

MELANIE FRIEND

★ NO PLACE LIKE HOME



Edita Arifi, Kosovo Albanian law student, refugee in Nepro-steno camp, Macedonia, 13 June 1999, describes mementoes she brought with her from Kosovo:-

“The Serbian police often stopped me and my friends and sometimes confiscated our textbooks. They'd ask, “Why are you going to university? What's the point of studying? You'll be out of Kosovo soon.” It made me even more determined to study...”

“The first day in the camp was terrible - I stayed inside the tent looking out at the people going past. I missed my mother and father. Now, two months later, I still think about them all the time. I see them every night in my dreams: my mum says goodnight to me and hugs me”.

ECHOES FROM KOSOVO

If you want to go the easy way, you would bill Melanie Friend's "No Place Like Home," broadly, a human rights project that has little to do with either photography as it is used in news or with news as it is depicted by photography.

For more than a decade British photographer Friend, whose work has most recently been exhibited at the Houston Center of Photography in the United States and at the Hasselblad Center in Sweden, kept returning to Kosovo and the surrounding area to communicate with and depict, in the most general sense of these words, with the plethora of nationalities that make up what Western politicians as early as the 19th century referred to as the "Balkan powder keg."

This is a place where the odd twists of history have placed Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks beside each other in a relatively small area that all of them feel entitled to call home. This is a place, which has seen numerous conflicts that the disintegration of several empires (the Ottoman, the Hapsburg, the Soviet) generated. Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks went on calling it home.

This is the place, which saw, throughout the 1990s, the worst atrocities in Europe since the Second World War: discrimination, poverty, ethnic cleansing, mass rape, destruction, civil,

and then international war; a place that the European Union would assist, in its European Union sort of way, but definitely not have. Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks, trapped in a country that has deliberately ostracized them and having to pay in blood for the crimes of their leaders, would still call it home. Perhaps because there is no place like home.

Melanie Friend is not interested in the newsy aspect of developments in and around Kosovo. In her pictures you would not see bombed buildings, pools of blood, or children's corpses lying in mud. Instead, she is documenting, through photography and recorded testimony of Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks, what has *not* been on the CNN or the BBC: the *reason* why ethnic animosity and sheer savagery can so easily break out into the serenest field, the calmest street, and the most peaceful home. And why Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks would nevertheless call it so.

To be confronted with these ostensibly nonchalant documents of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances is, as Ian Jack, the Editor of *Granta*, puts it, shocking: "The shock is the realization that these suddenly-changed and cancelled lives were once so much like our own." One could argue that this is what the

whole late 20th century international human rights movement is about.

Still, this is the easy way to interpret Melanie Friend's work. Deeper inside, it is as much a tale about the Balkans as it is about universal values, their promotion and negation. Even though "No Place Like Home" expands and enriches our knowledge of the Balkans, with all their inherent controversies, the narrative, at its deeper layers, inspires reflections about the existentialist state of humankind. To preserve their homes, Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks have often had to choose between the "lesser" evil. But does choosing the lesser evil make it less evil? Do people, who have to decide, not tend to forget, more often than not, that it was still evil in the first place? Would the heuristic mill that Serbs, Albanians, Kosovars, Bosnians, Macedonians, Gypsies, and Turks have been put through make them bend down, pick up the broken tools, and start constructing their homes again, or, conversely, was the violence so horrendous that it is unlikely to be forgotten any time soon? What is remembrance? The inability to forget the past? And what is the past? What makes the present live with itself?

These are questions that transcend regional and national boundaries and that have no easy answers. Melanie Friend has been brave to ask them. **Anthony Georgieff**

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Miradije Aliu, Kosovo Albanian, back home in Prishtina after the war, 30 September 1999:

“On June 14, two days after NATO arrived, we made our way back to Kosova.... I felt like it was doomsday. We saw a desert, a dead place, not a living soul anywhere, and lots of houses burning. Everything was in ruins .. As we came through the front gate, everything smelled of ash and human shit. We saw the house we had loaned to the school all charred and burnt, but fortunately, the walls of our little house were still standing ...the Serbian police deliberately had used our home as a toilet .. it took us women - eight of us - six weeks to clean the house ...”



I.S., Kosovo Serb living with 24 hour KFOR protection in his house, Prizren, 25 April 2000:

“I’ve only been on the street, with KFOR escort, three times in the past nine months; my wife came out only once. When my mother-in-law went shopping with KFOR, Albanian villagers shouted abuse at her:” Go to Serbia,” This [Kosovo] is not yours”, ”We are going to kill you.” ... My wife keeps sane by reading a good deal - classics by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal. I spend a lot of time in my workshop, in the part of the garden which isn’t visible from the street. I feel very uncomfortable when I go out the front door. Sometimes I see an Albanian friend pass by. Our eyes meet for a moment, and I can’t see any animosity, but we can’t speak because it’s dangerous for him...”



**Qerim Nerjovaj, Kosovo Albanian,
who survived massacre at Lubizhde
on 12 April 1999**

“...Everywhere I go, there are traces of what happened. Every time I come here, I notice different bits of clothing, and then in the night I see them in my sleep. When I go to see my burned house, I remember it was burned by the same people .. On the road to Prizren, I remember being beaten at the crossroads by the Serbian police... When I’m alone, I get flashbacks. I’m only twenty-five, but because of the things I’ve seen, I feel very old ..” (interviewed 21 October 2000)

