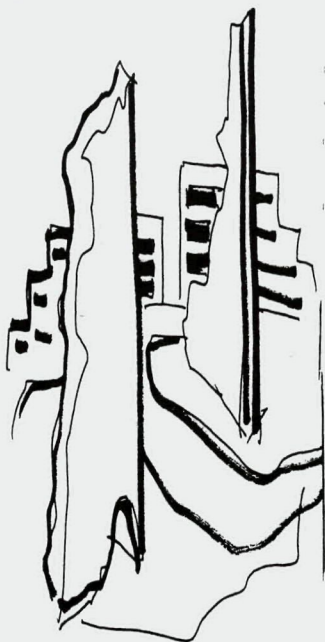


Window View from Jerusalem

The common conditions of hatred, chaos and pain are depicted here by the author who ventured from Jerusalem to war-torn Kosovo.

by Vered Kater

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I was born in the middle of a terrible war, a war based upon hate for people like me, of the Jewish faith. This is the hate that destroyed many people and countries.

I do not remember the bombardments or the results of other destructive actions. Great hearted Gentiles hid me from the eyes of the Nazis and the only pictures that I can imagine from the war are the black and white ones from old films. Perhaps my motivation to go to a war zone and help a people that are not Jewish was because I was saved by people who also did not have the same religion as mine.

Upon arrival at the border of Kosovo, the very first impression is one of total chaos; people pushing and pulling and screaming at the authorities; people on open wagons traveling in both directions; large graveyards and empty buildings in ruins alongside roads full of potholes; tension in the air. I feel as though I am walking onto a movie set, but I am not yet one of the actors. I have the opportunity to see both sides and feel the tensions in the air.

Once I begin work training nurses at a district hospital, I find myself becoming a part of the healing process. At night, I think about my day and the different feelings that go through

me. I compare Jerusalem and my teaching there with the teaching here in Kosovo.

Waking up in the morning on a clear day in my house in Jerusalem, I can hear the tits, sparrows, bulbuls, and a lone woodpecker begin their day and mine. Normal city noises intrude – the faint sound of a city bus, someone hooting in the background, children laughing. In Peje, Kosovo, I wake up to the sounds of cawing blackbirds and howling abandoned dogs. Looking outside, I see two empty windows, like large eyes staring at me. Their black “makeup” is irregular, bombed and burnt wall paint. The roofs



are gone and a few crooked chimneys try to cheer up my view. When I open the windows, neither woodpecker nor curious sparrows fly away. A dark cloud of ravens passes by on their way to the next feast on a rubbish heap.

As if I am in a dream I see the red rooftops of Jerusalem, dotted with solar heating panels and hot water tanks,

green pines waving in the wind. I shake my head and wash my face. Now, with my glasses on, the stark reality hits me. I am here now in a country devastated by hate.

My day begins early and before 7 o'clock I am downstairs waiting to be taken to work in the hospital. Not many people are on the streets at that time; work is scarce so there is no need to get out of bed this early. The few people I do meet are dressed carefully in mended clothes, often wearing shoes that are not suited to the weather or the work they are doing. In Jerusalem, strangers pass each other without smiling or talking. Here in Peje, people really look at me, examine my face, perhaps to assess me as friend or foe. Inevitably I receive many large warm smiles.



An attempt is made to start a conversation and even though the language barrier is great, I am always invited to share a cup of coffee. As soon as someone hears that I am from Israel, the whole atmosphere changes and suddenly I am shaking many hands. This feeling of being seen as special is not easy to accept from

people who lack everything and ask for nothing but to touch and be near me because I am from Jerusalem.

The driver that takes the interpreter and me to the hospital is unshaven and very depressed. Before this war he had 17 employees and 3 touring cars; now he has to be grateful to be alive, to have one car, and to receive \$2 for driving me 10 km. On my way to the hospital I prefer looking up to see the green mountains. The sun rises slowly and everything glows with the early, eager face of a new day. If I dare to look around me, I see broken houses with burnt furniture hanging out of gaping holes, once the curtained windows of a family home. Groups of chattering school children are absent. Instead, long lines of tired looking people with sagging shoulders wait to receive food and goods.

I often grumbled about the red traffic lights and narrow roads in Jerusalem. The traffic lights in Peje do not work and if they do, nobody pays any attention to them. Here I wish for this kind of an obstacle; the piles of destroyed furniture and dirt overflow the area and attract animals as well as hungry and curious children.

The roads are narrow, not because they were constructed that way but because bomb craters and piles of rubble make the passage very narrow and difficult. The rubbish truck in Jerusalem has a habit of totally blocking the road I need to go through to get to work, especially if I am late.

In Jerusalem, I never re-

ally thought about the different smells on my way to work: dust from the dry roads, car exhaust, the white Jasmine next to my door. In Peje my nose tries not to smell the smoldering rubbish with the specific additional odor of household goods that are rotting away.

When I arrive at the hospital in Jerusalem, a sleepy looking guard waves me through the gate as soon as he sees my parking permit. In Peje a fierce-looking Italian soldier, flanked by two tanks, examines the car and our papers before letting us in. Once inside, the smell of cigarettes dominates. I wonder if perhaps this is good, as the other attacks on my nostrils may be worse.

The pediatric floor where I teach is not like anything I have ever seen: large rooms with partially broken windows; no sink or a faucet, only the bent water pipes sticking out of the walls; plastic bottles of water everywhere, but patients simply not washed. Sheets are changed only if there is no choice, and the situation has to be really bad for this to happen.

The white ironed uniforms of the nurses are a sharp contrast to the gray sheets. Nurses take their uniforms home because the boilers in the hospital are also destroyed. At home, shoes are white and more or less sensible, no high heels. Here, shoes that are worn during work, are something else, from plastic slippers to anything else one can imagine. (The nurses told me that the Serbs systematically stole all their footwear.)

The traditional 10 o'clock break is also a custom in Peje.

Here, however, I do not see the coffee with bread, cheese and jam. Everyone, including physicians, goes to the dining room to receive the one free meal that is donated by a non-government organization (NGO). I participate in this "feast," but it is so sad that I can hardly swallow anything: a brownish fluid with floating cabbage accompanied by stale bread. This is often the only meal that the workers eat during their long day. Just thinking how much I normally take my food for granted and how much food is thrown away in our hospitals makes me ashamed.

After work I return to the house where I am staying; the owners are there. As the housing situation in Peje is difficult (70% of the houses are destroyed), they continue living there and sleep in the crowded apartment of his parents. The father is sitting on the floor of the bedroom. He is quietly crying in front of a large painting. This is one of a series of six paintings he painted before the war called "The Creation." The whole series was stolen and today people found one painting, with a small tear, buried in the ruins of the church. I sit down next to him, hold his hand. He slowly starts talking in broken French about the birth and death of his creation. I am deeply touched and try to comfort him. We sit for a long time. He hugs me, goes to a drawer, and after a long search gives me a photograph of the painting. Before handing it to me he writes:

"For the respective moment I give you everyday of life.

Born reborn this picture of painting, my painting it was wounded and with the painting I feel the pain. Thank you Wolnut Bigolli."

Later in the evening I decide to go out to eat something but I meet Fatmira, my landlady, on the stairs. She speaks only Albanian and I cannot manage more than a greeting in her language. She points at my stomach and her mouth. As soon as she sees that her guess is right, that I am on my way to a restaurant, she takes my hand. She brings me back to her home and brings me her own food from her parents' house. This, again, is so special that I have no words to describe the feelings that engulf me.

How can people that are so full of hate and sadness be so kind and gentle? Speaking to Albanians, I feel the hate they have for the Serbs. They live in their abandoned houses and gleefully tell me how much they would like to kill all of them. On the other hand, I personally only meet friendliness, hugs, and real care.

It will take a long time to digest all that has happened to me in these five weeks. At night I do fall asleep but am soon awakened by the noises that I am not used to hearing: the helicopters that patrol the area, the occasional gunshots, and the mine explosions when a night animal strays from its path.

I spend my last evening with the friends I have made in Peje. I am surrounded by people who speak languages I do not understand, but that is really not important tonight. This feeling of friendship and caring for each other does not need to be

expressed by more than a smile or a touch.

I learned many things from these brave citizens and I think that they learned something from me. But I did not manage to impart what I think is the most important message – that with hate there is no future for anybody. I wonder what will happen to my friends in Peje. I hope they will make the right decisions and will build their future with a balance of love, wisdom, and forgiveness. □

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