

**Prison in Macedonia**

Tamara Lazaroff

Zharko, Alek and I are sitting together on this warm summer night, under a *dudinka*, a mulberry tree, enjoying some *rakija*, home brew, soda and wine. The Ohrid lakeside breeze is blowing gently over us and Alek, with wry eyes, is telling me – he is telling us – me and Zharko – about prison in Macedonia – from experience – how you have to take your own cup and bowl and spoon.

I'm not sure whether to laugh.

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. Why would I lie? And all they give you to eat, in your bowl, if you are lucky enough to have one, is boiled mung beans and beetroot. As if you are an animal on a farm.'

Zharko's elastic face chuckles into sudden creases and lines. From his relaxed, buoyant expression, I would say he has heard the details of this story before, but he leans in to listen, generously, as if it is for the first time.

Zharko and Alek are old friends. I don't know for how long. But, I can see they have an easy familiarity like two old comrades, like high school chums. Me? I am no-one special, probably, for them, just another tourist passing through, a paying guest at Zharko's pensione in Ohrid on which the *dudinka* stands.

In my mind, of course, I am someone. I am more than just a tourist. This country was my almost-homeland. It is the country of my parents and grandparents, my great-grandparents and great-great grandparents before that. And this is my 'return' 'home' to gather knowledge, stories, alternate realities, the possibilities of the life I might've had, lived, breathed, owned, been owned by, had to break free of – as from a prison – just as anyone attempts to break free of what is expected, conventional, known.

Zharko and Alek are good people to talk with, now, about these possible realities. We are *generacija*, of the same generation, all of us in our late thirties now. But we all notice that I've got a baby-face, in comparison to them, as if I've had it too easy, as if I've lived in a match-box all my life in Australia padded in cotton wool. I've got no lines or scars or cuts on my cheek or forehead, like Zharko, especially. He catches my eyes running over them.

'I know, I know,' he says. 'I look like a criminal, like our Alek. But, I swear, I got this one' – he touches the freshest scar above his left eyebrow – 'from running into a door.'

He has spent the winter just gone, he says, with too many things to think of, renovating: trying to quickly turn the crumbling ground floor of his mother's house, the family home in the old part of town, into rooms that people will want to pay to sleep in during their holidays.

He laughs. 'This one here is from walking into a pole on the street, when I was trying to decide which plaster to use. I'm ashamed to say it's true!'

'Prison in Macedonia.' Tamara Lazaroff.

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I like Zharko's face. I like his scars. I would like to trace over them, the sticking-out seams, with my fingertips. But I don't – I can't – because it would seem too intimate, like a romantic gesture which it isn't, it couldn't be. Instead I praise him with words.

I say, 'You've done a good job' – with the renos, I mean – even though every time I brush past the walls in my room the plaster crumbles away, even though the shonkily-hinged door to my bathroom doesn't close properly. Who cares? It's the effort, the trying that counts. And the warm welcoming atmosphere that Zharko creates, in his house, just by being himself.

Because of this – Zharko's warmth – I am always forgetting the line, between us. Maybe, there is no line. It's confusing sometimes. I don't know whether I am just a temporary tenant or now a friend, because of the generosity he exudes, the genuine connection that seems to exist between us.

Yesterday, he invited me to go for a swim with him in the late afternoon. We did lazy laps together in the lake and then we lay down, side by side, under the sky and soaked up the sun until we were dry. It was the first time I had seen him wearing so little, just a pair of sagging speedos, and so I got to see, to study the rest of his many scars – on his chest, his arms, his legs – a lifetime, I thought, of distraction, absentmindedness, dreaming whilst awake – and not the result of crime or violence as it might seem.

I also got to hear what came before.

Up until last spring Zharko lived in South Africa. He lived there for ten years – as, Macedonian, professionless and cashless as he was, no other country would have him. But he badly wanted to get away. He would've gone anywhere he said, to see what else there was to see of this world. And he saw it – some.

He worked in a semi-legal gambling house in Johannesburg with other people, from other countries – Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Kosovo, Bangladesh – whose citizens no-one else wanted.

He earned good money until one night the Chinese mafia arrived with machine guns – there'd been some kind of unpayable debt. So, Zharko with some of his fellow workers, in an attempt to save himself, ran up to the first floor, jumped off a balcony, broke ankle bones – but didn't feel the pain till afterwards – and fled into the night.

But this isn't what made Zharko want to return to Macedonia.

He said he could feel himself changing, becoming the kind of person who likes to live alone, like a Western European, all locked in himself, with alarm systems, for everything, going off. Zharko didn't want this to happen, he said. Even though he had his own house, a good car, money, it wasn't enough.

I said I understood as we drove back to the *pensione* along the pot-holed road in his old, beat-up Yugo. We were silent the rest of the way.

But here, now, there is no silence. There is only Alek, gregarious, who wants to talk and laugh, to steer the conversation back to the topic of prison in Macedonia. For him it's almost one big joke.

'Can you believe it?' he says. 'All they gave us to eat was boiled beetroot and mung beans. Every day! But this is the food I hate most in the whole of the world.'

We all laugh. The terrible, terrible tragedy of it.

I watch the way the two of them do – laugh – free in their bodies. It delights

me. I see the two old men they will become, *inshallah*, if they make it that far.

Zharko slaps his thigh and makes a sucking in and out sound, like an old-fashioned air pump. And Alek laughs with no sound at all coming out of his wide-open mouth. You can see all the fillings and the gaps where he's already lost some of his teeth. Zharko's body vibrates. And then there's one final wheeze.

But I want to know how Alek came to be in prison.

We will get to that.

First, Alek and Zharko want to laugh some more. They do. Their laughter is infectious. It is also intelligent, deep, dark, ironic. Its meanings I can garner just the edges of. They are remembering a mutual friend – Lupcho – who went to prison a couple of months ago – not in Macedonia but, in all places, Belgium, for something petty, an unpaid fine.

'Imagine! Lupcho!' Alek says. 'In prison! In Belgium!'

There is more open-mouthed, uncontrollable laughter, the wiping of tears from eyes.

This Lupcho, I gather from the two, is the most law-abiding citizen you could meet. He is honest to a fault. This is what makes the prison sentence so funny for them.

Alek is saying, 'But remember, he wouldn't even cross the road unless a policeman waved a flag and gave him the nod.'

Zharko is saying, 'I remember he wouldn't give me the answers to the driving exam – even when I offered to give him a hundred *dinar*.'

Alek is saying, 'Better he went to prison in Belgium than here, in Macedonia. He wouldn't survive. But imagine! A TV and DVD in every cell! Special food to suit every allergy. Free medical care. In prison in Belgium, Lupcho, I hear, is studying to be an astronaut. You can do everything in prison in Belgium. You can fly to the moon!'

Lucky Lupcho. We all agree about that.

But Alek...

Apparently, as Alek tells it, he once lived quite close to luck but not close enough. He used to share a one bedroom flat in Brussels with Lupcho, five other Macedonians and one Serb – Toni – that was his name. Alek makes a point of repeating it again.

'Toni, *be*.'

*Be* means 'man'. Alek flicks the back of his friend's head to wake up his memory bank.

Zharko says, 'Ah, Toni.' His eyes flare up a moment in recognition.

There's a story there, but not for me, not this time.

Alek goes on. He faces me, intently.

'We were all, you know, trying to enjoy the luxuries the West still does best: good times on film, good times in style, label whiskey, sunglasses, sexy music, sexy art.'

Alek was a student then. He was studying to be an architect. He had dreams. He also, obviously, had a student visa and a working visa too, but then they both ran out. They lapsed.

Now, Alek explains, under the *dudinka*, what I already know.

'We all go to other countries to make money. Everyone does from here – like

Zharko. Sometimes we like it better. And we want to stay. Life is good in Belgium. The stars shine brighter there. I did not want to go home. So I didn't. I became an Illegal Immigrant.'

Alek and Zharko begin to laugh now, afresh.

'An Illegal Immigrant,' Zharko repeats again and again. In English with his thick Balkan accent, he sounds out all the syllables, emphasising every one. Gives each rendition a new intonation, all of them filled with menace, evil.

'Yes,' says Alek. Proud. 'This is what I was. But then I got sick of being poor.' Alek's face shows mild disgust. 'I got sick of asking my parents, like a baby, for twenty euros here, twenty euros there. I got tired of waiting for the money to arrive, also. I wanted to be my own man. So I slipped back across the border, into Macedonia. I went to Skopje, the capital, and I got a job in a bar along the banks of the stinking Vardar. This river will stink, for me, always. And I waited.'

We wait too – for the rest of the story – as Alek pauses briefly to fill his shot glass with more *rakija*, downs it and then goes on.

'Friends, this is how it happened. In the bar, I worked. One week, one month, two months, three. It didn't matter. I knew they would come. You can't overstay your welcome in the EU without someone taking notice. But I was calm, I was patient. It was the middle of summer. It was Skopje. Skopje, our capital, you have to know, is just one giant *dupka*, a hole that collects the humidity and dust. This heat, it makes us Macedonians more lazy. Everything takes twice as long. So I had time. I knew that.

I also knew there were people ahead of me in the queue. So I waited my turn. And then they came, as I knew they would. It was right at the end of August. And they were just as I expected. Two middle-aged coppers in plain clothes. One with a flabby stomach hanging over his pants from too much pork, and the other one with large sweat patches under his arms and bad breath like sour milk. Lazy, in no hurry. They sat down at some stools by the bar and asked for two beers, a couple of *Skopskos*. They said, "Don't worry about glasses, young man. Just give us the bottles."

And then they drank and smoked a bit. They eyed off the waitress' arse. They made some lewd remarks, loud enough for everyone to hear. They tried to bring back their youth.

After a bit, one of them, the one with the stomach said, "So, you'd be Alek Nikolovski, then?" taking a swig.

I said, "Yes, that's me."

The other man with the sweat stains said, "Well, here's our man."

I didn't put up a fight. It was too hot. Forty-four degrees. If I really wanted, I suppose, I could have run but where would I have run to? I took off my apron. I went to tell his boss why I wouldn't be able to finish my shift. My boss accepted my reasons. He wished me luck. I was ready, but then the coppers didn't want to rush.

One of them said, "Just get us two more *Skopskos* for the road, hey pal?"

The other one added, "Well, you might as well get one for yourself too."

So I did. Then we sat and drank together, we talked about the football, this and that, and then when we finished the fat one pulled out the pair of handcuffs from his pocket. I offered him my wrists.

As we left, one of the other barmen – a good man – a Muslim – called out, "Hey, Alek. Here. Take these."

He knew, from experience, I'm guessing, about prison in Macedonia. There are more Muslims and gypsies than anyone else in there. He gave me a bowl, a cup and a spoon. His own, goddamn it. He probably carried the things with him, in his bag, just in case. And I just looked at him, as if he was mad.

I said, "What is this?"

He said, "In case your parents can't come to see you straight away."

I said, "What?" – because I didn't know. I'd never been to prison in Macedonia before.

The coppers just gave my friend a wink and waved, pulling me by my collar towards the van. They pushed me in. They put the siren on, for fun. Then they took me where I had to go. And that was that.'

I have lots more questions. I want to know if Alek made friends in there. And what he did, how he spent his days. But Alek, all he wants to do is take off his shirt. He's sweating, he's hot, I suppose.

Then he turns. He is showing me his back. He wants me to see.

He says, 'This is what I did in prison in Macedonia. I got this tattoo.'

It's huge. It would've taken weeks, months to complete. It's of an intricate eagle with outstretched wings – a power symbol – and then over the top in a horseshoe kind of arc are the Cyrillic letters. They say: СО ПАТНИК ПАТНИК.

I read the words, out loud.

'But you don't know what that means, do you?' Zharko asks.

Zharko wants to tell me it's a Macedonian kind of idiom, an old saying. He wants to tell me that in Macedonian ПАТНИК (pronounced *patnik*) has a double meaning. The modern – 'journeyer'. And in the old Macedonian – 'suffering' – the noun.

So the tattoo reads: 'With the journeyer, suffering'.

I say that I understand, that even though I have not been to prison in Macedonia – and I probably never will – that this saying makes sense. With any journey there is the accompanying suffering – and also, you hope, some joy.

For me, for example – coming to Macedonia – being here – it's hard – I feel so much emotion. It's a tangled knot I have no words for, yet. It makes me tired all the time. I sleep and sleep till midday. I go to bed before nine, exhausted as if I've been carrying, dragging around with me a heavy weight all of the day. Of course, I know, my suffering is a privileged suffering, different to the suffering of these two good men. But suffering is suffering any which way – it's relative.

Never mind. Tonight, I am warm and lighter because of the company of Zharko and Alek. I smile at them. I smile at the lake. I smile at the starry sky. I smile at the whiskey on the table. If I don't smile, I'll probably cry.