

**FOOTBALL, FREEDOM
AND PARADISE!**

RUDI WATA

My Story

with Gerard McDade

Foreword by Paul McStay



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CHAPTER 1

REFUGEE

The Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on 30th March 1991 represented one of the highlights of my early football career.

Here was I, 21 years of age, taking to the pitch, representing my country against the cream of French international football at the time.

Among the ranks of ‘Les Bleus’ were names who would go on to make their mark on the European and global game.

The craft and leadership of Laurent Blanc, the fortress power of Basile Boli, the midfield intelligence of Luis Fernandez, the guile and finishing of Jean-Pierre Papin and then, the maverick talent that was Eric Cantona en route to making his genius felt in English football as well as on the continent.

All of them, under the command of their manager – unmistakably, one of the greatest French footballers of all time – Michel Platini.

These and men like them were the challenge that we, as proud Albanians, were having to face in order to compete on the international stage.

And yet – my own emotions were also in play, in the cauldron of the French national stadium.

I was a professional football player, concentrating on the game, but there were other issues.

Aleks had left abruptly.

Two years my elder, my brother had made the decision that it was time for him to leave Albania.

No one in my country, a beautiful country but one of repressive post-war communist dogma and brutal, torturous technique, took the decision to leave family, loved ones and friends lightly despite that repression.

It wasn't just a decision for oneself. You were making a decision with potential implications for the ones left behind and the punishment that *they* could suffer.

I had been tempted, *of course* I had, but the pull of my family was strong and, yet ...

My belief was that it wasn't your fault if you were born into a country under dictatorship, but it was if you chose to accept it.

It wasn't your fault if you were born into poverty, but it was if you chose to do nothing about it.

Aleks had taken that chance, but I needed to know that he was safe and well.

I had much on my mind, so much to contemplate and I did so the night before the game against the French.

We, as a squad, were in Geneva and when morning came, the plan was to have breakfast and make our way across the border into France.

That plan became a little more challenging when we were informed by the hotel authorities that three of our squad had changed their clothes, picked up their rucksacks and gone for a 'walk' in the middle of the night. It was clear that they were not set on returning and our manager, a great man by the

name of Bejkush Birce, had to shrug his shoulders and plan for a European Championship qualifier against one of the best nations on the planet with the bare bones of a 15-man squad now depleted by three.

To bolster the set-up, he called up a trio of players from the under-21 squad who were also competing in France that day. Not what you would call an ideal solution.

My memories of that night were of a hard match against an inspired opposition.

Two down in the first ten minutes, four by half-time, we rallied in the second half only to ship a fifth courtesy of an unfortunate own goal from Hysen Zmijani.

My team-mate would later be destined to play a part in my own plans, which I had now solidified.

Did my emotions affect my own personal performance that night?

Very probably, as my concentration was mixed with insecurity, but I completed my mission with what I like to think was dignity and I left the field of play clutching the jersey of no less than Eric Cantona, who offered it to me as a swap.

I had done my duty and served my country.

Our squad made its way back to the Hotel Concorde Montparnasse courtesy of the coach laid on by the French Football Federation.

Once back at the hotel, I picked up a sheet or two of the complimentary stationery as well as an envelope and pen as I set about writing the most difficult letter of my life.

How does one tell one's parents that you are leaving the country of your birth and their heritage to start a completely new life?

Through the letter I was able to impart to them that a group of Albanian immigrants from Belgium had informed me that Aleks was alive, well and relocated in Bari, Italy.

My parents had no telephone, so the letter was to be my only way to give them this information.

'Aleks is alive and safe,' I wrote, in my native Albanian. *'Please understand that this is my only moment to begin my future. Football will be my life – my chance for a professional career. When possible, and I hope soon, please come visit me in France and forgive me.'*

I slipped the letter into the envelope before placing it into my pocket and then I went looking for one man – my manager, Bejkush Birce.

He had always been good to me and now I felt I had to respect our relationship, by telling him that I was leaving.

Being the man he was, a man who had grown up in the post-war austerity of communist Albania, I felt he would understand my decision.

As a man of the world, he would also have known that there would be Communist Party members travelling with our squad as government officials – the *Sigurimi*.

Their duty would have been to ensure that we all returned to our homeland as well as ensuring that the defection of three of our players would not indicate a system going out of control.

'I cannot come back. I need freedom,' I said and Bejkush gave me an emotional hug and wished me well along with the very best of luck.

The next task was to entrust my envelope to another of my team-mates and he was the unfortunate scorer of the final French goal, Hysen Zmijani.

He and I had perspective. We knew the game was the game, but this was more important.

This was freedom, choice, and life.

Hysen assured me that he would fulfil the task for me and, secure in that knowledge, I left the hotel and went down into the Metro with another squad member, Adrian Sukaj, for company.

As I sat on the train, I contemplated that I was now heading into an unknown world and all I had with me were the clothes I stood in, the contents of my bag containing the football boots that were the tools of my trade, the key to my future, as well as the 50 American dollars (contraband currency in Albania) that nestled in the pocket of my jeans.

Adrian and I had been assured of the procedure by other immigrants and our route took us straight to the nearest police station, *Gendarmerie*.

Once inside, and in the hope that my fluency in Italian would be understood by the French police, I attempted to inform them that we were Albanian refugees and that we sought political asylum in their country.

With those words, my life would change forever, but in that moment, around 1am on the morning of 31 March 1991, we were taken through the procedure of detailing passport numbers and identification before being informed that an interpreter would be summoned, and we would be able to state our case.

Within 24 hours, Adrian and I were taken to a refugee camp in Nantes.

The camp was a symbol of equality.

It did not matter that, two days before, I had been on the international football stage – that I had been on the same pitch

as Fernandez, Papin and Cantona, whose shirt was still lying in my bag – that I had represented my country and my people in front of thousands in the Parc des Princes as well as millions watching on television.

My new life starts here – where all are equal.

Like them, I am a refugee.