

## Natasa Kandic Letters

### **Monday and Tuesday in Kosovo**

29 and 30 March 1999

I reached Pristina before nightfall. I could not get to the HLC office. The building is opposite the Police Department and prison and the front entrance was locked. Someone inside said, "We don't know you and we won't open the door." By his accent, I knew the man was Serb and he must have known by mine that I was Serb too. I knew that the residents were Serb and Albanian and I saw their determination to allow no strangers into the building as the good side of Pristina. I went round the back and saw guards at the entrance of the neighboring building. Several men were standing behind neatly stacked sandbags. I spoke with them and learned that they were Serb and Albanian residents of the building and that they were guarding their homes. They had agreed that Serbs would defend Albanians from the police, the Albanians would defend Serbs from the KLA and all would defend themselves from paramilitaries and other bands. When air raid warnings are sounded, everyone goes down to the shelter except those standing guard.

From there I went to Nora's. I had just arrived when a weeping neighbor rushed into the apartment: "They have taken our car." Three men in police uniform had come, she said, forced open the car door and drove it away. "Better the car than your son," said Nora's father. I dialed over 20 phone numbers. Most phones were not working. It was quiet until 4 a.m. Then there were explosions, followed by silence.

When day broke, I went to see some friends. The Kelmendis phone was cut off. Bajram Kelmendi's shingle was still on the door of his law office. Neighbors told me they hadn't seen his wife Nekibe since the burial of Bajram and their sons. I asked them to give her my regards. Then, together with Nora, a relation of Fehmi Agani and a driver from Belgrade, I made my way to Dragodan, Fehmi Agani's neighborhood. When we reached it, we were stopped by police. They asked to see our papers and when they saw that Nora and Arsim were Albanian, the one in charge ordered them out of the car. I got out too, saying we all worked for the same organization and were looking for a friend. The officer replied that Albanians no longer worked in Serbia and should be on their way to Macedonia. I asked since when police had the authority to fire people and he yelled at me to get back in the car and shut up. I sat on the seat, leaving the door open and my legs outside the car. He slammed the door against my legs, saying Serbia was being ruined by such Serbs. The one in charge called someone over his Motorola. This lasted about 10 minutes and then he waved us on. We made our way back to the center, hardly believing that we had got off so lightly. We drove through side streets to the Suncani Breg district. On the way, we saw wrecked and looted stores and kiosks. We found Vjollca but she was determined to stay with her family in Pristina. We were driven away by her Serb neighbor. "What kind of gathering is this? No loitering! Albanians, inside your homes!" he said.

In all-Albanian districts, we encountered groups of people discussing what to do: should they make their way to the border or stay until the police ordered them out of their homes? Some told me no more than 1,000 people were left in Pec, those who managed to get out of the column the police and military escorted to the Montenegrin border. None of them knew if it was true that Fehmi Agani had been killed, not even his relations. They had heard the report on CNN. Nor was there any reliable news of

Baton Hahziu, the editor of *Koha Ditore*. People kept to their homes. Only the bravest went to see relations who live near by. Only a few phones were working.

The streets of downtown Pristina were almost deserted. People were in their apartments or the stairways of their buildings. In one of these buildings, we spoke to residents and found Mentor. He was just about to leave for the border. Everyone we spoke to was in a panic. With one exception, an Albanian, who calmly repeated he would not leave his home until he was thrown out. An elderly Serb woman came in and stopped for a moment to chat with her neighbors. She too appeared to be fearless.

We started out for Macedonia, in two cars, at about noon. It's 75 kilometers to the Djeeneral Jankovic crossing. Several cars coming from side streets joined us. When we were on the road to the border, there were hundreds of cars behind us. The plan was to get to the border, wait until Ariana and Mentor had crossed and then Nora and I would make for Belgrade. Three kilometers from the border, the column stopped. Rumors flew around that the border was closed, that police were taking cars, that they were separating out the men... The sight of police with masked faces in the column frightened us and we decided to return to Pristina. No one prevented us. People asked us what was going on and we tried to persuade them to go back home. But only a few cars followed us. As we drove back, we saw that there were more than 2,000 cars in the column. We also saw groups making their way on foot, all gripped by a terrible fear.

We got back to Pristina, dropped off Ariana and the others and I, Nora, her brother, and Mentor headed for Belgrade. I was afraid of what would happen at police checkpoints. The first was just outside Pristina on the road to Gnjilane. Our driver asked a policeman if the road to Gnjilane was open. "Depends on the name," was the reply. The officer checked the driver's papers and let us through. The driver's papers were examined at the other checkpoints too and we were allowed to continue. Soldiers at a military checkpoint 10 kilometers outside Pristina asked to see all our papers. There were no problems. We reached Belgrada at about 10 p.m.

### **From Montenegro To Pristina**

3-7 April 1999

None of the Kosovo Albanian displaced now in Rozaje (northern Montenegro) and Ulcinj (Adriatic coast) have tried to return to Pec. Only local Muslims go to take food and medicine to the mostly elderly Albanians who are still in Pec. Albanians from Istok and surrounding villages started arriving in Rozaje on Friday, 9 April.

Though it seems as if all Kosovo is in Rozaje, no international humanitarian organizations have a presence here. Reporters come, take notes if the story is about a massacre, and then return to Podgorica to wait for a military coup. There are over 1,000 people in the mosque – children, elderly, sick. They have not had a bath since they came to Montenegro on 27 or 28 March. Younger men are seeking ways to get out of the country and find somewhere to make a living. They would all send their families back to Kosovo if their safety was guaranteed.

A teacher from Pec tells me the inhabitants of her neighborhood were driven from their homes and taken to the indoor sports stadium on 30 March. They were held for 12 hours and then the army returned them home. The next day, they were again driven

out and ordered to go to Montenegro. The first men who drove them out and took them to the stadium had camouflage paint on their faces and wore black caps. The teacher said the soldiers who took them home said, "We have orders that you should return to your homes." Those who ordered them to leave for Montenegro, she says, wore police uniforms.

Here in Rozaje, I was told that that several people were killed while the inhabitants were being driven from their homes. Five men were killed in the yard of the Kastrati house in the Brzenik II neighborhood. A woman whose son, Nevzat, was killed, says her son, two brothers with the last name Gega, and another three men were slaughtered in front of her. Some odd men in uniforms and caps on their heads came into their yard, she says. They seemed to be drunk and shouted and cursed. They told her she would not be killed, that they would let her live so she would pine for her dead son. They killed the men with knives. Nevzat bled to death in his mother's arms. One of the Gega brothers, whose belly had been slit open, lingered on for a few hours. Other uniformed men came the next day and took the bodies away in a truck.

When I said I was going to Pristina, everyone in Rozaje was astounded. As I was leaving the town, the police wished me good luck. The road to Pristina via Novi Pazar and Kosovska Mitrovica was deserted – not a single vehicle. My first impression was that Pristina too was deserted. The first block of apartment buildings in the Suncani Breg district, before Matican village, was empty. Cars stood in the parking lot. Friends of mine lived on the second floor of one of these buildings. I went up, rang the doorbell and knocked. Then I tried the knob and the door swung open. Everything inside was as it used to be, at least at first glance. I met only two women on the block. The residents were given 10 minutes to leave their apartments and go to the railway station.

On the next block, I saw children playing and found some friends. The police had not been there. But many people left nonetheless, fearing that they would be ordered out of their homes at any minute. Some returned on Sunday and Monday (3 and 4 April). They had waited several days at the border and, seeing that police were not preventing people from returning, they decided to go back home. Besides the residents, there are people from other neighborhoods in these buildings. Serbs and Albanians are keeping together. They lock the front entrances at night and no one can either leave the buildings or come in. People listen to the news until the power is cut. Only a few phones work. They are not in touch with their family members or relatives in other Kosovo towns and villages.

They keep talking about the events from 31 March to 3 April. By a quirk of fate, several people from the Taslidze neighborhood remained in Pristina – they were not there when the inhabitants were being driven from their homes. Pristina was gripped by panic when the expulsions from the suburban areas started. Rumors of killings and disappearances ran round. Nobody dares report disappearances to the Serbian police. The bombings in fact do not scare Albanians as much as "those" who will come and slaughter them - "those" being paramilitaries, police or armed gangs.

Listening to the news on the BBC, Sky News, Tirana TV and Serbian TV, they gather that Pristina was not as badly hit as Pec, Djakovica or Prizren. The downtown cafes were blown up before the NATO intervention. Some civilian facilities were destroyed by the NATO attacks and there were civilian casualties. Everybody, myself included, is afraid of being accused of spying and we kept away from the ruins.

On the night of 6/7 April, I talked for a long time with my friends by candlelight. D. tells me it is the women who bring the news about local events and that they get their information while standing in line for bread. They tell the men when it is safe to go out or to visit with friends in neighboring buildings. Everyone watches the news and then talk it over. Another major topic is "what do our Serb neighbors say." These neighbors are ordinary people but a lot of importance is attached to their words. According to D., every half hour or so, a housewife comes to his apartment with new information from the Serbs: "They say the situation is better today," or "they say it will be a bit better tomorrow."

We were just leaving at about midnight when explosions were heard and continued until daybreak. The phones were all out in the morning and somebody said the main post office must have taken a hit. It was only when I came back to Belgrade that I learned that not only the post office but the Social Security Department building had also been hit and that there were civilian casualties.

Before I left for Belgrade, I went to check up on the HLC office. I had heard the police had been there. There was a police officer outside the building. He let me in but said I was not to touch anything as "something was found in here and the police will be investigating." As soon as I was inside, an elderly lady with a dog ran up, shouting "Call the State Security; I was told to report if anybody came to this office." The officer remained silent. "Well, I'll be on my way now," I said and left. I shook with fright as she shouted after me, and heaved a sign of relief once I had left Pristina.

On the way to Belgrade, I saw several large groups near Kosovska Mitrovica. They were on foot, with children, making for Vucitrn. I asked where they were going. "Home, but we're not sure if we can," was their reply. When I told them to go back home, they remained silent and just plodded on. "People are returning to Pristina; go back home," I cried out to them.

After Raska and about ten kilometers from Kosovoska Mitrovica, I waited for hours near a bridge that had been destroyed by NATO, hoping to find some kind of transportation. A villager came up and warned me sternly that I was not to stand on their land. He said he had seen a Muslim woman under the bridge before it was bombed.

**Dear friends,**

May 12, 1999.

I am currently in Montenegro, consulting lawyer - refugees from Kosovo - about ways to conduct research into events in Kosovo after 24 March. There are over 80,000 Albanian refugees in Montenegro. Approximately 60,000 of them are from Pec, Mitrovica and Istok. Interviewing refugees will help us obtain relevant material about the pattern of ethnic cleansing in the above places. This material will be useful to the ICTY's Office of the Prosecutor for their decisions on conducting investigations and bringing indictments.

The office in Montenegro, in Ulcinj, is the third office of the Humanitarian Law Center. The office in Pristina does not exist any more. Last time I was there on 3 April, was my second visit to Pristina since 24 March. Through the open door, I saw books and paper scattered all over the place, desks with no computers, and the usual mess after a police search. Mentor Nimani, one of my lawyers, lived in the

neighborhood. I will never forget 29 March in Pristina, and Mentor on the staircase of his block, at his wit's end from terror and ready to flee Kosovo. We had been in contact on daily basis in the previous days, so I had known he lived in fear that someone might come, knock on his door and kill him, but the terror I saw in his eyes made up my mind then and there to depart immediately. I had already found my other staff, so we were ready to go. Vjollca stayed in Pristina. Her father was adamant that she stayed with her family and that they were not to lose contact. She phoned me from Albania several days later. All families from her part of town had been expelled, transported by train to Blace, a village close to Macedonian border. She spent a few days there, out in the open together with a group of 20,000 people. They were put on buses and taken to the Albanian border by night.

On that 29 March, we started from Pristina towards the Macedonian border, Ariana, Nora, Kushtrim and some friends whose names I cannot disclose for their personal security. Several hundred cars followed us. We returned after we had received information that the border had been closed, and when we saw policemen wearing masks on their faces. We returned to Pristina, dropped Ariana off, as she decided to stay until my next visit, and turned Belgrade bound. I do not know how we managed to leave Kosovo, there must be God somewhere. A car with three Albanians and two Serbs. We cleared all check points, each in fear that they will discover who we were, arrest and separate us. Mentor's fear did not disappear in Belgrade. It was easier for him, but that was no freedom either. Several days later, we went to Montenegro, Mentor then went to Albania and subsequently to the US. Nora stayed in Montenegro working with refugees for a while. She left for Budapest on 4 May. She, too, is US bound. Ariana was waiting for my arrival in Pristina. She was looking after our Jeep. She left for Macedonia on 5 May. She is currently visiting camps and interviewing refugees. She plans to return to Kosovo as soon as it is safe to do so.

Whenever I show up in Pristina, people can hardly believe it possible. It amazes me that I manage to do it. The first time I went back, on 27 March, I took a taxi to the bus station in an attempt to find a bus for Kosovo. Some ten meters away from the bus station, it occurred to me to ask the driver if he would take me to Bujanovac, a small place 100 kilometers from Pristina, thinking that I would be able to catch a lift to Kosovo from there. He agreed to my proposal, and when we were near Bujanovac, he accepted, for a generous fee, to take me all the way to Pristina. If it had not been for him, I could not have taken three Albanians out of Kosovo. He had a way of chatting with policemen, an air of nonchalance when clearing check points, asking about fuel and cigarettes, that left an impression he was one of their own kind. I went with him two more times. He would always ask, "who are we getting out this time" before each trip.

When I travel to Kosovo, on roads with no traffic, with police and military check points, I never think about the possibility of something bad happening to me. Riding through Serbia, my primary concern is fuel. I keep bothering the driver about how much fuel we have already spent. When I see the road sign for Kosovska Mitrovica, I start to look round. The villages were intact until 5 May. They were obviously empty, but there was no arson. I took a note that on 23 April, I met a large group of people on the same road, who were walking towards Vucitrn. These people were returning to their homes having spent two weeks in woods hiding, and were anxious whether the police would allow them to go back and whether their houses were still standing.

They were looking at me in utter disbelief when I told them they should return home, that people were going back to Pristina from the border. Unfortunately, these same people as well as others from Vucitrn, have been expelled from their homes. On 5 May, I saw that the town was empty, and many houses were on fire. The same day, I passed through Mitrovica. There were neither police nor military in the town center. There wasn't a soul to be seen. Large sections of town had been destroyed. One could see that houses had been plundered first, and then set on fire. There were some people in the suburbs. Serb parts of town were intact. Afterwards, when I talked to Albanians from Mitrovica who came to Montenegro, I found out that approximately 30,000 Albanians were expelled from Mitrovica on 15 April, and that they had been ordered to leave for Montenegro. They traveled on foot, it took them three days to reach Dubovo, a village 80 kilometers away from Mitrovica, where the Yugoslav Army stopped them. The army kept them there for three days, when three officers announced there had been an "order for refugees to return home". They were put on buses and shipped back to burnt down Mitrovica. Hunger and fear made many of them leave Mitrovica again and go to Montenegro.

Every time I enter Pristina, I feel relieved. I say to myself, "It's still standing". Bajram Kelmendi is gone. He was murdered on the first night of NATO bombardment. He was taken from home with his sons that first night. Fehmi Agani is gone, too. I never managed to meet him in Pristina. He was last seen at Bajram Kelmendi's funeral on 27 March. People were saying he was in Pristina in hiding, changing houses, and that it was good he was not going out. I tried to find him, but no one knew where he was. Now I wonder if it was possible that he was still free at the time, and if it was his decision not to communicate with anybody. I shall not have peace until I find out how he was murdered and what was happening with him after Kelmendi's funeral. He was an old friend. I can still hear his words: "How is it going Natasa, are you less busy, how is your health, your family?"; and in the same breath: "There is hope, we must believe that things will get better". A long time ago, in 1994, we both attended the Conference on the Hague Tribunal in Bern. I remember those days for two reasons. Although there were only a few participants from Serbia, he spoke Serbian in front of a huge audience, the majority of them Albanians. He said he was doing that because of his Serb friends, out of respect for their work. One day during the Conference, he invited me to meet some of his former students who had arrived from Germany and Switzerland to attend the part of the Conference concerning Kosovo. When he introduced me, I realized that he had not told them he had invited a Serb woman. At that time, there were few occasions for Serb and Albanian intellectuals to sit together and talk. I could see that his students were stunned, but soon they welcomed me and apologized for the fact they did not speak very good Serbian.

The news about Agani's death has reached me in Montenegro. At the hotel reception desk, I have been told that a cousin of Agani's called from Pristina and said he had been arrested. The next day, the news said his body had been found near Lipljan.

**Letter from Natasa**

May 23, 1999

I received a letter from Prizren dated 4 May 1999, but it did not reach me until the 20<sup>th</sup>. It bears a Serbian PTT postal stamp and it was probably mailed by someone who left Prizren. The letter itself is printed in capital letters and unsigned, but it came from a very good friend of mine.

B. says that large refugee columns are moving towards the Vrbnice border crossing every day. There are three check-points before the Albanian border. He learned that many refugees had their identification papers torn up and that license plates from their cars were taken away. The remaining Albanians do not dare leave their homes. After mass expulsions of Albanians from the surrounding villages, the targets have now shifted to doctors, professors, lawyers, political activists and Albanians who worked for the OSCE or rented their houses to OSCE personnel. They are questioned by police and then expelled to Albania by force. B. says that some of the expelled sent signals that they were safe by contacting the Albanian media, but that others disappeared leaving no trace behind. About 650 Albanian families do not know what happened to their sons who were forcibly mobilized in the Yugoslav Army. Local authorities told them that they are digging trenches somewhere on the border with Albania. Everybody fears paramilitary groups, unmarked cars, police questioning, possible expulsion and, as of late, hunger. Sick people do not dare go to the doctor and resort to traditional cures instead. People in bread queues say that remaining Albanians will have to pledge loyalty to the state or leave Kosovo. B. says that these rumors are killing them. They do not know what to do. If they go, this will mean leaving behind their homes, property and the town they love. If they stay, all they can expect is humiliation. If only there were some international organization in the area, they say, they would feel more secure and this would give them strength to persevere and stay there. Fear has taken such proportions that they do not dare tell anyone when they decide to leave.

There are not only bad news but also some good news today. In the case of Kosovo, good news is when I hear that "police came, but all went fine, nobody was killed". On 21 May 1999, police searched about 200 Albanian flats in the Suncani breg section of Pristina. The tenants were asked to produce their identification papers and to report weapons and refugees, if any. My friends told me "they were not beaten or harassed". A group of about 60 young people, including girls, were searched separately. Except for a few secondary school students, they were all university students. After a thorough search, most of them were released, but 18 were taken to the local police station, where they underwent questioning for several hours. Fourteen were then released, but two boys and two girls remained in custody. The four were taken away from a flat in which police found a uniform of the former Yugoslav People's Army. People in Suncani breg say that one of their Serb neighbors will try to find out what has happened to them.

Intensive diplomatic efforts for resolving the Kosovo crisis prompted me to send a few stories about Kosovo to the Belgrade daily Danas. The editor told me that the texts were fantastic and revealing, but that he did not dare publish them.

On my way to work today I passed by some of the facilities destroyed by NATO. When I asked military authorities to grant us access to civilian facilities destroyed in

the attacks and civilian witnesses of these attacks, my request was rudely turned down. We are therefore left only with newspaper reports. When I travel through Serbia, now more and more by side roads, I talk to people in villages and I see that they have no problem understanding what is going on. They are fully aware that the most vital issue for Serbia at present is to call to account those who are responsible for everything that has happened. The general feeling, however, is that this is not possible at the moment.

More than 50,000 people have left Belgrade since 24 March 1999. It is not easy to describe life here. My friends abroad find it very hard to believe when I tell them that there are people in the streets just like before, that local cafes are busy even when the sirens go off, that taxis circle the city at night when the streets are completely dark and that I don't know anyone who goes to air raid shelters. Electricity and water supply cuts mean that beside queuing for bread people now have to find ways to fetch drinking water too. Common sense has it that candles should be bought in the church because they are much cheaper there and because they last much longer than the decorative candles sold in household supply stores.

Until 24 March 1999, there were about 100 Albanian students in Belgrade. Now only a few have remained. On 13 May 1999 police raided and searched a flat at No. 5, Klara Cetkin Street in New Belgrade. Four students (Edon Hajrullaga, Bekim Blakj, Safet Blakj and Luigj Ndue) were taken away. Luigj, who has been living on the same address for the past six years, was just about to defend a master's thesis at the Faculty of Special Education in Belgrade. When the bombing started, he invited the other three students who lived in the Students' Hostel to come to his flat. One neighbor said she saw police taking the boys away, but added that a girl with short hair was also taken with them. A check in Belgrade court registers shows that there is nothing on them and, for the time being, police refuse to give any information.

People in Serbia by and large support the G-8 proposal for ending the war. This is evident from statements by high-ranking officials of the ruling party and other government officials. More and more reports speak about Albanian refugees who were forced to leave their homes because of NATO air raids. One can hear this not only from politicians but also from law experts. When the Belgrade Law School was asked by JURIST: The Law Professor's Network from Pittsburgh University whether Yugoslav armed forces had responded to NATO attacks "by deportation and forcible transfer of Albanian population", the reply was that Albanians were fleeing Kosovo because of NATO bombs. The same school said that that trains reaching Belgrade everyday bring Albanians, Serbs, Turks and others who have fled Kosovo. For the sake of facts, I would like to quote here what one Albanian from Pec said about expulsions of Albanians from that town (I have interviewed 98 Albanians expelled from Pec and they have all corroborated his story):

"Friday, 26 March. We were sitting at the table when a group of about 20 people in uniforms and red berets accompanied by three civilians raided our home. None of them wore masks. Their uniforms looked like army uniforms. I recognized some of them as people from the Brzhenik I section of the town. They shouted at us 'You have one minute to leave'. My daughter in law put her baby in the cradle and then one of the uniformed men kicked it so hard that the baby fell out of the cradle and started to scream. We all started to leave the house except my old father who cannot walk. One



of them ordered my son Blerim to stay behind. My son remained silent but my wife and I started to cry and plead with them to let us stay too. My son then cried that he would stay behind and that we should go. My wife and I would not budge, but they started shoving us and pushing us out by our shoulders. When I saw a rifle pointed at Blerim's temple, I tried to go back and help him, but then I heard a shot and saw Blerim taken up in the air before he crumpled down in a heap at my father's feet. They got hold of me too, but then my wife rushed and took me out of the room. When we left the room we heard three more shots. I heard them shouting that we should go to Clinton. Blerim's body was left behind. We tried to go to our cousins' house but streets were crammed with people and police ordered us to join one of the columns. They also told us that the road to Montenegro is safe."