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Kosovo: the train of hope

THE JOURNEY

by Emiliano Bos, photos by Livio Senigalliesi

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The Swedish word *Rokfritt*, meaning “smoke-free environment”, is written on the blue second-class, second hand wagon. The Swedish railways have donated these trains to Kosovo. These compartments with their worn seats are perhaps the only place in the Balkans where no one dares to light up the ubiquitous untipped cigarettes. While the train waits on the line at the little station of Lesak, the air is thick with smoke in the “Rim” (Rome) café-bar opposite the station. Irregular spirals form a mosaic that only the stationmaster’s whistle will sweep away. The train is leaving. Ljubisa Djordjevic, a 72-year-old Serb and a refugee for the past seven years, takes a window seat. His face is a mask of lines deeper than the current borders of the former Yugoslavia. Lesak is the last “non border” in this land. It separates Serbia and Kosovo, an administrative division that has been hibernating in the freezer of history since the 1999 conflict. The UN has been busy these past few months trying to give shape to the independence of the former Serbian province, where the majority of the population is Albanian. “I worked at the post office in Pristina for a lifetime”, says Ljubisa, shaking his head, “until such time

as it was possible to live with the Albanians”. Albanians have occupied his house in Obilic, near the future capital of Kosovo, for the past seven years. “Now I live in Ulcinj, in Montenegro. I was told that I could come back, but no one will guarantee my safety here. Let’s see”, he says without ill feeling, slowly leaning a hand on the velvet upholstery of the seat. Any journey to the former Yugoslavia, even this seemingly unending one, obliges one to reckon with memory and the past. As Kosovo moves slowly towards independence, the “train of hope”, which brings Serbs and Albanians together, puffs southwards, leaving behind Mount Kopaonik and the town of Kragujevac on the same railway line as before, previously uninterrupted by the new borders. Ljubisa’s lined face disappears thrice, when the train enters three tunnels. No light pierces the dark in the smoke-free wagon. The railway line hugs the Ibar River, cuddles it in a narrow gorge and thrusts it away in the wide valley that follows. The rails play hide-and-seek with the serpentine curve of green-tinted water, pass over it once, twice, thrice on bridges rebuilt after the war, the same bridges that NATO planes shot down during the last war of the second



millennium against the despot Milosevic and his long military arm in Kosovo.

A STOP AT THE MINES AMIDST THE GHOSTS OF BLAST FURNACES

Zvecan station: the last stop in Serbian-majority Kosovo. The next stop, Mitrovica, is in the Albanian part of the province. While the two communities live practically separated today, this was not the case in the past. In the 1980s, thousands of Albanians worked at the Trepca mining complex, which appears all of a sudden behind the mountain, its 305-metre high smokestack looming like the Eiffel Tower. A third of its 23,000 and more employees were Albanian. "Those were other times", says Stevo Bosovic, technical director of the plant, with a melancholy sigh. He wears a worker's blue shirt and has hands as huge as forklift trucks. These steel furnaces produced thousands of tons of zinc and lead each year: "The mines are about thirty kilometres from here", the manager explains. The British, who won the first concessions in 1927, diverted the course of the Ibar to build the plants of this mining stronghold. Today, the Trepca complex is a monument to desolation and the inability of Belgrade and

Pristina to agree on ways to re-launch it. The legal department of the Kosovo Trust, the UN mission (UNMIK) office that handles privatisations together with the local government, has appointed an international manager. Serbia is claiming full ownership of the extraction section, in which, according to Belgrade, it invested billions of dinars in the 1990s. Bajrush Xhemajili of the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) says, on the other hand, that those funds were used to finance Milosevic's paramilitary groups. "This was a centrifugal machine to separate lead from used car batteries", says the technical director. He uses the past tense because the future remains uncertain. In the semi-darkness inside a shed, a handful of workers greet him cordially. To their regret, they have little to do. A few hundred people work in shifts: in all, a few thousand employees. The rest of the workers of a former time are victims of the absurd political and institutional limbo that has driven the entire economy of Kosovo to its knees. "We are using 30% of our potential while waiting for investments from France to restart production full-time in this section", the other manager, Radisa

Jacoljevic, adds, indicating a huge heap of silicon stock. The splendours of the industrial era are crystallized in the metallic shadows of the silent blast furnaces. The enormous mouths of fire that once spewed streams of melted lead are stone cold. The revolving cylinders of the presses have stopped roaring in this zoo of metallurgical archaeology. A veritable motorway of tubes devoured by rust emerges from the "Old Refinery", long fallen into disuse. A team of workers is dismantling an enormous round tub that was in use until a few weeks ago. "It contained 280 tons of liquid metal", says Bosovic. Lead flowed from the huge gear into a toothed wheel worthy of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The melted lead was then forged into small dies, like dough being made into biscuits. The two managers proudly indicate the latest products: stacks of bars with the "Trepca" brand engraved on them. Behind them, the windows of the old refinery, seen from afar, resemble a huge

crossword puzzle in which the broken panes are black squares between transparent horizontal and vertical panels. Above the workshop, a red star of the erstwhile Yugoslavia seals an era buried by the civil war of the 1990s in the Balkans. Lead and zinc now survive, ghostlike, only in the atmosphere, and in the water-bearing strata of the area, infested by the poisons accumulated over the decades. I have to hurry; the train of hope is leaving.

CESMIN LUG: THE INTERMITTENT LIVES OF THE GYPSIES

Before entering Kosovska Mitrovica, the train grazes the shacks of the gypsy camp in Cesmin Lug. Here, life stops punctually at

_In the 1980s, thousands of Albanians worked at the Trepca mining complex, now reduced to a desolate monument. Facing page: Stevo Bosovic, the technical director of the plant



The Serb and Albanian communities live practically separately, unlike the past, when at least a third of the 23,000 and more employees at the mining complex of Trepca were Albanians

9.47 in the morning. The metal snout of the locomotive emerges, perfectly on time, from behind the curve, pulling the usual two blue wagons behind it. The iron projectile shoots out on the roadbed so close to the steel shacks that it is a miracle they do not collapse. This feat is repeated four times a day, twice on the outgoing journey and twice on the return. "Each time the train goes by it's risky for our children", complains Latif Masurica, the leader of this little warren of shacks: 42 families, 175 people forgotten between North and South Mitrovica, hemmed for the past seven years into a place on the edge of a railway line, rejected by the Albanians and now by the Serbs. "We are in a desperate situation that everybody knows about. We have been waiting for far too long but nothing has happened", Latif grumbles. Until 1999, these families lived together with another 8,000 gypsies in the Mahala district in the southern part of the town, where the



majority of the population is Albanian. That year, Serbian paramilitary troops arrived, followed by NATO bombs, and hence the vengeance of the Kosovo Albanians, who accused the gypsies of collaborating with Milosevic's regime and burned their houses down. "They have rebuilt a few dozen houses now, but it's not enough", says the head of the village. For now, an international cooperation project has built respectable houses for 25 families, or about 150 people. Mitrovica's other gypsies continue to live as refugees in Serbia or Montenegro or simply in the northern part of the town on the other side of the river that divides it in two, and in Zitkovac and Cablare camps a short distance away, which also host Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

Once the train has gone by, life goes back to normal in the Cesmin Lug camp. Along the barbed wire fence separating the rail lines from the slum, Seidju Fitje squats next to a charcoal stove baking bread, surrounded by

a cluster of barefoot urchins. She is 39 and has eight children. The two youngest are four-month-old twins, Saim and Siam. She points proudly to them in her single-roomed house, about a dozen square metres where the entire family sleeps at night on mattresses joined as closely as the pieces of a puzzle. And poverty is not all there is. Children fall ill here, too: the Trepca mining complex is less than a kilometre away. For years, the smokestacks regurgitated their poisonous fumes into the air. "Even the water is contaminated. Our children's blood tests show that this place is uninhabitable", village chief Latif accuses. In 2004, tests carried out by the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed

_The "train of hope" is cheap, whatever the length of the journey: 50 euro cents for the Albanians and 35 dinars for the Serbs, who still use the old Serbian currency



Any journey to the former Yugoslavia obliges one to reckon with memory and the past, even the recent one, which seems neverending. And as Kosovo moves towards independence, the “train of hope” brings Serbs and Albanians together

that 40% of the blood samples taken contained high levels of lead; experts found traces of the metal not only in the water but also in the air and the land. “We met officials from the U.N., the High Commission for Refugees and various other international organisations. They have all vanished without a trace and we’re still here”, says Latif.

Gypsies use the train too, together with the Serbs and Albanians. Shamira, 17, is dark-eyed with a tangled mop of raven-black hair. She speaks to this foreign journalist in Spanish. “I learned it watching the South American *telenovelas* on television”, she says almost defensively. No gypsy home can do without the cathode-ray tyrant, which always has pride of place. This is also why thousands of Albanians came to Italy in the early 1990s expecting to find the land of milk and honey described by TV hostess Raffaella Carrà, who gave away millions on television to anyone who could guess how



many beans there were in a glass jar. “We live in the gypsy camp in Plementina”, says Shamira, hastening to add, “in a real house, though”, as if to quash the idea that people in the camps only live in crumbling shacks. Plementina is the largest gypsy area in Kosovo, “where we don’t have running water or schools”, puts in Shaa, the girl’s grandmother, hair tucked away under a pastel scarf. She is taking the “train of hope” to Pristina “because it’s cheap”. True: whatever their destination, Albanians pay only 50 cents (in euros). The Serbs, who still use the old Belgrade currency, pay 35 dinars. The train screeches to a halt, puffing clouds of smoke, as in a Western movie. We have reached Kosovska Mitrovica.

MITROVICA: THE OUTER LIMIT OF KOSOVO

“If prices stay this low, we will never be able to get our railways back on track without international aid”, Shanasi Beciri, the Albanian station master of Mitrovica, where the train has just arrived, mutters in Serbian. Wearing a red beret and holding a signalling disc, he sorts out the passengers with rapid gestures. “The cost of the ticket is a real catastrophe”, the stationmaster barks half-smilingly. He was born in Belgrade and has worked for the railways for over twenty years. Passengers usually go in two opposite directions here: the Albanians get on the southbound train while, on the other side of the tracks, on the train bound for the north and Serbian-majority Kosovo, Albanians get off and “the others” get on. The Albanian staff on the train follow the same unwritten rule: they stop here in Mitrovica and do not go on. Like Bezmet Islami, a lanky ticket inspector from the valley of Drenica in central Kosovo, where violent battles took place during the war. Now, Pristina-bound, he gets on a train that is nevertheless an encouraging signal of dialogue, where there are no separate compartments for one or the other community. People travel together. But, in Mitrovica, they live separately. U.N. envoy Martti Ahtisaari’s plan on the future status of Kosovo, on which the governments of Pristina and Serbia are yet to agree after thirteen months of negotiations, envisages a kind of “supervised independence”: a European mission will take the place of UNMIK, the unwieldy U.N. body that has administered the province



since 1999. The new “border” will pass through Mitrovica, divided in two by the Ibar River. In the historiography of the Balkans in recent years, this town is described as the epicentre of the hatred. North Mitrovica is the offspring of Belgrade: banknotes in dinars and newspapers in the Cyrillic alphabet. South Mitrovica is a suburb of Tirana: people pay in euros and read in Albanian. But they all meet, and sit next to each other, at a grill room called the “Palma” in the Serbian area. “Our roast chicken is the best in town”, says Iva Davidovic, who is 27 and draws a monthly salary of 120 euros. Radio TeleMitrovica’s 99.0 FM frequency also crosses natural borders, especially political ones. “Since the year 2000 we have been a tool in the peacemaking process. We’ve often hosted Serbian politicians and spokespeople”, explains the head of the radio station, Nexhmedin Spahiu, a journalist and university lecturer, who also employs Bosnians and Turks so as to give other minorities their say. The OSCE has called it a “voice of tolerance”: one of the few, to tell



_In Mitrovica, Kosovo, station master Shanai Beciri uses rapid gestures to sort out passengers on the “train of hope”, which has become a meeting place of choice for the different ethnic groups

the truth. Its technical attempts at reconciliation over the airwaves have crossed the barriers of the last divided town in Europe, which cannot even agree on car number plates. In the North, where there has always been a minority of Bosnians, Croats, Turks and Albanians, many of the cars on the roads have no number plates at all. “The Kosovo Albanians take them off so as not to be identified and the Serbs don’t put them on so as to avoid paying registration fees”, explains Giulio Torresi, 34, the Italian head of the local and international police force of the region of Mitrovica, grimacing.

“Save Kosovo, the soul of Serbia”, reads a poster at the entrance to the directorate of the North Mitrovica hospital. “Our priority is territorial integrity”, says the director Milan Ivanovic, a Belgrade ‘shadow man’

and spokesman for the nationalists in these parts, with a sullen air. He uses his office as the party headquarters: banners and flags with warlike slogans are stacked in a room with a photocopier. “Serbian army in Serbian Kosovo” reads one slogan, in English. “The Albanians are militarized separatists; there are 400,000 weapons and guns circulating in their territory”, Dr Ivanovic says reproachfully. He has a small Serbian flag on his desk. The other Ivanovic, Oliver by name, is more diplomatic. He is the main spokesman for the moderate Serbs in Kosovo. “This institutional paradox cannot last. There is no easy solution and the U.N. has realised that we too are like Palestine or Cyprus, i.e. time and patience are required”, says the politician, who bears a striking resemblance to the actor George Clooney. “There are people”, he says worriedly, “who do not want a stable Kosovo: war veterans excluded from politics and business, or new politicians”. Or even, Ivanovic hints, radical parties in Belgrade. The bridges and walls between the two communities in Mitrovica are truly strange.

Not one shop run by Albanians in the North, but there are already five Chinese shops on the very central Kralja Petra street. Not far away is the “famous” bridge on the Ibar River, once taken over by tanks. “The U.N. wanted to turn it into a symbol of the hatred of Serbs and Albanians for each other to hypocritically justify the cost of its mission”, says Dragana, a Serbian law student, indignantly. She was at university in Pristina when the West bombed Kosovo. She has lived in North Mitrovica for the past seven years. “There was a big library there. Now there’s not one bookshop or cinema”. The French soldiers called the bridge “Austerlitz”, forgetting that Milosevic, who was well liked in Paris, was not Napoleon. People actually also use another two bridges across the river, including a foot bridge that allows the few hundred Albanians in North Mitrovica to make their daily passage to Mitrovica South, where mobile phones use a separate telephone code and are operated by a public-private sector company with its headquarters in the principality of Monaco in a deal set up through a not-very-transparent privatisation under the aegis of the U.N.

Rivers and bridges become symbols in the Balkans and Mitrovica’s has not escaped mystification, not least because of a clumsy international restructuring attempt. Huge tapered cement arches and stage lighting have transformed the main bridge, where the barbed wire has now finally been rolled up. Only a *cheval de frise* and a couple of patrols remain to supervise it, while the Serbian “guardians of the bridge”, self-defence units ready to react in case of an attack by the Albanians, have vanished. In North Mitrovica, the “Mala Bosna” (Little Bosnia) district hosts a handful of houses in Serb territory inhabited by Albanians, Croats and Bosnians. Some are selling up; others remain: “We’ve been living here with the Serbs forever and had no problems”, says Najm Saiti, an unemployed 26-year-old. The unemployment rate is over 60% and goes beyond the real and false borders. According to a recent report by the International Institute for the Middle East and the Balkans, per capita income in Kosovo is 1,200 euros. Arriving from the north, Mitrovica is the entrance to Pristina, forty kilometres away. The “Kosovo

Express” chugs on towards the suburbs of the capital of a country that is waiting to be born officially.

KOSOVO POLJE: END OF THE LINE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF PRISTINA

The high school students who got on at the last stop are giggling because they haven’t paid a penny. Aidram, a 17-year-old covered in teenage spots, is lording it over the others because he speaks good English. The train slows when it comes to the flat land of the “Field of Blackbirds”. This is the end of the line: here we are at Kosovo Polje station – Fushë Kosovë according to Albanian toponomy, a place of myth and legend for Belgrade’s chauvinistic historiography. It was here that Serbian troops vanquished the Turks in 1389. Six hundred years later, Milosevic’s speech here to a million Serbs, accelerated his then unstoppable ascent, which subsequently ended with a heart attack in March 2006 when he was in prison at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, leaving his trials for crimes of war unsettled. The same Dutch prison cells now also hold the former Prime Minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj, waiting for international justice to be meted out for similar crimes. Meanwhile, he has asked his fellow Albanians for financial help by holding a genuine subscription. Hundreds of red posters of the former Prime Minister dot Bill Clinton Street (in honour of the American “liberator”) in Pristina, bearing the slogan “Me Ramushin” (“With Ramush”). He set up a foundation, which he even equipped with a toll-free number, to gather the funds required to pay his legal fees at The Hague. It was subsequently discovered to be a huge swindle. Pristina remains the capital of Kosovo’s contradictions and moods.

On a spring morning, under blue skies, fresh distances are being dug between Serbs and Albanians at the cemetery. “We were better off in Tito’s time”, says Krulislav Kostic, a 73-year-old Serbian. “My manager was Albanian and we got on. I’ve lived here for 44 years, but I’m never coming back”. He is carrying the last fragment of memory away with him from Kosovo: the remains of his wife, who died eight years ago after they had been married for four decades. “Now



The train that brings Serbs and Albanians together, the Kosovo Express, goes from Lesak to Kosovo Polje (Fushë Kosovë in Albanian toponymy), the suburb of the capital of a country still waiting to officially exist

that I live with my three children in Serbia, why should I leave her alone in this piece of land?" he asks. Two funeral parlour employees are exhuming the remains of Stana Kostic, who died of a heart attack in March 1999, a few days before war broke out. The husband fled Kosovo a few months later, together with tens of thousands of other Serbs. "After a life in Kosovo", he says, "I'm left with a pension of 310 euros a month and an album of photographs that I leaf through every evening before I go to bed. This way at least my memories bring me back here". The former Yugoslavia is as faded as those old photographs. Nostalgia for a past that cannot return, and fear of a future that will soon be decided by the U.N. Security Council, where the Russians are threatening to resort to a veto to help their friends in Belgrade in the name of the orthodoxy that unites them. In 2006, six Serbian families took the remains of their loved ones away from the Pristina cemetery. Three have already done so this year. Another ten dead have been exhumed in Pec/Peja. Eighteen in Kosovo Polje/Fushë Kosovë. After the exodus of the living, it is now the exodus of the dead. The latest is

Stana Kostic, who is travelling to Serbia in a zinc coffin in a red Ford Transit belonging to Zoran Radosaljevic's "Skorpion" agency. It takes about 400 to 500 euros and a bureaucratic procedure that is far from simple to cut off all ties with Kosovo. The "dear departed" business has no frontiers. In Pec/Peja, it is the Albanians who organise the transport of Serbian corpses: Haxhi Zeqiri manages a company called "Dardania", the old name of this land that the government of Pristina now wishes to write on the flag of an independent Kosovo. Belgrade has no intention of giving up its former province, as the West-friendly President Boris Tadic confirmed a few days ago. Serbia is offering "wide-ranging autonomy". The Kosovo Albanians translate that as "independence", now convinced that the U.N. will confirm the final goodbye. The word is already written under the blow-up of the late President Ibrahim Rugova, "father of Kosovo's independence", which hangs on a four-storey building in the very central Mother Teresa square. "If only Serbia would apologise in institutional terms, then we at UCK would do so too, even if we were a guerrilla outfit and not a State army", says Bajram Rexhepi, who was the first head of government of Kosovo after the war and is now the second most important person in the main opposition party (TDK). "The U.N. has helped us to rebuild rules and infrastructure. We are ready for independence", explains Shkelzen Maliqi, a writer and political analyst, at a table at the "Strip Depot", a café where Pristina's intellectuals frequently meet. "We are also the youngest country in Europe", he adds. Half a million emigrants and over two thousand missing people, the Kosovo Albanians who disappeared in the 1999 war. What remains of them are 297 discoloured photographs hung on the gates of the presidency of the republic – faceless or identifiable victims. Like Sokol Berisha, of Giakovo, who would have been 50 this June. The rain has left only the uncertain contours of his face and a pale cardigan. The Serbs are carrying their dead away from the cemeteries; the Albanians are still waiting to bury theirs.