

Central and Eastern European Review

Fatos Lubonja, *Second Sentence: Inside the Albanian Gulag*. Translated from Albanian by John Hodgson. I. B. Tauris in association with the Centre for Albanian Studies, 2009, 215pp.

The dark days of Albanian communism will manifest their effects for generations. Those incarcerated under the regime of Europe's strictest adherence to Stalinism must bear the deepest wounds. One such survivor is the well-known writer, Fatos Lubonja. Although he has published a number of books which have been translated into Italian, German, English and Polish, and has received numerous literary awards, it has taken thirteen years for his powerful *Second Sentence* to be published in English.

The clarity and objectivity with which Lubonja writes, confers this record with undoubted authenticity. This can be felt from the first words of the book, a note that he is not going to disguise any names, even though he may offend, and may expect repercussions. Furthermore, throughout the extraordinary account (and writing almost 20 years after the traumatic events), Lubonja is only once at a loss for the name of one of the very many individuals who featured: the camp's convict artist.

In the current age of memorializing, Lubonja's book will take an important place, for it allows the reader to see something of the scale of an increasingly paranoid society and its effects. Additionally we are given glimpses of the unbearable conditions in which Lubonja and so many others were forced to live and overwork, for so long. It is hard for us to comprehend how, after months of solitary confinement and interrogation, on starvation rations, he could reach a point of hoping to receive his further sentence of 'only' 25 more years in jail: 'now my craving for life was so powerful that this place was paradise, a warm and much-loved home' (p.95).

Of the seventeen years that Lubonja spent in jail and labour camps, in *Second Sentence* we hear only about the period 1978–79, which the translator describes as 'a critical juncture for the survival of the communist state' (p.215). Although a relatively short portion of his total time in prison, this must have been the most devastating period. After a vivid description of the desolation, but also the vivid beauty of the surrounds of the remotely placed prison, Lubonja outlines briefly the stark brutality of prison life and something of the varying physical and psychological effects such a regime enforced. He takes interest in the way people react to charges, discussing the different ways prisoners deal with the harsh and often brutal situations, noting that it was 'often the most gentle and sensitive (who) were the easiest to break' (p. 181). He

Central and Eastern European Review

sees the prisoners as belonging in three categories: most as compliant, a second category as those disliked by the authorities and a third—the informers. Foremost and universal of the effects of this imprisonment was distrust amongst everyone. The relevance of this distrust is completely borne out by the ensuing account.

Lubonja does not dwell on his pre-incarceration family life, nor on the arrest of his father Todi Lubonja, director of Albanian broadcasting, or even his own, shortly after. Rather, in this book, he focuses on his Kafkaesque discovery that the regime has found something beyond his original critical writings (found in his uncle's house), on which to pin the burden of an even greater crime, beyond his original sentence. This discovery only comes to him slowly, since he had always been careful not to express his disgust of either the regime or his situation to anyone, much less act on those feelings. He learned to accept pain inflicted by vindictive gaolers and interrogators without showing emotion and anxiety, and despite the sometimes unexpected and disempowering bodily effects. Further from the account, it seems that Lubonja never gave way to showing the anger, terror and exasperation which must have wrenched him during most of the time. He mentions homosexual assault and the enforced divorce of prisoners' wives (the deserted families, were encouraged to discard the 'bad biografi' of their prison spouse, which would totally handicap any future life of all of their family), though he does not clarify whether he suffered either of these situations personally.

In solitary confinement, a tiny crack in the door of Lubonja's cell allowed him a squint at activity outside. With this partial view of who was moving around just outside his door (especially as it was opposite the single toilet), the prisoner's solitary life was immensely enhanced. Curiously, smoking was apparently considered such an essential need of any man that it was part of prison routine for the warders to pass a light through slots in the cell doors to enable prisoners to light up. Exceptionally Lubonja was not a smoker. Deprived of mirrors, Lubonja managed to glimpse part of his face, illuminated by an occasional sun ray, reflected in his dark soup.

In retrospect Lubonja is able to look back to discussions in which the two prisoners, Fadil and Vangjel, tried to involve him, in order to begin to understand what it was for which he was being further convicted. Yet even this understanding seemed to point to so little that could incriminate him, that it was still hard for him to associate any further accusations towards himself, with those of the main culprits Fadil and Vangjel. It was known that these two had written a letter addressed to the

Central and Eastern European Review

Central Committee asking for a return to Marxist-Leninism, (this was in the post-Stalin era, and their desires were surely very strongly shaped by the fact that both men had married Russian women, from whom they had become separated by the political split). From that first dawning, we follow the machinery of paranoia which took Lubonja back to solitary confinement for five months, on minimal food rations and other further deprivations and tortures, during the trials of others, through to that of himself and his co-defendants. The accused totaled ten supposed members of a revolutionary organization, organized by Fadil and Vangjel (Lubonja was placed number six on the list).

If the two chapters, 'Arrest' and 'Investigation' portray the insanity of the regime orchestrating such a process, the last chapter 'Trial' shows even further the absolute absurdity, with the use of false (and not even intelligent) witnesses. 'It was a hotchpotch of low passions, petty self-interest, paranoid delusions, fear, ambition, vindictiveness, the desire to curry favour, cold calculation, and insane fiction' (p.52). There were prolonged procedures, finally producing the brutal sentences: death by shooting of three, and further prison sentences for the others for terms of up to twenty-five years.

Despite a further horrific 'Epilogue', we must be glad that such an eloquent writer and thinker has survived to alert the world to the possibility of the emergence of such regimes.

As John Hodgson notes, Lubonja's account presents 'an astonishingly dispassionate analysis of the totalitarian system, its manipulation of human fears and hopes, and its paranoid logic. (p. 213) It is not clear why his extremely enlightening 'Afterword' was placed at the end of the book. It provides a tremendously helpful setting of the complicated scene of this relatively short, but intensely grim time. Even for readers familiar with Albanian recent history, the short Afterword gives specific detail at least some of which is probably new to almost every English-speaking reader, and its prior understanding would help to accentuate the whole story. For a wider readership, maybe even a further page on Enver Hoxha's rise to power as Europe's most fiercely Stalinist leader, might also be advantageous.

Antonia Young

University of Bradford