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# The Train to Monastir



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## **The Train to Monastir**

*Budapest → Beograd*

One of the oldest films made in Macedonia captures the visit of sultan Mehmed V Reşad to Bitola, which was then still known as Monastir. On the blinking black-and-white frames you can see a company of gentlemen with fezzes on loitering in front of the train station. The door opens and a heavy-set man in the same dark uniform, with a fez on his head and a sabre hanging from his side exits, clearing a path by his presence alone. After saluting the group the sultan gets into an open coach, a jump cut and then the sultan surrounded by notables on some high steps.

This was in 1911 when sultan Mehmed V was no more than the puppet of a military junta. Looking back, this tour by the Caliph of Islam / Commander of the Faithful / Sultan of the Ottoman Empire / Emperor of Rome / Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques etc. etc. was the last flicker of the Ottoman reign over Southeast Europe. In the next year a coalition of Eastern Orthodox former vassals invaded the European part of Turkey, mired in civil conflict. One part of the coalition was the Serbians who achieved successes near Üsküp and Monastir - in retrospect the reason for the independent Republic of Macedonia some eighty years later. These broad strokes sketched the borders, which were drawn in by pen and built over by concrete and barbed wire later in the century.

The acceleration of the train jerks me out of my sleep. The rattle of the iron wheels and axles over a long iron bridge functions as an alarm clock, a minute or so after I awoke. That was probably the Danube, I surmise, so we have to have left Novi Sad just now. Light shines from behind the curtains. In colour. I want to get up, out of this cramped couchette. I wriggle myself free from the bottom bunk, put my feet in my shoes and slip silently through the compartment door. In the narrow corridor the view is bright green, I pull a window down: I inhale the summer morning and think, yes, this is how I will start my train journal to Bitola.

To rehydrate, I swallow the last of the Austrian soda I had last night, which tastes like lemon and stale beer. My tired eyes drink in the first impressions of the backyard of Serbia rolling by. Trees with rows of strange leaves on their branches. A small city with a salmon coloured train station, defaced by graffiti. A man sits on a weathered wooden bench underneath an overhang on chipped brown posts; a woman waits on the crumbling platform. Инђија it's called: *Indija* – and India could look like this early in the morning, I imagine. Next there are houses, sheds, and luxuriant bushes. White baroque church towers. This is still Vojvodina, of course, the northern part of Serbia which used to be the southern border territory of the Habsburgs for two centuries.

About one o' clock in the morning I had been woken up too. Passport control. At the border of the EU, Hungarian police checked the compartments one by one. On their uniform they had the provincial coat of arms depicting a hussar with a scimitar on the one side, a decapitated Turk on the other. Then the sound of doors closing, couplings rattling: a shunting yard with lamp posts which coloured the night a buttery yellow. A Serbian police officer goes from door to door stamping the passports. The sounds of doors opening and shutting come from further and further away, accompanied by shouts giving instructions. Across the threshold it's waiting in the corridor, the part of the night that is starting to make way for the dawn.

No one travels without any baggage. Everyone carries his or her own expectations along, their earlier experiences in their backpacks, and their prejudices in their suitcases.

As far as I was concerned Yugoslavia was synonymous with the war that had left a bigger impression on me than any other war from television news. I was nine or ten when Yugoslavia fell apart because of the civil war. I was at that age when you not only start to understand from a distance the connections in the world around you, but when you also start to grasp the little differences and tensions within the world. At least, I was that kind of child. The things the Children's News told me, about how the Serbians, Croats and Muslims had been each other's neighbours only a while ago, impressed onto me that small differences between neighbours could lead to fatal fault lines. In bad dreams I imagined my Frisian village with its subtle yet noticeable debris of confessional groups. The silliest distinction – for example, that it felt better that we had a church with a large, old tower and pointed windows, with a vicar in a black toga and beret – were in this light no less deep than the abstract schisms which led to displacement, mortar shelling and disappearances in Yugoslavia. Even the Yugoslavian landscape shown on television was familiar: the wooded hills looked like the Germany I knew from holidays. I'm staring out of the train window and I see similar square houses with flat, faded red hip roofs, with half-finished walls of brick in concrete frames.

It is still quiet in the corridor. Even the Hungarians are still asleep in the compartment next to mine.

Yesterday evening, around ten o' clock, I had my changeover at Budapest-Ferencváros, from the Vienna train to Bucharest, so I could catch this train. Ferencváros was more of a shunting yard than a station: an empty concrete space with railway tracks. There was also a young man from Serbia, who had worked in Hungary on a pig farm and was now heading home to Bačka Topola, before going to Denmark in a week or so. There the monthly wages for feeding pigs were four times as high as those in Hungary, with a 'veterinary' training and decent English. A freight train passed. Then a locomotive whistled around the corner, the train for Belgrade approached us while decelerating. I quickly glanced at my tickets, hurriedly said "safe travels" and jogged with my suitcase to the carriage bearing my number.

I pulled myself on board, shuffled forward in search of my couchette. It was already taken by four French girls. The conductor reported for duty as well, and I showed him my tickets. One of the ladies tried to explain the situation. The conductor reached out to take my tickets, speaking only Serbian. Loud noises were coming from the next compartment. The appearance of two inebriated Hungarians revealed why two of the French girls didn't want to join them in that compartment. Was it possible to trade places? No, this is my seat, I maintained. The conductor needed my tickets, he said louder in Serbian. I kept hold of them; this is my seat, my tickets. Still, I couldn't pass the girls off to the Huns; so I said "all four of you can stay in this compartment." The conductor kept holding up his hand, until a guy who could speak English, passed us and said: you need to give the conductor your tickets, you will get them back tomorrow. – I was allowed into my compartment. The girls were Erasmus exchange students in Budapest on a weekend trip. They didn't understand English very well, so I chivalrously changed to the slow French I remembered from school. Upon which they went on talking among each other in the Chinese which passes for fashionable French colloquial. Gripping about the missed company the Magyars chattered unintelligibly in the corridor, but our compartment door stayed shut. A better travel writer than me would have joined neighbours like them for drinks, even after such a long day of travel. But I was exhausted. We clapped open the bunks; four French girls fit nicely into three beds.

I'm still yawning. Maize fields. Acres with strings of hops. I hear shuffling behind me. One of the two Hungarians needs to go to the toilet. 'Jó reggelt!', I greet him in his own language. Surprised the man mutters something back.

Serbia looks second-hand. Off and on the housing along the railway looks like slums. Then István and István both appear in front of me, with inquisitive faces and questions in Hungarian. They show me small faded plastic cards of the Hungarian railways. My bits and pieces of *magyarul* act as a life-buoy for them. 'Nem értem,' I apologise. We're almost in Belgrade.

A printout materialises, a list of place names ending with Burgas: every intermediate station to the Bulgarian Black-Sea coast. I point out that they should not get off here in Nov Beograd, but change at the main station. Through the window I see two East Asians who got off, wandering aimlessly around with their large suitcases on the post-apocalyptic platform, while the train drives off again.

### ***Beograd → Niš***

The central station of Belgrade is nothing more than stage scenery. The building, at the end of a collection of tracks, is L-shaped and painted a grimy mustardy yellow colour, undoubtedly a relic from the 1800s. It is held together by nothing more than tape. It seemed to be built as part of a film set, and after the filming wrapped up in the fifties the extras remained behind. Grown old they sit on the benches with their luggage in plastic bags. Only the parked trains keep the illusion alive that travel is possible.

To say that time stood still here, would be mistaken. At Belgrade station time is running backwards.

There is no announcement board either telling when and where the trains leave. On the platforms there are displays meant for the destinations, but they haven't worked for a long time. "Where is the train to Skopje?" – "Next to the one to Sofia, over there." – I walk along a carriage from Saint-Petersburg, then one from Moscow. "Skopje?" – "Njet, Sofia." – A couple of conductors are standing at the beginning of the platform. One of them speaks German. "Nach Skopje?" – "Nein." He looks confused at my tickets: "Ihre Fahrkarten sind in Ordnung. Aber Zug fährt nicht. Nächste Woche fährt." But I can take the train to Sofia and go to Niš, which is halfway to Skopje. From there I can catch a bus to Skopje. My ultimate destination of Bitola is a concern for tomorrow.

István and István had followed me to the train. I had pointed out to the Hungarians the second-class carriage with 'София' on it. They beckon me to come to them. However, the German speaking conductor had shown me to the first-class carriage, where I gladly plop down in one of the empty and plush couches. Today it won't be a Europe of two speeds in this train, but for me it will be a Europe of two different train classes. I'm just in time, the train departs. The carriage has a soft carpet, the benches are widely spaced; some of the passengers immediately take off their shoes.

It is as if we're immediately outside Belgrade. Wrecks of carriages of the former Yugoslavian railway companies can be seen all along the route. It looks as if giant bushes have taken over the countryside. On top of the debris flowers grow in every colour. This international train to Sofia seems to be the only working train on this section – a stage on the route of the former Orient Express. In villages where dusty zastavas wait along the tracks and women dressed in regal blue uniforms function as station chiefs, old people come aboard the first-class carriage, just to get off again a few stops further on.

Just ahead of me a man is sitting while smoking and talking on his phone. At least he's smoking with the window open. After every phone call he sounds angrier and angrier. Just as his

shoes earlier, he now takes off his socks and lights up another fag. He's shredding some papers and throws the pieces out of the window; they swirl in the wake of the train. In a small town on the route a man is standing on the platform shouting and cursing at the passenger. The train drives off, the passenger lies down on the plush couch and falls asleep. His phone keeps ringing several times, but he doesn't answer it anymore.

After the village of Stalac we drive into a narrow valley, a ravine. Not even an unpaved road runs alongside the tracks anymore. The train is the only motorised traffic in a landscape of meadows, small farming tracts, woods and the river. Two small, bent over women in dark clothing walk along a footpath towards their fields. At a small, white plastered monastery with a domed church and a belfry the train almost drives through its garden. It's as if you're watching the middle ages pass by from the train window.

At last the train stops in Niš, a city of concrete factories which seem to gather dust as if they were kept in a dirty farm attic. Seemingly in the middle of a train yard I walk over the rust-coloured gravel. It is warm and stuffy during the middle of the day. The locomotive is uncoupled and driven to the other end. I watch the random collection of carriages as it continues its way to Sofia. The station building of Niš is like a kind of grey bunker, it lets the arriving travellers pass with a shrug. I find my way to the bus station, a row of containers along a thoroughfare, with a ticket office and sandwich shops. It will be almost three hours before the bus to Skopje comes.

With my ticket in my pocket, I set off to a park and sit down next to a gazebo in the shade, leaning against it. There is a newly built, white church, Sveta Petka. Now and then someone exits or enters the church: they light up candles in black boxes next to the church in defiance of the bright sunlight. Workmen visit the verger to drill two holes in the façade, but after the first hole they need a cigarette break badly. The verger, a small, bossy man with a shaven head, is being talked to by a middle-aged lady. The conversation starts to get heated, partly in Serbian, partly in English. "A big mistake", I catch the woman saying, and "mosque"; the verger follows this up with "the mosque was not here! – was there!", and points. Could there have been an Islamic place of worship that was demolished shortly before, now replaced by this Orthodox Church?

At an outside café I order my first Turkish coffee of the journey. To stave off sleep and as a gesture of goodwill towards the Orient. There is an empty seat at a table, next to a man who is reading. Not only the book in front of him makes it unlikely that he's a local. He orders in English, pays with Serbian coins from a plastic bread bag, and reads his paperback about *Conversations with God* religiously. In the meantime, I jot down notes about my travels so far. My neighbour apparently prefers to talk with his New-Age God.

### *Niš → Skopje*

I don't want to miss my connection to 'Skoplje', which is why I'm standing even longer by the side of a busy road, waiting for a bus with a 30 minute delay. Only right at the back is there an empty seat, between sullen faces holding bags on their laps. I doze off a bit from the heat and lack of sleep, but then the road starts winding spectacularly, through the *Grdelička klisura*, the large ravine of the Morava. The Serbians are also keenly looking out of the window. We drive over the soon-to-be-old road and the railway tracks bend with us up the wooded slopes. Above us you can see the high mountain bridges being built for a highway. It is really spectacular, the new highway too.

Far down below I suddenly see a gleaming railway bridge with a monument next to it. That must be the place where a NATO plane bombed a bridge in 1999 while a passenger train was crossing. Our small, clean Kosovo-war against Milošević. I remember the giddy excitement of

Dutch politicians within the purple haze of the broad liberal consensus of the nineties, who presented it as a righteous war to prevent worse. I was in the fifth year of my secondary education and as my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday approached I received a letter from the Ministry of Defence, assuring me that although the draft wasn't officially off the books, it was suspended for the time being. Not much later I read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, recommended for naïve adolescents of all ages. This concludes my history with war.

The stops during the journey clear some space in the bus. In the small town of Vranje a young woman and her dad get on. A stout woman, well-dressed with black hair and red-painted lips. I'm reading a book in a foreign language, and I meet her gaze for a moment. This probably raised a few expectations. "How your name?" she asks. I answer, and even though I'm tired, I don't mind to talk for a bit. She tells me her name and keeps her gaze on me. "How is your second name?" she goes on, and: "You – friends on Facebook?" She is the one who asks the questions. "I am from Kumanovë", she says. The way she swallows the final vowel indicates that she is an Albanian Macedonian. Her father sits next to her and clearly doesn't understand a word of the conversation. "Do you married?" she wants to know.

I'm starting to feel uncomfortable, and I say no. I put on my sunglasses and turn away from her. Proudly she ignores me in return. I berate myself for being such a jackass until we get to the bus station of Kumanovo.

We've undoubtedly arrived in the South of Serbia, evidenced by the mosques in the villages. This is near Bujanovac, a part of Serbia inhabited by Albanians. Just outside Kosovo.

The border with Macedonia is a real border, everybody has to have their *pasoši* ready, leave the bus and go to the Serbian customs shed, where I don't get an exit stamp. Then we have to walk to the Macedonia customs hut with the bus in tow. Hand in our *pasoši* to the customs officers there and then back into the bus. Wait for them to give back our papers. I gather from the papers of my neighbour that nowadays a Macedonian needs a work visa for a longer stay in Slovenia – which used to be the same country. I'm last to get my papers back.

It's getting late when we drive into Skopje / Shkup. The capital of Macedonia is a provincial city which expanded towards the east and the west. It is officially bilingual. Seen from a bridge near the station the infamous new city centre is surprisingly close, rising above a bulldozed block. The central station of Skopje is a large concrete whale of a building. Twenty years after a heavy earthquake, they dragged the creature hundreds of kilometres inland and put it to sleep on a bed of broad columns. After all these years the inside of the train station still looks like it's yet to be finished.

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 1963 the city was laid waste by an earthquake – early in the morning, as earthquakes are horrifyingly wont to do. When they rebuilt Skopje, they didn't want to reconstruct what had been, but they rebuilt using a utopia as their blueprint; a Japanese architect drew up the master plan. The new neighbourhoods consisted partly of flats, partly of residential precincts. In the city centre there was room for unpretentious horizontal modernism, with wide tracts of green in-between. For a city built during a dictatorship (though enlightened), the centre was democratic, or at least egalitarian. The wide streets didn't end at a towering monument, a palace or cathedral, but at the Macedonia Square, an open space. The large public buildings – the concert hall, the shopping mall GTC – were built at the side of the sightlines, in modest and horizontal concrete. At the central square the focus was on the most useful and one of the oldest symbols of Skopje: the *Kamen Most*, the medieval bridge with its worn, smooth sandstone paving, the link between the rebuilt and the old Turkish city.

In the last few years they've laid down two rival bridges to the right of the Stone Bridge.

These bridges have no elegant dromedary hump or the dusky desert yellow. They are white plastic casts with bronze-coloured plastic statues of Hellenistic rulers and the more acceptable names of the Macedonian literary canon. They are bridges devoid of people, partly because of the high-pitched noise coming from the lamp posts – officially to ward off the mosquitoes, but apparently also to ward off protesters with paint bombs. Notwithstanding, I walked along the latest additions to the new part, but I won't elaborate on the nationalistic kitsch and lack of sense of proportion, because I will not justify crime out of a naïve sense of wonder. The most recent buildings of the Skopje of Nikola Gruevski and company are criminal – not postmodern-ironically criminal because of their bad taste, but objectively criminal: 'Skopje 2014' has been built on a foundation of wide-spread corruption, of debts made for unnecessary edifices and for lining the pockets of party members, while in other parts of the country utilities are crumbling and women have to slave away for small wages in the textile mills.

At the quay of the Vardar, where crude leaking boats that were designed by people who had never seen boats beforehand, bob around, you can find foreigners and rich Macedonians, copying the foreigners, sitting behind green beer bottles. I avoid the canned classical music and cross the Stone Bridge. Through a small strip of broken-up disorientation and via stalls selling trinkets with Macedonian and Albanian flags, I walk into the old Čaršija. The muezzin starts to sing from the lowest minaret, after the last glimmer of twilight disappears. Consecutively other towers join in with this choir song. The old neighbourhood consists of low houses, one floor above the shops.

Green flags hang from the highest minarets, it is Ramadan and Friday, people gather at the mosques, but mostly hang back at the threshold. A Sunday-like quiet descends over the smooth, worn streets of Shkup and Üsküp; I find my way across the bridge towards my hotel room in Skopje, so I can leave early in the morning.

### ***Skopje → Bitola***

Mehmed V came to Bitola by train and I was planning to do the same. The penultimate Ottoman sultan was just in time before the loss of his provinces, but I missed my train even though I had left very early for the Skopje station. With ignorant confidence I go to a ticket office that I passed last night. I'm focussed more on the self-taught titbit of Macedonian than my surroundings, so I firmly buy '*edin bilet do Bitola*' for '*denes... prviot*' (today, the first). Afterwards I sit down on a bench to inspect the first ticket I bought myself using Macedonian. I look at the time and read what it says above: I mistakenly bought a ticket for the next bus to Bitola. At roughly the same time the train, which I had wanted to take me to Monastir, leaves on the railway tracks high above my head.

Thus I end up going by bus. After I ate my first ever *burek* with spinach and was offered a sour sparkling glass of *boza*, I report at the bus station. They check your tickets before you're allowed onto the platform, every seat is reserved. The lady I'm sitting next to doodles around with her bag, mirror and telephone. The bus drives through the suburbs along a highway which is called 'Autoroute Alexandre le Grand'. Again a gorge with a river and wooded flanks, then upwards with a view of Veles which lies under a patina of ochre. The winding traffic has to go over a narrow bridge here, which explains the previous Turkish name of Köprülü 'at the bridge'. This bottleneck of Macedonia would be international news six months later because of the backrooms filled with otherwise unemployed youths typing English *fake news* reports to influence the American elections. Maybe somewhat sad in our eyes, but for quite a few Macedonians they were heroes for a moment, fighting for ... for something, no one knew what.

After Veles the hilly country is more light brown. Grapes, fruit trees and tobacco-coloured

men who drive tractors pulling wagons full of peaches. At a small restaurant in Kamen Dol the bus stops for a lunchbreak. Across the aisle from me sits an elderly, English-speaking couple with crossword puzzles; Australians travelling through the Balkans, I learn when we start talking next to the bus. After this stop the road climbs up the mountain. Rough and rocky, past vestiges of habitation, the road crawls over bends with the sky as its verge. All around the barren, rocky landscape offers resistance, it's like we are not driving over a pass but are breaking through the mountain ridge.

Suddenly the mountain walls open up; greener slopes come into view, in the distance the terracotta oasis of a city with brown lumps of rock behind it. *Toa e... grad... e Prilep?*, I ask my silver-haired neighbour, trying out the Macedonian language again. After stammering at first, I get on reasonably well: I'm able to say that I'm travelling to Bitola ... *za kulturen proekt* ... and even that *jas sum Friziski pisatel od Holandija* (I'm a Frisian writer, from 'Holland').

After the steep mountains another, new land begins. The broad plateau of Pelagonia lies between jagged mountains, which are brown and dry in summer. It is mind-boggling how little was known outside of the Balkans about the layout of the mountain ridges and valleys of Macedonia and Albania for many centuries. One would travel around South-eastern Europe, of course, by sea. It wasn't until 1859 that the German scholar Johann Georg von Hahn, supported by Austrian subsidies, undertook an expedition to the mountains, rivers and resting places to chart them more precisely. His travel journals are full of contained amazement. But the end goal for Von Hahn was to find the best route for a railway line from Vienna to Constantinople, via Belgrade and Salonica. Hidden in the mountains Prilep and Monastir would not become stopping points along the main route.

I continue my conversation with my neighbour in English; tell her about the kind of literary expedition I'm on. She is a psychologist, board member of a Macedonian-Turkish organisation in Bitola. We chat about Turkish loanwords in Macedonian.

When we exit the city again the country is barren. Only at the foot of the next mountain range is it green again, do villages occur. I understand how people have lived here of old, pressed against the mountains. In the flat countryside I see cows, a small herd of less than twenty animals, with a herdsman amongst them with a stick slung across his shoulder. The hottest part of the day is looming. The herdsman of these few cows has to go out into the fields every day, always away from civilisation – the sham that is the pastoral idyll can be seen clearly. People are moving away from the countryside, the collective corporations have been broken up, and tracts of farmland are becoming tracts of weeds. The technical farming skills are deteriorating too, even though still 18% of the population live off agriculture. A few weeks later I'm having a drink with a few Macedonian acquaintances at an outside café in Bitola, where Australians and city folk drink the day away with coffee, and share my observations and analysis of the potential of large-scale farming – and I feel the colonialist within me bubble up, a landlord-to-be.

The city! Underneath the looming grey blue pyramid of the high Pelister the road becomes wider but worse, with houses and shops alongside. Yet, in the left corner of my eye I can feel the threatening presence too of the energy plant REK out there in the plain, near an infernal lignite mine, with its carcinogenic chimneys lacking soot filters.

## ***Bitola***



The city is like an island. Bitola keeps hold of its inhabitants in the long square kilometre of the main street Širok Sokak and the promenade towards the hill Tumbe Kafe. Here you can sit next to each other and watch the passers-by, drink beer and coffee, and eat warm cheese or baked maize cobs. During summer evenings the city is synonymous with walking up and down that one street.

The city is the large, old houses, scattered through and around the city centre, as if they had sprung up out of the soil before the streets, which twist between their gardens. At the elegant quays of the Dragor, as Von Hahn wrote after his first visit, “a long row of large new houses stretches out, where numerous military pashas, other higher officers and civil servants live. The building style of those houses is a quirky mix of oriental and occidental that gives them a gracious impression, and the ornaments of the facades, when not too brightly coloured, give them a quite coquettish appearance. But leaving this neighbourhood aside, we found in the other parts of the city more new houses and freshly plastered facades than in any other city that we had travelled through until then, and in contrast to them Bitolia gives the impression of being all one princely palace.”

The houses are square and Mediterranean. It is the city of the former Islamic and Vlach middle class, from the time when the city bloomed, as an administrative centre but certainly also because of the tobacco trade. Some of the houses have been revived in pastel colours, others survive in a state of noble born decay. As long as these houses remain, between the dilapidation of communist flats, newly built, whitewashed villas and collapsed huts, the historical city of Bitola still has a future.

I observe the city, while I settle down between the open doors of a café between the cathedral Sveti Dimitrija and the old mosque Jeni Džamija, my notebook open before me on the table. I’m looking at the bell tower and the monument for the ‘Situation’ of 2001. As I write the slow city life passes by, the way life inevitably works around here. I read the city like a book in a language I don’t yet completely understand. Two teenaged youths cycle on the sidewalk and make the sign of the cross at the church. A pot-bellied priest steps out of a van, his ponytail wet, and wearing a shabby black frock. He orders a frappe; a young woman sits down next to him with a cup of coffee.

A motherly Roma girl with slippers on pushes a stroller with two toddlers in front of her. In the park next to the tower a Muslim boy poses as a tiny carnival prince with his mother and father. Families in smart attire and in high heels gather to go to church. A band of three elderly gipsies shuffles along with a group of people, blowing a few tired notes from their saxophone, clarinet and drum set. If someone gave them some money, they would no doubt play much more enthusiastically.

Between the old houses, a step backwards, is the ‘National Institute University Library of Saint Clement of Ohrid’, an unassuming flat with long, concrete steps leading to the entrance. Bitola, I figured out after a few days, is a city without any real bookshops. My longing for books grows exponentially because of this, but the first few days I keep on finding the library closed. With my guide Marija as interpreter I manage to enter the library one fine day. At the *šalter* (front desk), a glass fortress, we explain why I would like to become a member. I have to sign a contract with the rules and regulations. To find out if they have the books I’m looking for, they send us to a door which has ‘Information’ written above it.

In a small room sits a man, about thirty years old with short, light brown hair, behind a computer. The small office is lined with veneer. Behind him hangs a painting of a fruit bowl; a sticker with the logo of the party in office, VMRO, is inserted into the frame of the painting. We wait in the office on faux-leather couches. The information specialist has to finish a call first, and I gather that it’s about the hospital. Afterwards he looks for my book titles in the online catalogue and writes down their codes on a piece of paper. Then he invites us behind his desk, so he can explain

how the library functions. It turns out that you can just browse the catalogue online and on the computers available in the hall, and in the end it is all quite self-explanatory.

Back to the *šalter*. We may proceed downstairs, to the book repository. The *magaziner* appears from his subterranean office. A tall, elderly fellow, with white hair, artistically long in his neck, and a moustache, yellow copper glasses, and a shirt in softly flowing metallic colours. To me he looks like a poet of gentle love verses, or maybe a writer of nursery rhymes. He leads us through the bookcases, filled mostly with weathered books in Macedonian and Serbo-Croatian, well-thumbed paperbacks which suffered through many years of use as unpopular study books.

We take a nice pile of books with us upstairs, into the sunlight. A few anthologies made for school use, starting with nineteenth-century folk ballads about, I believe, robber-heroes who hide in the mountains and about Christian girls who are in danger of ending up in some pasha's harem. The one book I myself had insisted on borrowing, was the one, according to my hypothesis, that was the beginning of Macedonian linguistics and literature: the normative grammar from the 1950s by the philologist, functionary and poet Blaže Koneski.

Above ground I have to have my picture taken for my library card in the porter's lounge. The photographer likes the fact that I'm a *stranski* (foreigner). He also has relatives all around the world, and he sums up where his grandparents came from and the countries where cousins of his live. The world is ours together, or (as a Macedonian saying goes) 'there are people and non-people'. – I get my card swiftly, with my name in the transcription and spelling which I myself recommended: Андре Рулоф Лојенга – with a *j* before the *e*, which arrogantly goes against Koneski's rules of grammar, but also, sad to say, against the linguistic feeling of ordinary Macedonians.

That evening I visit the library again. From the catalogue I found out that I could borrow recent Macedonian-English dictionaries as well. My piece of paper with book codes and titles are put in the book lift, and my books come up shortly afterwards.

It is quiet in the library. An hour before closing time, the *magaziner*, with his white locks, and the *portir* are sitting on the couch in the hall. The *magaziner* wants to show me the reading room. On the fourth floor are two rooms with tables, behind glass. Bare, no book cases, but with a view of the city. We speak English slowly and carefully. The *portir* calls out to his colleague: "Just speak Macedonian with him, otherwise he'll never learn!"

I take the books with me to my room, put them down on the table and leave my studies there for the moment. Soon I have an appointment with my hosts. The gentle night pulls, the city draws me to explore her streets. I walk through the streets of a formerly lively *pazar*, a small neighbourhood which had been renamed 'Boulevard 1st of May', stretching towards the east along the Dragor. The crumbling walls and forgotten displays have a layer of sepia-coloured dust over them, blown in from the Pelagonian plain. A tin shaving bowl, just like the helmet of Don Quixote, hangs above the open door of a barber shop, where an at least eighty-year-old barber still bustles between dull mirrors and in the sweet smell of cologne and pomade. Even the trees along the quay are grey while the sun sets into dusk. I hear a shrill whistle, which repeats itself forcibly, growing louder and drawing near. It is the train! Across barrier free level crossings it plods on to Monastir, its terminal. Behind the eastern residential area it rattles and whistles on, and I turn off into other winding streets back to the junction at the Širok Sokak where I agreed to meet up. I've arrived in Bitola.