

## **SCHENGEN BEARS**

*Mileta Prodanović*

I have told this story at least hundred times. And every time, just like an ancient story-teller who is passing the glorious historical events to new generations, I would come up with some new details. The general idea was always the same, but each new telling gives a new and specific highlight, and the story picks up brand new, and for me unexpected point. Sometimes it focuses on bravery of its actors, and the next time it depicts the European Union as *Immaculate*, a protector-saint wearing a dark blue robe and halo made of golden stars, just like a caring mother concerned for our future even when she's bombing us.

At first, I was reluctant to put the story on the paper, because once it is recorded it loses its unique breath of life - just like a butterfly that must be pinned down and killed first in order to take its eternal place in a glass showcase of some butterfly collection. Truth be told, the audience ready to listen to my story was becoming very small - everyone I know have already heard the story in some form - as an anecdote or an elaborate history full of details. I was certain that printed text would go much further than my voice, but undoubtedly, without the possibility of improvisation, the sensation would be dulled.

Prehistory begins in mid 90s of the last century. It was a time when our beloved dictator, after signing the peace treaty, transformed in the eyes of the foreign media from «Balkan Ripper» into the «warrant of peace and stability in the region». This acknowledgement indeed flattered him and enabled him to torture and steal from us - his vassals, even more. The wall of sanctions, raised at one time with the purpose to confine his destructive passion, was removed for a moment. Our basketball players were allowed to play with foreigners, ours singers were allowed to sing on faraway stages, our artists were allowed to show they work beyond the black hole.

My wife, who was working in a Belgrade gallery at the time, was given the task to organize an international visual arts exhibition - the first one since we were allowed to socialize again with civilized countries. During preparations, she met a curator from Thessalonica and they became friends. Let's say, for the sake of the story, that her name was Penelope.

Few years later, our dictator, esteemed western companion, went back to his previous form of the «Balkan ripper» - and great powers decided to punish him by bombing us.

In my home town, bombing is regarded as some form of a natural catastrophe. The reasons are always different, just like the forces sending their planes to our skies were always different - but it always happens that bombing comes in the spring. People would usually look at the tree tops, see the buds almost exploding into leaves, and mumble: „Hmm... spring. We should be careful...”

We heard on the radio that the fatal fireworks started. For 50 years, my country, cornered between two cold-war blocks, have prepared for this attack - whether coming from the East or the West. We were growing old listening to the motto: “There is nothing that can surprise us”. When it finally happened - it turned out that

the alarm sirens were out of order. We asked our neighbors whether they have heard the strange sounds, some kind of howling. They all shook their heads.

The city was in the dark. From the window, we could see the glimpse of people running to the shelters. The phone rang. Line was filled with static, so it was clear that it was a long-distance call. Sobbing and poor English of the caller prevented me to recognize who it was - afterwards it turned out that this was my wife's friend from Greece. She was worried for our safety, horrified with the fact that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, someone she knows can be killed in the explosion of the rocket missile or in the ruins of their own home hit by bombs.

As the days of NATO intervention went by, her calls become more frequent: we tried to calm her down, we explained to her, and other friends calling from the safe distance, that what was happening was just some kind of a video-game. In this game we are just pixels - only difference is that after making a mistake, there is no option to click on the "play again" icon.

Each time she saw a pointed North Alliance aircraft, loaded with peace-making projectiles, setting off from the base near Villa Paladini, Penelope would call to warn us and to share some of her concerns. It was no use explaining that we too were carefully monitoring the movements of these metal birds, that we're watching the same TV programs and enjoying the smiling faces of young pilots giving statements on the runway after a successful mission, that we too are gradually learning new vocabulary that is being born on the press conferences of the glorious NATO alliance, where, for example, the expression "civilian massacre" was replaced by a much dignified one: "collateral damage"...

The following days showed that propagandas, which were crossing over our heads, seemed to be more destructive for our mental health than bombers (that we couldn't see anyway) whose brilliant actions were coming to us only as an echo of distant explosions, as the burning night sky, or images of crushed metal and dissembled bodies on our TV screens.

Belgrade Zoo, located in the old fortress, quite close to our flat, was one of the mythical nodes of nearly all earlier bombings. It seems that the people were more afraid of the possibility to meet an alligator or a tiger in front of their houses, eating remains of human bones, than of the devastating effects of bombs. This nightmare image had its historical example: during the German bombing in 1941, the Zoo was indeed hit. After all, this is also the opening scene of a pretentious domestic movie, the most successful export product from the Dictator's era.

The battle for the freedom of our land - as it was reported by television stations loyal to our brave leader, beside the soldiers included various show-biz personas, defiant concerts on squares and bridges were held every day, the song and dance glorified the destruction of the land. Indirectly, the saga was contributed by wild animals: director of the Belgrade Zoo dispatched a pathos-filled proclamation that the animals will inevitably become the victims of the bombing. Leopard, stressed by detonations, chew its own paw, zebras tried to commit suicide by running into the wall... He especially emphasized the fact that thirteen brown bears will most certainly die from hunger.

The next time Thessalonica curator called, when we somehow managed to persuade her that we're in no immediate danger, it turned out that Penelope has a brother. His

name is Yorgos, but he preferred to be called George. This brother, if we understood her correctly, was head of a non-governmental organization for protection of the Balkan brown bears.

The activists of "Ursa Felix" heard the appeal of the charismatic Belgrade Zoo director. They decided to act - in the name of the principles of their organization, in the name of the general declaration on the animal rights, and in the name of European Union, the most generous donor of their organization.

It took me several talks with Penelope to finally believe that this was not a joke. I was still in disbelief even after we solved some major transport problems and came to setting the best possible route for a long-vehicle truck to pass through Belgrade center.

One day she called to tell us that the expedition had started. The crew were two vets, a driver and, of course, the main man of the organization, Penelope's brother. They decided to take the longer route via Bulgaria, since most of the roads in the south of the country were crowded by Kosovo refugees trying to find salvation in Macedonia. They were moving on side country roads - most of the bridges on the high-way were damaged.

At this stage of the bombing, the blackouts were no longer necessary: state-of-the-art missiles with graphite fibers were tested so successfully that short circuits on Serbian power lines staged a re-run of the Old Testament darkness. Nevertheless, with the help of my drawings sent by fax, the Hellenes found their way to our street.

Under the dim light of a gas lamp, we were looking at the colorful "Ursa Felix" leaflets. Bad conditions prevented us to read the text (it was in Greek anyway), but the photos spoke louder than words. We could see unfortunate bears dragged by wandering Gypsies from one Balkan fair to another. For centuries, bears were forced to dance and moan to music, and to imitate human beings, thus earning the money for their aggressive and heartless masters.

Torn between traditional minority rights and animal rights, the "Ursa Felix" activists chose the latter: they have been purchasing from Gypsies their livelihood - tamed bears. Bear-owners from Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria did not hesitate to give up their animals - the offered amount surpassed their annual earnings by far - for just a part of this sum they could easily buy a bear cub from the hunters, train it by use of alcohol, so that it stays small, pierce its nose with hoop and set out on the road, to visit new fairs or other animal protection activists...

Beside the photos of tortured animals with shabby furs were shots of impeccable bears, bear-models, taken in the freedom of the Northern Greece wild-life parks.

My task was to lead corpulent descendents of Achilles and Ulysses in their final section of the voyage - through the darkness of the park and the fortress, and to the pre-arranged apartment in the Zoo. There was no moonlight. Fortunately, I was very familiar with paths, so I almost did not need the flash-light. Sinister silence was broken from time to time by roars of frightened animals or a cry of a suddenly awoken bird.

Skilled Greek vets finished their job quickly. They were not disrupted by air-raid sirens, or hissing sounds of cruise missiles flying low over Belgrade roofs.

Lucky bears were put to sleep and loaded into the huge truck. The following day, sometime around noon, they set off for the South, towards the Schengenian Country. We waved after them for a very long time.

Our Greek friends were happy because they succeeded in a very important part of their mission. Now, the only thing left was to sneak through hidden roads to the verge of closed zone, and to believe that the images of numerous saints glued to the wind-shield of their truck would protect them from the stay missiles.

I was wondering whether the freshly awoken bears, still dizzy from the chemicals running through their veins, know how lucky they are: they were leaving the black hole, the zone impossible to escape from - without standing in line for days, in rain or snow, waiting for the visa outside some European embassy. Unlike my fellow citizens, they were not forced to give proof to consular officers that the invitation to, for instance, choir festival was not forged - by singing something...

Hissing missiles continued to cruise over our heads. When we had electricity we continued to monitor reports from Brussels press conferences of the glorious Alliance, to improve our knowledge by multitude of useful data, such as, for example, that depleted uranium is not so hazardous for health as once thought...

The spring turned into summer: the season for wearing t-shirts with "Ursa Felix" logo in the shape of a teddy bear.

Madam State Secretary of the United States promised that the bombing would return us to the stone age. As the days went by, this worthy ideal was getting closer. If we find ourselves among the ones spared by the "smart missiles", we will be able to paint animals on the walls of our caves just like the ancient artists of Alta Mira.

I was certain that in that case I would paint bears. I would put my efforts - in line with my skills, to give the painted bears the portrait characteristics of the bears I helped save. Thirteen of them. Some say unlucky number... some say lucky.

Mileta Prodanović (Belgrade, 1959) artist, writer and art critic, lives in Belgrade, where he studied architecture and painting. Professor at the University of Arts in Belgrade, publishes essays, art criticism and fiction since 1982. Since 1980 he is exhibiting his work extensively mainly throughout Europe. In 1986 he was one of the artists representing Yugoslavia at the Venice Biennale.