

Title:

Skopje - Where Time Stood Still

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Summary:

Frozen at an early morning hour, the stony hands of the giant, cracked clock commemorate the horror. The earthquake that struck Skopje in 1963 has shattered not only its Byzantine decor, has demolished not merely the narrow passageways of its Ottoman past, has transformed not only its Habsburgian waterfront with its baroque National Theatre.

Keywords:

Article Body:

Frozen at an early morning hour, the stony hands of the giant, cracked clock commemorate the horror. The earthquake that struck Skopje in 1963 has shattered not only its Byzantine decor, has demolished not merely the narrow passageways of its Ottoman past, has transformed not only its Habsburgian waterfront with its baroque National Theatre. The disastrous reconstruction, supervised by a Japanese architect, has robbed it of its soul. It has become a drab and sprawling socialist metropolis replete with monumentally vainglorious buildings, now falling into decrepitude and disrepair. The influx of destitute and simpleton villagers (which more than quintupled Skopje's population) was crammed by central planners with good intentions and avaricious nature into low-quality, hi-rise slums in newly constructed "settlements".

Skopje is a city of extremes. Its winter is harsh in shades of white and grey. Its summer is naked and steamy and effulgent. It pulses throughout the year in smoke-filled, foudroyant bars and dingy coffee-houses. Polydipsic youths in migratory skeins, eager to be noted by their peers, young women on the hunt, ageing man keen to be preyed upon, suburbanites in search of recognition, gold chained mobsters surrounded by flaxen voluptuousness - the cast of the watering holes of this potholed eruption of a city.

The trash seems never to be collected here, the streets are perilously punctured, policemen often substitute for dysfunctional traffic lights. The Macedonians drive like the Italians, gesture like the Jews, dream like the Russians, are obstinate like the Serbs, desirous like the French and hospitable

like the Bedouins. It is a magical concoction, coated in the subversive patience and the aggressive passivity of the long oppressed. There is the wisdom of fear itself in the eyes of the 600,000 inhabitants of this landlocked, mountain-surrounded habitat. Never certain of their future, still grappling with their identity, an air of "carpe diem" with the most solemn religiosity of the devout.

The past lives on and flows into the present seamlessly. People recount the history of every stone, recite the antecedents of every man. They grieve together, rejoice in common and envy en masse. A single organism with many heads, it offers the comforts of assimilation and solidarity and the horrors of violated privacy and bigotry. The people of this conurbation may have left the village - but it never let them go. They are the opsimaths of urbanism. Their rural roots are everywhere: in the the division of the city into tight-knit, local-patriotic "settlements". In the traditional marriages and funerals. In the scarcity of divorces despite the desperate shortage in accommodation. In the asphyxiating but oddly reassuring familiarity of faces, places, behaviour and beliefs, superstitions, dreams and nightmares. Life in a distended tempo of birth and death and in between.

Skopje has it all - wide avenues with roaring traffic, the incommensurable alleys of the Old Town, the proper castle ruins (the Kale). It has a Turkish Bridge, recently renovated out of its quaintness. It has a square with Art Nouveau building in sepia hues. An incongruent digital clock atop a regal edifice displayed the minutes to the millennium - and beyond. It has been violated by American commerce in the form of three McDonald restaurants which the locals proceeded cheerfully to transform into snug affairs. Stolid Greek supermarkets do not seem to disrupt the inveterate tranquility of neighbourhood small grocers and their coruscant congeries of variegated fruits and vegetables, spilling to the pavement.

In winter, the light in Skopje is diaphanous and lambent. In summer, tis strong and all-pervasive. Like some coquettish woman, the city changes mantles of orange autumn leaves and the green foliage of summer. Its pure white heart of snow often is hardened into grey and traitorous sleet. It is a fickle mistress, now pouring rain, now drizzle, now simmering sun. The snowy mountain caps watch patiently her vicissitudes. Her inhabitants drive out to ski on slopes, to bathe in lakes, to climb to sacred sites. It gives them nothing but congestion and foul atmosphere and yet they love her dearly. The Macedonian is the peripatetic patriot - forever shuttling between his residence abroad and his true and only home. Between him and his land is an incestuous relationship, a love affair unbroken, a covenant handed down the generations. Landscapes of infancy imprinted that provoke an almost Pavlovian reaction of return.

Skopje has known many molesters. It has been traversed by every major army in

European history and then by some. Occupying a vital crossroad, it is a layer cake of cultures and ethnicities. To the Macedonians, the future is always portentous, ringing with the ominousness of the past. The tension is great and palpable, a pressure cooker close to bursting. The river Vardar divides increasingly Albanian neighbourhoods (Butel, Cair, Shuto Orizari) from Macedonian (non-Muslim) ones. Albanians have also moved from the villages in the periphery encircling Skopje into hitherto "Macedonian" neighbourhoods (like Karpos and the Centre). The Romas have their own ghetto called "Shutka" (in Shuto Orizari), rumoured to be the biggest such community in Europe. The city has been also "invaded" (as its Macedonian citizens experience it) by Bosnian Muslims. Gradually, as friction mounts, segregation increases. Macedonians move out of apartment blocks and neighbourhoods populated by Albanians. This inner migration bodes ill for future integration. There is no inter-marriage to speak of, educational facilities are ethnically-pure and the conflict in Kosovo with its attendant "Great Albania" rumblings has only exacerbated a stressed and anxious history.

It is here, above ground, that the next earthquake awaits, along the inter-ethnic fault lines. Strained to the point of snapping by a KFOR-induced culture shock, by the vituperative animosity between the coalition and opposition parties, by European-record unemployment and poverty (Albania is the poorest, by official measures) - the scene is set for an eruption. Peaceful by long and harsh conditioning, the Macedonians withdraw and nurture a siege mentality. The city is boisterous, its natives felicitously facetious, its commerce flourishing. It is transmogrified by Greek and Bulgarian investors into a Balkan business hub. But under this shimmering facade, a great furnace of resentment and frustration spews out the venom of intolerance. One impolitic move, one unkind remark, one wrong motion - and it will boil over to the detriment of one and all.

Dame Rebecca West was here, in Skopje (Skoplje, as she spells it) about 60 years ago. She wrote:

"This (Macedonian) woman (in the Orthodox church) had suffered more than most other human beings, she and her forebears. A competent observer of this countryside has said that every single person born in it before the Great War (and quite a number who were born after it) has faced the prospect of violent death at least once in his or her life. She had been born during the calamitous end of Turkish maladministration, with its cycles of insurrection and massacre and its social chaos. If her own village had not been murdered, she had, certainly, heard of many that had and had never had any guarantee that hers would not some day share the same fate... and there was always extreme poverty. She had had far less of anything, of personal possessions, of security, of care

in childbirth than any Western woman can imagine. But she had two possessions that any Western woman might envy. She had strength, the terrible stony strength of Macedonia; she was begotten and born of stocks who could mock all bullets save those which went through the heart, who could outlive the winters when they were driven into the mountains, who could survive malaria and plague, who could reach old age on a diet of bread and paprika. And cupped in her destitution as in the hollow of a boulder there are the last drops of the Byzantine tradition."