

Seven-Year-Long Journey

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I will never have a clear viewpoint about Knin and the life there, I cannot do without it, and yet I'm running away from it; this obviously awaits me in the process of resolving things. But after all, one needs to believe unconditionally in the good within one's own self, and all the rest will work out as it should.

Finally, I must wake up and understand where I am. Establish harmony. Accept America as a place where I can function, more or less...

“It was a long, long journey... only one more mile to go...”, the old black guy was softly singing his blues, caught on the Radio Prnjavor waves, somewhere in the heart of Bosnia, amid a column of refugees aimlessly dragging itself ‘somewhere’, in August 1995. For most of the refugees, this ‘one more mile’ caught on the radio has so far lasted seven whole years. Still far from the end. Moving people here and there, from one part of the world to the other, bringing them back again to their native land, taking them under the big city lights or throwing them into the depression of backwater provinces. And then all over again, in circles.

“Once I'd lost my house, the entire planet became my home”, said ironically one of the passengers from this column, a year later, sitting on the terrace of a big city café, lazily sipping his espresso. And added that after the “Storm” he doesn't have his anchor any more. He has only a buoy, which he drops when he has decided to float a while in the place where he's found himself. And afterwards he moves on. These short cuts, destinies of the stateless people, are the stories about three men from this August column: Boris, a psychologist from Knin, returnee, Dragan, a poet from Knin, still in exile, and Milan from Obrovac, truck driver, immigrant to America. These are their postcards from the seven-year-long journey, search for themselves, their comings and goings...

Written by Igor Čoko

STORY ONE: Dragan, 32 years, poet, Knin / Belgrade

Dragan is from Knin. One of the indispensable faces from the previous life of Knin streets. City freak. Today he lives in Belgrade. Writes poetry. Dreams about return. He went there, saw, came back. Went again. Looking for a way to find himself. Still on the road... These are his impressions.

A DREAM WITH SEVERAL DIMENSIONS

Internal emigration: I've never accepted the word "exile". Nor the entire story itself. I've always treated this as a form of changing residence. Like, I'm not in Knin any more. But I have never accepted these surroundings. I'm only physically here. I'll be honest to say that in the past seven years I haven't spent one minute here! It's like a form of internal emigration. I always found it funny when someone treats me as a refugee; the word foreigner is much closer to me. I feel bad here, awful! Maybe we'd be better off if we had come to the United Arab Emirates. We might have been treated as foreigners there. And here we have the treatment of "locals" who are not local. When this government and the people needed us, then they claimed us as their own. And now when the circumstances demand something else, we're "outsiders". Between this hammer and anvil we've been living here for seven years. Now, one doesn't need plenty of imagination to understand what was going on. It's not enough to say it was bad. It's best to start with "confused, confusing, and..." move to worse options.

Return to own self: Return? Absolutely! Firstly, return in the psychological sense, return to one's own self. We've moved away from normalcy, now we have to go back to it. Also the one staying here has to go back. To himself. After seven years of exile, plus four years of war, we don't even know who we were when we existed. Running away from these blows, we somehow turned into amphibians, adapting to circumstances, we've become something else. And return home is, at least for me, the only way to go back to myself. For, when I'm down there, I am with myself! I cannot even think about this here, this here is not mine, I have no connection any longer. When I walk, I can imagine I'm walking through any town, New York, Athens... But when I walk through Knin, I'm walking through Knin. Here I don't care where I am. It's completely irrelevant where I am. I was in Knin. Going home is like... a fairytale! When I go to Knin, it's like I've come to something that does not exist! A few days after I went to Knin for the first time after five years, it was incredible! I could not comprehend this was possible, that I can be here again. I look around myself, I had to visit everything to realise this dream has several dimensions. There I understood that this was the only way to go back to myself. Return. It took me several days to realise that Knin has remained the same. That it hasn't changed. The Fortress doesn't give a fuck about anybody. It never moved an inch! You understand... It's all the same. Once I used to think that towns are made of people. But it's not true. Towns are geometry. Buildings, streets... Something creates a constellation of powers inside which you behave in a certain manner. That's the catch; I can hardly be a Belgrader because I was formed as a citizen of Knin. It's a different geometry.

Waking up from the fairytale: Wow... It's different phenomenon! You step into a fairytale for a while and suddenly you wake up in a nightmare. Not even in the "Matrix" can one see that. You touch this form of paradise and all of a sudden you have to go back "somewhere". When they had told me "we're going back to Belgrade" I wasn't fully aware of what Belgrade was. At least not at the moment while I was so impressed by Knin. However, when I returned to Belgrade, I realised where I have arrived. Although I've been here for years. Compared to Knin, Belgrade is a nightmare for me. Exactly because of this fairytale. I have a feeling that if we stay here we'll all turn into marginal characters who live this city and work in it with one face, and at night dream of juniper trees, bushes and rocks...

It's because of this that people become dual personalities. When they remain somewhere else, in America, Australia, Belgrade, their personality splits. Daytime and nighttime characters. The daytime one performs everyday duties, talks in English, in the 'ekavian' dialect, and the nighttime one lies down and raves in his sleep, dreams of "stallions around the threshing pole". This is bad for a man. Consolation is like a one winged pigeon. It has one wing, but it cannot fly. Heavy, eh? If for nothing else, I'd go to Knin just to get away from these refugees here!

STORY TWO: Boris, 36 years, psychologist, Knin

Boris from Knin, Boris to Knin. Three times back and forth. Via Belgrade, Netherlands, exile, asylum, stateless life and miserable existence in asylum seeker camps... Looking for himself and finally always going back "on the spot", to Knin, where the story began. And where it will inevitably end. This is his postcard.

WELCOME AGAIN TO THE SPIRITUAL AND UNIVERSAL PROVINCE

Right to life: I have spent three and a half years as a refugee, being in exile. My first feelings were those of void, being lost, disorientation, but also, which may be contradictory, a great relief after four years of the Republic of Serb Krajina cancer that was spreading through my soul.

For me, the first days of exile were marked with freedom, relief and unburdening. But this lasted for a very short while and my first step towards integration into Serbian society were marked with incredible problems. Although I started working only a month after the "Storm", with drug addicts, there was no way I could reach an equal status with the natives, and this lasted until November 1998, when I returned to Croatia. Simply initiating procedures to obtain basic civil society attributes was for me the work of Sisyphus: I'm talking about documents, right to legal employment, right to a roof over my head, food. Right to life, damn it! Living in the Serbian society in the lethal Milosevic-Markovic phase carried deadly consequences. It was horrible! Only the complete chaos, Romany resourcefulness and masturbating over plans to move to Seychelles or Aruba have saved me from a complete personality disorientation, which led to accepting surrender. In my case this resulted in marriage with a colleague, a daughter of the provincial Yugoslav Left Party tycoon. What is there to say about all the years of exile, apart from a few friendships with the natives, beautiful Belgrade in spring sometime around the Marathon, walks to lower Dorcol and my training in family psychology - all the rest I would gladly trade for one climb up the rocks above Zrmanja.

The worm of temporariness: Symbolically I returned to Knin as early as the summer 1997, after I've obtained my Croatian personal documents in Slavonia and landed in my native town, that fucking province which I can't get out of my heart and soul, that pole of nostalgia and esotery stuck inside me, which I'll take to my grave. This was a ten day visit after which I returned to Belgrade with full tanks of psychic energy in terms of having something, having my house preserved, the Mediterranean, Krka river, even local friends! And you in Serbia can keep slaughtering each other over Siberian winter, freezing summers, stinky water as if it was from the planet of Uranus, and your urge to fight with your closest neighbours over access to a 38 story building and so on. This was my crucial mistake, a pattern that I keep repeating in all communities in which I have tried to grow roots - like, I'm here only temporarily and I can afford to be less of a petit bourgeois than my neighbours. And then hit on everybody with the para-anarchical suicidal behaviour style.

Upon return everything was going OK, I found a job with an obscenely high salary, new gang to hang out with, going to the seaside, simply - everything! But the worm of temporariness, which was born in me after the "Storm", was constantly drilling through my mind. It all ended with my leaving again, this time to Holland for a political asylum. And this was on the tenth anniversary of Tudjmanistic reign, on the day when the First President died, 10th December 1999. Regardless of the far better material living conditions in Croatia in '99, regardless of the car that takes you to endless national parks around you without your asking about fuel price, regardless of the second hand computer as a status symbol, proudly carried around by members of the western civilisation, regardless of the job, the house, one gives up such a life with a reason. Then you make a selection in your head and remember that you could have got into countless fights with some Croatian looser because he called you a "Serbian asshole", because you couldn't approach Croatian women, since a part of them, like the Croatian men, believe they are "great victims of war" and keep faking their

segregationist fight in a more sophisticated way. And after the selection and the initial confusion, you reach out for the old para-anarchical mechanism “I don’t belong here, I want out”. And you leave one night with a friend, you start to fake it, and automatically become the victim of this new deceit called - life in the liberal Western world. You simply look for a way out in a closed circle.

Sophisticated hell: ...My life in Holland as a political and economic asylum seeker lasted less than eight months, from December 1999 until August 2000. Holland offers you asylum very easily, and then you go through three circles of sophisticated hell in various asylum seeker centres. The Dutch have a great interest to give you asylum, because they get important financial contribution from the UN for every asylum seeker, and also have an excuse for their terrible, incomprehensible egotism in terms that they are good, great in their humanitarianism towards all dregs of world crises, like they understand a Chechen and a Sierra-Leonese and a Chinese and a Bosnian. There is no end to this state archi-narcissism, everything echoes with hymns to their liberal ways and power, as if they are re-conquering Indonesia in their colonialist battles. But reality is quite different; state officials dealing with asylum seekers, and not only with them, have less education than an average Tadjik who went to school, they do not understand the behaviour of their praised Queen Beatrix, let alone the behaviour of us asylum seekers. They have set perfect legal traps where they give you negative replies over and over again to your requests for asylum, there is no way you could get a legal job, everything is coercing you either into plain crime or silence while you await deportation in one year more or less. One of those half-trained policemen forbade me to watch CNN, saying that was too much violence for us asylum seekers. They shove you into some improvised mega-tent or container near the border with Germany or Belgium in the middle of bloody nowhere. After my good behaviour in the first two centres, they put me in a tent near a run-down Trappist monastery to try and integrate with a Romany from Lazarevac, a Somali member of Al-Quaida and two Armenians in fake Armani clothes, who smoke cocaine in the morning instead of coffee and rob jewelry stores on the other side of the country at night and come back at dawn and play innocent, traumatised by the war in Armenia, which never happened, but who could convince the Dutch who think they know everything. And so the days go by, you’re behind the wire, you’re on the verge of tears over the fate of a Chechen or a Ugandan who are true asylum seekers and have nowhere else to go, you stick to the sacred rule to have no contact with any member of our former peoples and nationalities, for they are all smugglers, half criminals, or have gone crazy from war and destitution, they can only hinder you in both the cosmic and the asylum status field. Finally I gave up, my heart was breaking over the fate of Yuma from Uganda whose family members were slaughtered, on one hand, and the rage that was building up in me at the immoral propositions of my countrymen to rob a gas station and go for dope and hookers to Rotterdam, on the other. My reason for leaving Holland was that I became fed up with all the misery around, but also within myself, in the reactivated mechanism of thinking that happiness is somewhere else, even if it means that it’s in the place, which was a constant source of misfortune for me!

Golgotha revisited: I remember how I flew from Zagreb to Split (paid by IOM, like the flight from Amsterdam to Zagreb - they even give you an individual financial aid of about 300 US dollars for a new start!) and I was tripping again that my Croatia is a lovely country, which is basically the truth. Indeed, in Holland I was awaiting return in an asylum seeker centre and the rain hasn’t stopped from the beginning of July until the scheduled flight at the end of the same month. Almost a month of summer rain without a moment’s rest! And then - the sea, Rok waterfall, the sun! But man is a social being, return among people meant again going through Golgotha, misunderstandings, and false expectations. This time very few people understood me: for God’s sake, I’ve returned for the third time! But I’ve learned something from my mistakes. No more political engagement of any kind, respect what you have and for what you’re ready, withstand and withstand again all forms of humiliation from the situations when someone takes your job because that someone is of a different nationality, has tits, or is emptier than you, as far as remembering that you’re a few years older, that

you're slowly giving in. Welcome again to the spiritual and the universal province. But with peace in the soul and the sun on your forehead. Although I had to start everything from scratch, it is better to build something on ruins properly than to paint an unrealistic picture of yourself and everything around you. I will never have a clear viewpoint about Knin and the life in it, I cannot do without it, and yet I'm running away from it, it obviously awaits me in the process of final resolution. Or I will never resolve it, I cannot be certain about anything in that respect. But after all one needs to believe unconditionally in the good inside oneself, and all the rest will work out as it should.

STORY THREE: Milan, 24 years, Obrovac/Lynn, USA, truck driver

"I told you that the second message will be more elaborate and that I'll write more about myself and how I live here. At the moment I'm not employed anywhere and I'm not doing any work whatsoever. I spent ten days in the hospital for lunatics and I'm still taking pills"

(Tears. Pause...)

This is how the story began with Milan from Obrovac. His refugee saga stopped on the East Coast of the American continent, in Lynn, a town eleven miles away from Boston. Before that, his nomadic adventure has lasted for three years. After leaving Obrovac for the Hungarian city of Komaron, to his mother's relatives, immediately before the Storm, followed the trip from Pristina and Kosovo, and from there, when the heels started burning again, a new flight to America and Lynn. The place where he has currently dropped anchor. This summer, Milan was in Belgrade again after three years. Returning to America caused a nervous breakdown. Several days after the first message, in which he had described the current state of his psyche, Miki pulled himself together and sent a letter in which elaborately explained his impressions about life in America and revisiting Belgrade. This is his story.

SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR

Against the machine: Fuck it, sorry, last visit to Belgrade threw me into a heavy depression. I don't know if I feel worse when I see how things are there or when I have to leave. When I landed at Surcin airport, I knelt down, crossed myself three times and kissed the ground. I could not believe I was here again after three years. That I'm returning to the place from where I had flown off to a better life. It's a strange feeling that fulfills a person when he finds himself in this region again. Fuck the Internet, crying over the web, that's all nothing but deceit. The feeling of positive chaos that we've lived in over the past ten years remains in you as a germ and you cannot get rid of it even if you were I don't know who and possessed I don't know what powers. You can call it lack of adaptability, I don't know. In America everything is a machine, you function along the seems, programmed to give physical and spiritual maximum if you wish to survive. And we are Dalmatians, used to an easy life, and this new regime actually destroys your psyche. You're not naturally like that and you fall into their machine. Then you fucking endure, you adapt and manage. That's why I became ill immediately after having arrived to America! Simply I could not withstand it, all that was getting terribly on my nerves. Over time, I accepted the game, with some alterations of mine. And then, because of all this, you hide this germ of anarchy inside yourself, you trip, you dream. Then you find yourself again among your own people and feel this germ growing inside you, filling you with some perverted pleasure. Like an eruption. Like dope. But, fuck, getting off it is hurts like cold turkey, the nausea is bad. I snapped upon return, something broke inside me. Ugh, it's so screwed...

Loneliness kills: I hate America. Even though it offered us the only way out from the chaos. We lived in Pristina. My folks went there directly, after the Storm, and I joined them at some point, coming from Hungary. My folks told me "come to Pristina, you'll have a room in the Student's Home, university free of charge..." I didn't hesitate. It was great in Pristina. The inevitable adolescent outburst of passion and emotions happened. Dead town, but the gang was good. My parents lived in a refugee collective centre, with another 300 people. Then we were given a room in a barrack. Then there was war again. When UNHCR opened the programme for third country resettlement, we did not have a moment's doubt. Although it was a difficult decision, it was our only option. You think about settling down finally, there's no more Obrovac, no more Pristina, enough roaming around. You leave everything behind, embark on that voyage; you don't even know how many you've made. Later I heard that the barrack in Pristina in which we used to live was burned down during NATO bombing campaign. There, you see.

I mean, I'm OK in Lynn, I'm provided for, I have almost everything I need in life. I have all this everyday material shit; I don't know what to do with them any more. The mailman works for me. I

sit around, have fun, I drag him over, I order things out of boredom. CDs, musical instruments and gadgets. I can afford it. I have a musical home theatre, outrageous sound... And I'll tell you, I've been calculating. If now, after such a short period I've lived here I have everything I need, what would happen in a year or two? All I've lost in Obrovac and Pristina, I've regained here. And doubled. I have a house, every member of the family has a car, I have the latest model of the Ford jeep, and I'm paying it off at the rate of 500 USD a week. But what good is all this money and things when I cannot spend it and share them with people I love, and who are not near me?! In fact, on second thought, I have nothing! And then my mother is surprised when we get a 300-dollar phone bill. What can I tell you, I call Yugo, talk to people for an hour or so. Then I have the feeling that the gang is here in the room with me. We drink beer. Fool around. Sort of.

And then, finally, I rush off to Belgrade, to meet with people I miss. Unbelievable feeling of relaxation, the germs start working. The fact you're doing nothing whatsoever, that you're lying around, having fun, burning those bloody dollars... And then you go back to America and see how miserable you really feel. Loneliness kills. I have our people here, I don't make friends with Americans, but they're already under the influence of the Big Brother. Calculated profit-makers. Fuck that...

The rough awakening: When I first arrived in Lynn, I did all sorts of things. From catering personnel in hotels to painting houses and apartments. The procedure was the following: get up at six o'clock in the morning, start the car, fight with apes in the highway to get to work, there you switch to English, I'm fucking bad at it, I don't bother too much to learn it. I remember the time when a cop caught me for speeding. Recently I had a court hearing. They reduced my sentence; I was only fined, because I'm a sort of recent immigrant. I still need to get my green card. Then you come to work, strain your brain to explain something to your boss, then you wonder if he'll understand you, the process of putting thought into bad English is so screwed up, slow... And then I toil all day, get back home around ten at night, completely beat, ready for sleeping and nothing else. Then I understood why the Yanks are so crazy about weekends...

And then I finally passed the driver's test and found a job as a "teamster" for a truck company. The truck, brother, you're alone behind the wheel, from coast to coast. Nothing to think about. Give the brain a rest. Minimum communication, listen to the VHF radio communication, that's the only contact with people. Apart from the delivery time. Three months on the road across America. Great feeling. The impression of all the nature, the vast space around you. But one grows tired from that, too. Good money, but there's more to it than that. I don't know, maybe my problem is that I still haven't a clue what I want?

...What else can I say but that I finally need to wake up and understand where I am. Establish harmony. Accept America as a place where I can function, more or less. The only comfort I get from the knowledge that my gang is just twelve hours by plane from me. I can be there in a day if I want. So far, and yet so near...

Sorry, must fly. Cheers!