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6-23-99

After Hiding for Months, Albanian Is Local Hero

By CARLOTTA GALL

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia — Veton Surroi believes he owes his life to looters in a utility truck. The prominent publisher, a member of the Albanian delegation to the Kosovo peace talks in France last spring, was one of the few leaders of the Albanian community to remain in Pristina throughout the last three months of turmoil and survive.

Once, on one of his rare ventures outside to swap safe houses, Surroi saw three armed men climb out of a special police car and come toward him.

"I was scared as hell," he recalled in an interview Sunday in the looted offices of his newspaper, Koha Ditore, Kosovo's main Albanian-language daily.

"I was saved by a utility truck that came by," he said. The men in the truck were looters and drew the interest of the police. "I went quickly down a side street. It gave me time to get away."

It was just one of several close shaves in the 11 weeks he lay low in Pristina, Kosovo's capital, evading Serb police squads and paramilitary groups who were herding Albanians out of the city and hunting down eminent intellectuals.

Surroi was almost certainly a target. After the human rights lawyer Bajram Kelmendi was killed on March 24 on the first night of violence in Pristina, Surroi went underground.

He has emerged as something of a hero to local Albanians, one of the few who stuck it out throughout the NATO bombing and the Serb rampage, refusing to flee to neighboring Macedonia or Albania. He looks weary, a little thinner, with dark smudges under his eyes and a closely trimmed beard.

Sitting smoking his trademark pipe, he said the decision to stay was a moral one. "I thought that as somebody who signed the Paris accords, I had taken some responsibility and could not go out. I thought 'I am going to suffer the consequences.'"

"Also the people here in Koha Ditore, we are kind of a family. I was absolutely not going to leave while others were here."

Surroi, son of a Yugoslav diplomat, who grew up largely abroad and speaks fluent English and Spanish, also admitted that he had misread both Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and NATO.

"I thought it would be shorter. I had miscalculated Milosevic and overestimated NATO. I thought they would move much faster in their targeting. The first week they looked like the sisters of mercy. It drove me crazy."

Although Surroi routinely denies any political ambitions, he is often mentioned by diplomats and foreign observers as a potential political leader of Kosovo. His stint underground in Pristina is likely to enhance his image among local Albanians.

Asked what he intends to do now, he joked: "First, I am thinking how to get an espresso machine into the office." His newspaper offices were looted of equipment and his printing presses across town were destroyed. On top of that, Pristina still has no water and there is not a single cafe in town serving coffee, the favorite drink of the Balkans.

"We need strong democratic institutions. Koha Ditore is a strong institution and has survived," Surroi said, drawing on his pipe. "It needs to be independent and a pillar of society through which citizens can be informed."

Surroi clearly intends to rebuild his newspaper, which for the past six weeks has been published in Macedonia by some editors who did escape. He wants, he said, to help nurture new political figures and parties.

He is critical of the two men who are currently the main rivals for the political loyalty of Kosovo Albanians — Hashim Thaci, the young commander from the Kosovo Liberation Army, and Ibrahim Rugova, the writer long seen as the leader of Kosovo's Albanians, who has lost ground over the past year to the KLA and whose image suffered during the war because of his televised meetings with Milosevic.

The two should help to form a consensus government that would work closely with the U.N. mission that is to run Kosovo for the foreseeable future, Surroi said. Elections should not be held before next spring or summer, he said.

Despite strong urging from the international community, Thaci and Rugova have not met since the Kosovo peace talks collapsed in March after the Albanian delegation signed an accord but the Yugoslavs refused, Surroi said.

Rugova, who initially stayed in Pristina and went to Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital, on at least two occasions to see Milosevic, eventually left in May for Italy. Thaci's whereabouts are difficult to determine — he is often in Albania's capital, Tirana, but also in Kosovo with his guerrillas.

Surroi, by contrast, can say with truth that he has suffered along with the people of Kosovo.

Recalling his time in hiding, he said the low point was staying with four families crammed into one house and realizing that his presence was endangering them. "I was thinking, 'Why should they pay the price, why is my life worth more than that of a 13-year-old kid?'" Surroi said.

That pushed him to move another time. His only moments outside were the four times he changed his hiding place. He believes he was not caught because he avoided the telephones, which he said police were tapping, and which soon went down anyway. He was careful even about garbage that might give away his presence, he said.

He started out staying with relatives, and ended up in the homes of vague acquaintances. His 64-year-old mother was with him all the time. "She is a strange kind of revolutionary," he said, laughing.

END

Surroi

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