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Travel article from the Visoki Decani monastery in Kosovo – part of the setting for **THE WOLF IN BANJA LUKA**

An Iron Ring Around a Serbian Heart

Nothing is like it used to be in Visoki Decani in northwestern Kosovo. The monks lead an isolated life in the beautiful Monastery that has survived the comings and goings of enemies for centuries. The Monastery is a symbol of Serbian self-perception. Today, the monks and their history survive only because Italian troops form a protective iron ring around their sanctuary.

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Kraa-kraa-kraa.

The calls of the shiny black crows sound ominous. Only they have the audacity to break the silence on this mild fall day sitting in the cottonwood trees along the small mountain road. To my right, signs warn about danger from mines in the thicket. On the other side of the thicket, grassy fields spread out until their flatness is terminated by the mountain slope rising with red, brown and green colors sparkling in the sun. Fall has come to northwest Kosovo as a last sigh before the harsh winter sets in.

Suddenly, the crows are quiet and silence takes over again as the road turns and light brick walls become visible ahead on the edge of the valley. From now on, every step is a step back in time. Way back to the year of 1327. Back to the creation of the most precious jewel in the Serbian-Orthodox Church, the Visoki Decani Monastery.

Now, I also see military vehicles and a group of soldiers in camouflage uniforms. To my left, conifer trees stand side by side in the steep and rocky terrain. Further down, deep among the trees, the Italian troops have erected their base camp. It is a large camp, made to look very small and almost invisible due to a huge camouflage net covering the camp. Even further down, they have their checkpoint, where it took me two days to be given permission to continue.

The long gun barrel of the Centauro tank points directly towards the road from the town of Decani. Heavily armed soldiers follow every move and thoroughly check the few people who use the small road to ensure they have permission. The Italian troops have formed a protective iron ring around the small Serbian enclave of the Visoki Decani Monastery. The threat comes from Albanians. After last year's brutal attack by Serbian troops, the Albanians have now returned to the area under the protection of the international KFOR troops. Thus, Italian troops now protect the Albanians - as well as the Serbian monks inside the thick walls of the monastery. Walls that prevent them from seeing the outside world where evil seems to move in circles.

The Monastery is a symbol of the Serbian heart's deep sense of belonging to this Holy Land. Serbian mythology and self-perception has its origin back in the bloody Kosovo wars. In 1389, Prince Lazar led the battle of Kosovo Polje, also known as the Blackbird Plain, against the Turks and Islam. The Serbs were defeated, but in the memory of Balkan poets, the defeat became at least half a victory. Even though the Serbian Empire had already been crucially defeated in a previous battle, the battle of Kosovo Polje dominates national poetry, where losers are turned into heroes.

At the main gate, I am retained once again. A soldier speaks briefly on the radio before he nods and leads me back in time through the gate into the sanctuary. He asks me to wait under the arched portal. With much flapping and cawing, a handful of crows take off from the wall and head toward the other side of the valley. Thus, my attempt to remember, to separate and to find the facts is interrupted. Here on the edge of the past, time and place dissolve and truth mingles with lies – which is the way it has always been in the Balkans.

The night before the battle against the Turks, God gave the Prince a choice between an earthly and a heavenly victory. A Serbian triumph on the battlefield would rescue them from the Turks. Defeat would ensure the Serbian nation eternal salvation. The pious Lazar naturally chose defeat. This story constitutes the main content of popular Serbian poetry – and perhaps that is the main reason for the Serbs' penchant towards martyrdom, whether it is forced on them or not. The widow of the Prince gave two huge candles to the monks of Visoki Decani with orders to light them when the Empire was restored. 535 years later, in 1924, King Alexander entered the Monastery Church and lit the candles. In this way, history leads us to the Serbian version of the truth: that the cultural heritage of Serbia lies in this country – and that Kosovo can never be Albanian.

The soldier leads me to the courtyard where the Monastery Church towers in the center. Built with marble squares in bright colors and stripes of almost purple, the building shines in the sunlight. Right before all hell and Slobodan Milosevic broke loose in Kosovo and cost 10.000 Albanian lives, Visoki Decani was to be included on UNESCO's Cultural Heritage List. Now, the case - of the most controversial cultural heritage on earth – has been suspended.

Quite uniquely, the church of today is exactly the same as in 1335 – erected during the reigns of Stefan Uros and his son Stefan Dusan the Great. Unlike many other churches that have been attacked, smashed and rebuilt, not one wall or pillar has succumbed during 665 years. The church is also unique behind its walls. It holds the largest collection of

Byzantine icons in the world. Not restored or repainted versions, but in their original state as they were created by the masters of the Middle Ages.

- Everything is like you see it... The way it has been through all times... The monk makes a gesture with his arms and silently lets me have a view. Even though my visit was unannounced, Brother Jowan was very hospitable and promptly opened the heavy door to this amazing sight. The longhaired monk with the bristly beard does nothing to break the silence under the arches. Only when asked, he answers in a mild and soft voice followed by a direct look that, in his dark eyes, holds a peaceful balance with the room.

- If the Italians did not protect us, the Albanians would instantly attack us. If we did not have KFOR, we would have to escape, Brother Jowan answers my question about a gloomy present in this impressive place of the past.

Apparently, everyone who talks about Kosovo, and the Balkans in general, tells the truth. There is the truth of one side. There is the truth of the other side. The real truth must be somewhere in between.

- During the war, we protected the Albanians, who took refuge with us. We gave them safe shelter and food. Today, they will not have anything to do with us. They used to work for us in the fields and in the forest. Now they do not dare. They are afraid of the revenge of the UCK if they help us.

Brother Jowan's eyes grow somber and his soft voice sounds a little bitter. Even though the truth is blurry in the Balkans, it is a well-known fact that the monks of Visoki Decani opened the gates and helped the Albanians escape during the Yugoslavian Army's ethnic cleansing last year. It is also a fact that the monks have since then been attacked by Albanians – just like other places in Kosovo where suffering has been substituted with revenge and then more suffering.

Many Orthodox sanctuaries in Kosovo have been blown up or burned to the ground – not unlike what the Serbs did in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The ruined sanctuaries include the Monastery of Saint Gabriel in Binac, Saint Uros Monastery in Sarenic and the Church of the Holy Virgin in Korisa - just to name a few.

Among the human casualties, 1200 Serbs are still reported "missing". The monk, Chariton Lukic, is not among them. His body was found on August 8, but his head is still missing.

- It happened last summer at the end of June. We were attacked with mortars. Nine grenades fell just around us. The nearest about 10 yards from the outer wall, says Brother Jowan.

- Yes, without the Italians we would be forced to try to escape... The Monastery used to be an active part of the area. These days, we only go to Decani when it is absolutely necessary and always escorted by the Italian troops. All our shopping is done in Montenegro – also under escort.

As we talk, we quietly walk around the church. Now and then, we stop to admire the impressive ornaments. With a few exceptions, they all look as if they were made last week. Not a single undecorated spot to be seen. These walls contain more than 1000 large compositions with thousands of figures, and Jesus Christ, being the most important, pictured high up under the dome.

- Both camps have their extremists. The Albanians prefer to hide the fact that we helped them during the war. It does not fit with their picture of us. Albanians have ruined 80

churches and churchyards – many even after the KFOR arrived. They are envious of the several hundred year-old Serbian heritage in Kosovo. The UCK wish to extinguish the existence of this heritage, because it torments them and it ruins their argumentation. In fact, the mosques in Kosovo are Turkish and not Albanian, according to Brother Jowan. He wishes to dissociate himself from the war, Milosevic and the Serbian extremists. The church is against war and destruction. However, Kosovo is Serbian territory and that is the way it is, according to his version of the truth. His desire to talk is waning and he looks at his watch. He needs to get a few things ready for the next ceremony.

- I do not know... I really do not know...

My question about the future of the Monastery and Kosovo makes Brother Jowan lift his shoulders and he gives an apologetic gesture with his hand. His tone of voice suggests that repeating the question would be pointless, because he simply cannot answer it. Still, hesitantly he tries:

-Saint Stefan is the founder of this Monastery. He is our protector and benefactor. Throughout history, he has helped us when things looked bleak and hopeless. He will help us somehow. He is our sanctuary.

Things certainly have been bleak and hopeless for the monks of Visoki Decani. After the defeat at Kosovo Polje, they were under Turkish rule. The story goes that an Imam was hit by a rock and killed under the archway. To the Turks, that was a sign that they were to spare the Monastery. A gigantic lineage of Serbian kings from the Middle Ages adorns one of the walls in the church. The characters closest to the floor have no eyes – only little holes in the wall are left.

- The Turks took out their eyes as far as they were able to reach, which was not that far, Brother Jowan explains and smiles a little. He heads for the exit, letting me know that I am welcome to stay as long as I wish.

The residential wing flanks the north side of the yard. It is characterized by a wide gallery that runs the entire length of the building. Carefully, I walk up the flimsy steps and avoid leaning towards the banister that is hanging only by a few rusty nails. From the gallery, I walk a few planks leading me to the ladder that leads to the Church tower.

As I look up, directly under the gigantic bell, I see the guard. He sits crouched on a three-legged stool wearing his camouflage uniform. The kid quickly hides something under his bag when he sees me. He smiles at me rather embarrassed with his cigarette hanging from his lips. He did not, however, do a good job hiding his secret... Under the bag, a pair of large breasts peak out on the rocky floor. Apparently, not everyone within the Monastery renounce female company these days. In these parts, I guess, a hot magazine may ease many privations when you are on duty as a guard.

Our chat is an awkward mixture of Spanish-English-Italian. They guard the tower in 12-hour shifts. In other words, the place is being watched 24 hours a day, but “no problems out there”, the kid says and points to the valley. He yells out and I now see the Centauro tank by the wall on the other side. The barrel points toward the clear mountain stream that runs through the landscape. In the tower of the Centauro, I see a soldier wearing flashy sunglasses not unlike the ones used in professional cycling and skiing. Down the stairs, the guard leads me through a low-lying passage and a small door on the other side of the

wall where four of his colleagues are standing. I offer the four soldiers the compulsory cigarettes.

-The Monastery is a high-risk zone, one of them says.

-We are always on guard. The people down there... He points to the bottom of the valley towards the town that is not visible from up here. Like everywhere else in Kosovo, the task is carried out very seriously. The soldiers are constantly ready to use their weapons – even up here where the only threat seems to be the crows.

Just as I am about to walk back down, an old Mercedes is slowly making its way up the mountain road. There is a Danish flag in the front window and I remember Brother Jowan telling me that the Monastery receives help from Denmark. It turns out that the driver is one Vitus Nielsen, Engineer and Project Manager of a rebuilding program in Kosovo led by the Danish Church. He arrives with a load of gravel for a new floor.

-We don't exactly hide it, but we don't talk a lot about helping the monks either. The Danish Church does not distinguish between the two sides as long as you need help, so every once in a while I take the truck and come up here. The monks have made a pass for me, which means that I am, in fact, the only person who can get past the Italian guards at any time, Vitus Nielsen explains. We sit down near the gallery where Brother Jowan soon joins us. This time, he offers Slivovits and a diminutive, strong cup of coffee. They talk about the new floor and the monk asks if it would be possible to get a load of tiles. They would like to be ready in time for winter.

Brother Jowan remembers last winter. Minus 20 degrees Celsius seems far away on this warm fall day, but it was extremely cold. The monks burned a load of wood each day just to keep the worst cold out.

-On top of them, the first snow fell as early as October 6 this year, the Dane says and nods towards the mountains. Maybe a warning sign that winter is getting ready to test this country to the limit once again.

I drive down the mountain with Vitus Nielsen. We stop at the checkpoint, where I am to report and check out. When the Dane shuts off the old truck engine, it is suddenly so quiet that I hear the crows again.

I cannot see the Monastery anymore, but now I know that it exists in a hazy shadow of history and different truths. Somewhere up there, 30 monks live in the midst of a grandiose past surrounded by a muted present.

