

## **The Watchdog and his Murderers - A walk through Belgrade with the Serbian investigative journalist, Dejan Anastasijevic.**

**By Stefan Apfl, Falter weekly**

They came to his home at 2.45 AM. Dejan Anastasijevic and his wife Lidija were asleep. Magda, their 15-year-old daughter was still out enjoying Belgrade's nightlife, when two unknown perpetrators placed two hand grenades, which had been stuck together, on the window sill of their ground floor apartment. The detonation shattered the neighbourhood's windows and drove grenade splinters into the walls of the bedroom. Only because the force of the first grenade blew the other back out onto the street, undetonated, did the Anastasijevics survive the attack. Only for this reason.

The attack was carried out on Saturday, 14th April 2007. The apartment in the narrow Hadzi Djerina street is a hundred meters from the fashionable Speakeasy Cafe, in which Dejan Anastasijevic takes refuge from the stifling midday heat of Belgrade. He seems in a hurry. Restlessness is in his nature. He extinguishes a cigarette, and reaches for the packet. His Zippo lighter-bears the inscription: Yugoslavia Federal Police. For years they prevented him from sleeping easily. The man has a sense of humour.

Anastasijevic, 45, looks unremarkable. He is freshly shaven, with short hair, a checkered shirt and sandals. What you won't see: he is a thorn in the flesh of a nation, a nation that would prefer not to confront its recent past. He writes from Belgrade for the Serbian weekly Vreme (Time), and the American Time magazine, about security, organized crime and the past. In Serbia, these are far reaching and dangerous assignments.

The young Anastasijevic read comics, wrote poems, and listened to Lou Reed while wearing outlandish leather jackets, as if to make a statement. Had the course of events in Yugoslavia taken a different path, he would now be a western style yuppie. But as things turned out, he's left trying to forget the war and the grenades in his apartment, by means of too much work and too much alcohol.

The name of Dejan Anastasijevic became well-known in the nineties. Vukovar, Srebrenica, Pristina. The Yugoslav reporter reported on the civil war in his homeland and the places that became international bywords for horror. He ate dinner with the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, interviewed General Ratko Mladic, and eventually become one of the main witnesses at the cross-examination in the Hague of the former Serb dictator, Slobodan Milosevic. The war is history. Anastasijevic helped write that history. Like many other Serbs he is still in its grip today.

In a TV debate on April 12 2007 he criticized as too lenient a court ruling from two days previously against four Serb paramilitaries who had executed six Muslims in the Bosnian War. The killings were recorded on videotape. The victims, some not even adults, are seen being taunted. Three days after his television appearance, Anastasijevic was torn from his sleep by the grenade.

The assassination had two consequences. For the first time Serbia, as a whole, came to the support of a difficult and provocative journalist. The pro Western President Boris Tadic, the

nationalist head of government Vojislav Kostunica and the most important media of the country clearly said: this has to stop! The second consequence: Anastasijevic has known since then that he must fear for his life and for his family. It would not have been the first murder of a journalist in Serbia. Sometimes it looks like an accident. Sometimes “they” shoot their victims in public. In all of the cases, the question of who “they” are remains unanswered. Liberal media and international observers suspect ultra nationalists, former Milosevic loyalists, whose orders still come from the very top, as being behind the attack.

*”War is a matter of predictable risks and how to minimize them. They could catch me now, whenever and wherever they want. But they won’t change my life. They can’t frighten me anymore. Only my wife and my dentist can,”* said Anastasijevic, and he laughs. His face resumes its serious expression sooner than he would have liked it to.

On the way from Speakeasy café to his office at Vreme one passes by Bulevar kralja Aleksandra and Tasmajdanskipark, where the young Dejan emptied sand pits and chased after balls. This side of the six lane street is ‘his patch’ in a city of 1.5-million residents: *“My castle. Everything I need is here. My café, my bar, my editorial office and my home,”* says the Belgrade resident.

He was born here. His father worked as a radio journalist, his mother as a scientist in the military - upper middle class, not particularly religious, not particularly politically active. In his youth he went through the same momentous stages as his peers in the West. “Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll.” Like them, he took secret drags on joints, travelled through Europe by train, whined along to Neil Young and grappled with the system after reading “1984” in his bedroom. Like them Anastasijevic loved Hesse. And like them he is ashamed of it. *“It was a golden age. And we didn’t realise it,”* he says. His generation grew up in an open, prosperous Yugoslavia. At a time when Tito ruled a functioning multi-ethnic state and Yugoslavs were equally at home in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Skopje.

On the Kralja Alexandra some passers-by recognise the journalist. The chain-smoker breathes heavily and is slightly hunched over when he walks. His arms hang down at his sides without swinging. He looks like an old guard dog, on patrol once again. Only twice since his birth has he left the country, for a year. The first time was in 1999, when he fled to Vienna to escape the Yugoslav State Security. In 2001, he was awarded a scholarship to Harvard. Things change quickly in Belgrade.

He has little in common with the Belgrade of tomorrow which is developing two kilometers from here. International chains like Zara, Mango and Gucci came soon after the end of sanctions, adding to and stirring up the already colourful mix of time and form. Next to the illuminated letters advertising Hotel Balkan one finds the emblazoned logo of McDonald's. High-rise monsters of steel and glass tower over the ruins left by bomb attacks.

A few isolated groups of young men, or couples, are the only visitors from abroad. Few are still curious about the other Europe. Those who do come, are surprised to see the women of Belgrade dressed in a manner that reveals confidence in their own bodies. Exposing a great deal of skin, and leaving little to the imagination, they strut along the streets - as if these were catwalks and springboards to the West in one. Supposedly, there is currently nowhere in Europe where as many cosmetic surgery operations are performed per day, as in Belgrade.

Anastasijevic's pay at Vreme is no more than the average for a Serb, that is, between 200 and 300 euros a month. More than a third of the population is between 15 and 35 years old, one third of them are unemployed. Yet nine out of ten have a mobile phone. The biggest problem for the youth of Serbia is the lack of freedom to travel. It costs them a lot of time and money to get one of the coveted visas. The young people long to go to London, although Serbia is the only place where their identity as Serbs can go unnoticed. Abroad the term evokes the image of an aggressor, a criminal. Anastasijevic: "Serbia is now a European state that has deficiencies, as do many others. The country belongs to Europe. It will go its own way and scream and kick while doing so."

Reaching the two story office building, he enters the upper floor at Vreme (Time), a weekly political magazine, liberal and out of the mainstream. Black office furniture, dark grey carpets and smoke-yellowed walls dominate the atmosphere. Two types of editors scurry through the halls - women in their late twenties, and old bearded fellows. In the time of Slobodan Milosevic, when ninety percent of the media were under state control, a triumvirate told the other side of the story; the radio station B92, the daily newspaper Danas, and Vreme.

The new-found freedom of speech and competition have reduced the magazine's importance. With 17,000 print copies it is trying to hold its own in the competition for attention. However, in a media landscape, which has become increasingly commercialized and trivialised, in part due to investment by foreign publishers like WAZ and Ringier, Vreme still represents quality. Anastasijevic started contributing to Vreme in 1993, reporting on war torn areas of Yugoslavia.

Initially he didn't want to have anything to do with war and politics. Comics and literature were his domain. He quit studying molecular biology in 1986 after ten semesters in order to make a career in these fields. Dejan Anastasijevic found translating short stories and reading comics for the newspaper Student, more appealing. The obstreperous editorial staff was fired by Milosevic in 1987. In 1991 Anastasijevic also had to abandon his twice weekly show on radio B92 in which he had reviewed the latest comics. Daily, the military police knocked on his door to draft him for the war against the Croats. In order to escape a civil war, in which he did not want to take part, on any account, he fled to Vienna, where he knew a girl from his youth, and stayed for three months. During the day he packaged Falter advertisements for fifty Schillings an hour. At night he roamed among the cafés, arguing about real world communism with Marxists. Finally, he decided to report on this war that wouldn't leave him in peace.

Anastasijevic empties his next glass of red wine. He is seated in the garden of the editorial staff's local, where leafy trees provide shelter from the afternoon heat. It was here that he had drunk coffee with President Tadic on the day of the attack.

*"I don't miss the war. Although it had a fun side, this cowboy thing. Tearing down dirt tracks at 120 km/h and knowing you are constantly in danger. There are simply no rules. You get addicted to the adrenaline,"* he relates, in that mixture of heroic and reckless tones which war reporters often adopt. At first Anastasijevic started working as an organiser and fixer for journalists from CNN and BBC, then he started writing himself and reported on the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. For years he goes up in the morning, went to the front and came back at night, seven days a week. His stays with his wife and child were interspersed by – war. Anastasijevic went into the houses of civilians and into the military barracks, sticking his recording device under the noses of victims and perpetrators on both sides. Not only did

he speak their language, unlike the majority of his colleagues Anastasijevic was reporting on his war: *"I wasn't a tourist, who could return home when it ended and put a souvenir on my shelf. This was all happening in my home country."* Through all of those years his interviews and observations were proof, that the truth expounded by Milosevic and propagated by all news channels bore little resemblance to the reality at the front.

*"The nightmares pass with time. And you drown the daily horror in too many cigarettes and too much alcohol. When I came home and my wife told me about her everyday problems, I couldn't understand her concerns. No, I wasn't a good father."* Anastasijevic is now calmer, his frenzy has departed, the alcohol is working. Detached from his own story, he can begin to tell it: *"Boell writes of a man, who walks through the streets after a bomb attack screaming Enjoy the war, because the peace will be terrible."* Now that work, family and sobriety have departed, here sits a broken man, clinging to the cigarette in his hand until it makes him cough.

Seven years after the fall of Milosevic, Serbia is no success story. The attempt to bring the dictator to justice before the war crimes tribunal was largely unsuccessful. His performances in court allowed him to preserve his role as an ideological ruler beyond his own sudden death in prison. Anastasijevic says: *"The police and military have essentially not been reformed. The government is stable but incompetent. In the long term Milosevic will lose. Much has changed. The difference between a criminal regime and a democratic government, with occasional corruption, is like the difference between a concentration camp and a normal prison."*

There is 31 percent unemployment and 15 percent inflation in the country. After four lost wars in the nineties and the separation of Montenegro, many perceive Kosovo's internationally supported aspirations for independence as a further humiliation, and are resorting to adopting the role of victims. Only Russia is applauding the performance.

Kosovo is the largest obstacle that stands between Serbia and Europe. The region in the south of the country has always been presented to the Serbs as their historic "heartland". Only a minority of Serbs have visited it themselves. The ones who do go, are confronted with rejection by the ninety percent Albanian majority and react with feelings of alienation.

*"Serbs and Kosovars see themselves as each other's victims. Both have nationalist and weak governments, who show little interest in a solution. They hide their real problems behind this "status" issue. The Kosovars need safety on the roads, electricity and jobs. "Status" alone is not going to provide these things."* says Anastasijevic.

The signs of normalization in Serbia are inconspicuous, but they are there. On the day Milosevic's corpse was transferred from the Hague to Belgrade, Lou Reed gave a concert in the city. The singer's performance drew far more people than the former dictator. Anastasijevic says; *"That was a clear message. And Milosevic's final act of revenge against me. Because of him, I could not attend the concert."* In May, Marija Ćerifovic, not just any Serb, but a lesbian Roma woman, won the Eurovision Song Contest. The established parties in parliament responded by vying openly for her favour.

Anastasijevic's front door is unlocked. The apartment seems warm, intimate. The rooms have parquet floors, Picasso prints and children's drawings by daughter Magda hang on the walls. Anastasijevic has kept a single souvenir as a reminder of the horrors he saw. The photo

hangs behind the kitchen door. It was made in December 1991, shortly after the conquest of Vukovars. Two senior officers of the two armies are to be seen, a ball lies between their feet. Anastasijevic stands in the middle of the picture, eyes on the ball.

At the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague in 2002, Anastasijevic testified of this time, telling of the assaults, the drunken soldiers and the corpses on the roadside. "*I knew that one day someone would have to take responsibility for all this*", he says, and contemplates the picture, which he is still pointing at, for some time. In court, he sat opposite Slobodan Milosevic. Eleven years had passed since Anastasijevic had decided to go to war. This closed the circle: "*It was one of the most important moments of my life. Now, I could go home.*"

***Dejan Anastasijevic lives as a journalist in Belgrade. The 45-year-old writes for the Serbian weekly Vreme magazine, and for the American Time magazine. Anastasijevic made his name in the nineties as a war correspondent in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. In his articles and public appearances the Serb continues to dig up the dark past of this young democracy. In Serbia this is a dangerous business. In April Anastasijevic and his wife barely escaped an assassination attempt in their apartment.***