

Stray
mongrels,
many alive,
more of them
dead, prowl
and litter the
potholed
roads.

Carrion crows pick on the entrails and scatter at your approach. It is probably just because there are so few people about in a place usually teeming with life that the beasts grab the attention. It is Monday, the 3rd September, 1990, and Kosovo is on strike. Dead dogs and big black birds.

The discipline and sense of community is

extraordinary and frightening. Almost two million Albanians have been told to stay at home to protest at the police state that Slobodan Milosevic, the Belgrade Bolshevik, has erected here over the past couple of years. The response is overwhelming. What if the two million had been told not to strike, but to take up arms against their despised rulers?

In Pristina, the Kosovo capital that is dominated by nightmarish 60s-built concrete high-rise slums, the main streets are empty of Albanians. The only sound is of Serbo-Croat as the local Serbs, outnumbered nine-to-one in these parts, swagger around wishing it were always like this.

In the maze of mud paths and crumbling cottages on the other side of the disused railway tracks that is the ghetto area of Vranjevac—more reminiscent of the West Bank than the European mainland—life has been suspended.

Past the burnt fields of withering sunflowers and over the hills to Prizen, close to the Albanian border, the picture is the same. The rows of fabled filigree craftsmen's shops are shuttered. Nothing stirs. Even the ubiquitous shoeshiners with their battery of brushes, creams and lotions have abandoned their pitches for the day.

The impression that life is elsewhere contrasts with the scene a couple of days earlier when arriving in Pristina from the north. The streets are barely navigable. As usual, swarms of children crowd the vehicle. "You Britannia, here Albania," yelps a 10-year old as he reveals his bucket and sponge to wash the car windscreen. If you don't produce a handful of dinars, you risk a bucket of dirty water through the window. If you don't respond in kind to the V-for-victory two-fingered salutes made to passing cars, you risk a stone through the window. Like West Belfast, like Nablus, Pristina, children are already seasoned veterans in the endless conflict.

It is a conflict that makes driving through Yugoslavia a risky business these days, and not just in Kosovo. Everything depends on your number plates. Such

are the levels of mutual loathing among the various peoples of this unravelling state that you need to choose judiciously when taking a car through the country.

Renting a car in Belgrade, it is advisable to avoid one with BG, which is a red rag to the Albanian bulls of Kosovo and makes you a sitting target in the event of trouble.

Much better to get a car with the LJ registration hailing from Ljubljana in Slovenia, the ally of the Albanians in the fight with the Serbs. The trouble is that to get from Belgrade to Pristina with your LJ plates, you have to drive through most of Serbia, enduring at best menacing looks and verbal abuse. Don't get lost. If you ask a Serb the way, he is likely to point you in the wrong direction out of spite. And don't ask for Pristina in any case. You'll be lucky to get a civil answer.

Much better, when coming off the Belgrade-Skopje motorway at Nis, to ask for Prokuplje, the last Serbian town before entering Kosovo. On the outskirts of Prokuplje, a dusty provincial centre with a few crumbling, nineteenth century municipal buildings that evoke images of Gogol's or Chekhov's small-town Russia, are quartered the tanks and armoured personnel carriers of the Serbian paramilitary police and Serb-dominated Yugoslav army units poised to sweep into Kosovo at the first hint of unrest.

A couple of patrol cars sit in a poorly-signposted pedestrian area off the main street in the town, eager to pounce on errant motorists. If you're Albanian and from Kosovo, reckon on a half-hour delay and a hefty fine. If you're from Belgrade, reckon on being politely redirected.

Checking in at the sadly-misnamed Grand Hotel in Pristina has never been so problematic. Even when the Serbian police were shooting rebellious Albanians and the international press corps had descended on the province, there was always plenty of room at the Grand. No longer. The 400-room hotel is full to bursting with burly, middle-aged men bussed in from Serbia to take over the running of the province from sacked Albanians. Doctors, engineers, managers, administrators are following the call of the

Belgrade propaganda machine and moving down here either temporarily, to seek to blunt the impact of the strike, or more permanently, to run Kosovo's barely functioning economy.

Albanians previously in prominent positions in the hotel have been demoted. A contingent of 100 Serbs from Nis arrives on Sunday night to keep the post and telecommunications running the next day. "Kosovo is Kuwait, Serbia is Iraq" mutters an Albanian waiter as he glumly watches the newcomers arrive.

Round behind the Grand, past the headquarters for the weapons, down the steps through the underpass, and across the road opposite the offices of Rilindija, the Albanian language daily newspaper that has been closed down for "subversive activities", is the Elida—a little cafe and ice-cream parlour in the midst of Pristina's modest concrete shopping mall. It's the best place to be these days to find out what's going on. Breakfast at the Grand is unappetising, even more so when surrounded by tables full of mobilised beefy Serbs tucking into plates piled high with cold fried eggs, cabbage salad, pickles and bread with rancid butter. Breakfast of strong Turkish coffee, sticky *baclava* and home-made lemonade at the Elida, is followed by the waiter refusing any payment. "Kosovo is paradise, everything is gratis," he says with heavy irony.

In July, Albanian politicians locked out of the Kosovo parliament sat on the building's steps and adopted a declaration splitting Kosovo from Serbia and demanding its independent status within Yugoslavia's federal framework. The Serbs responded by dissolving the parliament, firing the provincial government, embarking on yet another round of sackings and jailings, and muzzling the Albanian media.

The offices of the openly active but strictly illegal Albanian political organisations and free trade unions were also closed down. These have since been re-opened after Serbia had bugging devices installed, say the Albanians.

The Elida has become the alternative gathering place

for the opinion formers of Kosovo—the nerve centre of the insurgency. From early in the morning until late in the evening, the tables are packed. Groups of journalists, trade unionists, university lecturers, student leaders, budding politicians huddle into conspiratorial groups. At one table leaders of a recently constituted free trade union of journalists plot tactics. At another sit leaders of the Democratic League of Kosovo, the mass illegal political organisation that claims 700,000 members against the 15,000 and dwindling membership of the nationally ruling Communist Party that has just metamorphosed into the Socialist Party.

In addition to the closure of the daily *Ruilindija*, Albanian language broadcasting has been indefinitely suspended. The journalists have nowhere else to go. But *Jedinatvo*, the local Serbian rag, carries on every day with its diet of threats, character assassination and vilification of the Albanians as separatists, terrorists, chauvinists and Islamic fundamentalists. Self-fulfilling prophecies, it seems, if Belgrade continues long enough with the repression.

I am joined at the Elida by Bujart Bukoshi, eager to tell his latest tale of repression. On the presidency of the Democratic League, Bukoshi is also a urologist who has worked at the surgery clinic at Pristina University for the past 18 years. No longer. The security forces marched into the clinic on August 15, took over the clinic and two others nearby, sacked the Albanian directors, brought in new Serbian directors and marched some of the doctors away in handcuffs. As patients looked on weeping, says Bukoshi, some 30 directors were removed from the premises after refusing to sign loyalty pledges to Serbia: "The occupation regime replaced the entire staff and structures." He says the daily average of 40-50 operations has been reduced to around three. The locals are frightened to go near the place for treatment. The medical teaching and working institutions and the various associated clinics at the university are the centre of medicine for all of Kosovo and enjoyed a good reputation.

In an attempt to check Bukoshi's story, I go to the clinic a few days later. Only Serbian staff are encountered inside, all of whom are unhelpful and rude. There is no one available to speak to. The roster list of doctors on duty carries only Serbian-sounding names. Outside the clinic, Albanian doctors still working and refusing not to work huddle together and complain of the new regime and how there is absolutely no communication between both sides of the ethnic divide except for the orders given by the Serbs.

A couple of colleagues go along the next day and also fail to see anyone except the Serbian police who detain them for a couple of hours. A Dutch doctor with the Helsinki Human Rights Federation says that 300 health workers, including 37 doctors at the university clinics, have been sacked. The reasons given him by the authorities are "incompetence and lack of loyalty". "To fire so many doctors for whatever reason is dangerous for health care," he says. The Dutchman has an appointment the following day with the new director of the surgery clinic where he says he will endeavour to clarify the Albanian stories. In vain. The Dutchman never made his appointment. He and his three colleagues were picked up by the police in Prizren, held for five hours, then overnight in a hotel, and expelled from the country and barred for three years.

The story goes out on the international news wires, when it is promptly denied by the Serbian authorities although witnesses have seen the passport stamps making plain the three-year ban. A few days later, Belgrade goes back on its earlier assertion. Yes, they have been expelled. No, they can't come back.

As well as the takeover of the medical services, there are rumblings of harassment of church and charity workers. One of the four foreigners expelled was an Austrian doctor bearing gifts from the Catholic Caritas aid organisation.

Some 30 miles south of Pristina, 10 miles off the main road to Skopje, lies the tiny village of Binca. The roads, or mud tracks, are virtually impassable, certainly impassable in winter. Tiny old peasant men and women,

literally bent double, totter along, the men in black waistcoat and white *plis*, the traditional Albanian headgear of elongated skullcap made of compressed wool, the women in bright, baggy pantaloons that look as though they used to be curtains.

Like most of Kosovo, Binca resembles one large building site, with houses springing up everywhere (none of them ever seem to get finished), paid for by remittances from family members working legally or illegally in West Germany and Switzerland, for the huge families that are the result of Europe's biggest baby boom. The Albanians of Kosovo, as one sceptical friend has remarked, appear intent on copulating their way into power.

On the edge of the village lies a large stone-built Catholic church featuring a newish, garish mural detailing the tribulations of Kosovo's 70,000 strong Catholic community, notably under the Turks; pride of place among the primary colours goes to the world's best known Albanian, Mother Theresa. But these days it seems that Mother Theresa too is *persona non grata* in Mr Milosevic's Kosovo.

Amid the romping pigs and scavenging chickens in the yard sits a modest little convent hospital where a few nuns have been administering to the needs of the locals—regardless of nationality—for the last 30 years. Early one morning in August, Sisters Miroljuba, Dila, Mirjana and Sofia had a rude awakening. Into this bucolic haven came the Serbian police, demanding to be shown their patients and their medical stocks. Sister Mirjana had never known anything like it in her 23 years in Binca. "They said we were treating the separatists. But we don't choose who we treat. Anyone who wants to come can come."

The police insisted on seeing the 150 patients, mostly children, in the nun's care that August morning, but were persuaded against this. They seized 2,000 disposable syringes and other supplies delivered from Zagreb in western Yugoslavia and from Skopje in the neighbouring republic of Macedonia. The post office in the nearby town

of Vitina has been told to return the medical packages arriving for the sisters. The pharmaceuticals enterprise in Skopje that supplied the nunnery has also been told not to do so, claimed Sister Miroljuba.

"We are in trouble because many people come here. They depend on us and we cannot get any medicines any more. The police just want to hinder us helping our people. There is no freedom." Most of the children being treated in Binca were there because of a 'poisoning' epidemic that struck Kosovo in March, with Albanian children fainting, vomiting and complaining of various sicknesses. The epidemic was never satisfactorily explained. Children are still coming to the Sisters of Binca for treatment.

This is what the Serbian police apparently could not abide. Dr Cohen, the Dutchman who was expelled, had been investigating the mystery illness and said he had seen police turning away patients from the clinics. "Even if someone is malingering, he still has a right to see a doctor."

The nuns, for their part, were accused by the Serbian press and the police of poisoning the children. So was Father Dode Giergji, secretary of the Mother Theresa charity in Pristina. Father Giergji lives 10 miles distant from Binca in the town of Urosevac, the seat of Bishop Nik Prela, the sole Catholic bishop in Kosovo.

At 5.30 in the morning, the very same hour of the very same August day that the police entered the Binca yard, 20 security men armed with automatic weapons and a bevy of plainclothes officers descended on Urosevac church. As the Bishop's seat, Urosevac is the focal point of the Church's charity effort in Kosovo. Medical supplies, food, clothes and other charity goods are stockpiled here before being distributed to the parishes, including the Binca convent.

The police seized everything. "Sisters in Vienna and Lucerne had sent medicines. We had also bought medicines in Pristina and Skopje. They took everything," said Father Dode, a young Albanian. "Because of the poisoning, they had to find someone responsible. The police were hindering

the treatment of children in the hospitals, that's why they came to us. Earlier we had improvised a small hospital with 25 beds; they blamed the Church for wanting to help. Now they say we are helping the Separatists and the terrorists."

In both Binca and Urosevac, the police demanded to see customs papers and receipts for the medicines. In both cases they said the supplies would be returned. They have not been. In both cases, though requested, the police failed to produce search warrants. The sisters of Binca and the priests of Urosevac have been called repeatedly to the police to answer questions. These days, charity deliveries from foreign aid organisations are checked by the police, says Father Dode. The week that I was there, a lorry-load of clothes collected by the Albanian community in Kumanovo in neighbouring Macedonia was seized by the police and prevented from delivery to the Mother Theresa offices in Pristina. "If we want to distribute anything here now, we have to do it quietly, because the police will prevent it, even bread to the hungry," says Father Dode.

Back among the eternally coffee-sipping devotees of the Elida it was time to talk to the Albanian leadership. Not too long ago, that was a problem here as the Serbian rulers stamped on the remotest sign of political organisation and the leaders remained strictly underground. That has changed. The Albanian community is organised and disciplined as never before. Its leadership is almost exclusively literary and intellectual for the simple reason that in the past the only channel for political activity was the despised Communist Party and its controlled networks of trade unions and other social organisations. The legitimate leaders of Kosovo Albanians turned rather to 'Albanology', writing, journalism and scholarship rather than to conventional politics.

But now these intellectuals have little time for literary pursuits, consumed as they are in the political struggle. Men like Ibrahim Rugova, the literary critic who is head of the Democratic League, or Rexhep Qosja, a writer and teacher at the university's Institute of Albanology, or

Adem Demaci, a novelist and poet in his youth who only returned to his native town of Pristina last April after a total of 28 years in jail for his political activities.

Demaci lives deep in the crumbling ghetto behind one of the high concrete walls that surround the homes of the Muslim Albanians. Once through the gate in the wall, it is a surprise to find a shiny new and spacious house. By the standards of the surroundings, this is a palace fit for a prince. But then Demaci is a prince to his people. The locals built the house themselves to welcome him home in April. Sprightly, diminutive, combative and irrepressible, Demaci is known as Kosovo's Nelson Mandela and they treat him accordingly. "I don't consider I was imprisoned. I was doing my duty. But I served my duty in a bad place, with crazy people."

It is more than 30 years since the budding novelist turned political activist was put away, shortly after the publication of his first and only novel, *'Snakes of Blood'*.

In November 1958 at the age of 22 he started a three-year term for 'subversive activities'. This was followed in June 1964 by a 10-year term for organising the 'Revolutionary Organisation of Albanians' which he freely admits aimed at separating Kosovo from Yugoslavia and merging it with Albania proper. Under the law, he concedes with a broad grin, he was guilty. No doubt about it.

But the third and longest sentence of 15 years in October 1975, he insists, was the result of a show trial when a group of 19 Albanian 'irredentists' got terms ranging from three to 15 years. "I only knew three or four of them and had nothing to do with their activities."

Only a mouthful of steel-capped teeth and large eyes behind thick glasses betray any hint of ill health from his decades in jail. He bristles with indignation at the idea, stressing that he abjures alcohol, coffee and tobacco. In 28 years he saw a prison doctor three times for minor complaints. There was no torture or physical abuse, he says, though the conditions were "terrible."

His saddest prison experience occurred in 1965.

Allowed half-hour family visits once every month, for many years these conversations had to be conducted in Serbo-Croat and not Albanian. "On November 28 my mother and sister turned back because they did not want to talk Serbo-Croat. After that my mother died of grief because she could not see her son."

Twenty-eight years away have mellowed the 54-year old's radicalism and views of how to resolve the intractable Kosovo problem. He now espouses 'Yugoslavism' and denies that he would like to see a 'Greater Albania'. But if his views are more moderate these days, the predicament of his countrymen is much graver than during his underground heyday:

"The situation is very dramatic. Kosovo has now become one big jail. The biggest jail in the world. The parasites are doing their best to stay in power, to destroy their own people and our people. The economy in Serbia is catastrophic, but they are spending billions on the police and the army in Kosovo to make us second-class citizens. They've suspended our government and parliament, all the firms that worked well are being run by police agents. All Albanian managers are being sacked and replaced by Serbs. Albanian doctors and nurses are being sent out of the clinics and new ones brought in from Serbia. So the clinics have no patients. A clinic with room for 600 patients has 15 or 20. It is absurd."

The redeeming aspect of the current crisis is, he contends, that whereas he operated in the underground, these days the Albanian resistance to the Milosevic regime is united, disciplined, organised and out in the open.

As a writer of early promise who did not get the chance to develop his potential, he views himself as 'Hegelian', not a socialist, but a dialectician: "I see things constantly developing so that there will be a way out of this model of terror. I was in favour of seceding and going to mother Albania. Now I've changed my mind. I want to stay and be equal in Yugoslavia. I'm convinced that in the future the borders will disappear anyway. That's why we don't

have to call for a change of borders."

Demaci's novel was written at the age of 20. It is no masterpiece, but these days he has other cause for novelistic satisfaction. The main theme of *'Snakes of Blood'* was a plea for an end to *gjakmarrja*, the merciless practice of blood feuding and vengeance between families that has plagued Albanian life for centuries. It is only during the past five months of freedom since his release in April and decades after the novel's publication that the plea has been heeded in the rites of reconciliation that a Pristina professor has been arranging across Kosovo, 95 such ceremonies in a few months. The Albanians of Kosovo are united as seldom before. They have an enemy much bigger than themselves. "This process is dying out. After 32 years I've seen the time when blood revenge will be stopped. Forgiveness takes much more courage," says Demaci.

The novel was written while he was a student of world literature in Belgrade and it was this that brought him to the attention of the Yugoslav authorities. "He is not a great writer from the aesthetic point of view," says Mustapha Xhemail, the redundant literary editor of *Rilindija*. "But he is important because that was the first Albanian-language novel. It was very ambitious and given the situation here, publishing a novel at the age of 20 was very bold. It is no accident that they sacrificed his life to inspire fear among other Albanian intellectuals."

The acknowledged leader of the Kosovo Albanians, head of the Democratic League, is another intellectual certainly not inspired by fear, Ibrahim Rugova. His home is no Kosovo version of a princely palace, but on the seventh floor of a decrepit tower block. There's little point in having the address as there are no street signs. But everyone knows where he lives. The taxi driver ferries you straight there and refuses payment. As they say: "Kosovo is paradise, everything is gratis."

Outside, the light is blinding, the heat blistering. It is almost noon. A couple of kids play on the concrete with broken chairlegs and a makeshift ball. Inside the tower

block, it is pitch black and stinking. The ground floor is strewn with household rubbish which you'll probably stumble into. The lift looks suspicious, an invitation to trouble. There is no light in it, either. A cigarette lighter illuminates the right button and the lift creaks and shuffles its perilous way up to Rugova's flat.

Visiting these people is like revisiting pre-1989 Eastern Europe. The good old bad old days of Bolsheviks and dissidents have largely disappeared everywhere else. Furtive rebels no longer play hide-and-seek with the secret police. They're too busy coping with the rigours of government. But the police state is alive and well in Pristina, which is of little comfort for the victims and a guilt-tinged source of pleasure for nostalgia-minded Western journalists.

Rugova takes it for granted that his phone and offices are bugged. Phone connections are a regular problem. But it is not absolutely clear whether this is a result of the rickety system, or whether more sinister reasons prevail. In any case, attempts for one hour solid to reach Pristina from Belgrade the previous week failed totally. But the Serbian Interior Minister did answer three times.

Despite the omnipresent squalor in the streets, the interiors of the Albanians' homes in Pristina are generally models of modest cleanliness and always very hospitable. Rugova's home is no exception. Seated, the thin and tousle-haired 45-year old appears small and frail. Upright, he is surprisingly bigger, unprepossessing, chain-smoking, with an impish sense of humour and air of romance engendered by the presence of a thin, silk scarf permanently slung around his neck.

"The strikes are a form of passive resistance," he says in his halting French, stressing that his organisation "still" wants to pursue political means and dialogue with the Serbs, but that there is no one to talk to. Milosevic, he says, is intent on provoking a civil war over Kosovo.

"We believed at the start that we would have talks

with the Serbian opposition," says Rugova. "But where Kosovo is concerned, the Communists and the opposition are together. It is a combination of Communism, nationalism and neo-Stalinism. It is possible that things will get more radical here. I am against this because if there is a real conflict, we will lose too much. But the Serbian authorities have lost their nerve."

Like Demaci, Rugova insists that he has no ambition to see a 'Greater Albania' and would prefer Yugoslavia to stick together as a democracy. And despite the Belgrade press's constant accusations of separatism, Kosovo is the only place nowadays that still reveres the memory of Josip Broz Tito, the Communist architect of the post-war state. It is difficult to find one among the dozens of little greengrocers, coffee houses, tailors and cobblers in Pristina that does not have a portrait of the late marshal looking down on his customers.

Nonetheless, time is running out and there is a keen interest in the fate of Albania proper across the border, where Europe's most isolated Communist fastness has embarked on a slow opening and relaxation. The Serbian medievalist rhetoric about their history, 'specialness' and entitlement to Kosovo is increasingly matched by Albanian myths about their 'Illyrian heritage', and special and crucial place and role in Europe.

One of the reasons slowing the democratisation of Albania is the lack of an indigenous and experienced opposition in the East European dissident tradition. This is partly explained by the fact that almost the entire alternative intellectual Albanian elite is in Kosovo. Sooner or later, it seems almost inevitable, the likes of Rugova and Demaci will be running this place, not to mention the affairs of their kith and kin across the border in Albania. But probably not from the seventh floor of a smelly Pristina tower block.