

'Evil is the absence of empathy'

Nuremburg War Trials 1947 – psychological conclusion

Chapter One

March 1999.

The road from Pristina was deserted. Snowmelt trickled down the gulleys either side from the roadside drifts which encased the single track. The local school where Katya Gjikolli taught was closed, derelict, devoid of life and laughter. Swings in the playground dangled from their ropes, swaying in the cold spring morning; bouncing only to the whims of the passage of air. Bullet holes peppered the walls.

Katya pressed on with a sadness which enveloped her, but she had become used to the feeling; now there was only numbness.

Three years earlier Katya had graduated from The University of Pristina with a degree in English. The University had a history of dissidence, a hot-bed of radicalism according to the Serb authorities; but she had stayed out of politics, and religion for that matter, indoctrination served no purpose in her life; she was a free thinker. After completing her education Katya had of course been approached to work for the local administration as a translator and interpreter but she had declined. Various inducements had been offered – this lecturer post, that headship, all would be available should she so choose after she had served her time. She also refused to sign the loyalty pledge to the Serbian regime which, as an ethnic Albanian, she was required to do.

Her decision meant that she had been excluded from the best jobs, the fast-tracks that would ensure a comfortable ride for her and her family. But she had no regrets, her little school suited her; politicians had always let her down. First the Serbs and now the Kosovan Liberation Army. She wanted no part of the struggle; everywhere she looked all she saw was misery and death.

Ever since she was a child Katya had wanted to be a teacher, she loved the innocence of children – so uncomplicated, but in the last two years her life had dramatically changed. She had met her husband Ibrahim, known to everyone as Ibi, at the University and they married just after her graduation. Unlike Katya he was an idealist and joined the Kosovan Liberation Army in late 1997.

They had been married for less than a year when he was sent at short notice to support the offensive at Glogovac. Initially she had had the occasional scribbled notes from him which had been delivered by a local policeman who was sympathetic to the cause; but then it went quiet. She had heard nothing of his whereabouts or well-being for over three months and she had no address to write back. Hours had been spent looking aimlessly from her window hoping to see him striding homeward.

Katya stopped momentarily. Had she heard a sound? Her heartbeat increased. She looked back... nothing. Fear plays tricks on the senses.

The breeze tugged at the brown scarf which pinned back her blonde hair, her baby son safely asleep facing her in the papoose sling which she had strung across her chest. Picking up the pace once more, she anxiously made her way along the road, although that description was euphemistic; it was more a track where tractors and other vehicles had carved out ruts in what was once tarmac. On she went towards the cottage, slush clawing at her worn-out shoes like icy hands, hampering her progress and freezing her feet to the bone.

These were dark times.

She thought of Ibi and that day in late December 1998 when she answered a knock on her door. It was a bitter, snow-swept morning. She could remember the event as if it were yesterday. It was just after breakfast and she was in the kitchen washing up when there was a knock on the front door. Not an urgent knock that would have caused alarm; there were few visitors to the cottage, but an authoritative, business-like knock.

She dropped her dish-cloth into the lukewarm water. "Ibi...?"

Katya hurriedly made her way through the living room and slowly opened the door. She was confronted by a stranger unkempt in a grubby military uniform. Her heart sank.

"Are you Katya?" he asked. They spoke in Albanian, their native tongue.

He introduced himself as Major Kraniqi, commander of the local KLA unit.

As she trudged slowly onwards, her head bent forward against the biting wind, her breath visible in the cold air, she recalled she had asked him in and made him a drink. In her mind, as if it were yesterday, she could see his dishevelled appearance; his soulless eyes staring at the grounds of coffee as they revolved around the top of the steamy liquid like a whirlpool, watching as they dissolved to nothing.

He appeared at first struck dumb with fright, fear or just fatigue, lost in his own world; tired, drawn and beaten. Then, as he sat at their dining table, he started to talk in a faltering, trembling voice, an intensity of emotion that Katya had never witnessed before.

"Yesterday..." he paused and took a breath. "We were outside a village not far from Poljanci, when we were... ambushed by Serb militia, twenty, maybe thirty enemy. We fought them off for a while, but I had lost many men." He paused again; his voice laboured and filled with emotion. "Ibi and me... we managed to hide in a cottage, but we were discovered. Ibi told me to go... kept shouting... 'Go... get out; I will hold them off...'. He said that if I made it, I must come and find you and tell you he loves you."

Katya continued her journey towards the cottage, the familiarity of her surroundings reviving the flashback. She remembered the major holding his coffee, tears rolling down his cheeks, before continuing his story. "I made it through a back door just before the Serbs stormed the refuge and later I saw them drag Ibi from the building and put him in a truck. He was... seemed, unconscious but it was difficult to tell; I was many metres away..." He paused again and took another sip of coffee; he kept repeating, "I am so sorry, I am so sorry; he was a brave, brave man."

He wiped away a tear with a grimy stubby finger. It had taken all night for the commander to deliver that promise; but he owed Ibi his life.

The news had stunned her and, recounting the event, Katya felt the pain again like a knife through her heart. Given the Serbs' reputation, she knew that survival in their prisons, if he had made it that far, was unlikely; but she had made a pact with herself that she would keep. She knew she had to be

strong for their baby son. Melos had been born less than four months ago and was conceived the very night before Ibi had left. It grieved her even more that Ibi did not know he had a son.

It had been hard coping with her confinement on her own, but right up to the birth her fellow teachers had been a great comfort and support. Her mother visited when she could but, living an hour away, she had to rely on neighbours for occasional lifts; there was no public transport. Katya had kept working eight months into her pregnancy which meant she had earned enough to feed and clothe herself and put something by in case of emergencies. She had only taken two weeks off before returning to work but after just a couple of days the school was closed, over three months ago now; how everything had changed.

Katya checked the road again... nothing. The school had disappeared from view behind her; not far now. She whispered a silent prayer to anyone who would listen. "Please keep us safe; please, please keep us safe."

She could hear the rustling of the bare branches of the trees clacking against each other like some manic timpani. A cold shiver ran down her spine, nothing to do with the penetrating wind... utter, petrifying fear. Once again uneasily she glanced behind her... still nothing.

Kosovo was a dangerous place and she and her son were both in peril if she were to be captured by the Serbs. Rumours were rife that they made little distinction when it came to slaughtering ethnic Kosovans particularly those with apparent KLA connections. "I have to be strong; I have to be strong;" like a mantra, she repeated to herself.

After the devastating news of Ibi's capture, and after much pleading, she was eventually persuaded to stay with her mother in Lopusnic some 10 miles away from her cottage in Lapugovac; she had only stayed in case Ibi had returned, but she knew it was time to move forward for her son's sake. At the cottage there were simply too many reminders of family life with her husband. She had taken with her just a change of clothes for her and Melos.

Katya was an only child and was close to her mother. Maria Vitija had lived with her husband Josef for over thirty years but had been widowed five years earlier. Josef had gone into Pristina for some supplies and did not return home. He turned up in the morgue three days later. Maria had been given no details of how he died or in what circumstances.

For over two months during the harshest period of the Kosovan winter, Katya had felt relatively safe in her mother's cottage. They were reasonably stocked with food and neighbours supported each other; there was a great sense of community. But with each day, the war drew closer to their door. News came that the Serbian forces were seen in the next village pillaging for supplies. Stories of atrocities spread among the local population and Katya knew she would be in extreme danger. It was time to move. She pleaded with her mother to go with her, but Katya knew it would be in vain. "I was born here, and I will die here," she had said unequivocally.

So Katya was making the dangerous trip back to her home that morning to collect what belongings she could carry and anything else she might need for her escape. Her mother pleaded with her. "Where will you go?" she said, but Katya couldn't answer. She had no real plan, no arranged itinerary. She just knew she had to get away.

Katya managed to beg a lift from Afrim, a neighbouring farmer and family friend who, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to drive her back to the cottage on his wreck of a tractor. They set off just after dawn and Katya had to drag herself away from her mother's grasp as she cried out. "Katya, Katya, please... do not leave me," she implored one last time.

It took all Katya's mental strength, but she knew she had to go and as she looked back from the seat of the tractor she could see her mother collapsed in the doorway of her cottage overwhelmed with grief. Tears wouldn't come, she was beyond that. Katya was cried out.

The weather was still very cold in the early morning but at least the snow was almost gone; just the drifts in the verges where it had been piled high to clear the way for the occasional traffic. The tractor made slow progress, the huge tyres struggling to maintain traction on the treacherous surface. The

noise of the ancient Lanz Bulldog's engine was loud enough to wake the dead, certainly sufficient to arouse the interest of any nearby Serb patrols. Eventually after an hour his nerve failed him and Afrim stopped, still some two miles from the village. The farmer refused to go any further. "I am sorry Katya it is too dangerous," he said. Katya would have to walk the rest of the way.

Lapugovac was a small village of less than two hundred inhabitants. There was one shop, a general store where villagers could usually buy what they needed, and the school where Katya earned a living. With her teacher's salary and the money Ibi earned from the local garage where he was a mechanic, it meant they were comfortable compared to others.

Their home was a modest house with a small garden at the front and in the middle of a group of three detached two bed-roomed cottages. Ibi had taken their ten-year-old Volkswagen which had been donated to the KLA, so without any other obvious forms of transport, a long walk looked likely. Although the weather was inching into spring, it was still cold, particularly at night and early morning with the inevitable frost of a Balkan winter; but if they wrapped up well she reasoned, it was comfortable enough.

She was close now as she approached the brow of a hill and squatted low to create as small a silhouette as possible. She could see the cottages clearly, about a hundred metres ahead. Like the rest of the village they looked deserted. The neighbours had fled - or had been forcibly removed; there was no way she could be certain. Tentatively she walked towards the house, looking left and right as if crossing a busy freeway; up to the front door, then stopped. There was no sign of a forced entry; the door appeared intact. Perhaps she had been lucky.

"Booby traps; always check for booby traps," that's what Ibi had said. She had always thought it was alarmist, but this was different. She looked at the door frame not really knowing what to look for. No sign of wires or anything obviously out of place. She moved closer and peered through the frosted glass which was surprisingly unbroken. There was no movement in the blurred background, nothing. She took the chance and placed the key in the lock and slowly turned it.

Click, the key turned, she heard the lock fall reassuringly.

She pushed against the door carefully increasing the pressure until a gap appeared. Further... gently. She peered through and opened the door a shade more.

That's when it hit her... the smell, like rotting meat. She gagged. Quickly holding her scarf to her nose and mouth, she moved inside. It was dark, but the curtains, not fully closed, allowed a shard of light into the room. She gasped in horror; only her hand across her mouth prevented a scream.

He was highlighted by the sun's hazy rays, like a music-hall performer in a spotlight, his eyes vacant staring at the wall as if appreciating some old masterpiece. His mouth was open, his face twisted by the pain of his final death throes and the all too vivid tracks of blood from a gaping hole in his chest were clearly visible.

Katya retched.

"Ibi?"

It was her initial thought but straight away she could see it was an older man in what seemed to be the remnants of a military uniform. She didn't immediately recognise him. Then she remembered; it was Artan Kraniqi. But what was he doing here and, more importantly, how did he get here? Her heart was pounding as she moved through the house into the kitchen and found the back door had been forced. There was bloodied footprints leading to the living room and to the table where the body now sat. He must have been shot somewhere close by and made his way to the back door from the woods; that was a possibility Katya thought. He knew the house and would have been looking for help. Instead he had bled to death at her dining table where only a few weeks earlier he had told her of Ibi's capture.

This was no place for any detailed scrutiny, there was no time; the Serbs could be close. Quickly now, her mind racing, her pulse sprinting off the scale, she went upstairs. Melos began to cry; he had

been asleep for the last hour. He would need a change and feed but not here; he would have to wait a little longer.

Trying desperately to think logically, her nerves shot to pieces, her emotions in shreds, she went through her cupboards. She had her passport, papers and a small amount of money, about fifty Deutschmarks - the currency of choice in Kosovo, and a gift from her mother. She carried them in a small purse which was attached to a belt around her waist. She went upstairs and lay Melos on the bed.

Her hands shaking, she managed to take the photo of her and Ibi from its frame which still stood on the bedside table. She put it into a rucksack together with a change of clothes, some baby things, a blanket, disposable nappies, moist wipes and a few jars of baby food.

Must keep focused, must keep focused, she repeated to herself.

In her mind she was making an inventory, trying to salvage some sense of order in the chaos that surrounded her. A couple of minutes passed, or was it seconds, it was difficult to tell, just a blur. That's it, any heavier and it would slow her down and she can't afford to hang around.

Got to hurry, got to hurry.

Then she heard it; some distance away but definitely coming closer, the low rumble of a truck. She wanted to pee.

Katya listened fearfully to the crunching of gears as the driver made allowances for the incline towards the house. She crouched at the window and cautiously looked through, peering just above the lower edge of the frame and saw the vehicle. It stopped. Six soldiers, Serbs, got out. Four of them immediately started to urinate against the tree next to the first cottage. Katya froze; Melos continued to wail, his cries getting louder and louder.

“Sshhh!” she whispered abruptly. Whether the sense of danger or just the tone of urgency in Katya's voice had passed to the child she would never know but at that moment Melos, looking startled, was silent.

Katya could hear her own breathing. She tried inhaling slowly to regulate her heart rate, but her level of concentration was being driven by her mechanism for survival. She exhaled counting to five – a trick she had learned to use to control her nerves at college, but this was no end-of-term presentation. She was in grave danger and she knew it... but what should she do?

Decisions, possibilities.

Should she try to make a break for it which would almost certainly start Melos crying again, or keep down and hope they would simply drive away?

Her mind was made up for her. From the next building she heard the breaking of glass and automatic gunfire. A cry went out to the driver, "*benzin!*" and she saw him go to the back of the vehicle and bring out a large jerry-can. They disappeared from view, but she guessed what was happening.

Now or never...

She picked up Melos from the bed and put him in his sling. Then she took the rucksack, wrapped the straps around her shoulders and fastened it securely onto her back, her legs barely able to obey the orders from her brain. The sudden movement started Melos crying again.

Noise... too much noise.

Quickly down the stairs, into the kitchen, she stopped only to grab a small carving knife from the drawer by the sink. She dropped it into the opening of the rucksack. Then out through the back door, tramping over the small vegetable patch that had sustained them in recent years. As the cold air hit her she remembered she had left her gloves on the dressing table in the bedroom... too late. She reached the chain link fence at the end of the garden and pushed it with her foot. It gave way and she leapt the

half metre obstacle while holding her child tight to her chest. It was probably two hundred metres to the protection of the woods across an open field of rough marsh grass freckled with lying snow. Running was almost impossible but run she did, keeping her head down as low as she could as she headed towards the distant trees. Melos was screaming from his cocoon.

Hope was hanging by a thread. If the Serbs were preoccupied by their looting or whatever they were doing next door then she may have a chance... her only chance.

Katya struggled across the field; one minute her feet were landing on the tops of the mounds of grass, the next they disappeared into a hollow of snow. She was clenching her toes to avoid losing her shoes which would render her immobile; frostbite was still a possibility.

One hundred metres, her eyes played tricks on her. Despite her efforts the tree line seemed even further away. She dared not look behind her, worried what she might see. Fifty metres, twenty, ten, then into darkness as the forest enveloped her. She raced further into the trees not stopping to look back, half running, half walking, desperately trying to increase the distance between her and the danger not far behind. The further in she went, the denser and darker became the forest, the pines no more than two metres apart. After what seemed to be an eternity she stopped, disorientated.

She leant against a tree, her chest almost exploding with the pressure of blood being pumped around her body. Melos in his sling moved up and down to the rhythm. She looked around and realised she was hopelessly lost; a feeling of sheer desolation enveloped her. She tried to catch her breath but, with no time to lose and no choice, she carried on further and further into the gloom. The loneliness was beginning to eat away at her strength like some unseen parasite; panic lay just below the surface.

After the arbitrary tracks, mostly made by animals, she eventually picked up a more obvious trail, but had no idea where she was or in which direction she should go. Although she had lived nearby for almost two years she had steered clear of the forest. She found it frightening; it reminded her of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales her mother used to read to her as a child.

North, she thought, would take her towards Glogovac. Katya knew she must stay away from there at all costs. She remembered there was a train station at Klina which was where the main line from the south to Pec joined the line west from Pristina. Klina would be about fifteen miles away as the crow flies but nearer twenty across country. The terrain was mountainous, and she would need to follow the contours of the valleys. She recalled visiting the town as a young girl, in happier times. From there she could possibly catch a train and reach the border with Montenegro; then, who knows. But at this moment she had no concept of the points of a compass. There were no landmarks; she couldn't even see the sky, just the canopy of the tall firs.

Melos was crying again; she would have to see to him soon. For the first time she looked back in the direction she had travelled and saw no movement. The darkness of the trees cloaked around her like a shroud. In the distance, for a moment, she thought she saw a pall of smoke but couldn't be certain. She was safe, for now. She quickly saw to her son, cleaning him with wipes and replacing his soiled nappy which she then buried under some pine needles to ensure no trace.

Again it was decision time. She chose the path to the right, concluding logically it appeared to be heading away from Lapugovac. She followed the track for probably an hour without seeing a soul, Melos had mercifully gone back to sleep. All she could hear was the wind struggling to break through the trees. Progress was slow and the weight of the rucksack on her back was beginning to tell. It felt as if it were getting heavier by the minute, the straps cutting into her shoulders.

After a while, the track widened and she suddenly came out of the eerie gloom of the trees into a clearing. The weak sunlight after the darkness made her blink and she shielded her eyes with her hand. In the corner she could see an old building, a hut of some kind. It reminded her of the woodman's cottage from Hansel and Gretel. It looked deserted but she wasn't taking any chances. Slowly, keeping to the tree line she carefully approached the shack.

As she got nearer she could see it was made from logs with one open window cut into the middle on the side facing her, not particularly robust but it would provide shelter whilst she fed her son and

took stock. She needed to rest; she had been walking for two hours. Reaching the entrance, there was no door, she could see it was a shelter of some kind designed to provide the woodsmen with a place to eat their lunch or have a smoke out of the wind. Anxiously, she slowly peered inside. It was dark and gloomy, the small window not really providing sufficient light. She could see evidence of previous visitors - discarded beer cans, cigarette stubs. She could also see in the corner the source of the rancid smell; it was also someone's lavatory.

Steering clear of the mess she found a spot which was reasonably clean and put her rucksack down on the bare earth floor. Lifting Melos from his carrier he woke up and, clearly hungry, started crying again. Without any water or heat she did what she had to do, she unbuttoned her shirt and pulled down her bra connecting her son to her right nipple. He suckled gratefully. For the first time she started to relax; so far, so good.

She completed her feeding and placed Melos on a blanket to change his nappy. Her back was to the door, but instinct told her something was wrong. The light had changed; it had gone dark. She turned to see a shape in the doorway blocking the hazy brightness. Silhouetted against the opening was a man in a military uniform, carrying the obligatory AK 47. She inhaled sharply as her survival reflexes took over. She heard the voice of another man, so there were at least two and she was trapped. There was no escape, no way out. Once again her heart started to race.

"Hello, what have we got here? What is your name, my lovely?" said the man. It was Serbo-Croat, not her native Albanian, but she understood. It was not a greeting. She gave her name as asked.

"K... K... Katya Gjokolli," she managed to stutter.

"And where are you going?"

She told him where she was heading. "Klina."

She heard the other man's voice. "Who is it?"

"She says her name is Katya... She is very pretty, too, for a Kosovan."

He took two steps forward, slowly, eyeing up the girl. Immediately his gaze was drawn to her open shirt and half exposed breast. Melos was still on his back on his blanket legs pounding in the air gurgling happily, totally oblivious to the danger. Katya quickly clasped her shirt to protect her modesty and started to button up.

"Ne, ne...!" He motioned with his weapon for her to drop her hands.

She was still on her knees and turned her back to the soldier. Her hands moved to the floor and she leant forward on all fours protecting her son. She felt hands grasping her ankles and pulling sharply. The momentum caused her to fall flat on her stomach and instinctively she started kicking out at the soldier. Her skirt rode further up her legs, exposing her thighs to her attacker. Her knees dragged across the rough ground grazing them; she felt nothing. Still on her stomach, she screamed, a totally futile gesture. She heard the click of the safety catch of the AK 47 being released. She turned over and gasped in horror as she saw the soldier pointing the automatic rifle at her son. She was almost convulsing with fright.

"Ne...!Ne...!" she screamed.

The second voice called out. "What is happening?"

"Stay outside and keep guard. This one is mine," said the aggressor.

The soldier obeyed; a question of rank and knowing his turn would come. She was still on the floor and recognised her situation was hopeless. She faced the soldier, her hands held up in submission. Whether it was the inevitability of the situation or some inner strength that had taken over, she would never know, but somehow a calmness took hold of her.

There was a voice in her head. "Be strong. I must be strong," it was saying.

Sitting up she lifted her skirt and slowly pulled down her panties. Her situation was desperate, she knew resistance was pointless and would surely mean the death of her and her son. At least she may be spared a beating. The soldier placed the gun down on the ground beside him and started

unbuttoning his trousers revealing urine-stained underpants. Katya caught her breath bracing herself for what was to come.

He fell on top of her and she let out a deep breath as his weight pressed her to the dirt. She felt his hardness enter her. It was rough and painful. She had not had a man inside her for a long time, not since that final night with Ibi. Tears started to fall from her eyes as the man pumped into her. She was angry, sad, terrified but somehow, paradoxically, she suddenly sensed control had moved in her favour. She stopped crying; this violation was not of her seeking. "Be strong. I must be strong."

His breath smelt of stale cigarettes and he was beginning to sweat profusely. It was all over in a matter of seconds and, as she felt the stream of his orgasm shoot into her, he collapsed on top of her totally spent.

She wanted to be sick.

His weight was pinning her to the floor, no chance of escape. She turned her head and saw Melos still on the blanket playing with his toes. But between her and her son, within touching distance, was the open rucksack. She slowly moved her hand and carefully felt inside the bag. The man was still catching his breath. She found what she was looking for as she touched the hard handle of the knife with her shaking fingers. In one movement she swung her arm round and plunged the blade into her assailant's back with all the strength she could muster.

Blood oozed from the wound and he screamed a piercing shriek like a stuck pig, both hands grasping at the knife that was out of his reach. She pushed him off and grabbed the rifle just as the second soldier appeared in the doorway, alerted by the scream. Still seated on the floor, she blindly aimed and pulled the trigger. The recoil sent her backwards, missing Melos by a matter of inches.

Daylight streamed through the gap; the blockage having slumped to the floor... lifeless.

Melos started crying again frightened by the sudden commotion. She slowly moved towards the door and the motionless body blocking the entrance. Turning him over she could see the bullet had hit him in the face which was now unrecognisable as that of a human being.

She threw up what was left of her meagre breakfast.

Struggling to remain in control, she recognised she was still in danger; other militia could be close by. She quickly dressed herself, grabbed her rucksack, zipped it up and wrapped it around her shoulders and heaved it onto her back once more. She lifted Melos into her arms and into his papoose.

Suddenly she heard a moaning noise behind her. It was the first soldier, her attacker, still alive. He knew her name and could obviously recognise her again. She had no alternative. Without a hint of hesitation or conscience, she stared into the eyes of her attacker as she raised the rifle to his head and pulled the trigger. The groaning stopped. She pulled the knife from his back, wiped it clean of blood on his jacket and put it back in the rucksack.

Melos screamed.

She dragged the second soldier into the hut away, she hoped from inquisitive eyes.

She had to move fast... now.