

Remembering Kosovo

Joel Schalit

Six years ago today, I found myself stranded at Malpensa airport in Milan. My connecting flight to Tel Aviv was two hours late, and no one at the Alitalia desk had been able to tell me why. Exhausted from the twelve-hour flight from San Francisco, I kept looking at my watch, thinking that the later I arrived in Israel, the more difficult it would be for my seventy-nine-year-old father to come and pick me up.

An hour later, a middle-aged man carrying a briefcase sat down beside me. “*Atah medaber ivrit?*” (Do you speak Hebrew?) he asked, as he extended his hand. “*Lo kulkach tov,*” (Not so well) I told him. “I’ve been living in the U.S. for nineteen years, and its kind of rusty.” He proceeded to introduce himself, telling me that he was a fashion wholesaler who’d come to Milan for the spring shows. I told him that I was a writer on my way home to Israel to visit my parents.

“Do you have any idea why this flight is running so late?” I asked. “Alitalia can’t even give an estimate as to when we’re actually going to leave.”

“Yes,” he replied. “NATO has taken over all of the sky lanes that are usually reserved for air travel between here and the Eastern Mediterranean. I bet they haven’t assigned a passage for this flight yet. Besides, most flights between here and Tel Aviv usually fly over Yugoslavia.”

As astute as my newfound friend was, however, he was only partly right. When an Alitalia representative passed in front of us, I decided to get to the bottom of it. “Prego Signora, could you tell us what’s going on with our flight?” My neighbor stared at her,

amused. “Of course,” she said, looking a little flustered. “We have a shortage of pilots due to the war in Kosovo. They’ve all been requisitioned for military duty.”

I’ve been replaying this scene in my memory a lot these past few weeks, the memory triggered by watching Germany’s sixtieth-anniversary commemorations of the end of the Second World War on Deutsche Welle TV. The irony of the sixth anniversary of NATO’s air war over the former Yugoslavia coinciding with these commemorative activities has made me want to remember everything about that fateful time in 1999. Despite all the talk of remembrance, it felt like something was being forgotten.

While it would be impossible to deny the contemporary relevance of World War II today, the last of the Balkan Wars holds more immediate significance for me, and perhaps many people of my generation. Even though NATO had peacefully ended the Bosnian War and turned Bosnia-Herzegovina into its first formal protectorate, the astounding level of force it brought to bear to over the skies of Serbia has always felt like it broke some kind of

metaphysical taboo.

For sixty days, NATO bombed everything from bridges and power stations to factories and military targets. By the time the campaign was over, though Milosevic’s murderous forces had withdrawn from Kosovo, his country lay in absolute ruins. After the aircraft had returned home, progressives on both sides of the Atlantic—many of whom had initially supported intervention—felt deeply conflicted about what had just been done.

Defending the former Yugoslav regime, in *The Destruction of a Nation*, Michael Parenti argued that NATO had dismembered one of the last multicultural socialist nations. On the other hand, Noam Chomsky’s *The New Military Humanism* and Slavoj Žižek’s *Nato as The Left Hand of God?*, while condemning Milosevic’s actions, argued that NATO’s intervention represented the first time in which imperialist-style military force had been used to achieve liberal political ends.

Watching footage of new German troops on their way to Afghanistan, following yet *more* coverage of the World War II commemorations on Deutsche Welle TV, all I could think of was how much I missed being clueless about where my plane to Tel Aviv really was. And why I was going to be late meeting my father.

Ignorance is by no means bliss, I muttered under my breath as I finally found the courage to turn off my television set. But, I wagered, feeling connected to something so big and of such enormous significance takes a little getting used to. Maybe next year, someone else besides me will remember the war in Kosovo. □

Joel Schalit is managing editor of TIKKUN.