

'Evil is the absence of empathy'

Nuremburg War Trials 1947 – psychological conclusion

Chapter One

March 1999. The road from Pristina was deserted. Snowmelt trickled down the gulleys from the roadside drifts which encased the single track. The local school where Katya Gjikolli taught was closed, derelict, devoid of life and laughter. Swings in the playground hung on their ropes, swaying in the cold spring morning, bouncing only to the whims of the passage of air. Bullet holes peppered the walls.

Katya pressed on with a sadness which enveloped her but she had become used to the feeling; now there was only numbness.

Three years earlier Katya had graduated from The University of Pristina with a degree in English. The University had a history of dissidence, a hot-bed of radicalism according to the Serb authorities; but she had stayed out of politics, and religion for that matter, indoctrination served no purpose in her life; she was a free thinker. After completing her education Katya had of course been approached to work for the local administration as a translator and interpreter but she had declined. Various inducements had been offered – this lecturer post, that headship would be available after she had served her time. She also refused to sign the loyalty pledge to the Serbian regime which, as an ethnic Albanian, she was required to do.

Her decision had meant that she had been excluded from the ‘plum’ jobs, the fast tracks that would ensure her a comfortable ride for her and her family. But she had no regrets; her little school suited her - politicians had always let her down, first the Serbs and now the Kosovan Liberation Army. She wanted no part of the struggle; everywhere all she saw was misery and death. Ever since she was a child Katya had always wanted to be a teacher; she loved the innocence of children – so uncomplicated.

In the last two years her life had changed dramatically.

She had met her husband Ibrahim - known to everyone as Ibi - at the University and they married just after her graduation. Unlike Katya he had always been an idealist and joined the Kosovan Liberation Army in late 1997. They had been married for less than a year when he was called up at short notice to support the offensive at Glogovac. Initially she had had the occasional scribbled notes from him which had been delivered by a local policeman who was sympathetic to the cause, but then it went quiet; she had heard nothing of his whereabouts or well being for over three months. She had no address to write back. Hours had been spent looking aimlessly from her window hoping to see him striding homeward.

They were dark times, and as Katya tentatively made her way along the road towards their cottage, slush clawing at her worn-out shoes, like icy hands, hampering her progress, freezing her feet to the bone, her thoughts spun back to that day three months ago when she answered a knock on her door. It was a bitter, snow-swept morning in late December 1998. She could remember the event as if it were yesterday.

It was just after breakfast and she was in the kitchen washing up when there was a knock on the front door, not an urgent knock that would have caused alarm - there were few visitors to the cottage – but an authoritative, business-like knock. ‘Ibi?’ she thought. Katya made her way through the living room and slowly opened the door. She was confronted by an unkempt stranger in a grubby military uniform.

‘*Jeni Katya?*’ – ‘Are you Katya,’ he asked.

‘*Emri im është Major Artan Kandic,*’ he introduced himself as Major Kandic, commander of the local KLA unit.

As she trudged slowly onwards, her head bent forward against the biting wind, her breath visible in the cold air, she recalled she had asked him in and made him a drink. In her mind, as if it were yesterday, she could see his dishevelled appearance, his soulless eyes staring at

the grounds of coffee as they revolved around the top of the steamy liquid like a whirlpool, watching as they dissolved to nothing. He appeared at first struck dumb with fright, fear or just fatigue, lost in his own world; tired, drawn and beaten. Then, as he sat at their dining table, he started to talk in a faltering, trembling voice, an intensity of emotion that Katya had never witnessed before.

‘Yesterday ...’ he paused and took a breath, ‘we were outside a village not far from Poljanci, when we were ...ambushed by Serb militia ...twenty, maybe thirty enemy. We fought them off for a while but I had lost many men ...’ he paused again. ‘Ibi and me ...we managed to hide in a cottage but we were discovered. Ibi told me to go ...kept shouting ‘go ...get out, I will hold them off’ ...He said that if I made it, I must come and find you and tell you he loves you.’

Katya remembered the major’s tears at this point before he continued, ‘I made it through a back door just before the Serbs stormed the refuge and later I saw them drag Ibi from the building and put him in a truck. He was ...seemed unconscious but it was difficult to tell, I was many metres away...’ he paused again and took another sip of coffee; he kept repeating ‘I am so sorry, I am so sorry; he was a brave, brave man.’

He wiped away a tear with a grimy stubby finger. It had taken all night for the commander to deliver that promise - but he owed Ibi his life.

The news had stunned her and, recounting the event, Katya felt the pain again like a knife through the heart. Given the Serbs’ reputation, she knew that survival in their prisons – if he had made it that far – was unlikely; but she had made a pact with herself that she would keep. She knew she had to be strong for their baby son. Milosz had been born less than four months ago and was conceived the very night before Ibi had left. It grieved her even more that Ibi did not know he had a son.

It had been hard coping with her confinement on her own, but her fellow teachers had been a great comfort and support right up to the birth. Her mother visited when she could but, living an hour away, she had to rely on neighbours for occasional lifts - there was no public transport. Katya had kept working until eight months which meant she had earned enough to feed and clothe herself and put something by in case of emergencies. She had only taken two months off before returning to work but after just a week the school was closed, almost six months ago now; how everything had changed.

Katya checked the road again – nothing, the school had disappeared from view behind her; she whispered a silent prayer to anyone who would listen, ‘Please keep us safe; please keep us safe.’

She could hear the rustling of the bare branches of the trees clacking against each other like some manic timpani; a cold shiver ran down her spine, nothing to do with the penetrating wind. The breeze tugged at the brown scarf which pinned back her blonde hair, her son safely asleep facing her in the papoose sling which she had strung across her chest.

She had no real plan, no arranged itinerary, but she knew she had to get away. Kosovo was a dangerous place and she and her son were both in peril if she were to be captured by the Serbs. Rumours were rife that they made little distinction when it came to slaughtering ethnic Kosovans particularly with apparent KLA connections. ‘I have to be strong, I have to be strong,’ like a mantra, she repeated to herself.

After the devastating news of Ibi’s capture, and after much pleading, she was eventually persuaded to stay with her mother in Lopusnic some 10 miles away from her cottage in Lapugovac; she had only stayed in case Ibi had returned, but she knew it was time to move forward for her son’s sake. At the cottage there were too many reminders of family life with her husband. She had taken with her just a change of clothes for her and Milosz.

Katya was an only child and was close to her mother. Marije Slavic had lived with her husband Jovan for over thirty years but had been widowed five years earlier. Jovan had gone into Pristina for some supplies and didn't come home. He had turned up in the morgue three days later but Marije had been given no details of how he died or in what circumstances.

For over two months during the harshest period of the Kosovan winter, Katya had felt relatively safe in her mother's cottage. They were reasonably stocked with food and neighbours supported each other – there was a great sense of 'community' - but with each day, the war drew closer to their door. Then news came that the Serbian forces were seen in the next village pillaging for supplies; stories of atrocities spread among the local population. Katya knew she would be in extreme danger; it was time to move. She had pleaded with her mother to go with her but Katya knew it would be in vain.

'I was born here and I will die here,' she had said unequivocally.

So Katya was making the dangerous trip back to her home that morning to collect what belongings she could carry - and anything else she might need for her escape. She had begged a lift from Afrim, a neighbouring farmer and family friend who, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to drive her on his wreck of a tractor.

They set off just after dawn, the weather still very cold that time of day but at least the snow was virtually gone, apart from the verges where it had been piled high to clear the way for the occasional traffic. They made slow progress, the huge tyres struggling to maintain traction on the treacherous surface. Eventually after an hour Afrim stopped the tractor some two miles from the village; the farmer refused to go any further, it was too risky; the rumours of Serb patrols made him nervous and the noise of the ancient Lanz Bulldog was loud enough to wake the dead. He was sorry, but she would have to walk the rest of the way.

Lapugovac was a small village, less than two hundred people. There was one shop, a general store where you could usually buy what you needed, and the school where Katya earned a

living. With her teacher's salary and the money Ibi earned from the local garage where he was a mechanic, it meant they were comfortable compared to others.

Their home was a modest house with a small garden at the front and in the middle of a group of three detached two bed-roomed cottages. Ibi had taken their ten year old Volkswagen which had been 'donated' to the KLA, so without any other obvious forms of transport, a long walk looked likely. Although the weather was inching into spring, it was still cool, particularly at night and early morning when there was the inevitable frost of a Balkan winter, but if they wrapped up well it was comfortable enough.

She approached the brow of a hill and squatted low to create as small a silhouette as possible. She could see the cottages clearly, about a hundred metres ahead. Like the rest of the village they looked deserted – the neighbours had obviously packed up and fled or had been forcibly removed. She walked on up to the house, to the front door and stopped. There was no sign of a forced entry – the door appeared intact – perhaps she had been lucky.

'Booby traps; always check for booby traps,' that is what Ibi had said, which she had always thought was alarmist, but this was different. She looked at the door frame not really knowing what to look for; no sign of wires or anything obviously out of place. She moved closer and peered through the frosted glass which was unbroken – there was no movement in the blurred background, nothing. She took the chance and placed the key in the lock and slowly turned it.

Click, the key turned, she heard the lock fall reassuringly.

She pushed against the door carefully increasing the pressure until a gap appeared. Further ... gently. She looked in and opened the door a shade more.

That's when it hit her ...the smell - like rotting meat. She gagged. Quickly holding her scarf to her nose and mouth, she moved inside. It was dark; but the curtains, not fully closed, allowed a shard of light into the room.

And then she saw him, highlighted by the sun's hazy rays, like a music hall performer in a spotlight, his eyes vacant staring at the wall as if appreciating some old masterpiece. His mouth was open, his face twisted by the pain of his final death throes; and the all too vivid tracks of blood from a gaping hole in his chest were clearly visible.

Katya gasped, then retched.

Her initial thought was that it was Ibi. But straight away she could see it was an older man in what seemed to be the remnants of a military uniform. She didn't immediately recognise him. Then she remembered - it was Artan Kandic. But what was he doing here and, more importantly, how did he get here? Her heart was pounding as she moved through the house into the kitchen and found the back door had been forced and there was bloodied footprints leading to the living room, to the table where the body now sat. He must have been shot somewhere close by and made his way to the back door from the woods, Katya thought. He knew the house and would have been looking for help. Instead he had bled to death at her dining table where only a few weeks before he had told her of Ibi's capture.

This was no place for any detailed analysis, there was no time. Quickly now, her mind racing, her pulse off the scale, she went upstairs. Milosz began to cry – he had been asleep for the last hour. He would need a change and feed but not here, he would have to wait a bit longer.

Trying desperately to think logically, her nerves shot to pieces, her emotions in shreds, she went through her cupboards. She had her passport, papers and a small amount of money, about fifty Deutschmarks – the currency of choice in Kosovo - which her mother had given her, and carried them in a small purse which was attached to a belt round her waist. She went upstairs and lay Milosz on the bed.

Her hands shaking, she managed to take the photo of her and Ibi from its frame which still stood on the bedside table, and put it into a rucksack together with a change of clothes, some

baby things for Milosz - blanket, disposable nappies, moist wipes and a few jars of baby food. Needing to keep focus, she was making an inventory in her head trying to salvage some sense of order in the chaos that surrounded her. A couple of minutes passed, or was it seconds, it was difficult to tell, just a blur – that's it - any heavier and it would slow her down and she can't afford to hang around. Got to hurry, got to hurry.

Then she heard it - some distance away but definitely coming closer; a lorry. She wanted to pee.

Katya listened fearfully to the crunching of gears as the driver made allowances for the incline towards the house. She crouched at the window and looked through, peering just above the mantle and saw the vehicle. It stopped. Six soldiers, Serbs, got out and immediately started to urinate against the tree next to the first cottage. Katya froze; Milosz continued to wail, his cries getting louder and louder.

'*Shhh! Qetë! ...*' she whispered abruptly. Whether the sense of danger or just the tone of urgency in Katya's voice had passed to the child she would never know but at that moment Milosz, looking startled was silent.

Katya could hear her own breathing. She tried inhaling slowly to regulate her heart rate but her level of concentration was being driven by her survival mechanism. She exhaled counting to five – a trick she had learned to control her nerves at college, but this was no end-of-term presentation. She was in grave danger and she knew it ...but what to do?

...Decisions, possibilities.

Should she try to make a break for it which would almost certainly start Milosz crying again, or keep down and hope they would drive away?

Her mind was made up for her. She heard the breaking of glass and automatic gunfire from next door. A cry went out to the driver – '*benzin!*' and she saw him go to the back of the lorry

and bring out a large jerry can. They disappeared from view but she guessed what was happening.

Now or never...

She picked up Milosz from the bed and put him in his sling. Then took the rucksack and wrapped it round her shoulders and fastened it securely onto her back; her legs barely able to obey the orders from her brain. The sudden movement started Milosz crying again.

Noise, too much noise.

Quickly down the stairs, into the kitchen, she stopped only to grab a small carving knife from the drawer by the sink. She dropped it into the opening of the rucksack. Then out through the back door, tramping over the small vegetable patch that had sustained them in past years. Too late she remembered she had left her gloves on the dressing room table in the bedroom ...too late. She reached the chain link fence at the end of the garden and pushed it with her foot ...it gave way and she leapt the half metre obstacle holding her child tight to her chest. It was probably two hundred metres to the protection of the woods across an open field of rough marsh grass freckled with lying snow. Running was almost impossible but run she did, keeping her head down as low as possible towards the distant trees. Milosz was screaming from his cocoon.

Hope was hanging by a thread. If the Serbs were preoccupied by their looting or whatever next door then she may have a chance ...her only chance.

Katya struggled across the field; one minute her feet landing on the tops of the mounds of grass, the next disappearing into a hollow of snow. She was clenching her toes to avoid losing her shoes which would render her immobile ...frostbite was still a possibility. One hundred metres ...her eyes played tricks on her; despite her efforts the trees seemed even further away. She dared not look behind her, worried what she might see. Fifty metres, twenty ...then into darkness as the forest enveloped her. She raced further into the trees not stopping to look

back, half running, half walking, desperately trying to increase the distance between her and the danger. The further in she went, the denser and darker became the forest - the pines no more than two metres apart. After what seemed to be an eternity she stopped, disorientated.

She leant against a tree her chest almost exploding with the pressure of blood being pumped round her body. Milosz in his sling moved up and down to the rhythm. She looked around and realised she was hopelessly lost and the feeling of sheer desolation was palpable. She tried to catch her breath but, with no time to lose and no choice, she carried on further and further into the gloom. The loneliness was beginning to eat away at her strength like some unseen parasite, and panic lay just below the surface.

After the arbitrary tracks, mostly made by animals, she eventually picked up a more obvious trail, but had no idea where she was or in which direction she should go. Although she had lived nearby for almost two years she had steered clear of the forest. She found it frightening; it reminded her of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales her mother used to read to her as a child.

North, she thought, would take her towards Glogovac. Katya knew she must stay away from there at all costs. She remembered there was, a train station at Klina which was where the main line from the south to Pec joined the line west from Pristina. Klina would be about 15 miles away as the crow flies but nearer 20 across country. The terrain was mountainous and she would need to follow the contours of the valleys. She recalled visiting the town as a young girl, in happier times. From there she could possibly catch a train and reach the border with Montenegro – then who knows?

Milosz was crying again – she would have to see to him soon. For the first time she looked back in the direction she had come and saw no movement. The darkness of the trees cloaked around her like a shroud. In the distance, for a moment, she thought she saw a pall of smoke but couldn't be certain. She was safe – for now. She quickly saw to her son, cleaning him

with wipes and replacing his soiled nappy which she buried under some pine needles to ensure no trace.

Again decision time – she chose the path to the right, concluding logically it appeared to be heading away from Lapugovac. She followed the track for probably an hour without seeing a soul, Milosz had mercifully gone back to sleep, all she could hear was the wind struggling to break through the trees. Progress was slow and the weight of the rucksack on her back was beginning to tell; getting heavier by the minute, cutting into her shoulders.

After a while the track widened and as she came out of the eerie gloom of the trees, the weak sunlight made her blink. She shielded her eyes. It was a clearing. In the corner she could see an old building, a hut of some kind. It reminded her of the woodman's cottage from Hansel and Gretel. It looked deserted but she wasn't taking any chances. Slowly, keeping in the tree line she carefully approached the shack.

As she got nearer she could see it was made from logs with one open window cut into the middle on the side facing her, not particularly robust but it would provide shelter whilst she fed her son and took stock; a welcome rest. She had been walking for two hours. Reaching the entrance - there was no door - it was obviously just built to provide the lumberjacks with a place to eat their lunch or have a smoke out of the wind. Anxiously, she slowly peered inside. It was dark and gloomy, the small window not really providing sufficient light. She could see evidence of previous visitors - discarded beer cans, cigarette stubs. She could also see the source of the rancid smell in the corner – it was also someone's lavatory.

Steering clear of the mess she found a spot which was reasonably clean and put her rucksack down on the bare earth floor. Lifting Milosz from his carrier he woke up and, clearly hungry, started crying again. Without any water or heat she did what she had to do, she unbuttoned her shirt and pulled down her bra connecting her son to her right nipple. He suckled gratefully. For the first time she started to relax - so far, so good.

She completed her feeding and placed her son on a blanket to change his nappy again. Her back was to the door but instinct told her something was wrong. The light had changed – it had gone dark. She turned to see a shape in the doorway blocking the hazy brightness. Silhouetted against the opening was a man, military, carrying the obligatory AK 47. She inhaled sharply as her survival reflexes took over. She heard the voice of another man – so there were at least two and she was trapped – no escape, no way out. Her heart started to race again.

‘Zdravo, Kako se zovete?’

Serbo–Croat, not her native Albanian but she understood; it was not a greeting - she gave her name as asked. ‘K... K... Katya Gjikolli,’ she managed to stutter.

‘Kada su vam idu?’

She told him where she was heading - ‘Klina.’

She heard the other man’s voice. ‘*Ko je to?*’ – who is it?

‘Njena posebno se Katya Gjikolli– the man at the door told the other her name.

The soldier at the door took two steps forward, slowly, eyeing up the girl. Immediately his gaze was drawn to her open shirt and half exposed breast. Milosz was still on his back on his blanket legs pounding in the air gurgling happily, totally oblivious to the danger. Katya quickly clasped her shirt to protect her modesty and started to button up.

‘Ne, ne!’ He motioned with his weapon for her to drop her hands.

She was still on her knees and turned her back to the soldier. Her hands moved to the floor and she leant forward on all fours protecting her son. She felt hands grasping her ankles and pulling sharply. The momentum caused her to fall flat on her stomach and instinctively she started kicking out at the soldier, her skirt riding up her legs exposing her thighs to her attacker. Her knees dragged across the rough ground grazing them; she felt nothing. Still on her stomach, she screamed, a totally futile gesture; and then gasped in horror as she heard the

click of the safety catch of the AK 47 being released. She turned over and looked on terrified as the man pointed the automatic rifle at her son. She was almost convulsing with fright.

'Ne!'... 'Ne!' she screamed.

The second voice called out *'Šta se dešava?'* ...he was wondering what was happening.

'Ovaj je moj - ostane izvan' - this one is mine - stay outside.

The soldier obeyed; a question of rank ... and knowing his turn would come.

Recognising her situation was hopeless, still on the floor she faced the soldier, her hands held up in submission. Whether it was the inevitability of the situation or some inner strength that had taken over, she would never know but somehow a calmness took hold of her.

'Be strong. I must be strong,' a voice in her head told her.

Sitting up she lifted her skirt and slowly pulled down her panties. Her situation was desperate, she knew resistance was pointless and would surely mean the death of her and her son. At least she may be spared a beating. The soldier placed the gun down on the ground beside him and started unbuttoning his trousers revealing piss-stained underpants. Katya caught her breath bracing herself for what was to come.

He fell on top of her and she let out a deep breath as his weight pressed her to the dirt. She felt his hardness enter her. It was rough and painful; she had not had a man inside her for a long time, not since that final night with Ibi. Tears started to fall from her eyes as the man pumped into her. She was angry, sad, terrified but somehow, paradoxically, she suddenly sensed control had moved in her favour. She stopped crying; this violation was not of her seeking. *Be strong. I must be strong.*

His breath smelt of stale cigarettes and he was beginning to sweat profusely. It was all over in a matter of seconds and, as she felt the stream of his orgasm shoot into her, he collapsed on top of her totally spent.

She wanted to be sick.

His weight was pinning her to the floor, no chance of escape. She turned her head and saw Milosz still on the blanket playing with his toes. But between her and her son was the open rucksack, within touching distance. She slowly moved her hand and carefully rummaged inside. The man was still catching his breath. She found what she was looking for and felt the hard handle of the knife with her fingers. In one movement she swung her arm round and plunged the blade into her assailant's back with all the strength she could muster.

Blood oozed from the wound and he screamed a piercing shriek like a stuck pig, both hands grasping at the knife but out of his reach. She pushed him off and grabbed the rifle just as the second soldier appeared in the doorway, alerted by the scream. Still sat on the floor, she blindly aimed and pulled the trigger, the recoil forcing her backwards, missing Milosz by a matter of inches.

Daylight streamed through the gap, the blockage having slumped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Milosz started crying again frightened by the sudden commotion. She slowly moved towards the door and the motionless body blocking the entrance. Turning him over she could see the bullet had hit him in the face which was now unrecognisable as that of a human being.

She threw up what was left of her meagre breakfast.

Struggling to remain in control, she recognised she was still in danger; other militia would be close by. She quickly dressed herself, grabbed her rucksack, zipped it up and wrapped it round her shoulders and onto her back once more. She lifted Milosz into her arms and into his papoose.

She heard a moaning noise behind her – it was the first soldier, her attacker - still alive. He knew her name and could obviously recognise her again – she had no alternative. Without a hint of hesitation or conscience, she raised the rifle to his head and pulled the trigger. The

groaning stopped. She pulled the knife from his back and wiped the blood on his jacket and put it back in the rucksack.

Milosz screamed.

She dragged the second soldier into the hut away from inquisitive eyes - she hoped. She had to move.

Now!