Agent of Change

After moving to Switzerland in the early 90's to escape from a system of political, economic and social inequality, Bujar Nrecaj returned to Kosovo with a cause - to give rural children greater access to books and make going to school an enjoyable memory.

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On a cool spring morning in 1990, the residents of the village of Lutogllavë, Kosovo, had left their homes and were strolling around in a state of distress. Word had gotten out that in various places around Kosovo, Albanian schoolchildren were being rushed to hospitals after experiencing unusual symptoms of poisoning.

Parents in Lutogllavë feared for their children's safety. It was easy to find out that the primary school students were fine – the youngest ones studied in a dreary two-classroom building located within the village while those above fourth grade attended classes in the village of Korishe, twenty minutes away on foot. The teenagers, however, attended the gymnasium in the neighboring town of Suhareka. There were rumors that students from this school were among the poisoned ones.

Lutogllavë is sprawling village in southwestern Kosovo that stretches along the national road linking Suhareka to the historic city of Prizren. The villagers gathered close to the national road and watched as ambulances raced by them, carrying the gymnasium students from Suhareka to the regional hospital in Prizren. They desperately tried to spot familiar faces inside the ambulances.

Bujar Nrecaj, who was 12 at the time, says that he vividly remembers the scene when his family noticed his uncle's son in one of the ambulances. "I remember the shock; it's one of those memories that stay with you forever," he says while sitting in a comfortable Prishtina café, sipping a cup of the city's omnipresent macchiato.

"My childhood memories were not as good as I would have wanted them to be," Bujar says. This feeling is, for the same reasons as for Bujar, perhaps shared by the majority of Kosovars who happened to be children at that time.

After a tense decade in the '80s that culminated with the removal of Kosovo's autonomy in the Yugoslav federation, Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia began a harsh campaign of repression against Kosovo's Albanian population — which lasted throughout the '90s and was classified by many international monitors as a de facto apartheid. In 1991, Kosovo essentially became a police state, with curfews and arbitrary arrests as the norm.

The mass poisoning of about 3,000 school children, although vehemently denied by Serbia and dubbed as "a theatrical performance of a large scale," was later proven by French and Slovenian doctors to have been caused by an unidentified gas. It was widely believed that the Serbian regime used this tactic to incite fear among the Albanian population.

None of the children who were hospitalized on that day died, but it is an experience Bujar remembers to this day — the first story he shares when recalling his childhood.

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

"I've always thought that if you really want to help people, you shouldn't send them fish — you should teach them how to catch fish."

It was now May 2009, and two decades have passed since the infamous poisoning incident — Kosovo is an independent country and Bujar is a tall and postured thirty-year-old professional architect. He is also a Swiss citizen, his family having left Kosovo when he was still in primary school.

On this particular spring day, he's back to his childlike self, running around the schoolyard of his native village with a sense of enthusiasm. As cars pass on the adjacent national road, Bujar puts the finishing, decorative touches to improvised high tables furnished with champagne bottles and finger food. His eyes often turn fearfully towards the threatening and moody clouds, hoping that that they would not unleash rain on the open-air inauguration ceremony that he was diligently organizing.

Aided by friends and school personnel, Bujar takes a long strip of red silk cloth and ties it around a small, square and wooden building, which stands elegantly at the center of the schoolyard. With a precision typical off an architect, he ties the cloth into a knot at what seems like the central point of the building's door.

Inside the sleek and charming Scandinavian-style structure, on all four of its sides stretch two rows of wooden shelves carrying hundreds of children's books — from dictionaries to encyclopedias to even the Albanian translations of the Harry Potter sequels. The shelves hang on the sides of thick windows, which make the books and the interior of the building clearly visible from the outside.

At 10 in the morning, Bujar eagerly awaits the last guests' arrival. A group of clouds has dispersed and cleared the way for sunrays, transforming a dreary mood into optimism. The joyfulness of the moment is fueled by soft background music and the large crowds of noisy children gathered in front of the new library, some of them delightfully dressed in Albanian national costumes. They're all standing alongside disbursed groups of grown ups – teachers, parents, and out

of town visitors.

At one point, Bujar approaches the improvised podium, grabs the microphone, and utters his first sentences through a soundtrack of distant car noises and raucous shouts from kids whose attention he fails to get. His voice trembles a bit from emotion, and a slightly reddened face betrays his shyness.

He talks about the importance of childhood memories — his own, and those of the children standing in front of him — on the psychological development of children, expressing the hope that the current generation of pupils, unlike his own, would associate their childhood with books, reading and a thirst for knowledge. He then makes a passionate plea to the schoolchildren and teachers to make good use of the rich selection of books available in the library.

Several speeches later, the ribbon is cut and Bujar stands proud and graceful as children and guests enter the library. A project that he had designed and fundraised would now be serving a community he was very attached to. It seemed as though nothing could make him happier.

His sense of enthusiasm is shared by, among others, the Norwegian Ambassador to Kosovo, Sverre Johan Kvale, whose embassy decided to finance the construction of the Lutogllavë library with 17,000 euros only two minutes after Bujar had entered Kvale's office with a model of the design and presented the idea. Impressed by the quality of the construction, Kvale promises in the inauguration speech that he would support the building of at least two more libraries within the year and possibly more in the upcoming one.

The achievement only boosted his confidence and assertiveness. Feeling that he was onto something good, his ambitions grew larger. "Why can't every Kosovar village have such a library?" Bujar starts asking the people around him.

IN THE CAFES OF ZURICH, TWO FRIENDS DISCOVER "BUNATEKA" - a word play from the Albanian word for library (biblio*teka*), and *buna*, close to the Albanian word *bunar*, meaning well or source of water.

For Bujar, the construction of the Lutogllavë library was the realization of a long-standing dream. He came up with the idea in early 2007 while he lived and worked as an architect in Switzerland.

He had just graduated from the University of Zurich and taken up a promising job at a Zurich-based studio that was working as a local partner for Souto Demoura, the renowned Portuguese architect, on a development project for the Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis.

Bujar would often meet and have passionate discussions about Kosovo with fellow Kosovar-Albanian diaspora friends, most of whom he had met at the University of Zurich's Albanian Student Association.

"We always had this desire to help Kosovo somehow," he says. "Every now and then, we would talk about what we can do to help the kids here. But somehow we never liked the idea of sending things that would be used and then produce nothing sustainable, like pens and pencils."

"I've always thought that if you really want to help people, you shouldn't send them fish — you should teach them how to catch fish," Bujar says. His thinking on the issue resembles that of someone who has spent a career working in development assistance.

"In one of the meetings with my Albanian friends, I proposed an idea to build libraries for rural children," he says. "The majority of our population lives in villages and the children there have no opportunities whatsoever for personal development. First I thought of

making some mobile library that would be installed within a truck and then move from one village to another. But then the idea evolved into building a static structure that would be cost effective."

Bujar's friend Naser, a graduate of psychology from the University of Zurich, was enthused by this idea. "Naser told me that he had always wanted to do something for his native village as well and that he found the library idea interesting. We decided to meet up and take it a step further."

Bujar already had developed some design ideas, but Naser gave him some of the essential tips that would later become the central facets of the whole project. These suggestions incorporated aspects of the psychological development of children into the library's design. It was during the discussions between the two that the central theme moved beyond the simple notion of providing reading opportunities to children and expanded to the idea of creating "positive memories."

Bujar and Naser would go back to the grim memories of their childhoods and discuss about the effects that they've had on their lives. It was not just the political tensions that were stuck in their heads, but the whole experience of going to school.

"The schooling experience in Kosovo is quite traumatic," Bujar says. "You go to a school facility that is run down and offers no proper conditions; the teachers are authoritative and they use outdated and unappealing teaching methodologies. There is nothing interesting going on that a child can find exciting."

He suggests that there is no wonder why schoolchildren in Kosovo simply stop being curious at a certain age and develop an aversion to reading and learning. Through didactics focused only on the dissemination of information, the educational system merely gives children some very basic knowledge and skills but creates a serious side effect by associating the whole notion of learning and reading with traumatic experiences.

As Bujar and Naser were discussing about such issues in the cafes of Zurich, they were well aware that the educational philosophy in Kosovo could not be changed overnight. But they hoped that their modest library project would at least develop a "psychologically programmed" liking for books on at least some school children, perhaps sparking within the more talented and curious ones a desire to learn on their own.

"It was Naser's idea to use transparent glass in the library and to have the books visible from outside," Bujar says. "In this way, the children would be exposed to the image of books every time they would walk through the schoolyard. In their mental maps, books would receive their deserved status of importance. Having in mind the gloominess of the whole school experience, this library would stand out as an attraction and the visibility of books would create within them a positive association for reading."

The two friends decided to name the project "*Bunateka*." Bujar explains that the name is a word play aimed to sound close like the Albanian word for library (biblioteka). For Bujar, the first part of the word, *buna*, is close to the Albanian word *bunar*, meaning well or source of water.

"The idea is that books are a source of knowledge just like water is the source of life," Bujar says.

OFF TO AN UNKNOWN LAND

It was in the summer of 1991, several months after the infamous poisoning incident, when Bujar's family decided to move to Switzerland. The tensions in

Yugoslavia were reaching a tipping point, and for anyone in Kosovo with an opportunity to leave the country, it seemed logical to make a move. At the time, it was widely thought that if there was to be any war in Yugoslavia, the first battleground would be Kosovo, and not Slovenia. Bujar's father had been working in Switzerland as a construction worker since the mid-'80s, part of the wave of Kosovars who had gone abroad as "gastarbaiters" (guest workers) and formed the first generation of what are now the clusters of diaspora groups in Western Europe (the largest of which are in Germany and Switzerland). The family's intention was to seek political asylum, and in those days it was easy for a Kosovar Albanian to get one.

It was also simple to get to Switzerland at the time because Yugoslav citizens still could travel to Western Europe without visas. The only obstacles in his family's move to Switzerland were the emotional shock of having to leave home and the insecurity of what the future would bring.

Bujar remembers traveling to Switzerland by bus with his mother, sister and brother. There is something particularly Swiss about the fact that he remembers the exact time and hour when he got off the bus in Zurich. "It was precisely 13:30 p.m. on March 24, 1991," he says.

For Bujar, that hour marked the start of a new life in a completely unknown country. He had just entered his formative years and was vulnerable to a certain degree of culture shock. This would have been a bigger problem had his family left the slow-paced life of rural Lutogllavë and settled into any burgeoning cosmopolitan metropolis. But the Nrecajs chose to live in the small and serene town of Amriswil, Thurgau canton, where Bujar's father had found a new job at a factory.

Adapting to Switzerland, though, was not easy. He enrolled at school in September, and despite taking language courses to overcome learning obstacles, Bujar found himself lagging behind his peers.

"Back in Lutogllavë I was one of the best students, but in my first year in Switzerland I found myself at the bottom of my class," Bujar says. "Over there, they separate students on the basis of their qualities, and I was put in the group of the weak students. The condolence was that I was the best within this group," Bujar adds with laughter.

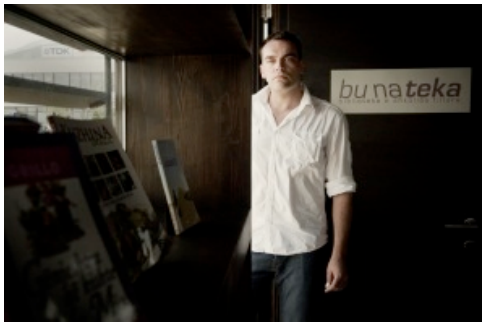
While students in the lower category generally had a hard time finding placement in high school, a teacher helped Bujar enroll at a vocational school for construction in the city of St. Gallen.

"The vocational schooling in Switzerland is very practice oriented, so I was placed at an architectural studio and tasked with drawing high structures," he says.

Bujar completed the vocational school in 2001 with above-average grades and then enrolled at the University of Zurich's Faculty of Architecture, from which he graduated in 2006.

"I always liked drawing, I don't know why. It just seemed a natural decision," Bujar says of his choice to study architecture. Furthermore, he had a burning desire to apply these skills in his homeland. "I also had this idea that this kind of knowledge could be very useful for Kosovo," he says.

LIVING UP TO HIS NAME



Although at first sight the *Bunateka* idea might not seem very inventive and might not promise any spectacular effects, it most certainly addresses one of the most fundamental structural problems blocking Kosovo's progress. After all, what is it that keeps a country poor and underdeveloped if not massive outpourings of development aid?

Many commentators and social scientists have pointed the finger to some of the country's cultural traits as being at the root of the problem. Using Haiti as an illustrative example of a country facing "structural poverty," Lawrence E. Harrison suggested that such countries are faced with "a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences" like, for example, the tendency to externalize of responsibilities, social mistrust, etc.

Kosovo also has some of these "progress resistant" traits, and the root causes for enabling their persistence are linked to the poor education system and the psychological nurturing that children receive from their families. These two factors create a structural barrier for children to develop and overcome the economic and intellectual conditions of their families, thus preventing any upward mobility in society.

Cultures change very slowly. So it would be hard to expect any significant change without well-targeted state policies and programs, like some type of radical reform of teaching methodologies. But at a time when no such initiatives are at sight, some gaps could be filled and effects achieved from the actions of individual agents in small communities.

This is precisely where initiatives like Bujar's come in. His *Bunateka* project might not radically affect the overall quality of education that the rural students receive. But the library could at least serve as a life-changing experience to some of the village's hidden talents who would now have a chance to indulge in reading and perhaps develop a thirst for learning independently.

Bujar knows very well what it means to be given a chance. "I had a chance to read books as a kid. I got them from my family. You could immediately tell the difference in the success in school between those kids who had some access to books and knowledge and those who didn't," Bujar says. Perhaps the biggest chance he got in life was the opportunity to live and educate himself in a country like Switzerland.

During his time there, Bujar was one of those immigrants with a strong emotional attachment to their homeland. He lived his entire life possessed by the dream of one day coming back to live there.

"Kosovo was my eternal preoccupation. I visited the country almost every year, even during the '90s. At school I would always make presentations about the county's history and culture," Bujar says.

As a graduation thesis, he designed his family's new house in Switzerland. "I created enough space so that the house could fit only my parents and my brother's family. I didn't create any space for myself because I knew that I would be coming back to Kosovo one day."

After graduation, he became so possessed by the idea of returning that he started to bore those around him by talking about the subject all the time. "One day my uncle had enough of my blabbering and yelled at me: decide already, either leave or stay."

Several days before Kosovo's declaration of independence, Bujar was sitting in front of his office computer looking for available airplane tickets to Prishtina. He was very tempted to be there on Independence

Day, but he also was hesitant. There was no official notification that anything would happen Feb. 17, only some hints and indications.

"A German colleague from work told me that she'd had a chance to go to Berlin when the wall went down. She had decided not to go. She told me that she regretted this decision to this day." The colleague's indirect suggestion prompted Bujar to immediately buy the ticket and ask for some days off from work.

Bujar describes Feb. 17, 2008, much as anyone who happened to be in Kosovo on that historic day:"It was a dream come true. I have never seen such a large mass of happy people." He says that the decision to return to Kosovo had already been made inside his head while he was walking around in the jubilant streets of Prishtina on that day. He didn't tell anyone until about two weeks later. But no one who really knew him was surprised by the news.

On April 3, Bujar left one of the most prosperous countries in the world in order to fulfill his dream. He settled in his native village of Lutogllavë, where he spent time with his family and worked on a new design and model for the *Bunateka*. "I decided to return, but my aim wasn't to just sit back and do nothing for the community. I wanted to come back to a country where I could raise my future children."

Bujar stayed in Lutogllavë for about two months until the lack of any meaningful activities started to bore him. "I became a little stressed and started asking myself: did I make the right decision?" So he decided to move to the more dynamic capital, Prishtina, where he rented an apartment and opened his own private architecture studio, BN Architects. He took on some small projects to earn money, but *Bunateka* remains his main priority.

Bujar initially approached the Ministry of Education with the project, hoping to spark some interest. He asked for a meeting with Minister Enver Hoxhaj for two months, pestering his secretary with phone calls and even dropping into his office one day to see whether he was available. Through an intervention from the Swiss Embassy, he was only able to get a meeting with a department director who gave him moral support and a letter of recommendation for the project, but no funding commitment.

Bujar then submitted a project proposal to foreign embassies in Kosovo and donor organizations. Several of them invited him for meetings but he was not able to get any concrete promise until he met the Norwegian Ambassador, Sverre Johan Kvale, in November 2009.

Bujar is a soft-spoken and tall man with somewhat of an epic face. He speaks Albanian with the natural glitches and insecurities of a person who has done all of his schooling in a foreign country, carefully and slowly structuring his sentences and choosing his words. What he says always seems as if it's been carefully processed within his head.

Then, there's something about the glow in his eyes that very easily gives away his idealistic spirit. Perhaps it was because of this trustworthy and dignified posture that it took him only two minutes to convince the Norwegian Ambassador to finance the Lutogllavë library. Kvale says that he not only liked the vision behind the library idea, but that he had a very positive gut feeling about the sincerity of Bujar's motives.

After inaugurating the *Bunateka* in Lutogllavë, the Norwegian Embassy funded the construction of a second one in Sferk, the native village of Bujar's partner in the project, Naser. Three more libraries have been built so far and two more will be finished by the end of this year, making the total number seven. The Swiss Embassy in Kosovo has co-financed three of these, supplementing the grants from the Norwegians.

Bujar now continues to raise money, aware that there could be more donors out there who can understand his idea and its relevance for Kosovo. "My hope is that this idea will be picked up by more donors

and possibly the Ministry of Education," he says. "I strongly believe that this should turn into some kind of a national program and that one day all of Kosovo's rural primary schools would have a library like this. It really wouldn't cost that much."

His determination to continue working on the project seems to get stronger with every new library that is built and especially after he goes to meet with the rural kids who benefited from his project.

Bujar and his libraries were recently featured in the "plus of the week" segment in Jeta në Kosovë, the prime-time current affairs show produced by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and aired in RTK, the public broadcaster. The TV crew went into the mountainous village of Bajgore, near Mitrovica, to visit one of the libraries that were inaugurated last year. They left the place inspired. "I was very touched when the school principal told me that the pupils were harassing him to allow them access to the library after the school hours. Days like that motivate me to go on," he says.

Altruism seems like something inherent in Bujar's character. His parents might have been unaware of this when they named him Bujar — a word that in Albanian means generous. With the work that he's doing, he's living up to his name.