in the same building. It turned out he was a good friend of Miki’s.

On the next day, I had my long-awaited interview with Kostunica. It had taken much effort, over many months, to set it up. Although he had won the elections in Serbia in the previous year, the elections had been declared invalid because of the low turnout. This low turnout was tangible proof of the fact that nothing was left of the euphoria that had accompanied Milosevic’s departure in 2000. True to form, the former opposition had become divided almost immediately. Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia came to stand for the conservative right, and Zoran Djindjic and Boris Tadic took on the liberal, pro-European mantle. In March of that year, just a few months before I arrived in Belgrade, Djindjic had been shot dead in broad daylight in the centre of Belgrade. A number of arrests were made, including that of the former military commander Milorad “Legija” Ulemek, but those who had given the orders for the assassination were never found. It was speculated that the mafia, which had scores to settle with Djindjic, was behind his killing. In any case, Serbia’s international standing was seriously dented by the incident.

Outwardly, Kostunica reminded me of Al Pacino. He was cultivated and elegant, a man of the educated classes of Belgrade. In our private conversation before the interview proper began, I discussed with him the similarities and differences between Serbia’s position in 2000 and Poland’s position in 1989, exactly as I had done three years earlier with Boris Tadic. Both countries had been embarking on a period of reforms, but from different starting points. Martial law in Poland had been tough, but could by no means be likened to the years of outright war that Serbia was emerging from. Kostunica was a pessimist. He said that, for all his faults, Milosevic had at least kept the mafia at bay. He had been able to maintain links with them and benefit from those links while keeping them under control. When Milosevic departed, the mafia increased its power. “Unfortunately, Serbia is not a normal country,” he said. “People who want to follow the law here are referred to disparagingly as ‘legalists’. Fraud and circumvention of the law goes on in every country, but here they are actually approved of by the authorities. We’ll get nowhere until we change this situation.” In his opinion, Serbia had a duty to remember its past and its identity, even in its eagerness to be embraced by the rest of Europe. It had no right to give up Kosovo or to abandon the Serbs who were still there, or those who had already been driven out. It also had a duty to protect the Serbian heritage sites in Kosovo. He argued that international law was on the side of Serbia, and that the air strikes had been a clear violation of the UN Security Council resolution. Kosovo was on a completely illegal road to independence. “In violation of the law” was a phrase he used repeatedly. He was also irritated that his party and his way of thinking were increasingly being regarded as out of touch with the times. He was dismayed to see former communists coming to power in other former Eastern bloc countries, as if people were utterly oblivious of what their lives had been like until 1989.

Immediately after my meeting with Kostunica, I spoke to the Catholic bishop in Serbia. There were very few Catholics in the country.
Under communism, they had been severely discriminated against and repressed, and their voice in Serbian society was still weak. The recent wars had widened the divide between Orthodox Christians and Catholics. Most Serbs had a series of knee-jerk reactions whereby they equated Catholics with the Vatican, the Vatican with Germany, and Germany with anti-Serbianism. It was difficult to overcome these deeply ingrained prejudices.

From Belgrade, I decided to get a night train to Sofia. I already had a premonition that it would not be an uneventful journey when I was on my way to the station in Belgrade. My premonition was confirmed as soon as I arrived at the station, where a battle between rival football fans was in full swing. After a lot of ducking and weaving, I managed to find my way through them to the platform, where my train was waiting. The conductor reminded me of the Polish baritone pop singer Krzysztof Krawczyk. He did not appear to be entirely sober. I told him that I already had a ticket but that I would like to buy a place in the sleeping car. He asked me for ten euros, and I gave him a fifty euro note. He put it in his pocket and pointed me in the direction of the sleeping car. “Wait a minute, what about my receipt and my change,” I asked. At that point, the conductor suddenly became incapable of understanding Serbian, Macedonian or any other language. I was furious. It wasn’t the money I was angry about but the fact that he thought he could make a complete fool out of a passenger. A tall man with a beard, who looked like a university lecturer, told me to go and look for a free sleeping compartment. “I’ll have a word with the conductor,” he said. I found a free compartment and sat down in it. The train moved off form the platform. I had the compartment all to myself. After a few hours, we arrived in Nis. A Serbian policeman came into my compartment. He was blond, with very close-cropped hair. He didn’t look at all like someone from the Balkans. “Passport. Where is your proof of your right to stay in Serbia?” he asked. “You must have a document from your hotel or proof of registration at a police station.” “I was staying with my family,” I answered. “That doesn’t change anything. As a foreign national you are obliged to register your stay at a police station.” “I didn’t register because I had no idea I was supposed to. It’s the first time anyone’s told me about such an obligation.” “In that case,” the policeman replied, starting to flick through his copy of the criminal code, “you either have to pay a 600 euro fine or spend three days in custody in the detention centre in Nis.” I started laughing, because the situation seemed completely surreal. Eventually I realised he wasn’t joking. I assured him it really was the first time anyone had told me about this obligation and that I would be sure to register the next time I came. “600 euros,” he repeated stubbornly. “I don’t have that much money,” I said. “I only have 300. What say I give you 200 and we consider the matter closed?” The policeman blushed bright red. “That’s an attempt to bribe a state official. There is another paragraph in the criminal code dealing with that,” he informed me. This is getting serious, I thought, for the first time realising I might have to spend the next three nights in some filthy police cell in Nis. I would never get to Sofia, and I wouldn’t even be able to go back to Belgrade to collect all my things. I would be sent back to Poland on the first available train with an incriminating stamp in my passport. Deported. How was I going to explain this to my boss? A specialist in the Balkans making such an ignominious return from her first mission to the Balkans for her new employer. I started making up stories about how many difficulties I was beset by in my life. The policeman nodded sagely. “We all have our problems,” he said, and laid his hand on my knee. “I’m sure we can solve this problem in another way.” I felt like slapping him in the face, but he had my passport in his hand, we were alone in the compartment, he was a policeman, and I had broken the law. The odds were stacked against me. I pushed his hand away from my knee and said we would definitely not find a solution that way. I began to improvise, and inadvertently hit on something quite ingenious. “You’re a wonderful man, and any woman would be delighted to be with you,” I went on (I was trying hard not to laugh as I said this), “but I have a serious problem with men. I react aggressively to them. I had treatment for it and even spent some time in hospital. Since I’ve been taking the medication I no longer get the bursts of aggression I used to get.” “You’re having me on,” he said. “Why should I be having you on?” I replied. “People with mental health problems don’t have it written on their faces.” I must have looked slightly like a lunatic to him, because after looking at me inquiringly he wrote a telephone number on a piece of paper and gave it to me. “I’ve taken a note of your personal data,” he said, “so I’m covered if the customs stop...
you. But call me when you’re on your way back.” He left the compartment, and I heaved a sigh of relief. The next visitor to my compartment was the conductor, now even less sober than before. “Alright, girl?” he asked in broken English. “Da, alright,” I answered. Then the man with the beard who looked like a university lecturer was back. He came in and sat down by the door. “I spoke to the conductor and he’s going to write out a receipt for you,” he said. “The policeman was in your compartment for a long time, did you have any problems with him?” “No,” I said, “we were talking about mutual acquaintances.” The man with the beard gave me a strange look. Then he began to sing Jacques Brel songs in the original, followed by Bulat Okudzhava. “Are you interested in occultism?” he asked after a while. “Not any more.” “But you know what it is. How about black magic?” “No, thank you.” He was very persistent. “Do you know what black masses are? You’d make a very good medium.” This can’t be happening for real, I thought. First the policeman, and now him. He pulled an apple out of his pocket and offered it to me. “Please, have an apple,” he said. For a moment, it flashed through my mind that the apple might be spiked with some kind of drug. “No, thank you.” “But you must,” he insisted. “Look what a delicious reversal of the biblical roles, Adam tempting Eve!” “Okay, we’ll eat half each.” I broke the apple in two, and we each took a bite out of our respective halves. “May I kiss you?” he asked. I felt like swearing. Using the grossest possible obscenities. “Why not?” “Because I have a boyfriend.” “But he’s not here now, and I am.” “No matter.” “So what do you say?” “No.” I tried to sell him the same story as I had used so successfully with the policeman. “You have a mental health problem? Excellent, I’m a psychiatrist!” As proof of his claim, he gave me his professional visiting card, with the address of his practice in Sofia. This was really going too far, I thought. In that case,” I told the Bulgarian psychiatrist, “you must be aware that therapy must never be combined with private life.” My situation was not optimal. I was by the window, and my bearded companion was towering over me and blocking my way to the door. The tipsy conductor staggered past our compartment again. “Alright?” “Yes,” I said and launched a counter-offensive. “It’s a very intriguing proposal, but I’m completely exhausted and am only dreaming of one thing at the moment, and that is to be left alone in peace and quiet. I’m sure you can understand that?” The man with the beard must have understood, as he left the compartment. We reached the border. A Serbian customs officer was the next to enter the compartment. “Passport!” he rapped. I gave him my passport. He flicked through it, stamped it and gave it back to me. “Is that all?” I asked in astonishment. “What else do you want?” he retorted. “No, no, nothing,” I hastily replied. So may strange things had happened to me that I couldn’t get to sleep that night. When we got to Sofia the next morning, the conductor came round to my compartment with the receipt and my change. I thanked him and apologised for having lost my temper. “Take care,” he answered. When I returned to Belgrade three days later, my journey along the route of the old Orient Express was fortunately a much less eventful experience.

Belgrade, Kosovska Mitrovica and Pristina

After my return to Belgrade, I spent two days visiting family and friends and then set off on my travels again. This time I was heading for Kosovo with Beata, the friend I had made during my trip to Kosovo and Macedonia in 1999. She was working for the UN mission now. We arranged to meet on the Albanian side of Kosovska Mitrovica and to go from there to Pristina. But first of all, I had to get to Kosovska Mitrovica. There weren’t many buses going in that direction. So I had the idea of getting a taxi. I negotiated a price with the driver in advance. We were getting near Kosovo when the driver suddenly stopped the car and got out. I followed him. He opened the boot. “What are you doing?” I asked. “I’m changing my number plates,” he answered. “I’m not going into Kosovo with Serbian plates. I’m putting the Kosovar ones on.” Which he duly did, and we finally got to our destination.

Kosovska Mitrovica is a funny place. The bridge over the Ibar river divides the town rather than uniting it. The northern part of the town is a Serbian enclave. Albanians live in the southern part. Soldiers and police from the international forces guard the bridge, which is a major flashpoint. As I was crossing this bridge I realised I was the only civilian on it. There were no Albanians going to the Serbian quarter, and no Serbs going to the Albanian part of the town. For a moment, I felt like the hero of a Western, Clint Eastwood pacing down a deserted street with dozens of pairs of eyes watching him secretly. My brief illusion of stardom
was shattered by a hail of stones thrown by some Albanian children, which very nearly hit me. Fortunately, Beata was already waiting for me with a driver and we hurried into the car to avoid the next hail of stones, which hit our car as it was driving away from the bridge. Later, a friend explained to me that the abnormal conditions of life in Kosovska Mitrovica had caused the children of the town to run wild. They tortured animals and behaved aggressively towards people more often than was normal. Besides, I was crossing the bridge from the Serbian side, so the children automatically saw me as an enemy.

Pristina hadn’t changed much since my last visit four years earlier. I was struck, however, by the many expressions of pro-Americanism that had appeared. President Clinton, in particular, was regarded by the Albanians as the co-author of Kosovar independence. The main avenue in Pristina had been named Bill Clinton Avenue in his honour. It seemed a superficial change. But maybe it was more than that.

Beata had rented a flat in one of the tower blocks in the town centre. It was furnished like a flat in the West, though quite modestly. There were occasional power cuts. The neighbourhood it was in was generally considered to be pretty safe.

The next day we set out to meet as many people as possible. More and more Serbs and Roma were leaving Kosovo. The Roma were in a particularly difficult situation. It is true that they hadn’t been treated as well as they might have been by the Serbs prior to 1999. If they were lucky enough to have a job, it was the worst kind of heavy manual labour. Then the NATO air strikes came, followed by an exodus of Serbs. The Albanians repressed the Roma as well as the Serbs, because in their opinion the Roma had collaborated with the Serbs. The Kosovar Roma then came up with an ingenious idea. In the census, they indicated Egyptian as their ethnicity. The word Gypsy comes from the word Egyptian, and according to one popular legend the Roma claim to have fled Egypt together with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, except in their case they got considerably further away from Egypt than the Holy Family, arriving in the Balkans rather than in the Holy Land. Having labelled themselves as Egyptians, the Kosovar Roma started applying for asylum in Egypt. They were supported by some Serbs, including academics, who saw in the story of the Roma’s Egyptian ethnicity a way of reducing the apparent percentage of Albanians in the population of Kosovo. This all sounds like something out of a Kusturica film, and the Kosovo Roma’s situation might indeed be considered laughably absurd. But for the Roma themselves, it was no laughing matter. They were living in extreme poverty and in complete uncertainty about their future. Nobody wanted them, and nobody was prepared to help them. They had been stateless for centuries, without their own state, without even a common language to unite them. They had been eliminated as inferior beings in German concentration camps during the Second World War, and during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s they had been attacked by all sides in the conflict. They were of course an irritating presence for the mainstream of society: they begged in the streets, they stole, they refused to be educated and to live by the rules that everyone else lived by. But they were also universal victims, everywhere and at all times, and nobody kept a record of their eternal martyrdom. Now they were leaving Kosovo with the Serbs. Most of them ended up living on rubbish tips around Belgrade. The ones who stayed behind in Kosovo lived off humanitarian aid from international organisations. They told us about all their problems, but helping them was difficult, principally because of their refusal to abide by any of the normal rules of society.

After several hours, we went back to the centre of Pristina. On the ground floor of one of the tower blocks there was a European-style café. We met some Polish women there, who were working for some international mission. It was clear they had no idea of the history of Kosovo or of its broader context. They confidently spouted platitudes about Kosovo’s glorious present and future as an independent, democratic state, in which the rights of minorities were, and would continue to be, fully respected. I had difficulty not getting involved in a row with them.

**Podgorica**

I got a bus from Kosovo in the direction of Montenegro. It didn’t turn out to be a brilliant idea. As it was crossing the mountains, our bus was stopped by an armed band of smugglers. All of us, about a dozen or so passengers, had to get off the bus. Some of the smugglers got on. I was
slightly anxious, but the incident didn’t go any further than a search of the bus. No-one was beaten up or not allowed to travel further. The smugglers might possibly have hidden some contraband under the seats. In Podgorica, I met a friend who was a female member of the Montenegrin parliament. Since February, the bond between Serbia and Montenegro had been loosened. Instead of Yugoslavia, there was now a new creation called the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Although calls for independence were getting louder in Montenegro, the Montenegrins were still very much divided on the issue. Rosa belonged to the pro-European movement in Montenegro, so she was in favour of independence. “Serbia is a burden on us,” she said. “We’ll get into NATO and the EU quicker without them. We’re a small country, so our problems are on a smaller scale.” But for a small country, Montenegro’s problems were actually quite big. Unemployment, the sluggish recovery of tourism after the war, and a general lack of certainty about the future. All this was being taken advantage of by the Russians. They were one of the very few nationalities who were not afraid to invest in Montenegro under its current circumstances, mostly by buying up real estate.

Towards evening, I arrived in Bar. I went to the seafront. It was the first time I had seen the Montenegrin coast. I know it sounds corny, but nothing relaxes me like the sound of waves breaking on the shore. I spent hours walking along the shore listening to the waves. All my worries were gradually washed away. Eventually I managed to drag myself away from the seafront to the station. I had some excellent cake and baklava in a local eatery at the station, which was slightly down at heel. To the surprise and amusement of the old men propping up the bar, I ordered some raki to go with it.

In the train, I shared a compartment with a Serb woman who had some relatives on the coast. She was charmed to hear that I had gone to Bar just to hear the sound of the waves. We started talking about spells, curses and charms. Belief in superstitions is universal in the Balkans. If things aren’t going right for you it means that someone has asked a witch to put a spell on you, she told me. You have to find another witch to undo the spell. She told me that in central Serbia, where her family came from, there were a lot of witches in the countryside. The most interesting thing she told me was about posthumous marriages. This is an old tradition, which is still practised to this day. If a couple has been unable or has not had time to marry before dying, their relatives perform the marriage for them after their deaths. “One young man from where I come from fell in love with a girl from the neighbourhood,” she told me. “They took him away to fight in Bosnia, and she died while he was away, probably from grief. A few days later, the news came that the young man had been killed in the fighting. They sent his body back by train, in a coffin. The train nearly collided with the hearse that was carrying the girl’s coffin. The boy’s family got off the train and met the girl’s family, who were in the cars following the hearse. The young couple were reunited in death. The priest married them, so they could be buried together as a married couple.” She was visibly taken up with her story, and kept offering me burek with cheese as she related it to me. She also told me about some other old Balkan customs, such as the Albanian *besa*, the pledge of honour to remain silent and to keep one’s promise. There was a story of two friends from the times of the Turkish occupation. One was a Serb, the other an Albanian. The Serb, fleeing from the Turks, against whom he had been fighting, entrusted his small son to the Albanian. They made a pledge of honour to each other. When the Turks asked the Albanian to surrender the boy to them, the Albanian told them that the boy was his own son. So the Turks killed the Albanian’s real son. But the Albanian continued to insist that the Serb boy was his son. That is how *besa* works.

After two days in Belgrade, I went back to Cracow, via Budapest as always.
Chapter VIII.

November 2003

From Cracow to Belgrade (via Vienna)
Only a month had passed since my last trip and I was already on my way back to Belgrade, this time by plane via Vienna. This trip was completely different from previous ones, because I was going to Belgrade as an OSCE observer for the presidential elections. We were to receive some training during our first three days in Belgrade. Rooms were booked for us in the Holiday Inn. This in itself was an interesting, new experience for me, because for the first time I wasn’t going to stay with friends or relatives, in a private home. I hadn’t arranged to meet anyone while I was there because I knew I wouldn’t have enough time. So, for the first time, I saw Belgrade through the eyes of a tourist. It was my city and not my city at the same time. In the evenings we ate out in restaurants. After an interval of fourteen years, I was finally able to dine out in a restaurant in Skadarlija again. This time there was no poet wrapped in a black cloak like a wizard, but there was the same exquisite game as before, served with red wine. One Canadian member of our group bought roses for all the female colleagues from a girl who was selling them in the restaurant. It was a nice romantic gesture, even though we all had to contribute to the cost of our own flowers when the final bill was divided up among the group. That evening I made friends with Grazyna, who was an interpreter for the Polish military mission in Kosovo.

**Nis, Vanje and Presevo**

Finally, after our three days of training, we were divided up into teams of two and sent out across the country. I was sent to the south of Serbia with my colleague Blair. We stayed in Nis, not far from the Bulgarian border. Nis is the capital of the Sanjak, Serbia’s Muslim belt. The most famous tourist attraction there is the macabre Tower of Skulls. In 1809, during one of the many Serbian uprisings against Ottoman rule, the Serb leader Stevan Sindelic, struggling to hold out against a much larger Turkish force, ordered his men to blow up their gunpowder store. Three thousand Serbs, and nearly three times as many Turks, were killed by the explosion. The Turkish leader decided to take his revenge on the corpses of his Serb adversaries. He ordered the bodies to be skinned and a tower to be built from nearly a thousand of their skulls, as a warning to
anyone who might be tempted to follow their example. Today the Tower of Skulls has been incorporated into the walls of a church, so it was a slightly less gruesome sight than I had imagined. Over the years, some of the skulls were stolen by relatives of the fallen who believed a certain skull to be the skull of their loved one and wished to give him a proper burial. The story made a profound impression on my British colleague. It reminded me of a similar episode in Serbian history when the Turks had dug up the mortal remains of the Serbian prince Saint Sava as a reprisal against another failed uprising and had them publicly burnt on a pyre in the centre of Belgrade. It was an attempt to annihilate the legend of the Saint, and with it a part of Serb identity, hundreds of years after his death.

From Nis we travelled on to Vranje, where there is still a very visible Turkish influence on everyday life. There are many small and rather tatty barber shops for the men of the town. They go there to have their beards and moustaches trimmed, and above all to talk. Vranje was also once famous for the red wine it used to produce.

Our visit to Presevo on market day was particularly interesting for us. One could literally buy anything and everything at this market. Live poultry and goats, machine guns, hand-crocheted napkins, kaymak and ajvar, drugs, homemade alcohol and clothing... It was crowded and noisy, like a real Middle-Eastern bazar. After our visit to the market, we went to get a coffee. Some locals in leather jackets approached us. “You come for elections?” they asked us. Then one of them added, “You have one Serb in group?” He eyed me quizzically. Fortunately the surname on my ID badge was hidden by my scarf. I unashamedly denied my Serb origins. “I'm from Poland, and my colleague is from the UK,” I replied. “I don't think any Serb would be stupid enough to come here as an observer.” After a moment's hesitation, they appeared satisfied with my answer and left us, agreeing that any Serb that came here as an observer would have to be completely out of their mind.

Both Presevo and Bujanovac were Albanian majority towns. The Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac was active in the region. Its aim was to separate the region from Serbia and join it onto Kosovo. A major drug smuggling route also crossed the region, along which heroine and other drugs were smuggled from Turkey into Europe.

In fact, over one half of the heroine being sold in Europe came by this route. For the local people, one of the main sources of income was their share in the spoils of the drug trade. There was anti-Serbian separatist graffiti everywhere. Gunfights were becoming a more and more common feature of everyday life.

At crack of dawn on Sunday morning, we started our tour of the polling stations to make sure we were there when they opened. Our driver was also our guide. The first polling station was in a school. Although it was only seven o'clock in the morning, the gentlemen of the electoral commission were determined to treat us to some raki as well as to breakfast. We tried to explain that, as electoral observers, we were not supposed to drink on the job, but they weren’t having any of it. The same episode was repeated over and over again that day, at every polling station we visited. “How can you refuse to have a drink with us, as a mark of friendship? We're drinking to the success of the elections!” So the only way we could preserve some sobriety was to pretend to drink the raki by wetting our lips in it and no more. In any case, as the day progressed, the spirits of the gentlemen at the polling stations were raised to ever greater heights by the quantity of raki they had consumed, and they paid less and less attention to what we did with the raki given to us. Once the polling stations had closed, they put on loud pop-folk music, performed by the likes of Ceca and Lepa Brena, and began dancing as the counting of the votes got underway.

In spite of the exuberant spirits we encountered on our tour, however, I came away with a gloomy picture of life in the region. Previously, I had associated the region with the many uprisings against the Turks that had taken place there, with the birthplace of the Emperor Constantine and with a work of literature. The action of Borisav Stankovic's controversial but celebrated 1910 novel *Impure Blood* is set in Vranje. It tells the story of the sexually awakened daughter of a Serb merchant who is married off to a young Turk. But after a day touring the polling stations of the region, I had begun to associate it with poverty, with sadness, with despair even, and with a sense of a very uncertain future.
The Polish embassy on Kneza Miloša Street, Belgrade.

Republic Square, Belgrade, 2003

Bombed building in Belgrade

Bombed building in Belgrade

Grave of brothers Milic and their father in Kosovska Mitrovica

Vojislav Kostunica in his office during an interview with me, October 2003, Belgrade

Podgorica
Wedding dress from the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb

Przysmaki balkańskie (translation: ???)

Vučko the wolf cub, mascot of the 1984 Olympic Games, and the former Olympic stadium converted into a cemetery
Chapter IX.

May 2004
Cracow, Vienna, Sarajevo
I spent several months nagging Jerzy Marek Nowakowski and Marek Krol (the editors of the Polish weekly Wprost) to send me to Bosnia. I wanted to write an article about the camps for mujahedeen, and another about the plight of women who had been raped during the war. In the end, they gave in and I got the go-ahead.

I flew from Cracow to Vienna just a few days after Poland joined the EU. It was a memorable beginning of May, because apart from the accession of ten new countries to the EU there was also the Eurovision Song Contest final in Istanbul, which revealed a lot about the Balkans. Zeljko Joksimovic, a Serbian singer, qualified for the final. It is customary for Balkan countries to vote for each other in this competition. Joksimovic was one of the favourites to win the competition. Sensing that victory was within his reach, he made a provocative statement at the press conference on the night before the final: “You Turks were unable to defeat us for centuries; tomorrow night, I will defeat you in a single evening.” The atmosphere suddenly became electric. In the end, he came second. Later, in Bosnia, I heard the tale of the competition retold with many different kinds of commentary. At Vienna airport, I had a nasty surprise when an Austrian border guard took my passport from me and told me I wouldn’t be able to fly to Bosnia because I didn’t have a Bosnian visa. It was just a few minutes before take-off and boarding had already begun when the Austrian border guard returned my passport to me and told me I was in luck because the obligation to have a visa had ceased to apply as of the first of May.

In the plane, I was seated next to a middle-aged man with short-cropped blond hair. He was reading a detective story in English. Since I didn’t know who he was, when he asked me where I came from and where I was going I answered that I was Polish and that I was going to Bosnia to collect research material. He introduced himself as an American. As we were getting off the plane, he gave me his card and told me to call him if I needed anything or if I had any problems. I noticed the number was a landline and that there were some other contact details too. I put the card away without reading the name of the person I had been talking to or his job title. I hadn’t reserved a hotel room, so I started asking about hotels at the place where people were ordering taxis. They advised me to rent a private room in the town centre. As a frugal citizen of Cracow,
I suggested to two Swedish women who were going to the same address that we share a taxi to save some money. It was my first time in Sarajevo. It was a place I had been curious about ever since I was a child. On the way into town from the airport, I looked at the surrounding hills and thought how easy it must have been to besiege the town and shoot at its citizens from all those ideal vantage points above the town but very close to it. It must have been a nightmare for the people of Sarajevo. Our rooms were in a smallish house in the Bascarsija, the historic Muslim quarter. It was surrounded by small, old mosques, and I woke every morning to the voice of the muezzins, calling the faithful to prayer. The bazaar was only a stone’s throw from the house, which was built in a slightly oriental style. There were only four rooms available for rent, so the two Swedish women took one and I took another. The other two rooms turned out to be occupied by an elderly Norwegian man and a German couple.

I'm not entirely sure why the next morning I rang my friend from the aeroplane. He told me again to call him if I needed any help. The owner of the guest house was an elderly Muslim man. Every morning we sat at a small table on the pavement outside the house sipping coffee. He noticed I was wearing a crucifix around my neck. “Are you a Christian?” he asked. “Yes, I’m a Catholic,” I answered. “That’s good,” he said. “Why is it good?” I asked. “I thought you Muslims didn’t like the Christians.” “We don’t,” he replied, “but at least you believe in God, like us. You have some principles, some values. We can talk to you. We Muslims despise atheists the most. They are godless, more like animals than humans.” I didn’t want to get into a conversation about the war with him, so we started talking about life and death, and the transience of things. On the third day of my stay, I noticed that the Swedish women had disappeared somewhere. “What Swedish women?” the owner asked in surprise. “The only people staying here are you, the Germans and the old Norwegian.” The Norwegian certainly made his presence heard. Every night, we went through the same sequence of sounds: the sound of him stumbling up the stairs, followed by the sound of retching and vomiting. On the last day of my stay I couldn’t help asking him why he kept drinking so much, since it made him sick every time. He wasn’t offended in the slightest by my question and answered me in a very matter-of-fact manner: “Because alcohol is so much cheaper here than in Norway. I’m drinking as much as I can to keep me going for as long as possible when I go back home.”

Zenica

My first destination was Zenica, a mainly Muslim town in central Bosnia. Because of its relatively homogeneous Muslim population, it had not been the scene of any major fighting during the war. The Medika centre for female rape victims was in Zenica. I took a bus there, having given advance warning of my arrival by email. The building was painted in a light colour and looked like a school. The lady working there agreed to introduce me to some of the residents. These women were victims twice over: victims of rape, but also victims of their families and their circle of acquaintances. Their fathers, husbands and brothers thought along very primitive lines. They took the view that by “allowing themselves to be raped” they had brought shame upon their families. They had had to leave their homes, ostracised and stigmatised. There were not many cases where women raped during the war had received support from their families. Instead, they came to centres like this one in Zenica. Most victims who became pregnant as a result of being raped ended up giving birth to their child, whether they wanted to or not. An attractive thirty-year old brunette from the town of Travnik had been relatively lucky, because her pregnancy had not followed a gang rape. Her assailant had been a Serbian soldier. Her daughter was now ten years old. “I feel guilty,” she said, “because I don’t love her like I should. She is my child, so I love her, but when I look at her I can see the face of the man who raped me and I have to turn away because I can’t forget what happened. If I had had the choice, I would have had an abortion.” She was unable to cuddle her daughter or show any affection to her. Her friend in the centre had a twelve-year-old son, and she had no problem showing the boy her affection. “He’s my child and only mine,” she kept saying. Every woman in the centre was traumatised. Some had even been the victims of gang rape in front of their family or their neighbours. Very few of them were prepared to reawaken their memories of the trauma they had suffered. Many could not imagine returning to an ordinary life outside the centre. No-one knows how many women were raped during the war
in Bosnia. The figure is probably in excess of 80,000. Many of them left Bosnia to try to start a new life abroad, where nobody knew them. The rape victims were not only Muslims, but also Serbs and Croats. There were also rape victims in other conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Rape is sadly a “normal” part of war, but in the case of the Yugoslav wars the deliberate use of rape as an instrument of humiliation went further. Men were raped as well as women for the sole purpose of humiliating them. Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Albanians all engaged in the practice – there were no exceptions. If the rape resulted in a pregnancy, the perpetrator would feel satisfied that he had increased the number of people in his own ethnic group. The day after my visit to the centre, I talked to a young lawyer and human women’s activist in Sarajevo, Selma Hadzihailovic. She accused politicians of encouraging men to treat women as instruments.

As I talked to other people, especially people linked to the international forces in Bosnia, another issue emerged, that of war orphans. There had been thousands of them. What had become of them? I recalled Salman Rushdie’s words from the BBC documentary “The Death of Yugoslavia”: “When these orphans grow up, there will be an intifada in Europe, because they will want to avenge their parents’ deaths.” Europe’s passive indifference was culpable. The documentary was made in 1995, and a few years later, the French intelligence services were already issuing warnings about young Muslims whose parents had been killed by Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia being taken in large numbers by mujahedeen to training camps on the Afghan-Pakistani border. At these camps, they were being taught to use firearms and to hate the West, which had allowed the massacre in Bosnia to take place. Hundreds of children had disappeared from orphanages in Bosnia. A Bosnian parliamentary committee of enquiry managed to trace them as far as Italy, but it was unable to establish where they had gone after being taken to Italy. Unfortunately, many people had already lost interest in their fate.

Pale

I decided to talk to my friend from the aeroplane about the fate of these orphans. Unfortunately, he was unwilling to oblige and asked what else he could do for me. Without giving the matter too much thought, I said I would like to see the house of Radovan Karadzic. “A car with a driver will be waiting for you tomorrow afternoon,” he replied. I thought this was probably a joke, but just in case I did turn up at the appointed place, albeit a little late, the following day. A young man of about my age was waiting for me. His name was Mile. He was a local, and dressed in civilian clothes. The car had local, civilian number plates too. “How do you know the colonel?” he asked. “What colonel?” I replied. “I don’t know any colonel.” “The colonel, my boss, the NATO HQ boss.” For the first time, I took a closer look at the card my friend from the plane had given me and noticed that his first name, Mark, was indeed preceded by the title “col”. “Oh, so... Mark is your boss!” I concluded, in genuine surprise. “Not just my boss,” Mile replied. “He runs the show here, and he’s ordered me to show you Karadzic’s house.” So we got in the car and set off in the direction of the Republika Srpska. There was no official border to cross, but I did notice that at a certain point the letters on the signs along the road changed from being Roman to Cyrillic. Suddenly, Mile slowed down and asked me, “You see that white house through the trees on the left?” And that was it. That was where Radovan was living, or had lived. We didn’t drive up to the house. We didn’t see Karadzic. I wasn’t sure what I had expected, but all I got was a glimpse of the house from a distance. Karadzic, onetime psychiatrist, self-proclaimed poet and lute player: to Bosnian Serbs, their hero and defender; to Bosnian Muslims, cruelty and evil incarnate. Wanted by the Tribunal in the Hague and pursued by intelligence services from all over the world, he managed to evade arrest for years. There was talk of him being protected by a secret deal he had struck with the Serbs and the international forces, especially the French.

I felt a little bit disappointed that I had only had a brief glimpse of the house, so we decided to extend the outing by visiting a café in Pale, the capital of Republika Srpska. The town was a sorry sight. The poverty was even worse than in Bosnia. Weary people without a future drinking homemade raki in clouds of dust and smoke. Some of them dreamt of
secending from Bosnia and joining Serbia. They assumed that Serbia would be interested in them, but Serbia had many other things to worry about, and most politicians in Belgrade steered well clear of the subject of Republika Srpska. They knew that if the issue was raised it would cause problems. In particular, it would call into question the current borders in the Balkans, and the consequences of doing that would be serious. The local people derived a lot of their income from the proceeds of drug trafficking, arms trafficking and the smuggling of cigarettes and alcohol. The region was a time bomb. A small spark would be enough to reignite past animosities and conflicts. As in Danis Tanovic's excellent 2001 film “No Man's Land”, the easiest course of action was inaction: trying to improve the situation in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and also in Republika Srpska, would only have run the risk of setting the region on fire again. So the bizarre status quo was allowed to endure, with its alternation of power between Serbs, Croats and Muslims, and with international forces still stationed in the country. And nobody had any idea what else they could do.

Sarajevo

I returned to Sarajevo late in the evening. I could hear the old Norwegian going through his retch-and-vomit routine upstairs.

The next day I met up with a Bosnian friend and colleague, Senad. We talked about the war. “One day I was on my way home and some snipers were picking people off at random from the top of some tower blocks,” he told me. “A shell fired from a tank hit the building of the mint. There were coins scattered over the snow all around it. For some reason, I got it into my head that I would be OK if I followed the trail of coins. It actually worked - I got home in one piece.” Another vivid memory he had was of Joan Baez’s concert in Sarajevo in 1993. The city was under siege at the time, and coming to Sarajevo was an act of courage in itself on her part. She came to show her solidarity with the people of Sarajevo. During the concert, she played with local musicians. Before the war, Sarajevo had been a cultural, ethnic and religious melting pot and a breeding ground for talented artists. Emir Kusturica and Goran Bregovic started out here, as did the rock bands Bijelo Dugme ("White Button"), Crvena Jabuka ("Red Apple") and Indexi. The pop singer Zdravko Colic also came from Sarajevo. There was a cabaret here called Top lista nadrealista ("The Top List of the Surrealists"). The writers Ivo Andric and Mesa Selimovic hailed from here too. Andric won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961, and it is interesting to observe how his memory has been preserved in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Even though he was originally a Bosnian Croat, his legacy is only really acknowledged in Serbia, where he spent most of his life, and yet his Bridge on the Drina is a Yugoslav work of literature par excellence.

After meeting Senad, I went to a Catholic church in the city centre. There I met a priest, a Croat, who gave me his own account of the war. “Sarajevo was being shelled by the Serbs, that is indeed true,” he said, “but inside the city the Muslims were taking out their anger on Serbs and Croats, either arresting them or forcing them to flee. Until the war, Sarajevo was a multi-ethnic city. Now it has become mainly Muslim. Rich Muslim countries have been taking advantage of the Bosniaks’ embittered feelings after the war by building new mosques and Koran schools here, under the guise of providing humanitarian aid. Before the war, Bosnian Muslim women looked very much like Serb or Croat women. Now, more and more women in Sarajevo wear headscarves, because the Serbs, Croats and the old Muslim population have left, and have been replaced by Muslims from backward, rural parts of Bosnia. They’re completely different from us. It isn’t the city that it used to be.” I heard the same opinion from a Bosniak friend of mine, who, most bizarrely under the circumstances, was called Elvis.

Mostar and Medjugorje

There was one more trip I wanted to go on in Bosnia, and that was to Medjugorje. I got a bus to Mostar, and a taxi from there to Medjugorje: the white church rising above the surrounding fields, the rows and rows of benches in front of it, and all around me, the sound of Polish voices. Although pilgrims came from all over the world to visit this sanctuary to the Virgin, Poles made up one of the largest groups. A few years earlier, I had met Slavko Barbaric, a Franciscan linked to Medjugorje, in Cracow. He had provided a lot of help to the victims of the war in Bosnia but had
sadly died in 2000 while doing the Stations of the Cross in Medjugorje.

On my way back from Medjugorje, I stopped for two hours in Mostar, and saw for myself the extraordinary turquoise hue of the river Neretva that flows through the town. Mostar is magnificent, a rare example of exquisite architecture married to an exquisite natural landscape. The famous bridge, built centuries ago by the Turks, was destroyed during the war and rebuilt after it. The local Croats make up one quarter of the population of the town. Recently, they built a church with a spire that dominated the skyline of Mostar. In response, the local Muslims built an even higher minaret next to their mosque. Not to be outdone, the Croats responded by erecting a cross on the hills above the town. This contest involving religious symbols is a good illustration of the divided nature of Bosnian society. Before getting on the bus back to Sarajevo, I had dinner in a local restaurant. I sat with my back to the street, enjoying the excellent *pljeskavica* and raki. Suddenly there was a huge rumbling sound and the table and floor both began to shake. Without turning around, I asked the waitress if a column of tanks or lorries had just driven past. “That wasn’t a column of tanks, it was an earthquake!” came the reply. Fortunately, the tremours didn’t cause any major damage, as the epicentre of the quake was several kilometres away.

**Back in Sarajevo**

On the last day of my stay in Bosnia, just before going back to Cracow, I went for another walk around the town. Not far from the guesthouse there was a small shop selling handmade hats and bags. I bought a black velvet hat. The owner, Jasminka, and her daughter, who was about the same age as me, wanted to give me a small wallet as a gift and as a souvenir of my stay in Sarajevo. “We don’t often get visitors from Poland,” Jasminka said. She had been an actress in her youth. Her daughter had studied music. Now they were running their little shop, reminiscing about better times in days gone by and hoping for better times still to come. “But things will never go back to how they were,” Jasminka sighed. “Nothing will ever be the same. The most we can hope for now is peace.”

On my way to the airport in a taxi, I passed a huge, ugly mosque, a gift from a Saudi Prince. It was one of the most expensive mosques to be built here since the war. They had really made their mark on the landscape. According to local media, about one hundred new mosques had sprung up in Sarajevo alone since the end of hostilities. The new mosques were mainly Wahabbist. Of all the different kinds of foreign Muslims, it was the Wahabbists who were putting the most money into Bosnia and the greatest effort into indoctrinating Bosnians, which was very worrying from the point of view of the potential terrorist threat this might engender.
Chapter X.

December 2007
Brussels to Sarajevo (via Ljubljana)
For the first time I was setting off for the Balkans from Brussels, where I had been sent as a correspondent for the Polish weekly Wprost in 2005. During my first two years in Brussels, I hadn’t had time for any Balkan trips. At last, an opportunity presented itself – a short three-day political conference in Sarajevo. I flew from Brussels to Ljubljana and on from there to Sarajevo.

As soon as I arrived in Sarajevo I sensed that something was afoot. This impression was confirmed by the many armed police and soldiers at the airport. What was going on? A coup? War? Nobody could answer what seemed like very basic questions. A friend and I managed to push our way through to the taxi rank and get a taxi. We hadn’t even gone a hundred metres when we were stopped by police at a roadblock. We had to get out of the taxi and be searched. Our luggage was also checked very carefully. Again, there were no answers to all our questions. It was only in the evening, when we switched the TV news on in the hotel, that we finally found out what the cause of all the commotion had been. A bank at the airport had been robbed just before we arrived. The masked perpetrators were on the run, hence the roadblock.

We were booked into the Holiday Inn, a building of no particular charm, built to a standard slightly below that of its Warsaw counterpart. It did have an interesting history though. It had been opened specially for the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo, which turned out to be Yugoslavia’s swan song. Four years after Tito’s death, Yugoslavia found itself at centre stage again. Some people had already realised that the Yugoslav machine was running out of steam fast and was about to collapse, but it was still just about running. The standard of Yugoslav socialism was still being raised high, but the first cracks were already visible in Tito’s myth. The city and the country as a whole took the opportunity presented by the games to show themselves off to advantage. State-of-the-art stadiums, sports halls and training facilities sprang up all of a sudden, as did new hotels. Some of us still remember the wolf cub Vucko, the mascot of the Sarajevo games, shouting “Saraaajeeevoo!” in the voice of the pop singer Zdravko Colic, who was himself born in Sarajevo. Athletes and journalists from all over the world congregated in Sarajevo for the big event. Some of the sports journalists stayed in the brand new Holiday Inn. Only ten years later, the hotel was full of journalists again, but this
time they were war correspondents. On the morning after my arrival, at breakfast, I got into conversation with one of the waiters, Ivan, who I judged by his appearance to be a man of experience who had been working in the hotel for a long time. I was not disappointed. “I’ve been working here from the very beginning, from 1984,” he said. “We had the world at our feet then. People came to Yugoslavia as if they were going to the West. We travelled to the West ourselves without any inferiority complexes. Hordes of journalists from all over the world came here for the Olympics. All the big TV channels sent their teams. There were banquets going on all the time. The booze flowed freely and the nightlife was great. We felt as if we were on the set of a foreign film. Then the Olympics were over and it felt a bit empty, but we still had foreign tourists coming to us. Yugoslavia was still standing. But then, a few years later, the war started, and we got journalists from all over the world coming here again: Americans, Germans, French, even Chinese. War correspondents. Some of them spent most of their time writing in the hotel bar. They were afraid to go outside because we weren’t far from what they called “Sniper Alley”, where the Serb snipers used to shoot at people. Besides, some of them couldn’t speak our language and they had no idea what was going on here. They came for the fame and the money, and wrote whatever sold best. I met a few like that, who couldn’t really tell the difference between Yugoslavia, Iraq and Rwanda. They were only interested in grabbing people’s attention with lots of blood and corpses. But I’m not complaining. The job saved all of us, my family too, especially because of the tips we used to get. The extra money saw us through the worst part of the war. Now, we mainly get businessmen and people from international organisations. They’re not as generous with their tips, but at least we do have peace now.” Ivan was even kind enough to get me a proper Balkan coffee (Turkish/Bosnian style), not the usual kind of espresso you get in hotels.

There was another place that embodied the strange link between the Olympics and the war. I visited it on the following day. In 1984, this sports complex functioned as the Olympic Stadium. Medal award ceremonies also took place here during the games. During the three-year-long siege of Sarajevo, the fallen were buried here. Thousands of corpses were brought here from all parts of the city. Mortuaries and graves were made in the stadium for all the dead. Now, the stadium is deserted by the living. The white, spikey headstones, mainly Muslim, stretch out in rows across the open space in the middle, as if it were a military cemetery. There are also rows of graves between the stands for spectators. It’s almost as if crowds of invisible spectators are watching an Olympics of the dead.

In the city centre there is an Eternal Flame burning. It was first lit in 1946 to commemorate the victims of the Second World War. It never goes out. Now it also burns to honour the victims of the more recent war here.

What constitutes the worst kind of barbarism? Shooting unarmed civilians, or burning libraries with priceless, centuries-old books? Destroying historic monuments, or torturing prisoners of war in the most bestial way possible? None of the sides in the war were innocent in this regard. Indeed, they vied with each other to devise ever crueler forms of torture, such as impaling prisoners on a spit and burning them little by little for several days, to maximise their suffering. As regards the destruction of cultural heritage, no side showed any restraint either: neither the bridge in Mostar, nor the library in Sarajevo were spared. The Serb monasteries in Kosovo were torched and the crosses cast down from them; the old town of Dubrovnik was bombarded. All sides were engaged in a desperate, ruthless contest to destroy as much human life, culture and sense of identity as possible. To this day, Sarajevo, Vukovar and Belgrade bear the scars of the war: the bullet holes in the facades of houses and even in gravestones can still be seen, as a reminder of suffering and a silent reproach to those who made them. Do these still visible scars induce people to reflect on what happened or stir up their hunger for revenge? I think they will continue to have both these effects, for as long as the war remains in living memory.

I used the remainder of my free time for a quick visit to Bascarsija. Quite by chance, I stumbled upon the little hat shop. It was cold and already getting dark. Snow was falling. I saw a light on inside the shop and went in, still unaware that it was the same shop I had visited three years before. Jasmina and her daughter welcomed me as if I were an old friend, although I had only been to the shop once. There was a new member of the household too: Jasmina’s two-year-old grandson. Jasmina’s daughter played the Polish national anthem in my honour,
on an old upright piano. It was moving, and slightly surreal, to hear the anthem played in the cramped little shop cluttered with hats, bags and other regalia. I was treated to coffee, raki and tales of what had been going on too. What I miss most about the Balkans is this kind of spontaneous and openhearted hospitality.

Politically, Bosnia was still stuck in the doldrums. It was officially trying to get into NATO and the EU, but everyone knew it was going to be a long and very arduous process. Bosnia was a corrupt, politically complex and unstable patchwork of ethnicities, and it was going to be a difficult customer for any organisation to deal with. So various stopgap arrangements were contrived as a milksop to the people of Bosnia: financial aid with a multitude of strings attached, and a very hazy and far-off “European perspective”. The idea was to encourage the locals to undertake all the necessary reforms, cooperate with the international community and keep a lid on all the tensions inside the country. But Bosnians weren’t fooled by the very insubstantial favours they were being offered in return for their cooperation. One very strange office was created: that of UN High Representative (who was at the same time the EU High Representative as well initially), a throwback to the days of foreign governors being put in charge of Bosnia’s affairs. One could have got the impression that apart from the Arab states (whose motives were transparent), the only two countries genuinely interested in Bosnia’s fate were its old colonial masters: Austria and Turkey, who had struggled for centuries, and were continuing to struggle now, for influence over the region.

I went back to Brussels with a mixture of pleasant memories and despondency.
Chapter XI.

April 2008

From Brussels to Belgrade
In February 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence. This was a dark day in Serbian history. The loss of its cradle of statehood was a political defeat and a humiliation for Serbia. Protests erupted throughout the country. The biggest ones were in Belgrade of course. Thousands of people gave vent to their anger, mainly in front of the American embassy. American flags were burnt. All the EU countries bar five (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia and Romania) recognised Kosovo’s independence. Poland was among the countries that recognised Kosovo. Indeed the Polish prime minister at the time, Donald Tusk, would have recognised Kosovo’s independence at lightning speed had it not been for the restraining influence of the president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, who realised the far-reaching consequences of this decision, a decision that would have implications going far beyond Kosovo, Serbia and the Balkans. Kaczynski held up the process of Polish recognition of Kosovo for as long as possible. I was in Brussels at the time and in my commentaries on various Polish media, I was critical of the proposal to fast-track recognition of Kosovo. I knew that Russia would take the decision as a pretext for aggressive action against such countries as Georgia and Ukraine. It would establish a precedent in international law that Russia would cynically manipulate for its own ends, even though it was clear that Russia had never felt in the slightest hampered by international law in its own actions. So I was very surprised to get a phone call from the chairman of the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Jacek Sariusz-Wolski, asking me to go with him on a one-day trip to Belgrade as his advisor. The editors of Wprost gave their approval for me to go with him, provided that I went on directly from Belgrade to the NATO summit that was due to take place in Bucharest.

We landed in Belgrade on Thursday evening. A number of meetings with politicians had been arranged for the following day, starting in the morning. Less than two months had passed since the recognition of Kosovo, and Sariusz-Wolski was coming to Serbia as the first official EU representative to visit since Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. There were no demonstrations against the EU, but he was expecting a rather chilly reception. The first meeting was a working breakfast in the hotel restaurant. There was no tension, because the people we were meeting were representing Serbian NGOs and didn’t
consider Kosovo to be a matter of life or death for Serbia. Indeed, they almost said in as many words that without the millstone of Kosovo round its neck Serbia would be able to get into the EU more quickly and with greater ease. As I listened to them, I thought what a gulf there was between their ideals and the views of ordinary Serbs. Leaving the Hotel Moskva, one of the oldest and most distinguished hotels in the city, we set off for the Serbian parliament. We had three meetings scheduled in the Skupstina with different political parties. Setting aside the content of our talks, the way the Serbian politicians scrupulously ignored my presence at the table was both amusing and a little exasperating. I wasn’t planning to butt in, but at one point they were talking such obvious nonsense that I couldn’t refrain from correcting what had been said. My remarks were met with silence, as if I had said nothing. I was very impressed by Sariusz-Wolski’s reaction to this situation. “Dominika, you are a participant in this meeting as much as anyone here present,” he said. “Please do not feel inhibited about contributing to our exchanges.” I didn’t need any more encouragement to take part in the meeting, but I could see my participation was only very reluctantly accepted by the Serbian side. The patriarchal tradition does have its drawbacks. It was only after some pretty unsubtle reminders from Sariusz-Wolski that I was there as his advisor that the Serbian politicians began to talk to me. I took one overriding impression away from these meetings: that they were all lying, bending the truth in whatever direction suited their political affiliation. At every meeting there was coffee, juice (usually peach) and water, a short break to move from one meeting to the next, then the same ritual all over again. It was hard for me to keep up with at times. The meeting that has stuck in my memory most is the one we had with Bozidar Delic, who at the time was the Serbian deputy prime minister and minister of finance. He was 43 back then and had been educated in Paris. He was reputed to be a competent economist. He was a typical globetrotter. He had even advised the Polish government on privatisation. He had lots of books and photos in his office. “Sharon Stone,” he said, proudly showing us a photo of himself standing next to the Hollywood star. “I met her in the States. I’ve got one with George Clooney too.” Delic could be very persuasive. He had got Sharon Stone to start a protest movement in Hollywood against the recognition of Kosovo’s independence, which George Clooney also signed up to later. Although their protests didn’t have any effect politically, they did at least make the names of Serbia and Kosovo enter the consciousness of average Americans for a while. At the end of our meeting, he gave us some signed copies of his autobiography.

The last appointment of the day was a meeting with journalists in the Media Center. The venue reawakened memories. I had been in the same place ten years earlier, before the NATO air strikes. Over the course of those ten years, Serbia’s situation had got even worse: first the air strikes, with all the death and damage they caused; then the assassination of Dindic, with all the ensuing unrest; the strange death of Milosevic while he was being held in custody in The Hague in March 2006 (the official version was that he died of a heart attack, but there are many theories that a medicine administered to him caused the heart attack, just at a time when Milosevic, acting as his own advocate, was beginning to make accusations against the global elite and to present evidence that contradicted the hitherto accepted version of events); and, soon after Milosevic’s death, the secession of Montenegro. And now the country was facing the complete secession of Kosovo too. Two weeks after our visit Serbia signed a stabilisation and association agreement with the EU. So at least in theory it had chosen a pro-European course.

Sariusz-Wolski left Belgrade on the Saturday morning, and I stayed on for the weekend. I moved to Roksanda’s. The cold weather was nothing like the “April in Belgrade” of Zdravko Colic’s song. Dad and I visited Gran’s grave, then we met some relatives.

On the last day of my stay, I met Goran Bregovic. He was writing the music for a film about Ataturk. He gave me Andrew Mango’s excellent biography of Ataturk. Our conversation inevitably came round to Turkey and Islam. I was surprised by his angle on the subject. “Islam has reached the stage we were at in the Middle Ages,” he said. “The religion will have to reform and liberalise, as will Muslims themselves. But it’s going to take a long time.” “OK,” I said, “but before it happens they’ll get the upper hand over Europe as it weakens and they’ll rule over us.” “Maybe, but that’ll only be one stage in a longer process,” he replied. “It won’t be the first time that Europe has been under Islamic rule. Look at the history of Spain, as well as the Balkans. We won’t live long enough to see
it happen, but Islam will change.” I was a bit thrown off balance. Bregovic grew up in a Serbo-Croat family in Sarajevo, so his approach to the world of Islam was bound to be different from mine. Bregovic also paid me one of the nicest compliments I have ever received: “I’ve been observing you develop as a journalist for years, with great satisfaction,” he said. “But you’ve also grown as a person, and I can see you’re going through life with a sense of what you want and where you want to get to. Very few people have such a sense of purpose in life, very few have the courage to seek the fulfilment of their dream.” It had been worth staying on for a couple of days in Belgrade if only to hear those words.

Bucharest

On the following day I got the train to Bucharest, with a fever and a severe cold. The most symbolic moment of the NATO summit was Secretary General Jap de Hoop Schepper’s press conference at the end. It was at this conference that the disappointing news for Georgia, Ukraine and Macedonia was announced. When the Secretary General told the press that Macedonia would not be receiving an invitation to join the Alliance because of the Greek veto on the name of the country, the Macedonian journalists and diplomats demonstratively left the room in protest, waving the Macedonian flag. Their protest had of course no political effect or significance, but it was still an emotional and very poignant moment. At least some of the foreign journalists became aware that a great disappointment had been inflicted on this small country, and that the Alliance had made a mistake there and then, in front of our very eyes. The consequences of the Alliance’s other big mistake at that summit, its decision about Georgia and Ukraine, became clear four months later, when Russia invaded Georgia, encouraged by the passivity of NATO, and in particular of France and Germany.

I went back to Brussels with my cold, feeling despondent again.
Chapter XII.

November 2011

Brussels to Belgrade
This was a completely different journey to the Balkans. Dad had lung cancer. I wanted to see him again before it was too late. Even though I'd been told that with this kind of cancer he could still live for many years, I'd got it into my head that he would only last a few more months, and I flew to Belgrade firmly expecting that I would be seeing him for the very last time. In the plane, I sat down next to a man in a suit wearing glasses. I was glad that for once I hadn't ended up next to some loud and discontented infant. Once I was in my seat, the man turned towards me and I immediately noticed the tattoos on his arms and even dotted tattoo patterns on his hands. His face was of the kind that didn't inspire confidence. “Sure you want to sit here?” he asked, in broken Serbian. My pride would not allow me to say I would rather be sitting somewhere else. “Nothing against sitting here?” he continued. “Where are you flying to? Me, I’m going to Paris. They have the best perfumes in the world there. Have you ever been to Paris?” That didn’t sound very plausible, since the plane was going from Brussels to Belgrade. “First to Belgrade, then to Paris,” he insisted. “To get some perfume.” As he was contemplating the incredulous expression on my face, the voice of one of the cabin crew came over the loud speakers: “Popovic, has anyone seen Popovic? Is Popovic on board the aircraft?” My neighbour almost jumped out of his seat in his enthusiasm to let everyone know he knew where Popovic was. “I know, I know!” he called out. “They arrested him with me at the airport, he’s over there!” I realised that my intuition about my neighbour's untrustworthy character had been correct. The rest of the journey passed by peacefully.

A friend was waiting for me at the airport and took me to the Polish embassy, where I was going to stay in one of the guest rooms. It was Thursday evening, and I was due to fly back to Brussels on Sunday. I was intending to go and see Dad on the Friday and the Saturday. I was afraid of what I expected to be my last conversation with him. I was afraid of what he would look like after chemotherapy. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to raise his spirits. I had to think of some way of coping with my fear, and I had an idea. The best way to overcome a fear is to think of an even greater fear, just as the best way to cope with suffering is to impose even more suffering on yourself – it gets the adrenaline going. So I asked the Polish ambassador, Andrzej Jasionowski, if I would get shot in the
head on the border trying to go to Kosovska Mitrovica in Kosovo with my Serbian surname. “I don’t think they’ll shoot you in the head, but it’s not a great idea,” was his cautious response to my idea. But my mind was already made up. I would go to see Dad on Saturday, because now I was going to cross into Kosovo. I checked on the internet and saw that there was a bus leaving for Kosovska Mitrovica at midnight. I rang a colleague and friend, a Serbian journalist, and he gave me the contact details of his friend in Kosovska Mitrovica. I only told the ambassador about my plans. I didn’t want to stress either my Mum or my Dad unnecessarily. Włodek from the Polish embassy took me to the bus station. It was a dark and chilly evening. Rain was falling in a fine mist, blurring the contours of everything around us. It felt like the opening scene of a horror movie. I got into the clapped-out bus. There were a dozen or so other passengers, all laden with bags bulging with food of various kinds. At the very moment when the bus started to move, all my worries and problems just seemed to melt away: Dad’s illness, problems at work, financial problems, my own illness and my own broken heart. I felt an incredible surge of adrenaline and energy, and a kind of absurd euphoria. At last, I was off on an adventure. Something was going to happen! But after half an hour or so in the bus I began to feel the pain in my back again, my euphoria subsided, and I began to wonder what was going to happen to me at the border between Serbia and Kosovo. I did have a Polish passport and Polish citizenship, but the surname in my passport was obviously Serbian, and that could cause problems in Kosovo. Time passed, and we didn’t stop anywhere, except for the two stops mentioned in the timetable. The number of passengers in the bus gradually dwindled, till there were only a handful of us left. At four in the morning, we finally arrived in Kosovska Mitrovica, without having stopped at any border. As I was getting off the bus, I asked the driver why we hadn’t been stopped at the border. “The local Serbs have blocked the normal road off with concrete at the border,” he replied, “so we took the smugglers’ route instead.”

Kosovska Mitrovica

Although it was very early in the morning, I managed to find a bar that was open. It was hard to judge whether it was open for the survivors of the night before’s revelry or for intrepid early risers, but it was open in any case. Inside, the smell of cigarettes and alcohol permeated the gloom, but it was still an infinitely preferable solution to waiting outside for Zoran to come. It was cold, and because I hadn’t slept, the cold seemed to penetrate me even more deeply. I ordered a coffee, and then a second one almost immediately afterwards. Zoran appeared while I was drinking the second one. He was a local journalist, and a Serb. He had written an important and very interesting book about Serbian losses in Kosovo, including material losses. Unfortunately, nobody outside Yugoslavia had had a chance to read it. That was a shame, because it showed a side of the conflict which had been much less widely publicised. He wore jeans and a black leather coat. He had gaps in his teeth and wrinkles. His appearance was modest and even shabby. Most of the Serbs here lived in very modest circumstances, if not to say in poverty. “Are you Sasha’s friend?” he asked. “Yes,” I confirmed. He sat down and lit a cigarette, which was soon followed by a second one. He started talking about the lives of Kosovo Serbs twelve years on from the air strikes, and three years on from the secession of Kosovo. It could all be summed up as poverty, fear and no future. Serb cultural heritage in Kosovo, most of it sacred, was being systematically downgraded and destroyed. The Serbs here had a feeling of being completely on their own, because nobody was interested in what was happening here, not even many of the Serbs’ own politicians. At the time, there was a lot of talk about dividing Kosovo into two parts, a northern part for the Serbs and a southern part for the Albanians. But neither the Albanians, who wanted the whole of Kosovo, nor the international organisations, who were afraid of potential unrest, wanted to hear anything about a division of Kosovo. The local Serbs were the only ones who were interested in the idea.

Zoran suggested that we go and see a barricade that the locals had made. On our way there we crossed a square named after the Milic brothers. Two of the three brothers had been killed during the fighting in 1999. The father and the remaining brother died soon after. None of
the brothers had even reached the age of thirty before they died. They were only four of thousands taken hence by the war. Not far away was a monument to the Russian consul Shcherbend, who had been killed by Albanians in Kosovska Mitrovica in 1905. Before he died, he was said to have declared himself the first casualty of the struggle to preserve the Serbian-ness of Kosovo against the growing demands of the Albanian population. But while we are on the subject, it’s also worth mentioning an Albanian casualty, Sabahete Tolaj, a Kosovo policewoman. She had an unusual life story for someone from this region. She graduated from the flying school in Sarajevo and flew helicopters. During the war, she fought in the ranks of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Although I have a negative opinion of this organisation, I cannot speak badly of Sabahete. Her dream was of an independent, democratic and honest Kosovo. She was committed to fighting against the local mafia and against corrupt politicians. Seven years ago she was shot by unknown perpetrators. She was only 35. She was to have been a witness in the war crimes trial of Ramush Haradinaj. By some very strange coincidence, most of the witnesses who were due to testify against Haradinaj either did not live to see the trial begin, or else withdrew their testimony for unspecified reasons. Haradinaj stood accused of crimes against humanity, including the kidnapping, torture and murder of Serb men and trading in the internal organs excised from their corpses.

Kosovska Mitrovica is not an attractive town. Thirty thousand people, mainly Serbs, lived there before the war. After the war, Serbs from here and elsewhere moved to the northern part of the town, where there are now about twenty thousand people. Only one Serb, an eighty-year-old woman, stayed on the Albanian side. Eventually, we reached the barricade we had set out to see. It was just a shed made of plywood heated by a small stove inside and adorned with Serbian emblems. There were a few people sitting in it. Zoran introduced me to them. “This is a friend of mine. She’s a journalist from Poland, but she’s one of us,” he said. I spent the next few hours listening to the stories of people who had lost everything: their loved ones, their homes, their careers and their prosperity. Lidija’s husband had been a volleyball coach. When he died, she was left on her own with their three daughters. The oldest one even had to be escorted to school by KFOR soldiers. Otherwise she could have been beaten up, kidnapped or raped. Novak Djokovic was the only bright star in their firmament. He was born in nearby Zvecani and, ever mindful of his origins, never missed an opportunity to advertise his attachment to Serbia and Kosovo. He was even disqualified from the Australian Open once for wearing a shirt bearing the slogan “Kosovo is Serbian”. But Djokovic’s support for Serbia didn’t only take the form of symbolic gestures. He had provided funds for the local school and the local hospital in Mitrovica, and apparently he had bought all his old classmates a car. He came to visit as often as he could.

I asked Zoran if we could go to the bridge. “Yes, okay, but I’m not going to cross it with you,” he warned me. So I found myself alone again on the bridge over the Ibar, feeling heroic. On the bridge, there was a group of Italian carabinieri standing around their car. I asked them in English where the Polish soldiers were stationed. They didn’t understand, so I tried again in Serbian, German, Russian and finally in French. Then one of them gave me a faint smile and said: “Doucement, Mademoiselle, doucement!” So I repeated my question in French, doucement. “Aspetti,” he answered and called someone on his mobile phone, then gestured to me to wait. After ten or fifteen minutes, a convoy of cars with sirens on arrived and another group of Italians got out of them. “Il commandante, lui parla inglese,” he said, pointing to an officer sporting the inevitable dark glasses and slicked back hair. Bristling with pride, the officer explained to me in English that the Poles were stationed 150km away. “You can visit them if you have a car,” he added.

I didn’t have a car, so I thanked the officer kindly for his help. I decided to carry on across the bridge to the Albanian side, just for a symbolic, short visit. This time, nobody threw any stones at me. I ordered a coffee at one of the Albanian bars in English, then encouraged by the locals’ unwelcoming looks, I returned to the Serbian side. The police on the bridge are really the front-line guarantors of security in Mitrovica, but they cannot speak either of the local languages, or even English. It would be funny if it weren’t so scary.

Apart from the barricade I had already visited with Zoran, there were others on other key arterial roads. These barricades are the Serbs’ way of protesting against the creation of a formal border between Serbia and Kosovo. In the town, there are posters of Serbian Radical Party founder
Vojislav Šešelj with the slogan “We don’t want the EU”. The EU doesn’t want them either. The worst thing is that nobody wants them.

Before getting on the bus back to Belgrade, I went for lunch with Zoran. The local specialities were very tempting, especially the spicy sujuk sausages. Washed down with raki. In spite of my protests, Zoran insisted on paying for both of us, as the ancient law of hospitality here requires.

The bus set off for Belgrade as evening was approaching. It was raining, and the wind was so strong it seemed like the branches of the trees by the roadside could smash through the bus windows at any moment. The driver was playing turbo-folk ballads at full volume. Listening to the lyrics of one song after another, I came to the conclusion that Balkan men are exceptionally sensitive. They even suffer when they are the ones who have left or betrayed their lover.

Back in Belgrade

On the following day, I finally went to see Dad. As soon as I saw him, I knew that this was going to be our last meeting after all. Not because he had lost all his hair and looked thin and drawn. But I saw death, and the fear of death, in his eyes. I tried not to let him sense what I was feeling. “I was afraid you’d look even worse, but you still look pretty human.” “I’m trying not to scare anyone before I die,” he replied. “That can wait till I’m actually dead.” We talked about the whole of our lives, our family, our loved ones and all the memories we had. “Once, when you and Mum were still living with me in Belgrade,” he recalled, “we went for a walk together, but you didn’t want me to hold your hand because you said I stank of cigarettes. You ran off on your own, but then a storm came and you ran back to me, looking for a hug. “But you just said I stink of cigarettes,” I said. “No, Daddy, now you smell like Countess Walewska,” you said. You were always destined to be a politician.”

I took the opportunity to ask Dad a question I had wondered about all my life: “How many a day do you really smoke?” “On average four packs a day, eighty cigarettes,” he replied. “At least I’ve worked hard at getting lung cancer.”

Finally, even though I knew that Dad was an unbaptised atheist, or rather an agnostic, I gave him a small picture of a beatified Italian nun, the aunt of a fellow journalist of mine, Maria Laura, from Brussels. She had asked me to give it to my Dad when she found out the reason for my trip to to Belgrade. To my great surprise, instead of retorting that he didn’t believe in superstitions, Dad kissed the picture, put it in his pyjama pocket, crossed himself and hugged me as hard as he could. “My child,” he said. “I believe more in all that than in chemotherapy.”

The journey back to Brussels was uneventful, so I had the time to put my thoughts in order and to reconcile myself with what now appeared imminent and inevitable. I felt a slight sense of relief, because both Dad and I had really needed to talk. Not about Brussels, politics and suchlike nonsense. But about life. And death. Now I wanted Dad to have a peaceful death.
With Goran Bregovic in Belgrade

Bora Djordjevic, frontman of my favourite band Riblja Čorba ("Fish Stew")

With Emir Kusturica

All We Need Is Shljivovitca
Chapter XIII.

April 2012

From Brussels to Belgrade
Dad died on April 14, the day after his sixty-sixth birthday. I was still in Cracow at the time, where I had gone for Easter. I travelled from Cracow to Brussels, and a few days later I flew to Belgrade for Dad’s funeral. There was a lot of turbulence during the flight. Generally, I like a bit of turbulence, but this went on for too long and it was too strong. Suddenly it became hot inside the aircraft and there was a smell of burnt out electric cables. The plane lurched to one side. Some passengers started screaming. It was at that moment that for the first time in my life I experienced *globus hystericus*, a lump in the throat caused by extreme anxiety that prevented me from breathing and an irresistible desire to undo my seatbelt and open the window. A textbook case of panic. It crossed my mind that it would be ironic for me to die on my way to dad’s funeral, but then I realised that I was completely powerless to do anything and that hysteric would not change anything. All I had to do was to stay calm. In my thoughts, I made the sign of the cross on my chest. I had a book with me by the Benedictine Father Leon Knabit, so I silently asked Father Leon to help me.

We actually made it to Belgrade without any major problems. There had indeed been a technical failure in addition to the strong turbulence, but fortunately we had had the benefit of an experienced pilot. This time I was going to stay in one of the embassy’s guest rooms again. I didn’t want to cause the family any additional inconvenience.

On the day after my arrival, I went to see my stepmother. The notice of my father’s death, with a photo of him, was hanging on the door of the flat as well as on the entrance to the stairwell from the street. There were a lot of people inside the flat. Everyone was drinking alcohol. My initial reaction was to think how inappropriate it was to have a party under such circumstances. Throwing a party was out of character for Liljana as well. It turned out that, according to the local custom, anybody who had read the notice of death in the newspaper or on the door, even a complete stranger, had the right to visit the family of the deceased if they knew the address, ask a series of questions about the circumstances of the death, offer their condolences to the family, and finally, be served a drink by the family. The guest was expected to spill a few drops of this drink on the carpet or the floor and then drink to the peace of the departed soul. I admired Liljana’s patience, and the patience of my stepbrothers, as they explained to all the
guests, even to the complete strangers among them, that Dad had been 66 when he died, that he had died of lung cancer, that he had been ill for several months, that he had left a daughter and two sons behind him, and that, fortunately, the illness had taken him quickly and that he had not suffered for too long. That final suffering had always been the thing Dad had feared most. During our last conversation, he had told me that he wasn’t afraid of death, that he was ready for it and that he even wanted to die, but that he feared he would die in the same kind of agony as his mother had died in. So in my prayers, I prayed not just for Dad to get better, but also for him to die a peaceful death. And that is what he got in the end. The cancer developed quickly and Dad drifted away peacefully, listening to music, reflecting and sleeping. There was no final agony. My stepmother Liljana and my two stepbrothers Miki and Nesa had made all the preparations for the funeral, which was to take place on the following day.

I left their flat and went for a long walk. It was April in Belgrade again, warmer than the previous April, but politically, not much had changed. The Kosovo Serbs had organised a referendum on detaching the northern part of Kosovo from the rest of Kosovo and attaching it to Serbia. The result of the referendum, in favour of detaching the north from the rest of Kosovo, led to a unilateral declaration of independence, which no one recognised. In Serbia itself, the campaign for the presidential elections was beginning. The incumbent, Boris Tadic (whom I met again several times when he came to Brussels visiting NATO and the EU), had the best chance of winning, along with Tomislav Nikolić of the Serbian Progressive Party, which he founded himself after leaving the Serbian Radical Party, where he had been Vojislav Šešelja’s right-hand man for a long time. When Šešelja was put on trial in The Hague, Nikolic took his place. Then he changed course, and in these elections he was preaching Serbian accession to the EU. So a change of label was needed. A colleague from Serbian television explained all this background to me. We met for coffee in the city centre. I realised then that Belgrade, especially the old town, was gradually getting its old glamour back. Around the main pedestrian zone on Knez Mihailova Street, there were many attractive cafés, where people were beginning to spend long evenings again socialising with each other. There were more and more foreign tourists too. The old Belgrade was making a comeback.

On the day of the funeral, a friend of my brother’s was supposed to come and collect me and take me to the family flat, and from there to the funeral. I was too nervous to eat, so I only drank some tea. I just had enough time to pick up the wreath I had ordered from the flower shop. I got into the car next to Nesa’s friend Vukasin. He was a tall man with a moustache and grizzled hair. His face was strangely familiar. Finally, my curiosity overcame me and I said: “I’m sorry, but I can’t get over your resemblance to an actor from Kursadžije”. Kursadžije was a TV sitcom which Dad had got me hooked on. It lampooned policemen from each one of the former Yugoslav republics, and each of the actors actually came from the same republic as the character they were playing. My Dad’s favourite was the Montenegrin. And the actor who played him was sitting in the same car as I was. My brother had invited him to the funeral, knowing how much Dad had loved the sitcom and the character of the Montenegrin. The flat was full of people again, this time mostly members of my stepmother’s very large extended family from Macedonia. “Dominika! Have a glass of raki for the peace of your father’s soul!” I was told this several times by different relatives, so that, by the time we set off for the funeral, my head was already spinning.

The funeral itself was a secular one, because Dad had never been baptised. Dad’s coffin, with the lid on, was put on display in the cemetery chapel. We stood in a circle around it and received condolences from more than two hundred guests: my brothers’ friends, my stepmother’s friends, Dad’s colleagues from work and our family. Uncle Draga, Gran’s brother, was also there, bent double with age. I hadn’t seen him for ten years, and I knew that this would be my last meeting with him too. Gran’s other brother, Uncle Dile, who looked like Ronald Reagan, and his beautiful wife Liljana, were also there. I hadn’t seen them since I was a child. And another long-lost aunt. As I stood by Dad’s coffin, I realised this was actually a triple farewell for me. Apart from saying goodbye to Dad, I was also saying goodbye to Gran, whose funeral I hadn’t managed to attend, and to Yugoslavia, whose demise I hadn’t yet shed a tear for. At a certain point, I felt light-headed and began to sway slightly. I heard a voice say, “Look how much she loved her Dad, she’s fainting!” A group of strange women huddled around me, and then I got so hot I really did faint.
It was a secular funeral, without any religious component and without any priest. An old friend of my Dad's from university days and from work, who had known him for forty years, made the speech by the graveside. It was also my Gran's grave, as Dad was being buried next to his mother. “Our dear departed Dragan Ćosić had an extraordinary sense of humour,” he said. “He always made us laugh as we were driving to the military exercise ground. He leaves behind him his daughter, Dominika from Cracow, his two sons, Milorad and Nenad, and his wives, Elzbieta and Liljana.” He listed all of us “left behind” in a monotone roll call. But as he went on, I pricked up my ears. “Our dear Dragan was an eminent ballistics expert in the Yugoslav Army and designed and built its short-range rocket…” He revealed almost everything about Dad’s work, just stopping short of giving us the exact technical parameters and launch site locations. So it was at Dad’s funeral that I finally found out what his job had been. Overcome by emotion, I got an attack of the giggles. Fortunately, I was wearing dark glasses and covered my mouth with my hand, so that my spasms were taken to be another manifestation of uncontrollable grief. When the ceremony was over, we crossed over to where someone had set up a small table with glasses of raki by a path, a few yards away. Again, we had to observe the old Balkan custom, spilling a few drops of raki on the ground before drinking to the peace of the departed soul. A lavish funeral reception was laid on later, and again, funeral guests would come up to me to introduce themselves, give me a slobbery kiss and offer their condolences, followed by yet another glass of raki. I’ve never drunk so much in my life as I drank at my Dad’s funeral. Then I started seeing other members of the cast of Kursadzije and wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. But they weren’t. Nesa had managed to get the whole cast of the sitcom to come to the funeral. Dad would have been happy. He would have been happy to see everyone having a good time at his funeral too. In his lifetime, he had always loved to cheer up despairing widows and widowers at their spouse’s funerals. He was indeed blessed with an extraordinary sense of humour, even though, behind the mask of his smile and his jokes, he was a very sad and unhappy person himself.

In the late afternoon, after the funeral was over, I went to have a coffee with my cousin Ivana. We shared our memories of Dad and Gran, piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of our family history. Ivana was preparing to record another CD. This was no easy task, because to record a CD on the Balkan music market you needed to pay all the costs up front, unless you were already a superstar. Ivana had made a name for herself and was a respected figure in musical circles, but she hadn’t yet attained celebrity status, so now she was saving up to pay for her next CD before she had even started recording it. At the other end of the talent spectrum, Barbie dolls with wealthy sponsors and a complete lack of musical talent, vocal skills and charisma could afford to churn out CD after CD and have them promoted by the media. But achieving success on your own merits was and is always the more difficult way to go.

As I returned to Brussels the following day, I knew that I would not be going back to Belgrade for some time to come. Going back to the city in the knowledge that neither Gran nor Dad were there any more was going to be very difficult to cope with emotionally. Something in my life had come to an end.
Chapter XIV.

July 2015

From Brussels to Podgorica (via Istanbul)
Unexpectedly, the chance of a short working trip to Montenegro, of barely three days, came up. While I was booking the flight, as usual I decided to make life a bit more interesting and booked a route to Podgorica via Istanbul. This enabled me to spend three hours in Atatürk Airport, in the midst of a crowd of people on their way to every corner of the globe. Having finally arrived in Podgorica, I took a taxi from the airport to my hotel. I got talking to the taxi driver about the usual kind of things. “You must be one of ours, but you’ve got a funny accent,” he observed. “Live abroad? In Brussels? It must be boring there. There are no real men there either. Look at us – this is where the real men are!” I stifled a smile, as he sounded exactly like the Montenegrin character from the sitcom Kursadžije, who is always praising Montenegrin men as the most handsome, the bravest and the best. (In one of the scenes, the Montenegrin police cadet even has to give the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective “beautiful” and comes up with the answer “beautiful, more beautiful, me”. ) To give more weight to his words, the driver stopped the car and said, “Look at these men – tall, dark, strong, real Montenegrins!” Then he started talking about the grittier realities of life in Montenegro. “It's a struggle to make ends meets, as it always has been. You have to really box clever just to earn a little bit more. The politicians just lie to us and take our money. They’re not going to get us anywhere. They talk about getting us into NATO, but what’s the point of that? Fifteen years back, NATO was bombing us. What do we want to get into NATO for?” In the meantime, we had already arrived. The street was quiet, but still quite near the centre. A narrow path led from the street across a kind of park to a very elegant white villa, which was my hotel.

It was already evening, and I was only planning to have a bite to eat in town and then turn in for the night, but the receptionist told me there was a Zdravko Colić concert on the main square. There was no need to ask the way. Half of Podgorica seemed to be heading for the main square, to listen to the melodious voice of one of the most famous Yugoslav singers. In theory, Colić could already have been drawing his old-age pension, but he looked very trim and sporty. You could still see why he had been considered one of the best-looking singers of the former Yugoslavia (although, surprisingly, he was actually not a Montenegrin but a Bosniak). Admittedly, you could tell sometimes that he was relying
on pre-recorded playback to keep things going, but everyone had still turned out to sing along with their idol all the songs they knew by heart: *April u Beogradu* (“April in Belgrade”), *Tis i mi u krvi* (“You are in my blood”), *Kristina*, and, from his more recent repertoire, *Noc mi te duguje*. Some of the people in the audience were surprisingly young; others had reached the other end of their lives, and remembered Colić from when they themselves had been young. The peoples of the former Yugoslavia were still being held together, in spite of all the political divisions, by these singers and bands they all loved. After the concert, I met up with some friends who had come from Brussels. It’s difficult not to order fish when you eat out in Montenegro. The seasoned grilled trout and the mixed fish kebabs are delicious. Everyone ordered some kind of fish. And to round it all off, a glass of rakia “on the house”. My Belgian (actually Flemish) friend Mark was in Montenegro for the first time and loved the atmosphere there.

The next day I had a chance to take a look around Podgorica, or Titograd, as it had been known until 1992. The last time I had been here, over ten years ago, it had seemed less ugly than it seemed to me now. The low, unadorned buildings came off poorly in comparison with the private houses in Paris or Brussels. They didn’t seem to fit in very well with the beautiful scenery surrounding the town either. It should be said in defence of Podgorica, however, that it was also affected by the 1963 earthquake, which explained why there were so many new buildings, and why they were so low. The focus of political life in Montenegro at the time were Montenegro’s efforts to join NATO and Russia’s efforts to stop this happening. A recent court ruling had not helped to improve the general atmosphere. The case went back to 1999, when a resident of the village of Murin in Montenegro, Manolje Komatin, had been killed in the NATO air strikes. After the war, his family launched a legal battle to claim compensation for his death. After years of wrangling, a court finally awarded them €69,000, a huge sum when compared to the Montenegrin average monthly wage of around €300. But recently, a court in Podgorica had ordered the family to pay back the money they had received. This ruling made people furious and didn’t help to dispose them kindly towards NATO, the cause of all the trouble in the first place. Not everyone was angry with NATO however. Especially among young Montenegrins, there were many who saw the country’s future as lying with NATO and the EU, and who hoped that in the next year or so their dream of joining NATO would actually come true. Apart from covering this ongoing debate about joining NATO, the local papers also reported on such things as gunfights, political scandals and celebrity romances.

I was in luck again. There was going to be another concert on the main square that evening. It was part of a folk music festival, and as well as bands from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia there were also some from Poland. I felt as if I had travelled back in time. I remembered watching Yugoslav folk groups on TV when I was a child. Fortunately, the heat of the day relented as the evening progressed, and it was pleasant standing outside listening to the music.

The following day I met Vladan, my Montenegrin journalist friend. He had hardly changed over the last ten years. He had only changed employer. He thought that joining NATO was the only way for Montenegro to escape from the Russian sphere of influence. The Russians had already noticed that the West wasn’t taking much interest in Montenegro, and they had bought up most of the property on the Montenegrin coast. But they hadn’t stopped at that. Once, Montenegro had had its own aluminium smelter, which generated fifteen percent of its GDP and half of its export earnings. Somehow, after some strange jiggery-pokery, it had fallen into the hands of the Russian aluminium magnate Oleg Deripaska. Then it went bust, and a Montenegrin businessman bought it back from Deripaska. But that wasn’t the end of the story, because Deripaska, having bought the plant for a derisory sum and having pocketed large amounts of Montenegrin state subsidies to keep it going, was now suing Montenegro for the allegedly huge losses he had suffered as a result of the venture. “It’s as easy as that to destabilise a small country,” Vladan commented. A Montenegrin diplomat I knew, whom I met later, was even more outspoken. “The Russians are forcing certain political decisions on us by using financial blackmail. They’re prepared to go to any lengths to stop Montenegro joining NATO, because that would reduce their sphere of influence.”

My short stay in Montenegro was already drawing to a close. I didn’t have enough time to go to the seaside this time. I managed to do some last-minute shopping in a local shop: some finely ground, fragrant
coffee, ideal for use in a cezve, plum raki, ajvar and a childhood favourite – chocolate bananas. The taxi driver who took me to the airport lived up to expectations and asked me the usual series of probing questions: “How old are you? Have you got a job? Are you married?” To finish off, he showed me a picture of a horrifically muscular young man. “My son is a bodybuilder, he’s your age and he’s single. Look how handsome he is!” He smiled at me, waiting for me to agree. After ten years in Brussels, it was funny and touching to come across straightforward, frank Balkan ways again. People here ask you the most intimate questions without seeing anything inappropriate in it, as they will tell you every detail about themselves without hesitation. And they haven’t forgotten the art of true hospitality either, luckily.

I went back to Brussels via Istanbul, on the same route as I had come by. The stopover of just a few hours at the airport was a poor substitute for a proper visit to this wonderful city, which I had fallen in love with at first sight a long time ago.
November 2019

From Brussels to Zagreb (via Warsaw)
This trip was a working trip too, to report on the European People’s Party summit in Zagreb, in the run-up to the first Croatian Presidency of the EU. It was for less than three full days, with not much free time. We flew to Zagreb via Warsaw. The moment I got off the plane in Zagreb, saw the signs in Croatian, and heard the familiar sounds of the language, I felt as if I had returned to a home I had left years and years ago. Tomek, the cameraman, and I got a taxi from the airport and chatted to the driver. The streets were all blocked because of the imminent arrival of hundreds of politicians from all over Europe for the summit. By the side of some streets, cemetery candles and lanterns were burning, in commemoration of the tragedy of Vukovar. Electoral posters were on every available bit of wall, as Croatia was entering the final stages of its presidential election campaign. I realised that for the first time I had come to the Balkans to follow present-day events, in the here and now, rather than hunting for traces left behind by the past. Croatia had already been a member of NATO and the EU for several years. It was no longer at the same stage of its history as it had been ten or fifteen years ago. It had moved on, but the legacy of the recent wars still returned to haunt it occasionally. The driver was complaining, in accordance with established tradition: prices were high, wages were low, everything was in a complete mess, and politicians were only bothered about their own careers. It was a litany familiar to taxi passengers in many countries. “What do you think about the current president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic?” we asked him. “Should she be allowed to carry on?” “She’s got nothing to say for herself,” he said. “She’s no politician, she’s just in it for herself.” “Then what about Miroslav Skoro?” we asked. Skoro was popular as a singer, and he was the dark horse of the electoral campaign, stressing the importance of patriotic values. “Skoro’s not much better than Kolinda,” he replied. “They started off in the same party after all. He only left when they fell out with each other. But people like him, so he might pick up a few votes.” By a process of elimination, we arrived at the socialist candidate, the former prime minister Zoran Milanovic. “He seems to be the most sensible of the lot. If I go to vote, I’ll vote for him,” came the answer. We arrived at our hotel in the city centre, not highbrow, but pleasant and reasonably priced.
I left my luggage in the hotel and went to a nearby restaurant. The pljeskavica tasted so good that I realised what a profanation it was to praise Belgian steaks, which are as nothing compared to this culinary miracle. It was accompanied by finely chopped onion, kaymak and ajvar, and some house wine. The taste of food in the Balkans is incomparably more intense and authentic than in the West. When I got back to the hotel I watched a bit of local TV and found out there were mass teachers' strikes going on. They had culminated just in time for the summit. Schools were closed, and the negotiations with the government were bogged down. Some of the protesters made no secret of the fact that they wanted the strikes to tarnish the government's reputation in the eyes of its foreign guests.

The following morning we set out for the summit. It was being held in a sports stadium. It was an imposing edifice, a relic of the socialist era, with flights of steps leading up to it from every side. There were hundreds of people inside, but thanks to the fairly good organisation of the summit, we didn't have to queue to pick up our accreditation badges. Many well-known politicians had turned up, but the greatest interest was aroused by the appearance of the former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who hadn't been seen at such events for a long time. Donald Tusk's election as EPP president was a mere formality, as he was the only candidate for the post.

At one point in the proceedings, a tall, thin man came towards me and began to look at me. I had a sense that we had met before somewhere, and indeed we had. I had met Miro Kovac, the former Croatian foreign minister, twelve years ago in Brussels. At the time, he was still head of the prime minister's private office. I decided to turn this chance meeting to my professional advantage and secured the promise of an interview with Miro the following day. After finishing work in the evening, I walked around Zagreb a little. Even though it was my third visit to Zagreb, I felt as if I was discovering its charms for the first time.

As we came out of the venue at the end of the summit on the second day, the heavens opened, and it poured down. Taxis were nowhere to be found. Finally, one turned up for us half an hour after we had ordered it. I made a very quick stop at the hotel and then dashed to my interview with Miro. The interview was to take place in the building of the Croatian parliament. The parliament and the government's offices were in the same complex, on St Mark's Square. The architecture was imposing, but without megalomania. In the corridors, there was an exhibition of photos of Vukovar: of how it had been before and after the war, of Croatian soldiers who had been killed there, and of their families. We devoted the interview to the subject of the presidential elections. Miro thought that if Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic had to leave office, Croatia would be less committed to the Central European “Three Seas Initiative”. The country was also preparing very seriously for its presidency of the EU, in which it planned to focus the attention of EU members on the Western Balkans. A Balkan summit was being planned in Zagreb in May 2020, along the lines of the one that had been held in Sofia two years earlier.

On the last day of my stay, I had the morning free before my flight in the afternoon. As I wandered the streets of the old Gornji Grad (“Upper Town”) district, I remembered that the Museum of Broken Relationships must be somewhere nearby. I had read about it in the essays of Dubravka Ugresic. And there it was, only made up of a few exhibition rooms. There were dozens of objects, each of them accompanied by a letter with the story of a break-up. True-life stories and objects sent in by people from all over the world. There were entertaining and amusing stories, but also tragic ones. There was the white wedding dress with bodice and tulle gown that had belonged to a young Turkish woman. The date of her wedding had already been set for August, and both the bride and bridegroom were dreaming of a wedding in the garden. A few weeks before the wedding, in accordance with the local custom, they did a dress rehearsal and a mini photo session. The day after the rehearsal, the bridegroom-to-be went to work at Atatürk Airport in Istanbul. It was June 2016. A bomb exploded at the airport, and there was a gunfight. He was one of the 48 casualties that day. In another display case, there were two lace bras, one black, and one white, and a letter from an American woman. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer. First of all, they had tried hormone treatment, which had caused her to drastically gain weight. Then it turned out that both her breasts had to be amputated. The amputations were followed by chemotherapy, which made her hair drop out. In the letter, she had written, “Maybe one day, if I ever get better, I will get back a relationship with my own body, which I no longer...”
recognise.” The letter was dated 2010. I wondered whether she was still alive and whether she had managed to re-establish a relationship with herself. A German had written: “My darling, you were with me all those years. I looked forward to every meeting with you, from as soon as I got up in the morning. All our meetings were a joy, though towards the end some suffering started creeping into them too. In the end, they told me that I had to leave you for my own good, for the sake of my health. And now all I can do is look at the box you come in, my beloved pizza.” Each of the letters told its own story, often the story of a tragic separation from a loved one. There were many love stories, such as the story of a young Finnish woman who as a young girl had fallen hopelessly in love with a Swedish man twelve years her senior. Unfortunately, he was already married, but they had an affair nonetheless. During their affair, his wife had another child with him, and he decided to end the romance with the Finnish girl. She married another man, had a child and then got divorced. Then the romance with the Swedish man started again, and ended again. Years went by. The Swedish man became a widower. They met again. “He is 64 now, and finally free,” she had written, “but why should I tie myself to an old, neglected man, when it turns out that after all these years we have nothing left to talk about with each other? There are so many more interesting men around, and I am only 52.” The object that went with the Finnish woman’s letter was the first gift the Swedish man had given her – a copy of the Kamasutra. There was also a worn-out vinyl record, with a recording of an opera aria. The man singing the aria had a pleasant voice, but not a great voice. The recording had been made by the man at the end of the 1930s for his fiancée. He had hoped to be a singer, but they took him into the army in the war and he was wounded by a bullet in his windpipe. He survived, but his singing days were over. In the meantime, his fiancée had married another man. Many years passed, and after her death, her granddaughter found the record with some love letters when she was going through all the keepsakes her Grandmother had left behind. In this way, she found out about the great love of her Grandmother’s life. I spent two hours in the museum, immersing myself in the stories of people I had never met, in their unfulfilled dreams and their unfulfilled loves, in their painful partings, but also in their happiest memories. I completely forgot about the cares of the world. This low-budget museum is one of the most moving and thought-provoking museums I have visited, even though it is made up of a collection of fairly ordinary objects and letters of little intrinsic value.

In fact, it had provoked so many thoughts in me that I only remembered about the meeting I had arranged with my friend from the embassy at the last minute, when it was almost too late. The stuff of everyday life in Croatia was more prosaic, and much less romantic, than the museum I had just visited: political scandals, local government corruption and, of course, the elections. Miroslav Skoro, whom I had actually met by chance in Strasbourg a few months earlier, looked like he was going to take votes away from Kolinda. If he hadn’t stood in these elections, Kolinda would have been almost certain of being re-elected. Young Croatians were leaving the country in droves to work abroad, leaving behind them nearly deserted villages, in which only old people lived. The benefits of the country’s economic development were being spread very unevenly, which influenced the general mood.

The driver of the taxi that reception had ordered for me was waiting for me in front of the hotel. As I approached him, I noticed a policeman standing next to him, noting something down. I thought that maybe he had had to pay a fine because he had been parked in the same space too long, waiting for me. So I asked the policeman if I could pay the fine for him. “No need,” he replied, “everything’s in order. You can go.” As we drove off, I asked the taxi driver what had happened. “While I was waiting for you, some completely unknown man came up to me and started insulting me,” he said. “I wouldn’t say he was drunk or on drugs,” he went on. “I told him to calm down, because I was waiting for a foreign lady, and then he really laid into me. Fortunately, there was a policeman nearby.” At that point, the driver turned around and looked at me closely for a moment, after which he added: “The forces of evil are attacking me, because I am a man of the light. You should be careful too, Madam. They’re everywhere, and they can sense our presence.” I didn’t ask who “they” were, but I soon understood he was referring to “the forces of evil and darkness”. “In this world, most people are neutral, but apart from the neutral ones there are people of the light and people of the darkness, and there’s a constant struggle going on between the two.” Then he added, as if for his own benefit, “The struggle is getting more and more vicious.”
We spent the rest of the journey talking about spirits, music, food and prophesies. “You must look up the prophesies of Mitar Tarabich on the internet: they’re all coming true, one by one,” were his parting words to me, as I got out of the taxi at the airport.

While I was waiting for my flight back to Brussels (this time a direct one), I was thinking about how my trips to the Balkans had always involved tales of some kind of supernatural phenomena. In comparison with the countries of the West, one hears these kind of tales much more often in the Balkans, and Croatia is not much different in this respect from Serbia or Macedonia. Of course, this is a stereotype and a gross simplification, but that is what the Balkans are like: soaked through with beliefs and magic spells, extreme feelings and emotions, blurring the border between past and present, life and death. Death is not the end of anything in the Balkans, and how could one not love them for this?
Epilogue
I started writing this book over twenty years ago. In the year 2000, I had everything down on paper and was even thinking of publishing it. But then I hid the printout away in a drawer. I went on to writing and publishing other books. I went on many journeys. In this book, I have only described my trips to the former Yugoslavia. I have not included anything about my experiences of Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, or other Balkan countries. When the pandemic came along, struggling with depression I decided to make the most of the lockdown by writing down accounts of my trips to the former Yugoslavia from the last twenty years as well.

I miss Yugoslavia. I cry for it, as one cries for loved ones who have died. It was once a country, but now it no longer exists. The writer Dubravka Ugresic even describes herself as a widow of Yugoslavia. I suppose that makes me a half-orphan of Yugoslavia. I’m an orphan who fully realises that her parent – Yugoslavia – was toxic and pathological. I’m fully aware that Tito’s Yugoslavia was built partly on lies, illusions and crimes. It could only ever last as long as he lasted. Marshal Tito himself wasn’t just a powerful man in a white suit, he was more of a negative than a positive figure, with a very murky past. He ran the country with an iron fist, sending people who were politically uncomfortable for him to labour camps, to the quarries on the prison island of Goli Otok, where they died from disease and from heat. But even though it was built on lies and illusions, Yugoslavia itself was real. There were always old enmities lurking just under the surface, even while Tito was alive, enmities form the Second World War and from even further back, but as long as Tito was alive, the country held together somehow or other. Most of the people I met on these trips also miss Yugoslavia. Looking back, especially now, after what has happened there in the recent past, Yugoslavia looks like an oasis of peace, prosperity and security. Most of them too, just like me, subconsciously just can’t accept the fact that the country ceased to exist in front of their very eyes, and that so many innocent people died often very cruel deaths on all sides of the conflict. Even though we are familiar with the historical facts, the political circumstances and the consequences of the conflict, we are still constantly asking ourselves: how could this have happened? How could everything have been destroyed in the nineties, in the space of a single decade? Why was nobody able to avert the looming
catastrophe? In the final scene of Kusturica's "Underground", everyone is at a wedding banquet, sitting around a table outside, laden with food. As they eat, drink and sing together, they fail to notice that the piece of land they are sitting on has broken away from the coast and is drifting off in an unknown direction. To quote Kusturica, “once upon a time there was a country”; and to quote him again, “as long as there is no war, brother will not raise a hand against brother”. The war in Yugoslavia was fratricidal, that’s why it hurt so much. I haven’t gone into the causes of the war, the course it took, the involvement of neighbouring countries or the political deals that were struck – the time will come for that in due course. I have just described how, in sometimes more and sometimes less direct ways, the war influenced the lives of the people I met, and my own life.
Dominika Ćosić is of mixed Polish-Serbian parentage and hails from both Cracow and Belgrade. She graduated in Slav Studies from the Jagiellonian University of Cracow, where she also studied philosophy and did a doctorate in International Cultural Studies. As a journalist, she has worked for the Polish dailies “Dziennik Polski” and “Dziennik Gazeta Prawna”, as well as the weeklies “Wprost” and “Do Rzeczy”. Since 2005, she has worked as a correspondent in Brussels, taking up the job of Brussels correspondent for Polish state TV network TVP in 2016. She is the author of the novel Uśmiech Dalidy (“Dalida's Smile”) and of an account of Poland’s route to joining the EU, “From a Horizon to the Presidency”. She has also co-authored a guidebook to the Balkans. She cannot live without travel, politics, meeting people and having adventures.

I met Dominika over twenty years ago. She was a very young journalist at the time. Over the years, I have watched her personality and her character develop along with her career. This book comes straight from her heart, which belongs to the Balkans. She doesn’t just know all there is to know about Balkan history and politics, including the very latest developments. She has a feeling for the Balkans deep down in her heart. So this is more than just a travelogue and a collection of political press articles. It’s a very personal, intimate story about a country. Our country. Yugoslavia. For people who don’t come from there, this can be a special kind of guidebook. A guide to the Balkan soul. Dominika, I’m proud of you!

- Goran Bregović, July 2020