

Kosovo 1 (July 1999)

War kills. That is all it does.

—*Michael Walzer*



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Dear friends,

I have been back for two weeks. I do not know how to answer the questions about my time in Albania and Kosovo—as if I hadn't been there or had not returned yet.

The experiences are present, the images, the smell, the sound—everything is clear and yet it is impossible to transform it into an adequate and intelligible narrative of horror.

We wish to believe that we are able to defuse threats by giving them a name. Rumpelstiltskin loses his power when we guess his name. But sometimes Rumpelstiltskin rages even when we know what he is called. Sometimes words cannot banish, and their failure only increases our sorrow.

Maybe I simply don't know where to start.

There: in the refugee camps where the deportees were stuck, the men silently sitting on the field, smoking, covered under colored woolen blankets, the women bent over plastic buckets, washing the only clothes they had; there: on the fields where the corpses were decaying in the sun, in the hospitals with this inimitable smell of disinfection and death; there: on the overflowing marketplaces, in the devastated mosques—there we all had the same horizon of experience. We were all stuck in this world of pain and destruction. Within this context, all these horrifying scenes

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made “sense.” Of course, it all seemed unreal, and yet it was simultaneously too real for us to permanently call it into question. Our conversations and gestures were embedded in this context. It was a life within the same radius of violence.

Only now, back in Berlin, now when I am about to talk about this time, does its absurdity strike me.

In retrospect I can say: the experiences there are somehow separated from your reality here like the paste that I used to cut out with a biscuit-form on the cake tin at my grandmother’s when I was a child.

Maybe that is why journalists are considered disturbed cynics: because the reality that they describe is so disturbed.

That is the burden of the witness: to remain with a feeling of failure, of emptiness because even the most accurate account does not grasp the bleakness of war.

The Task

We were in Tirana when the peace agreement was signed and the Serbian delegation agreed to pull out of Kosovo within forty-eight hours after the settlement and to withdraw to what was left of the Yugoslav republic. The air bombardment of the NATO alliance had lasted seventy-eight days, during which they flew attacks against government buildings in Belgrade, against positions of the

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Serbian army in Kosovo—but also against civilian targets: bridges, factories, power stations, the television station of Belgrade, and various refugee treks, “collateral damage” as the propaganda unit in Brussels would call it.

At the end of the war, we could travel together with the ground troops that had been inactive so far and the thousands of Albanian Kosovar refugees returning to Kosovo—and write from there.

Our team in Kosovo included our Albanian driver Kujtim Bilali; his nephew and our translator, Noni Hoxha; Joanne Mariner, of Human Rights Watch from New York, whom we had met in the refugee camps in Albania; the photographer Sebastian Bolesch; and me.

We remained two more weeks in war-torn Kosovo and traveled throughout the entire region. We saw young men—who had been hiding out of fear of the Serbian militia—returning from the mountains and dirty cellars. We saw famished Albanian Kosovar prisoners with sunken eyes tied together on a truck. They were supposed to be kidnapped to Serbia and had been forgotten. We saw how the Albanian Kosovars celebrated the end of the repression. We saw everywhere how the Serbian units had raged: the burned-down farmhouses, the demolished minarets of village mosques, the mutilated corpses where the Serbian myrmidons hadn’t had time to erase the traces of their deeds and to bury their victims. We saw the Serbian troops during their withdrawal, drunk from stolen booze. But we also saw Serbian civilians fleeing out of fear of revenge. We also saw the neighborhoods of the Roma standing in flames.

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Death and Destruction

Since my return, people ask me: “How do you cope with what you witnessed?” “How do you digest all the experiences?”

The answer is: you don’t.

There are certain impressions you cannot “digest.”

The sight of a seventeen-year-old girl in the hospital of Prizren in Kosovo. She had been shot by a sniper the day before the allied forces entered Kosovo. She had a brain injury and urgently needed to be transferred to the hospital in Prishtina. That night she had stayed in a room with five badly injured men: Serbs, Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters, and Albanians, the enemies of the war crammed together into one overheated room. You could hear her breathe. She would probably die within the next five hours because the hospital could not transfer her to Prishtina—the Serbian troops had stolen the only ambulance for their flight at the end of the war.

The sight of a charred back of a dead Catholic Albanian Kosovar between hundreds of books in his house in Koronica. The muscles in the shrunken body were still recognizable—it looked like one of those charts from biology class where all muscles of the human body are schematically displayed. Except the man in Koronica was brown-black; his burned flesh was porous and looked hairy like scratchy fur. Arms and legs were missing. Maybe they had been cut off, maybe they were burned completely, maybe it had been the dogs.

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The Homeric heroes in the *Iliad* fear death less than the thought of being left unburied—outside the city walls—at the mercy of stray dogs. It always seemed rather strange to me that a living person would worry about his corpse being tattered by dogs. I could not imagine a world in which dogs would run around with human limbs in their mouths.

It was the brother of the dead man who brought us to this package of withered flesh. He walked from one room to the other, in a destroyed house, and talked as if it were still intact, as if that bundle on the floor still had anything in common with the human being he grew up with.

And one does not digest: the sight of corpses without heads, of cut-off body parts, contorted bodies that had been pulled behind a truck for miles (also reminiscent of Homer); the sight of bloated or burned corpses, some two months old, one week, one day.

There is this one image I cannot forget: the foot of a male body that we found in a ravine on a field near Meja. I still remember those two inches between the black leather shoe on his right foot and the blue cotton trouser, a peasant uniform such as I would see so often in the following weeks when looking at dead civilians. The corpse had been lying there, apparently, since April. In the meantime it had rained, and it had been as hot as it can be in a Yugoslav summer. One particular part of the image haunts me, a small detail: those two inches between the tied shoe and the hem of the trouser. Without the clothes that proved that this had once been a man, there were only two inches of dead, living flesh. Nothing else.

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And there was this sound, very quiet, first unnoticed, and then so penetrating in its repulsiveness that no taboo, no shame, could repress my hearing it: parasites were eating the rest of a human being.

I cannot forget the ten-year-old girl in Gjakova who stood in front of the burned-out ruins of her former house and could not say two complete, intelligible sentences. She spoke without pause as if her speech were making sense, she did not stutter, did not hesitate; she formed one incoherent sentence after another. Finally, we understood that in this house her father, her brother, her aunt, and two cousins had been killed. Her uncle and her two other brothers had been arrested by Serbian units and deported the day before NATO troops—the Kosovo Force (KFOR)—arrived.

She told us that her father had fallen off the roof celebrating the long-awaited NATO intervention. He had broken his leg and could not move when the Serbian soldiers arrived at their house. They had told the girl and her mother to leave the house—and killed everyone else in it.

I cannot forget how she stood there in her pink shirt, in front of her former living room wall, slightly oblique because there was no flat floor anymore. And I cannot forget that she could not speak properly, and that she occasionally only stared at us and then continued to speak. And that she did not seem upset at all.

She was quiet and calm and only every now and then did she seem irritated—when she realized that she did not know the trick anymore, that trick that someone had taught her, years ago, in another time: how to form sentences

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and make sense to others. Then she paused and suddenly felt like a stranger to herself, and then she seemed to tell herself that these words that came out of her mouth were unintelligible.

We were disadvantaged in comparison to other journalists who witnessed these images of death and destruction. Many reporters arrived in Albania or Macedonia only when the peace agreement was signed. But we had already been acquainted with the terrible events. We had been writing since April on the refugees and their fate, we had been listening to them: how their sons and husbands had been killed, what they had done before the crisis began, where they used to live, how they were expelled, how many hours they had walked till they had reached the border, when they had last seen their brother, where they were standing when a Serbian officer pulled a woman out of the throng of refugees, how they had been hiding in a barn.

At the end of the war, when we entered Kosovo, we knew exactly where to go and what to expect there. We had a map of killing in our minds—even before we arrived at the sites of the massacres.

But that meant that we could not relate to those tormented bodies as neutral bystanders toward anonymous corpses. After weeks of interviewing survivors in the camps in Albania, photographer Sebastian Bolesch and I knew the story of many of the dead; we knew whether their wives or children had survived on the other side of the border.

It also meant that we could imagine the corpses before us as fathers and brothers, as peasants or writers. We could

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imagine their previous lives, and sometimes we knew their relatives in Albania.

Impossible to gain distance.

But it was also conciliatory: to remember the real person, the living father or brother or cousin or neighbor; to ask for their story and narrate it; to recreate in writing a world that was supposed to be destroyed; to give each of these stinking, faceless bodies a name again and not to turn one's back.

Traces 1

The Serbian troops have pulled out the night before, and NATO units pass through the abandoned Serbian checkpoint at the border. The track vehicles raise dust and immerse the scene in a gray and yellow cloud.

The impatient Albanian victors cannot hold back their joy and longing to return faster than the convoy of army vehicles. Thousands are waiting with their cars and tractors on the side of the road, watching how the caravan of Western friends slowly winds up the pass to Molina, and then through the eye of the needle at the old checkpoint. Hundreds are queuing behind fences, behind the barbed wire, and the excitement pushes them farther and farther off the asphalt road. There are small welcome presents that the Serbian losers have left on each side of the border for the Albanian refugees. But the summer is a helpful friend, and so the hidden death is visible because the gray or green of the landmines is easy to distinguish from the dried-out grass.

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Some Albanian Kosovars are dancing in the small offices of the checkpoint. What used to be the victims' repressed fear now bursts out: windows are soon destroyed. The men's silent impotence is now discharged in the joy of power, the joy of being able to destroy. Chairs are thrown, tables destroyed. A howling mob, celebrating the victory and mourning its price. Furious about the humiliation, now that it's over.

Anger is a luxury one can afford only in liberty.

Nobody in the joyful crowd pays attention to the pile of metal sheet in a corner next to the checkpoint: there are license plates, covered with dust, lying amidst broken glass. Hundreds of old car plates, ripped off the vehicles. It wasn't enough to pull Albanian women and their children from their farms and houses, it wasn't enough to steal all their belongings, rings, jewelry, and whatever cash they had left. No, at the last checkpoint, right before expelling them into a foreign country, the Serbian police officers completed their task and robbed them of the last proof that these people had ever lived in the province of Kosovo. They confiscated passports, driver's licenses, property documents—anything the Albanians had carried on their deportation.

This strategy was more than just symbolic violence. What happened in this repetitive scene at the border was not just a simple demonstration of power or humiliation of the defenseless victims. Whether the soldiers at the checkpoint acted on order of the chain of command, I cannot know. But the action was systematic enough to understand the intention behind it: never should the

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refugees be allowed or enabled to claim a right to return. They were not supposed to keep any proof of their belonging to Kosovo.

There is reasonable doubt concerning the discourse of genocide in Kosovo, but the coordinated separation of an entire segment of the population, the apartheid measures that increasingly excluded ethnic Albanians from access to universities, schools, and work; the collective deportations that human rights groups had documented long before the NATO bombardment; and finally the mass exodus and the destructions and killings since March—all of these had a systematic character and aimed at the eradication of all traces of an ethnic identity.

Traces 2

“The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. When I see the blood I shall pass over you, and you will escape the destructive plague” (Exodus 12:13–14).

The bloody sign at the doors of Christian Orthodox Serbs was mostly of black paint, painted or sprayed. Six times they had to start in order to finish the writing on the wall, two crossing lines and four half-circles (the letter *c*, in Cyrillic *s*) in the corners: the Serbian cross with its four Ss, *Samo Sloga Spasi Srbiju* (“Only unity saves Serbia”), was supposed to help them escape the plague.

That is the archetypal symbolism that indicates inclusion and exclusion, the protection of one’s own people and the extradition of the others. Whether it is the blood

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on the doorframe, the writing on the wall, or the word *Shibboleth* that locals can pronounce but strangers cannot—numerous are the biblical stories and the historic accounts of the rescue of those who could declare themselves as members, and the banishment of those who could not read the signs. Religions and cultures do not differ in this respect.

But in the horror of this war, it was those small cowardly signs on the walls of Serbian houses that I found most disgusting.

While their ethnic Albanian neighbors were fleeing in thousands, while Serbian militia expelled mothers and children like cattle from their houses, while Albanian men were deported, kidnapped, or shot—there were some Serbian civilians who didn't have anything better to do than to mark their houses with the Serbian cross?

Nowadays the term *barbarity* is used to describe a particularly appalling archaic form of murder—a dubious usage, as if not all murders were “barbaric.” As if the technical features of contemporary killing were a moral achievement, as if the weapons of mass destruction of the first world were somehow more civilized than the machetes of the Hutu in Rwanda.

But all those who deny the moral foundations of common belonging are barbaric. So it is not only the burning of entire streets, not only the shooting of the handcuffed Albanian, that indicates the barbaric, but all those tiny little actions and gestures that separate and exclude the neighbor.

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Small and Big Gestures of Resistance

On my eighteenth birthday a friend and mentor of mine wrote a piece of advice on a tiny white business card, which she passed to me across the table of the restaurant where we were celebrating. She wrote: “What matters in life? To show dignified behavior under circumstances that suggest the opposite.”

It is not always great deeds—as books and films want to make us believe—that make a difference in times of war. Sometimes it is small gestures.

W. E. Sebald writes in his controversial book on aerial bombardment and literature about a woman who stood amidst the ruins after an air raid, cleaning the windows of her intact house. Primo Levi talks about his Hungarian comrade in Auschwitz who urged Levi to wash himself against all odds. What seems like a lack of moral sensibility, what seems like a cynical dullness against all the pain and sorrow around, is sometimes merely a struggle for remnants of ethical or just aesthetic standards of a former life.

Sometimes human beings rescue themselves through their affection for another for whom they have to care, sometimes through their anger. Sometimes it is an ability, a habitus, that helps one to face the extreme; sometimes it is a metaphysical attitude, a belief in another world, that blunts some of the power of reality.

Here are some who showed dignified behavior under circumstances that suggest the opposite.

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Kujtim

Kujtim was my driver and he is my friend. I met Kujtim on my first trip to Albania in April. My colleague Klaus and I had traveled from Skopje, Macedonia, to the Albanian border. We had crossed the border and hired a driver on the Albanian side and had asked him to drive us to the north, to Kukes. After hours and hours of driving through the mountains, on scary, winding, dusty roads, the driver suddenly stopped and got out of the car without explanation. We saw him standing in the road and waving to stop another car. When a gray Mercedes stopped, he spoke to the driver, returned to us and said that he couldn't continue driving, but this other car would take us to the north. Before we could say no, we found ourselves in a car that was already overloaded with people who didn't speak any language we could understand. We had no idea where we were, whether this driver was going to Kukes at all, and since it had turned dark by then, even the direction we were driving. Every half hour, the car stopped, and one of the girls who were now squeezed in between an old man and the driver jumped out of the car and vomited.

After about six hours of driving, we arrived in a town. The driver stopped in front of a bar, told us to go in and wait, and returned ten minutes later with a young boy, who spoke fluent English.

It was Noni, the driver's nephew. Kujtim asked his nephew to translate the following: "I don't know who you are, but you are foreigners. Your driver was a jerk, an unbelievable bastard who dropped you in the middle of the

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night in a country you didn't know. But the two of you were in my car and you were talking and you were laughing all the time. Anybody else would have been scared to death. You have young and pure souls! I like you! I have arranged a place for you to stay, and I will invite you for dinner and then we can talk about what I can do for you." Kujtim became our driver for two weeks that first time. I wouldn't say that he saved my life—but he made me feel safe in each dangerous situation ever since . . . and there were some.

When I returned this time, I knew I didn't want to have anyone but him as my driver. It took me a half hour in Kukes to find someone who knew him, and ten minutes later he showed up. A half hour later, he had quit his job and asked me what we would do. I asked him if he wanted to travel with me into Kosovo, and he agreed right away. Noni would serve as our translator.

Kujtim was the best dancer in Albania and would loudly sing along with traditional Albanian and Kosovar sad resistance folk songs on his tape recorder. He had been hosting eleven refugees, complete strangers to his family, in his apartment since the beginning of the crisis, and had taken those three people in his car (the first time we met him) from Kukes to Tirana (a ten-hour drive) so that they could try to find relatives in the other camps (the vomiting of the girl that first night wasn't due to the winding roads, but to trauma).

When we arrived later in Kosovo, in Prizren, for the first two days the Serbs were still in town. On the second day, the Serbs left in a huge convoy. That night, Joanne

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Mariner noticed that about one hundred families had missed the chance to leave in the convoy and were now hiding in the Orthodox church in the center of Prizren. Joanne came to me and said that they were civilians, families, who were scared to death that the Albanians were going to take revenge and kill them all. Kujtim was listening without understanding more than that Joanne was upset. I told Noni, who then translated to Kujtim.

We are talking about the second day of the liberation. We are talking about the end of the first day on which we had seen what the Serbs had done to the people and their homes. We are talking about the end of the first day that we smelled the stench of death.

Kujtim said: "O.K. What are we going to do about those Serbs? We have to help. They are the same as all the other refugees who are hiding in my home back in Kukes."

Emine

I met Emine in the heat of a summer afternoon in the women's tent in the camp Piscina in Tirana, Albania, eight days before the war was over. She was forty-six, a former lawyer who was denied the right to work by the Serbian government about seven years ago and has had no legal job since then. Emine fled her home town of Mitrovica two months ago. She had friends in Tirana who offered to let her to stay with them in their flat, but she refused. She didn't want to have the comfort all to herself and would

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rather stay with all the others in the dirty, hot tents of the camp, facing the heat, the nightmares about the past, the fears for the future, and the snakes in the tents. She had volunteered to work for Medica Kosova, a project organized by the German nongovernmental organization Medica Mondiale, which takes care of raped women. Half of Emine's family was missing, disappeared for two months; she had lost her house, her belongings, her passport—but she smiled when she talked to me.

“We have won,” she said at a time when the war was still going on. “We have won, already now, we have won because we survived.”

When I asked her what she meant, she replied that it had been Milosevic's only goal to completely wipe out the whole Albanian population: the fact that there was one, one hundred, maybe thousands left was not enough, but it was enough to make her a proud victor over a racist ideology. “His ideology and his policies wanted me dead—but I'm alive. We have won!”

And then she went on to envision her life after the war, how she will return to her destroyed house, how they will start a new life: “We will start anew but we will never be the same again. We will never be the same, but we will start to talk with the Serbs again. We have to. We have to have survived for something better.”

Sefer

In the corner of Sefer's tent in the camp in Kukes, in northern Albania, sits an old man. He can't talk; he is

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mentally ill. His grandniece is jumping on his legs, but the old man doesn't seem to care. He doesn't because he is paralyzed. He owes his life to his nephew, Sefer. Sefer and his family had left their home town, Gjakova, when the Serbs forced them out and destroyed their house. They flew to Koronica, a small town west of Gjakova. When a Serbian officer from Koronica was shot by the KLA, Sefer and his family left Koronica as well—he feared the revenge of the Serbs. Since the old man was paralyzed, Sefer carried his uncle on his back all the way to Orise. On their way, the Serbs stopped them and forced Sefer to “throw down his uncle,” then they arrested Sefer and about two hundred other men and stuck them into a two-yard-deep ditch. “They wanted to bury us alive,” says Sefer. When some old men were released and let out of the ditch, Sefer managed to escape. He returned to the place where he had left his uncle, and continued to walk, with the old man on his back, in the direction of Meja. When he finally arrived at Meja, he saw the dead: two lines of bodies lying on the main road, all with their hands behind their heads, face down, all shot.

Sefer was a witness to the massacre of Meja where, according to Human Rights Watch, about three hundred refugees had been killed on the 27th of April. During the morning hours of the 27th, the Serbs rounded up the people between Junik and Gjakova and killed them on the main road and in a field next to the Meja road.

“If I hadn't had to carry him,” says Sefer, “I would have been in Meja a few hours earlier.”

In fact, it was the paralyzed old man who had saved Sefer's life—not the other way round.

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Witnesses and Testimonies

“Nobody testifies for the witness,” Paul Celan writes.

Writing on the war in Kosovo, the reporting from the refugee camps from across the borders was problematic.

We were not eyewitnesses, but rather were dependent on the testimony of others. The stories could not be verified through images or documents—only through independent testimony from other witnesses.

It was morally and politically delicate reporting since our stories about the war crimes did not rest within a local context, but we transported them into the public sphere of the international community. We did not work in a vacuum, but rather in a political-military conflict, and we reported, of necessity, from only one side. Although there was a correspondent who wrote from Belgrade and whose articles could challenge and oppose ours, nevertheless we covered the situation in Kosovo solely through the testimony of one party: the Albanian Kosovars.

During the first European war that was justified through the discourse of “humanitarian intervention” alone, our dispatches on the human rights violations against the Albanian Kosovars were appreciated by the belligerent parties of the NATO alliance. Especially among the German public, which traditionally opposed international missions of the Bundeswehr, Germany’s armed forces, such stories of the suffering of the ethnically persecuted Albanian Kosovars could be used as a moral trump card in the rhetorical battle for war.

The public relations machine in Brussels fabricated polarizing reports from early on: the murderous acts of the

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Serbs on the one side; the virtual, clean military actions by an air force that intervened only for humanitarian reasons on the other side.

Nevertheless, with all due caution toward the conditions and effects of our writing, with all due criticism of the NATO propaganda—the events in Kosovo could not be perceived ahistorically. The ethnic campaigns of Slobodan Milosevic had already destroyed Bosnia, UN troops had already failed in Srebrenica and allowed the massacre of about six thousand men, Sarajevo had been besieged, and the systematic deportations and human rights violations against Albanian Kosovars had been documented long before March 1999.

Should we now refrain from writing about the wounded refugees, the abused men and women that crossed the border in thousands into Albania? Were the war crimes we could reconstruct via the testimony of the victims not trustworthy—just because they were useful to NATO commanders?

We reported on the human rights violations committed by Serbian soldiers or militia—even though it served NATO. Just as we reported on human rights violations committed by Albanian Kosovar civilians or militia—even though those reports did not serve NATO.

When we were finally able to enter Kosovo, we were nervous.

The first town we saw, Prizren, was hardly destroyed.

Had we written false accounts? Had we been fooled by horror stories? Had we contributed with our reports to a war that was fought because of the suffering of refugees—and did their stories now turn out to be wrong?

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Well, Prizren was to be an exception.

Other villages were almost completely destroyed. The accounts of the refugees—no matter how traumatized or disturbed they may have sounded—turned out to be amazingly accurate. Not only the numbers they had suggested but also their descriptions had been so precise that we were able to reconstruct a number of the sites of war crimes: there was the railway track they had mentioned, there the river that the train crosses, a hundred yards farther on there is a cornfield, and then . . .

Absurd Normalcy

Nothing on these trips happens as planned. Research leads to nothing, scheduled interview partners never show up, you cannot find the place you are supposed to go to, the entrance to the refugee camp is closed, everything takes longer than expected. And it is never really one's own desert if something good or reasonable works out.

It is details and accidents that decide success or failure, sometimes whether you are harmed or unharmed. A car accident can save lives when you arrive late where it was dangerous before. It is strangers whose knowledge and generosity are indispensable. Whether they welcome us or whether we meet them in the first place is pure coincidence. Sometimes there is some resemblance between us and their lost children, sometimes there is simply the desire for a cigarette or a conversation, and suddenly it is there, this atmosphere, this opening. It is not in our hands.

You can plan what to read before departure, you can

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pack carefully. I am ready to admit that I am a particularly paranoid organization freak and that I take everything with me: from old and new maps of the region, Japanese mint oil, an edition of the Qur'an, and a compass to a reserve pair of extralong shoelaces.

But once on the road?

It is pure luck whom you encounter, whether you advance faster or slower. It is unconscious actions, coincidences, that gain particular importance in areas of war. If our stupid taxi driver hadn't kicked us out, we would never have met Kujtim Bilali. And without Kujtim, we would never have understood the story of Kosovo, we would never have taken so many risks, and without our trust in him, we probably would not have escaped unharmed as we did.

We—Kujtim, his nephew Noni, the photographer Sebastian, Joanne Mariner, Markus Matzel, another photographer, and I—lived together in the Thelande, a rather dubious hotel. The six of us lived together in one room with four beds—and a bunch of cockroaches. Soon I had adopted Fred, my personal cockroach. We got along quite well, particularly after I had taught him a few rules of living together. So after two days, he was so polite that he would leave the bathroom early in the morning when I wanted to go in. Unfortunately, I have to report that Fred had a tragic accident at the end of my bed one morning.

We didn't have any food those first days and hardly anything to drink but coffee and schnapps. Fortunately we had brought some food from Albania. Since our group was growing daily and since all the other journalists in this

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hotel were hungry as well, our supplies didn't last very long. But we had some wonderful picnics on the terrace of the hotel—tanks passing by every two minutes, making conversation impossible; KLA fighters passing by, celebrating the victory and the end of the war by shooting in the air; returning refugees on tractors passing by in front of us, while we were having dry bread and sardines and beer for breakfast.

Certain goods and abilities became highly desired or envied: whoever had been given a combat pack by the allied soldiers (who felt pity for us) was considered lucky: a combat pack is a survival kit that contains absolutely disgusting stuff, only slightly varying according to the nationality of the army (certainly the French combat pack had the best food, and rumor had it that the Italian one included condoms). The Germans, of course, had the worst: it contained crackers and three different sorts of disgraceful sausages in tubes and tins.

After one week of one massacre site after another, after one week of anticipation that each burnt house and each newly discovered crime site with tortured and murdered Albanian dead would only increase the tension between the remaining Serbs and the returning KLA fighters and refugees—after that first week of hardly any food or sleep, after dreamless nights and nightmare days, we all needed a break.

The war was over, but peace had not arrived yet—and we were simply exhausted.

We decided to organize a party.

Joanne and I went from each crowded and dirty room of the hotel to the next and invited people and said that

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we would provide music (which was a lie) and attractive women (which was at best an exaggeration) but they would have to bring the alcohol.

The key was James, a South African technician working for the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), who had a talent for making different technical parts and equipment look and sound like a CD player. We collected and brought all we had: *ABBA Greatest Hits*, *Dance of the 80s*, Talking Heads, Billy Joel, Louis Armstrong, the Cure . . . it was amazing what dreadful music journalists and barkeepers in Prizren and the cleaning women of our hotel were listening to. Kujtim somehow managed to organize bottles of whiskey, gin, and schnapps, and the BBC opened their secret emergency box and donated plenty of Guinness.

For once, we stopped talking about the dead and mines and started to talk about our lives “out there,” in this other world, so far away from Kosovo.

In itself, the idea of a party in this landscape of death and destruction probably seems macabre.

Bad movies and allegedly progressive media critics enjoy designing the image of the cynical war reporter: a macho guy, divorced or impotent, with his shirt wide open so that you can see his hairy chest. During the day, he (it is always a “he”) sits unshaven and bored in a café at exactly the moment a bomb explodes in the street in front of him. At night, he sits in the bar of his hotel drinking whisky (as if that were available in these regions), unmoved by the world around him, only keen on a “story.”

The truth is that it is hardly possible to spend more than five or six hours in the hotel—the other eighteen hours a

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day you are on the road. And you—yourself already a victim of these haunting images—you long for any form of cynicism that could protect you.

Everything exists at the same time in areas of violence: everyday life with its routines, its small ridiculous features, overcomes all shame. When war has become a companion of life, then normal hierarchies of sorrow wear off, the lines between normal and abnormal vanish.

When death and destruction are daily experiences, it does not become more acceptable. It is normal in a quantitative, not a qualitative sense.

You count on it.

But this expectation does not go along with moral acceptance. It is a habitual expectation—just as you walk around in winter with shoulders pulled up to your ears, against the cold, but you don't shiver any less.

Whereas the extreme paralyzes you in the beginning, whereas at first it blocks you completely, this cramp slowly disappears and you begin to search for the point of fracture, for the disruption of war. That's where you discover spaces and playgrounds that (out of context) seem absurd.

In Kukes, Albania, the town gravedigger had led us to an untreated piece of land that served as a cemetery. It was pouring rain and we were stumbling behind the man with his purple umbrella from one hole in the ground to the next. While he mumbled and complained about the war, about the nameless dead who were brought to him every day from the nearby hospital or directly from the frontier, about dying in exile and the lack of assistants, he maneuvered elegantly with his white shoes through the soaked earth around gigantic puddles and pointed to the deep,

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fresh graves that awaited new nourishment with open jaws. While we were walking through the clay mud, more and more red earth clustered together underneath our boots. Our steps became heavier and heavier, and we tried without much success, slightly disgusted, to get rid of the sludge. We trampled around between the graves, and we were overwhelmed equally by shame and anguish. The earth underneath our soles seemed to pull us downwards, and we hectically rubbed our boots against grass or stones—and suddenly we had to laugh. It was half-frantic, half-desperate laughter. The gravedigger and Kujtim turned toward us. Of course, there was absolutely nothing funny in this situation, everything was tragic, but nevertheless or because of that we had to laugh about its absurdity.

Roma

Already on the first day in Prizren it was predictable that the Roma would become the first victims of the new conflict in the new Kosovo.

When the first convoy with Serbian families left the city, a crowd had gathered on the pavement and threw stones at the refugees. About one hundred Albanian Kosovars were standing on the steps in front of the hotel, yelling at the trucks and cars filled with terrified Serbs. After about ten minutes, I finally understood what they were screaming: “Ci-ga-ne, Ci-ga-ne!”

In this outburst of sheer hatred, they chose the word *Gypsy* to taunt the Serbs. It seemed to them, apparently, the most evil insult that they could think of in their rage.

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From early on, everything indicated that the Roma would once again be the *homo sacer*, as Giorgio Agamben calls it, the figure that can be killed without punishment being meted out later.

In the eyes of the Albanian Kosovars, the role of the Roma destined them for acts of revenge.

Certainly, the Roma never were, either individually or collectively, in a politically dominant or even influential position. Certainly, they were socially much too marginalized themselves to participate in the discrimination of Albanian Kosovars. They had not given any pretext, any motive for this violence disguised as revenge.

But they had not been deported by the Serbs. They had been spared. That alone was considered “collaboration” by the Albanian refugees.

The eternal stigmatization and persecution of Sinti and Roma has always been a scandal of history. Kosovo, unfortunately, was not different from other regions of the world. But in addition to all the old harassment against the Roma, there was something else in Kosovo.

The Roma here had been forced by the Serbs to work as carriers of the dead. They were called when someone had died; they had to collect the corpses and bring them to the morgue. In times of war, the Roma were ordered from the graveyards to the massacre sites and asked to cover all traces, to bring the bodies to some clandestine place and bury them. The Roma lived in old-fashioned settlements, mostly on the fringes of cities or directly on the graveyards where they worked.

In the unconscious of the Albanian Kosovars, the Roma were associated with death—and were feared.

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. . .

We traveled to Kosovopolje in the north of Kosovo. Hundreds of Serbian families had withdrawn to this region. The atmosphere was extremely explosive, as is always the case immediately after the end of a war, a military coup, in this phase of transition, in which one side has lost privileges, influence, territory, and the sense of security and the other takes it all over.

There is never any “vacuum,” as this transition is often thoughtlessly called. Power does not simply pass into a vacuum, just as energy in the physical realm doesn’t get lost—it gets transferred.

The Serbian civilians were terrified, furious, helpless. They felt unjustly persecuted by the entire Western world, abandoned by their troops, which had withdrawn to the Republic of Yugoslavia, and they all were in that state of aggressiveness that is rooted in fear and impotence.

For security reasons, we left Kujtim and Noni in the car, because we did not want to provoke the Serbs with Albanian companions—and walked to a former schoolyard.

We discovered about two thousand Roma crowded together in old classrooms and in the yard. They had been expelled from their homes in the neighboring towns of Mitrovica, Podujewo, and Prishtina. They had been beaten out of their houses by returning Albanians, who had stolen their last few belongings. Now they were hiding in this school building without water or electricity. They didn’t know where to go because they knew that nobody wanted them.

One of them, Naim, an eighteen-year-old boy, told me in fluent German: “We understand that the Albanians are

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angry after all that was done to them. It was horrible. But why are they mad at us?”

Naim invited me to come inside the building with him. Sebastian with his camera should stay outside. Photographers were not wanted. Before I could coordinate with Sebastian, they pulled me inside.

The rooms were almost bursting—people were lying, sitting, standing on the floor, in the hall, in the former classrooms; there were sick and old, children and babies all lying on the cold floor. I was surrounded by a huge group that guided me, squeezed in the middle, always one hand holding mine. Old women came up to me and touched my forehead and nose as if to bless me, mothers came up and asked me for aspirin and told me of their hunger and their fear. They all talked at the same time, pushing and pulling at me, till one of them called for order again. I almost fainted because it was so hot in there and because there were so many pressing me, but there was always someone holding me from behind and Naim tried to shovel space for me to breathe.

They looked at me as if I were an alien and constantly thanked me for talking to them. I think they were touching me to find out if I was real, or maybe they were testing whether I would be scared.

It was as if they had been taught to think of themselves as leprous, and as if they were surprised that someone came who did not fear contamination, threat, or theft.

More disturbing than their living conditions was the judgment of themselves that I, in a double reflection of external perception and self-image, could read into their

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surprise. In mimetic assimilation, they had almost become what others had seen in them. They already anticipated our rejection of them and were amazed when someone did not see them in the distorted mirror of centuries-old prejudices. What shocked me wasn't, of course, their touch, but rather their learned fear that I would be scared of them.

Ethnic Conflict or Circle of Violence

Shortly afterward, we drove into the west of Kosovo, to Peja, the birthplace of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In its religious-political importance, Peja can probably be best compared with Rome's importance to Catholicism. If separation of Kosovo was to be the political solution for the conflict, then Peja *had* to be Serbian. For religious or political reasons, the fleeing Serbs could leave every city, every village in Kosovo—but not Peja. It was logical that Serbs seeking protection would assemble at this symbolically meaningful town. When we arrived there, hundreds had gathered inside the cathedral.

We walked inside and talked with them. The desperate Serbian Kosovars were sitting and standing in the yard, behind safe walls, and Orthodox sisters in black offered us mocha in tiny cups. We learned that a KLA commando had killed three Serbian civilians the previous day. The feared circle of violence.

We drove immediately to the neighborhood they had described to us, and found the small farm. The three

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dead men were still lying there. Each of them had been killed with a single shot right between the eyes. A precise execution.

Of all the dead that I saw, these were the most “intact” bodies, and yet the sight of one corpse in the first floor of the building was more disturbing than anything I had seen before. This man had still been alive twenty-four hours earlier, and now he was lying in his bedroom, on the floor, hands folded on his belly as if a priest had done his duty. There were photos on the wall next to his bed, and a framed diploma at the end of the bed. It was absolutely quiet in this room.

Suddenly, I was overcome by the shame of an intruder, as if that cold body on the floor were still alive: quite different than in the case of all those mutilated corpses, I suddenly felt confronted with a human, the house had not been burned down, everything seemed alive and inhabited. I had entered the private rooms of a stranger uninvited. Too late I realized that I had nothing to do at this scene—and ran out of the house.

When we were just walking out of the garden, back onto the road, five military vehicles arrived and the Metropolitan of Montenegro (who was substituting for the Patriarch of Peja) arrived together with two other priests. The Italian soldiers were securing the road and the little farmhouse, and within five minutes, three wooden tables had been placed in the center of the garden in front of the house, and the three dead men were brought outside and thrown onto the tables. Some Serbian neighbors dared to come out of their hiding places and the Metropolitan

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mixed the oil and the wine in a beer bottle and began his improvised ceremony. We were watching this scene from the edge of the garden when suddenly one of the priests came up to me and gave me one of those small honey-colored candles all the mourning neighbors were holding in their hands.

I hesitated.

For whom should I mourn? Who were these three men with the clotted blood on their foreheads? What crimes were they guilty of? Who had executed them? Why? Were these paramilitary fighters who had participated in massacres of Albanians? Or were they innocent civilians who had become victims of arbitrary Albanian violence?

Should I reject the candle?

The Italian soldiers stared at me just as the stricken Serbian faithful did.

Would I tolerate their earlier crimes if I accepted the candle, or would I tolerate their execution if I rejected it?

It was a religious funeral for three men who had been murdered and I was asked to hold a candle for the dead . . . and I took it.

Later we questioned witnesses, and what the differing accounts had in common were trivial facts: it had been at 5 PM the previous day when ten KLA fighters in uniforms had entered the farm and had killed the three immediately.

Everything else: the background, the meaning, the assessment of the deed—everything disappeared in the biased perspectives based on the ethnic identity of the witnesses. Guilt or innocence—everything dissolved in contradictory testimonies.

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The Albanian neighbors declared that the three dead had been paramilitaries who had participated in burning houses of Albanians. The KLA in their headquarters in Peja said that this neighborhood had been famous for paramilitaries and had participated in a massacre in which thirty people were killed. When I asked them about these three men in particular, they just replied that it had been the whole town that was notorious for those crimes.

The old Serbian neighbor said that she was sure that these were completely normal, innocent civilians who had never committed any crimes.

Maybe it was naive to think that after this ethnic rampage there could still be a multicultural life, that the former victims could distinguish between the ethnic policy from Belgrade, the systematic killing of the Serbian militia, and uninvolved Serbian civilians, that the crimes of the past had to be remembered but not revenged.

I don't know.

What's certain is that we experienced both during these weeks: the consequences of a politically constructed ethnic hatred and the birth of a new myth of allegedly justified killings, disguised as spontaneous rage and revenge.

It is always the same pattern that turns victims into murderers: with reference to real or imagined persecutions, justifications are created for the eternal circle of violence. The inability to live a different future is rooted in what the American political theorist Wendy Brown calls a "wounded attachment," in an attachment to the wounds of the past; tied to their own humiliation, to former dis-

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grace and persecution, they justify deeds that make them more and more similar to their former tormentors.

We left Kosovo without hope. Without relief about the end of the war—even though we had longed for it in the name of all those nameless Albanian refugees. The streams of fearful wanderers were now moving to the north, not the south anymore.

What happened to Emine, I don't know. But I hope for her and for Kosovo that she keeps her promise and begins the dialogue, because only sheer violence, Hannah Arendt once said, only sheer violence is mute.