

EYES AND SMILES

A JOURNEY TO BOSNIA AND BACK OCTOBER TO NOVEMBER 2015

EUROPE ON THE EDGE

My mother taught me to look. She showed me how to see what lies below the surface. Face photos fascinated her. If they were smiling she said: 'Cover the lower part of the face. Look at the eyes. What do you see?' Often the eyes are saying something quite different from the smiling mouth. The eyes can't disguise the truth of what a person is feeling, however much the lips are stretching to express joy.

The media has been showing the ecstatic smile on the face of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the mastermind behind the Paris massacre; not of policemen or soldiers in battle, but people murdered without warning while at a concert or a cafe, civilians euphemistically called collateral damage during a war, but this time systematically targeted. He is shown brandishing a pistol and driving a truck. What we don't see are the corpses of people this former petty criminal from a European city has killed being dragged behind. Cover his wide grin and the eyes say something quite different about what is going on in the mind and soul of this triumphant happy killer.

The first impression is of deadness. My mother had a refined sixth sense which I am able to access only intermittently. On one occasion she opened the newspaper to be confronted by a gallery of faces, all of young men in the prime of life. She had no idea who they were, but shuddered and said that all of them were touched by death. Then she read the accompanying article. They were soldiers who had been killed in the Vietnam War. She saw death already in their eyes. She would have seen it also in the eyes of Abdelhamid Abaaoud.

The next impression is of anger, an incandescent rage totally at odds with the open smile creasing the lower part of his face, which on its own could be infectious and seductive. The anger hints at a sadness which is being obliterated.

As a portrait artist I am looking at a man in meltdown.

The first impression is however always the most significant. Who or what killed those eyes?

Looking at Abdelhamid Abaaoud's face raises not just a critical question mark over this young Muslim raised in a European city, but over the whole continent which bred and raised him. How did he and his accomplices lose faith in this society so completely that their best and only option would be utter contempt for life, their own and others? These killers may well be considered losers, scrabbling for survival on the edge of a society which shows no respect, is contemptuous and does not know how to control or manage them. They are not stupid. Both they and those trying to destroy them invoke religion to explain the nihilism of their life choice. They are not martyrs longing for death and the reward of paradise and an endless supply of virgins (I always pity these victims of promised rapes). Of course the young men don't believe that. Death and destruction are the endgame. Allah in a fanatical interpretation of the Koran is a rallying cry for the New Caliphate now known to be professionally organised by a caucus of Sunni generals and other leading figures from the deposed Saddam Hussein regime. Ousted by the American British invasion and not permitted any role in the political life of Iraq, they control the ISIS insurrection and provide a construct to legitimize its apocalyptic endgame, cynically attracting a disaffected and lost generation with the illusory promise of an Islamic Utopia.

What persuades these young people to be lured into this fatal cul-de-sac?

The question leads directly to another which involves everyone in Europe. Those who advocate war as a solution to terrorism declare piously: 'No-one wants to go to war, to kill, No one wants collateral damage. But there is no other way. Anyone who thinks differently is naive and wrong.' This hypocritical cant ignores the visceral thrill that going to war ignites: the pleasure of revenge and retribution and the delight in visually impressive explosions, shock and awe, of course not thinking about the people caught in the middle of the conflagration. Advocates of war rarely pay attention to cause and consequence. Diplomacy persistently fails because it is commercial interests that dictate agendas, not justice or a determination to find permanent resolution to underlying problems. For proof look to the West's unquestioning support for Saudi Arabia. There are other ways to deal with the causes of terrorism, especially in Europe, but these force Europe to look at the rottenness at the heart of its social structures, evident in the crass juxtaposition of disaffected frustrated energetic intelligent young people who feel disenfranchised from the society in which they live, and an alliance of governing elites with global businesses answerable to no one, and free from legal constrictions and therefore tending to be corrupt, an alliance which clings possessively to core values that are ruthlessly competitive. This rottenness is staring Europe in the face and

couldn't be more obvious. The young people leading the terror are European, born and raised in the shadow of these political and financial centres of influence, the other Europe that doesn't care and has other priorities. Just as suicidal killers do not really believe in paradise and virgins waiting for them, Europe also knows full well the causes of their murderous disaffection. To declare war on distant countries to deal with the matter is the convenient option, because it deflects attention away from the causes that are screaming at us. To declare that there is no other option is therefore hypocrisy.

When the point is made that the appeal of jihad has to do with what Olivier Roy calls the 'Islamization of radicalism', offering the attraction of a just and equal society, even when the reality is known to be nothing of the sort, certainly not for women, as well as adventure, empowerment and the familial even erotic intimacy of social networks, then surely the question must be: 'Why can the society we live in not offer the justice, equality, excitement and love all people, not only the young who are open to radicalization, crave?' Global powers can only offer, as Jason Burke succinctly puts it, 'strategic cynicism'.

Twelve years ago I found myself unexpectedly at a crossing point of these two Europes.

In 2003 on my way to Germany where we were creating a network of inter-faith groups interested in helping the project to rebuild the Ferhadija Mosque which had been deliberately destroyed by Christian nationalists during the Bosnia War, I stayed overnight in Brussels. The evening before my train left for Duisburg I came face to face with what may have been one of these killers, Salah Abdeslam, who shot dozens of concertgoers in the Bataclan concert venue and as I write is still at large. He was the one whose face I remember so clearly that I could have picked him out in a picture parade, a strapping young teenager, the youngest and most vigorous of three youths who mugged me on a side street near the centre of Brussels, and on the edge of the Arab quarter, tearing the bag off my shoulder. Moments earlier I had made eye contact with two North Africans driving past me slowly in a car, and remembering my work with Muslims in Bosnia, thinking they might appreciate a friendly gesture, smiled and nodded at them. A mistake. The drivers gestured at the three youths following who then attacked me. Indignant at having my friendly gesture interpreted as a signal for victimhood I resisted and fought back, but they beat me thoroughly, leaving me bleeding and banging on doors of empty buildings to raise the alarm.

The police retrieved my bag. I had sensibly left money and passport in the hotel safe, but the attackers took my mobile. They left my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* which I happened

to be carrying. This made me smile weakly thinking how in the circumstances Dostoevsky's analysis of violence, society and redemption might have been interesting reading for these fledgling criminals. The police then drove me slowly through the Arab quarter of Brussels in case I recognized my attackers. I did not know it then but now discover it was Molenbeek where so many European jihadi fighters come from. To my dismay and embarrassment I watched the faces of all the people on the streets glaring into the police car, at the driver and at me, their eyes burning with hatred and contempt. They were not intimidated. Despite being told by the detective in charge that this quarter of Brussels, within walking distance of the centre, was a no-go area, the police station stood then as now in the middle of the 'immigrant' district, and exerts the same control as an occupying colonial force. This explained the resentment of the people as we passed through.

Later the police arrested the two drivers who had signalled the attack. Whereas I sat in a dark interrogation room, uncomfortable and stressed while being kept waiting, the two young men were allowed to roam unsupervised around a large well-lit room and were served drinks. Their human rights were being scrupulously respected. Showing contempt for the police they sat on the table, swinging their legs nonchalantly, cracking jokes and laughing, completely relaxed. Their lack of deference struck me with particular force. They did not consider they had done anything wrong and turned me into the criminal nervous about being questioned.

Before leaving for Germany I talked with the policeman in charge of my case. He could only think about retirement or being put out to pasture in some quiet little Belgian town. He admitted already then that Brussels could neither handle the new demographic, the problems of assimilation and cultural diversity, nor control these young sons of immigrants with no future, nothing to do and feeling themselves constantly harassed and insulted. The European Parliament continues to consume most of the resources for public security, and too little, if any attention is paid to years of warning signs in the suburbs not only of Brussels but cities across the continent. It has been mostly left to underfunded and sidelined minority organizations to resolve the crisis building in many European cities, occasionally exploding as in the Paris riots of 2004. No one could miss the signs of the crisis. What should be an integrated approach involving all communities, especially those of the host countries, fails to materialize. Then the blame for murder sprees for which there were years if not decades of warnings is put on the shoulders of these organizations with limited means and influence, only exacerbating relations between communities.

For me the necessity for joint action and cooperation has always been clear. It remains a mystery why there is political resistance to what seems to me self-evident. Why do the governments of host countries prefer to isolate communities who are already struggling to overcome the stigma of being foreign and feeling generally unwelcome?

All this does not take into account foreign policy, wars, invasions and refugees: events that fuel anger.

The consequences of neglecting such matters are now being felt in Europe with shocking effect. What women, children and other non-combatants, 'collateral damage', have been suffering and continue to do so in far-away places for years, decades, even centuries, is now brought home. The causes must be dealt with rigorously and radically, or this war continues here.

The journey to Bosnia and back ended five days before the Paris massacre on Friday 13th November 2015, but I already had the impression of a continent on the edge.

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The massacre in Paris and the New Year molestation of women in Cologne puts this journey into the perspective of a war brought into the heart of Europe, complicating the ongoing crisis of Islamophobia and resurgent nationalism, as well as making life even harder for refugees trying to enter Europe. These people are labelled either asylum seekers or economic migrants; the former being considered more worthy of consideration, the latter unworthy. Both groups are escaping death by one means or another. However all refugees will now find themselves barred because of the fear that terrorists will use asylum as cover for entering Europe.

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It is possible to catch sight of refugees, although after the initial warm welcome given in Germany to the first ones who managed to arrive at Munich railway station, the authorities now prefer to isolate them as much as possible from the general public. Large tents at border crossings and augmented numbers of police indicate that there is an ongoing situation. Refugees are corralled and controlled in large numbers. Stations are packed with armed personnel in a perpetual state of alert. This is Fortress Europe in action. So even if the more determined and fitter people manage to breach the walls, they can be dragooned and siphoned off out of sight.

On Salzburg station for the first time I became aware of something unusual happening three platforms down. A number of heavily armed police and military personnel were ‘kettling’ a tightly packed group of refugees. There might have been several hundred crushed together. A sinister silence hung over the large crowd, submissive but frightened like souls waiting to know whether they were entering or leaving hell, and wondering what kind of punishment awaited them for a crime none had committed. The police kept them in tight formation so stragglers could not slip away. Every now and then one person would be released and accompanied by armed guards to a waiting bus.

Meanwhile we stood without stress and felt secure, luggage and train tickets ready, a planned journey ahead to the next destination, knowing where we were going. Other waiting passengers walked up and down the platform and glanced timidly but not without pity at the eerie scene. These refugees were other people, not any of ‘us’.

Unexpectedly, given the frequent reports of nationalists protesting against all migrants, everyone we met expressed compassion and even anger that not enough was being done for these refugees. Without exception they declared that Europe could accommodate them. ‘There is room for us all’. As the train passed through miles of sparsely populated fertile countryside, it seemed reasonable to agree.

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The refugee crisis remained a constant throughout the journey, sounding like an organ diapason and sometimes turning into a jarring cipher, an inescapable raw political reality. We expected disruption and schedule changes, as happened at all the borders, particularly Slovenia and Croatia. Each disruption highlighted the fact that the stress and suffering of these harassed people put all our minor inconveniences into perspective.

Alongside the fear and alarm among the many tightly squeezed refugees on Salzburg station we also sensed relief. They had arrived. They were grateful. And despite the humiliation of their present circumstances, they were hopeful. They had not died.

Europe meanwhile has for a long time already hardened itself to bodies turning up in public places. A photograph taken several years ago shows a couple of well-upholstered tourists sunbathing nonchalantly on a Mediterranean beach, only feet away from the corpse of a drowned man. Not even the proximity of a hideous death with its tragic back story should disturb their holiday.

Already then such an image raised a question mark over Europe, its priorities and above all its selfish heartlessness.

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The fragile and rusting state of Europe's infrastructure hit us the moment we arrived in Brussels. A sudden rail strike meant a delay of several hours before a coach took us to Cologne. Lack of preparation meant everyone being lead in a disgruntled procession to a distant part of the station complex while coaches were found to take us out of the country. The skeleton staff were harassed and grumpy. Having looked out for but not seen the poor desperate young men at Calais trying to enter England through the tunnel, I accepted the situation in Brussels as being just an insignificant nuisance and settled down to read Liz's present to me, Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March*. Several chapters later our coach arrived and we drove through the darkness to Cologne, eight hours after arriving in Brussels. The young driver had been woken up on his day off and he tried to find a way of leaving his passengers on the border to catch a train in Germany so he could return to bed, and presumably to whoever was there waiting for him. All this disruption and annoyance had the effect of livening everyone up on the coach. Strangers spoke to each other, jokes made to loud laughter, people sharing information on their iPhones about train timetables. One of them taught me how to download a couple of useful apps; so all in all a useful hiatus. It reminded me nostalgically of the time on a London bus shortly after the 7:7 bombing in 2005 when a forgotten attaché case caused sudden alarm. Again everyone enthusiastically began to speak to each other, as though thirsty for communication. Horror stories were exchanged about mysterious parcels, one of which turned out to contain venomous snakes. Disruption and fear bring people together in positive ways, a reminder of the Blitz mentality, mucking in, sharing and human contact. There should be more alarms.

THUNDER THIGHS AND A LIFE JUDGEMENT

My 70th birthday provided the excuse for this trans-continental journey. I intended to revisit places made twenty three years earlier. The Iron Curtain had then recently fallen, the Berlin Wall dismantled and the sharks of the unfettered market were already sniffing and taking over in 1991 and 1992. I wanted to witness a way of life before it disappeared, and on this latest journey would find out how thoroughly the sharks have triumphed.

First a brief personal note. Normally I shy away from birthdays and up to now would happily forget my own. This means I also forget everybody else's which is rude. Amazingly my friends put up with that. However this year's became a welcome celebration, like an achievement but also a feeling of at last being grown up, of surviving. The journey became a big present to myself, saved up for over several years and then prepared for well in advance, booking hotels at budget prices.

As the journey started, a memory from the far distant past came to haunt me. Up to my first year at University I had developed a modicum of self-esteem based on education at home as well as school, travel and work in Israel and Germany which had proved I could make my way in the world. The work on the land and in a factory had also transformed a nerdish needy pale schoolboy into a fledgling babe magnet. Girls would come and sit on my lap at college, while my fellow students looked on enviously. Then one day a girl, who would never have dreamed of sitting on anyone's lap, a deeply serious academic type, visited my room with her equally severe looking boyfriend and gave me an unsolicited lecture about me. 'You are not an adult,' she declared. 'You haven't grown up. I doubt you ever will. You are a child.' She meant it as an accusation, a judgement, and my feelings were hurt. I hid them and looked at her solemn judgemental countenance, while her boyfriend, stood silently disapproving behind her. I looked at her large legs, what at that time students used to call 'thunder thighs' and wondered how she could make such an observation when she hardly knew me. But deep down I knew she spoke the truth. Another friend put it more sympathetically, telling me I would be a slow developer. He spoke the truth. All my life I have felt like a child, not grown-up. Not even now that I am 70. I am a perennial learner. I constantly meet young people, much younger than myself, who in their intelligence and general attitude to life are older than me. When will I be developed? Hopefully before I kick the bucket, but as Alan Bennett would say for me: 'I wouldn't bank on it!'

THE ADONIS OF WARSAW AND THE SPRINTER OF KIEV

Two constants dominated my earlier European journeys in 1992 and 1993: refugees and economic migrants.

Yes. In 1992 and 1993. The journeys are described in my books *An Apartment in Kiev*, and *The Road to Chartres*. The latter would have been my first published book, but Alison and Busby closed down before I had finished the editing. My Kiev adventure is unpublished.

The Bosnia War had started and train passengers witnessed stressful scenes with frightened teenage girls and boys desperately clinging to relatives, already working in Western European countries, and who had come to rescue them at the border with the former Yugoslavia. One uncle I remembered anxiously solicitous about a young brother and sister, their tear-stained faces flushed with fear and embarrassment, following his every movement with alarm in case he failed to get them to safety and a new home. The girl and the boy reminded me of my parents who at that age had also been refugees, then Nazi Germany. On my 1992 journey across Europe I stayed in mostly empty cheap hotels. But despite the vacancy signs, these families were refused welcome. ‘We don’t want refugees!’ declared the hotel manager in Bregenz, addressing the breakfast room where I sat alone. She pushed her substantial bosom out, having thrown out from the reception area an exhausted bedraggled family who had probably been spending the night on the streets. She announced that she could not be expected to look after everyone, that Europe was full up and unable to cope with a problem that had nothing to do with her. The Balkan countries were then not considered a part of Europe. Eastern Europe may have separated from the defunct Soviet Union, but was considered a foreign continent; different from the prosperous rest of Europe. Crossing the border into Switzerland, guards patrolled the carriages, glaring at anyone who might look Balkan. They studied my passport with particular care, staring into my eyes with hostility, only reluctantly handing my passport back as much as to say: ‘We don’t trust you; you don’t look right.’

In those days refugees crossed borders alongside other travellers and were not segregated as today. Economic migrants did the same, mostly fleeing the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Carrying all their belongings in large sports bags these young male travellers stood waiting on station platforms in every town, city and country I passed through. If they did not already have an invitation to work somewhere they worried about being turned back at borders.

I shared a compartment with one from Warsaw, and on another occasion one from Kiev.

The man from Warsaw was a tall, slim blonde youth, so handsome that I did not dare talk to him. I glanced at him occasionally hoping that we might strike up a conversation on the long

ride to Vienna, but he kept aloof. Occasionally he opened the sports bag above him on the rack and took out a can of beer. He stretched his long legs and although physically relaxed, aware of his beauty, his facial muscles tautened with anxiety. When we crossed the border between Slovakia and Austria he suddenly thawed. I asked him where he was heading and he immediately shouted, as though bursting to tell me: 'Venezia!' He then smiled broadly and gave out a huge sigh of relief. A job waited for him there. I imagined him being a waiter in a glamorous hotel, but he didn't specify the work. Before I could create an opening for further conversation the train arrived at the Vienna Sudbahnhof, which faces East and South and though large was in those days markedly shabbier than the Westbahnhof that is a destination from the prosperous parts of Europe. As I left the station I noticed my Warsaw Adonis crouching disconsolately on his sports bag, waiting for the connection to Venice and clearly overawed by Vienna. He suddenly looked much smaller, thinner and less god-like than on the train in Poland. Compared to the smartly dressed Viennese commuters his coat and trousers looked cheap and his blonde curls were matted with perspiration and losing their lustre. At that moment he looked directly at me and for the first time smiled grateful for my attention, his eyes soft and vulnerable. He had joined the ranks of unwelcome economic migrants. I wished him a good journey and future. He thanked me and then stopped smiling, now looking sad and anxious. Perhaps the job would not materialize. Maybe he had made too much of it, or the price he would have to pay in favours be too high.

A year later another young migrant who shared my compartment from Kiev to Berlin wasted no time in making friends with me. This train would take me home. It carried him to a new life. Work waited for him in Berlin, but when he arrived, as possibly with the Adonis from Warsaw, the job turned out not to be guaranteed. For that reason he made a determined effort to know me and solicit my help filling out forms that offered vegetable and fruit-picking labour on farms in the UK. I never found out what happened to this young man who prided himself on being a star sprinter in Kiev, although we corresponded for several months. He informed me that the job in Berlin had not materialized. He returned home disappointed, disheartened, and then desperate. He constantly asked me about farm labour, but UK agencies organizing this kind of work were shady businesses and exploitative. I could not employ him and he has been on my conscience ever since. I could have done more for him.

A BODYBUILDER FROM TURKEY AND A SLAVE FROM ROMANIA

A refugee and an economic migrant bookended this latest journey through Europe in 2015.

The refugee had fled from Turkey a few years ago, before the sudden mass movement from the Middle East. Fleeing abuse, an alcoholic father and conscription he claimed asylum in the Netherlands where he has a permit to stay temporarily, is learning Dutch and in two years expects to receive Dutch citizenship. Apart from running a business repairing, buying and selling radios, TVs, CD players and computers, Ozan is a body builder entering and being a finalist in competitions. He is also a physical trainer. He now helps other refugees, people from similar violent domestic and political situations who have fled to places like Scandinavia, and because they are held in centres, are seeking to settle elsewhere in Western Europe. Familiar with the process, he advises them. He supports the Soul of Europe and wears our logo on his competition shirt. Of course I had to visit him in Amsterdam. He is an example of an asylum seeker who has successfully integrated. His self confidence gives no hint of his victim past. He speaks fluent Dutch and English and relates easily with everyone. In the station restaurant where we met the staff were impressed by his ability to converse with them. Of course his good looks help, but they too are worked for. He trains with total commitment. From being in his own words a chicken-armed weakling from Turkey Ozan put his body and mind through rigorous training to become a man of intelligence and charisma, someone no country would wish to reject.

Pavel my Romanian economic migrant friend met me on the final day of the journey, before we returned to England. By that time a stomach ulcer had sapped all my energies and laid me low. I would have preferred to see Yasser Louati of the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France (CCIF) but could not leave the hotel, opposite the Gare du Nord, which Pavel could easily access. Pavel had made the journey from Belgium to thank me in person for helping him and advising him in the past. I could not put him off. I also wanted to learn about his situation. Unlike my bodybuilder friend, Pavel has difficulty integrating. Whereas Ozan is self-confident and focussed, Pavel is at sea, lonely and troubled. The term economic migrant carries shame, someone after benefits and other peoples' jobs. The stress makes him sick and desperate. A well qualified university graduate he is forced to stick with a job which does not pay the minimum wage. He is in effect the slave of his employer. Because his wages cannot cover accommodation he is forced to share a room with no amenities, and that takes most of his wages. Landlords discriminate and charge foreigners more, just as in 1960s when I worked at the Porsche factory. My Gast Arbeiter co-workers had to pay twice the rent I paid for even smaller and furthermore over-crowded accommodation. Unfairness and injustice

persist in Europe, not just slightly, but brazenly on an exaggerated scale. Pavel, subsisting on a diet of bread and cheap vegetables managed to save up for the train fare. I reimbursed him of course. That also caused him shame. He is not sleeping in the mud of a filthy camp on the outskirts of Calais or Dunquerque like the lowest and most despised people there who endure sickness, harassment and indignity in their often futile and even fatal determination to secure a new and better life. He represents the reality of those who have no choice but to leave their country, because they are starving. Europe makes the distinction between asylum seekers and migrants, when in fact all of them are fleeing death.

These people are used to tough conditions of existence. Pavel comes from a small Romanian town a five hour bus ride from Bucharest. His parents live in a remote village, another half day's journey. He now lives in the small Belgian town of Rosslaere with a two hour commute to work which starts at 5.00 in the morning, the shifts lasting twelve hours with just two breaks of fifteen minutes. He is a food packer and works in refrigerated conditions which affect his health. He does not complain. This work is better than no work and starvation. His boss allowed him this day off to see me, but only on condition that he returned in time for the early shift next morning. So after a couple of hours talking to me he needed to catch the next train back to Brussels and then several changes of bus to Rosslaere. His aim, as with so many economic migrants is to return to his home country, start a business and take care of his aging parents.

Pavel does not suffer the extreme conditions of the migrants in Calais and Dunquerque, a situation which should be a cause of shame in Europe but despite the efforts of concerned journalists, aid workers and big-hearted volunteers, does not seem to concern the general population let alone the government, which basically does not care. However, the humiliation and degradation are the same.

Pavel's situation reminded me that it is not only the drama of war in foreign lands that is affecting Europe now but rotteness at the heart of this continent. As this journey persistently showed me, Europe is no longer a flourishing region, but a shell that hints at past promise of prosperity and comfort while coming apart at the seams, and at the heart of which is government that shows minimum mercy, lack of vision and humanity: a deadness of spirit. To an extent this might already have been the case on my 1992-3 journeys, but at least I came across human movement and activity, a sense of hope even if there was every expectation of

it being dashed. This time I observed collapse and withdrawal, state priorities being control and oppression. This has to do with fear and selfishness.

Such withdrawal and wilful blindness to the human condition exacts a high price.

Five days after we left Paris, a few young men from Belgium, one of whom I might have encountered, slaughtered a hundred and thirty one European citizens going about their evening pleasures. The response has been an aggressive unwillingness to look beyond national self-interests, and instead making decisions that perpetuate a global state of war.

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A critical situation in the life of another friend provides a perspective beyond Europe. Ari is an Iraqi Kurd who fled Saddam Hussein's prisons, left his wife and two children, walked across Europe and managed to settle in England around the year 2001. He built up a successful business during the early years of the Blair Brown economic upturn, saving money to buy land for his family who live about fifty miles to the South West of Erbil in the town of Mahmur. His business folded at the time of the 2008 financial crash, but resilient and determined by nature he survived as an odd job man and IT consultant, which is how I got to know him. Because Mahmur is now on the front line with ISIS, and constantly under attack, he returned to protect his family, joining a local branch of the Peshmerga. He informs me about the situation on Skype whenever he has connection, and relays a narrative different from the one we are told in the Western media.

The UK and America pride themselves on helping the Kurds and the Iraqis, but are in fact protecting their own interests. Only when the Russians entered the fray did Ari at last feel safe. 'It is the Russians who are saving our lives, not the Americans or British, who do very little,' he tells me. The Americans did in fact save Ari several times, for which he is of course grateful. Whenever his Peshmerga force see ISIS approach, the Americans are informed. They then send planes to halt any attack. However it is not enough. ISIS remain close enough to bomb Ari's town of Mahmur. He recently told me how both his neighbours' houses were bombed and the families killed, and that he is now desperate to take his family to safety. He does not want to be a refugee in his own country, because, as he explains, the Kurds have many factions, each of which only protects its own people. He would not feel safe outside his area. Besides which he resents losing his property to anyone.

He perpetually tells me that the Peshmerga above all lack up to date arms. ‘Give us the arms,’ he keeps begging, ‘and we can defend our people. We don’t need your boots on the ground; just give us the equipment to fight ISIS.’ He has shown me his rifle, an antiquated Kalashnikov which works only intermittently, and no match for the sophisticated equipment in the hands of ISIS and the former Saddam Hussein military personnel, long adversaries of the Kurds, which is controlling the fighting.

Ari explains to me how everything is politics in the Middle East. Regardless of international leaders’ rousing speeches explaining the need to invade and bomb, it is not about saving lives or destroying a terrorist organization, despite their claims. It is about negotiating spheres of influence in that part of the world.

Since the Russians are effectively restricting the movements of ISIS, along with other organizations hostile to their stooge President Assad, Ari thinks he can hold on to his house and land.

However, the one thing he and his Peshmerga forces are begging for is not being given. It is not in the interests of the Western alliance, certainly not of Turkey, nor of Russia, to provide the Kurds with arms. The Kurds who continue to be seen as a terrorist organization, despite hypocritical praise for their pluck and success at wresting back towns from ISIS control, are left to fight with antiquated weaponry. Meanwhile there are plans to bomb all areas where ISIS is considered to have a foothold, even though the terrorists are adept at hiding and moving base. Since Mahmur is still too close to the front line for comfort, this is a town which could well come under bombardment. Maybe a few ISIS fighters will be killed. But along with them will be a large number of civilians, collateral damage. And among them could well be Ari and his family.

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Ari was one of the reasons for our visit to Germany, because our colleague Hartmut in the Ruhr Gebiet town of Marl has useful contacts in Munich who met and advised Ari’s cousin’s family where they arrived fortunately early in the now daily processions of refugees. The Lutheran Bishop of Munich offered to accommodate the family in his residence, and invited Ari to stay. Proud and independent as always, Ari preferred to sleep on the streets until his cousin’s family were settled. One of the leading media channels in Germany interviewed Ari. He told them of his invention of a gadget that could identify and destroy roadside bombs by

remote control. He is still waiting for his invention to be taken up and developed. Those trying to defeat ISIS have other priorities. Once his cousin's family had been settled near Nuremberg, Ari returned to protect his family in Mahmur.

Apart from updating Hartmut on Ari's situation we wanted to discuss the crisis in Europe around attitudes to refugees, deteriorating relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and the rise of nationalism and how our various organizations should cooperate on counteracting these developments.

Hartmut and his colleagues expressed reluctance about helping Ari and his own family come to Germany. They told Ari to stay and fight with the Peshmerga to defeat the terrorists. Knowing Ari personally I shivered at such advice which falls from the tongue too easily. Apart from being perpetually aware of Ari and his family's vulnerability in the face of a well funded terrorist movement with no lack of sophisticated weaponry, the ease with which people who do not know war can speak about the need to fight disturbed me. Decisions are made to invade and bomb as though it were a game, with gung ho frills. For me the thought of my friend and his family being in any danger, regardless of whether he fought or fled, is enough to make me want to get him out of harm's way. But since I am without influence, the least I can do is to find common ground with friends and allies, and try to think a way out of these dilemmas.

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EYES OF THE CITY

The shakiness of Europe's infrastructure became evident again in Cologne. Germany is usually the most efficient of economies, but on this occasion a fault on the mainline at Essen brought rail services in the country's powerhouse region to a standstill across the Ruhr Gebiet for several days. The platforms on the normally busy main stations stood empty. We could only reach Hartmut by local train that crawled between the large cities of the Ruhr Gebiet, stopping every few yards. This reminded me of my journey in 1993 when by choice I went from place to place on the slowest trains, time to observe the suburbs of large cities and fellow passengers, which in the Ruhr Gebiet has now a markedly large Middle Eastern demography.

And city art. Graffiti are local commentary. They are the voice of those city people who do not enjoy access to influence. Large painted eyes dominate the graffiti across the Ruhr

Gebiet. They stare at us, and force us to look back. ‘We are here’, they are saying. ‘And we are looking!’ These paintings give the city eyes. ‘Look!’ they demand.

V’bagretz i v’zoloto odyeti lyessa – the woods clothed in scarlet and gold. Pushkin describes his favourite season, and these words followed me everywhere because indeed the landscape all over Germany blazed in autumn colours, even brutal city architecture adorned with broad washes of blood and bronze, copper and sun.

A MAN OF THE COMMUNITY

Ari is a small wiry man, slightly hunched as though perpetually on guard against a beating. But his slight appearance is deceptive. Resilient and a survivor, Ari knows how to protect himself and how to decide what fights to engage in and which to avoid. For weeks at a time, sometimes months, I don’t hear from him; then suddenly a message comes through on Skype telling me he is still alive, despite the constant attacks on his town by ISIS. In a time of crisis Ari is the man to stick with.

Hartmut, a grassroots activist and vanguard person, is another lean wiry man, but tall and always leaning forward with enthusiasm ready for action. Ari’s independence comes from spending years alone away from his family and home town. Hartmut is a man of the community, rooted to place and people. When he retired from being the Lutheran pastor in Marl, a declining industrial town now enduring high unemployment, he did not move away but continued with all his activities there, in close collaboration with the church and parish.

We first met Hartmut and his wife Almuth twelve years earlier at an interfaith conference in Istanbul. Hartmut is the visionary. Almuth, equally communally minded, keeps her feet on the ground. Recognising in each other fellow hippies from the 1960s we clicked immediately and established a network called the Abraham Forum, which would be an umbrella for all manner of inter-faith activities in Europe. The Soul of Europe focused on projects in the Balkans, and The Abraham Forum organized a large variety of local events with young and old and across the faiths, creating an Abraham Wheel which combined the Cross, Star of David and the Crescent. They rolled this wheel across the continent, notably through the Balkans, and made sure that everywhere it went people talked about its significance. The strength of Hartmut’s exemplary ministry is its grounding in local community which supports and works with him.

Hartmut shared our hope that this visit would mark the next chapter in joint activities, which had stalled after Qatar withdrew funding. He approved my description of our relationship as a river that goes underground, but emerges in full flood further down the line. I wanted to touch base with him and Almuth, keep our contact warm and learn about Germany's policy and attitudes towards the refugee crisis.

His mother's landscape paintings in their sun-drenched earth pigments, ochre, sienna and umber, now reflected the rusting autumn colours in the garden outside. October is an *unilaya pora*, a melancholy time, according to Pushkin who preferred this season to all others. The pictures and late flowers console and make me sad at the same time. Standing on Marl station's dilapidated platform and observing the handsome town houses along the embankment, garden furniture lying abandoned on the lawns, I saw a Europe withdrawing into itself and, with rare exceptions like Hartmut, not caring about the world outside each family's private fortress. I sensed a lack of vision for what the continent could be and become. Pushkin considered Autumn the ideal time for the awakening of the imagination. Clouds of foliage radiated a glow of gold over the drab outskirts of cities. The vivid colours complemented the garish graffiti with the staring eyes. 'Look!' they said.

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In Cologne we dined every evening at the same restaurant which served 'Bosniak' dishes, and assumed the managers came from Bosnia. We tried to engage them in conversation, and inform them about our work, but although friendly, they carefully avoided giving any indication where they came from, or even if they were Bosnian Muslims, Serbs or Croats. When we pressed them they cut us short by saying they used to live in the Former Yugoslavia. This touched me, and I respected their insistence on not being labelled. The destruction of their homeland was enough of a tragedy for them in that they had to flee the war and ethnic cleansing. They did not want to be reminded of how their beloved country had been dismembered. The paintings on the walls gave a few hints, all of them from a time long ago when Yugoslavia stretched uninterrupted from the snow-covered Alps of Slovenia to the border with Greece, and the warm waters of the Adriatic Coast. They reminded me of photos and paintings brought by refugees in the Second World War from Central and Eastern Europe, places and ways of life that had changed beyond recognition, like a dreamland of the past. Here in a Cologne restaurant the pictures depicted women at the loom, sun-baked corners of small picturesque towns, mountains and seas in a distant corner of South West

Europe, a far away Heimat where the owners' parents and grandparents had once made a life, but now a nostalgic memory.

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‘TERRIBLE TERRIBLE SILENCE! THE SILENCE OF THE GRAVEYARD’ Schiller

The journey continued to Erfurt in Thuringia which I had passed through by train twenty three years ago and wanted to spend time exploring, to show Donald the beauty of a Medieval town relatively untouched by the war, to visit the church where Meister Eckhart had prayed and to revisit the small town of Leutenberg where I had researched my last major painting. I describe the place and its significance to me in *The Face of a Child*.

The silence of Leutenberg disturbed me: the sinister silence of a graveyard. I remembered a busy little town, ramshackle and uncared for, but with many young people, the streets busy and shops open all hours. What had happened here in the last two decades? The houses and streets were clean and in good repair, but we noticed only two solitary figures walking around. I took Donald up some steep steps to the church towering over the town and spotted an elderly couple on their way to a funeral. I told the woman of my previous visit and she responded brusquely with a mixture of bitterness and anger: ‘Yes, people spent a lot of money given by the new government to make their homes nice, but there is no work here. All the young people have gone.’

I remembered the young people, faces glowing with excitement, crowding into the Gute Quelle Gasthaus where I stayed all those years ago, and the animated conversations about a new life after communist tyranny, but also expressing anxiety for the future. They were afraid that their social way of life would be destroyed. They never thought, and nor did I, that far worse awaited them, that unemployment would drive them from their hometown. I remembered sensing the absence of the Jews that had been expelled from the town, empty spaces. Now the young were also being expelled.

My depression about Leutenberg deepened when I found the Soviet cemetery behind the church, a strip of land with a row of gravestones facing each other leading to a memorial. Each gravestone displayed a name carved elegantly in Cyrillic script. The names indicated mostly children, a Vanya, a Misha, a Sonyushka, aged up to five years, a few of them babies. Only three were in their twenties, possibly teachers or parents, all with the date of decease in 1942, at the height of the Second World War. We stopped the local pastor on his way to the

funeral to ask about what had happened here, but he could only say they had been victims of some kind of atrocity to do with Ukrainian forced labour. The mystery remained. What had dead children to do with forced labour? Leutenberg had beautified itself, but the sense of a place deserted, of crimes unsolved and a history of ethnic cleansing deliberately forgotten filled me with disappointment and even dread. I knocked several times at the Gute Quelle Gasthaus, hoping to meet the cheerful friendly owners I had come to know twenty three years ago: the handyman husband renovating the rooms and the wife serving substantial breakfasts with freshly baked rolls and farm butter. But no one answered, the place also deserted. Gute Quelle means Good Spring. The name conjures up an old German town with a fountain in the main square where people could socialise, as in the second act of Wagner's *Mastersingers*.

After much searching we found a place open for a snack. A surly waitress served us undrinkable instant coffee and a bowl of micro-waved tinned soup. I asked about the Soviet graveyard, but she shrugged and said nothing. So people did know what happened but refused to talk about it. Thuringia is at the heart of Europe, a cultural centre and also the heart of its darkness. Weimar, one of the great literary, philosophical, scientific and artistic capital cities of the Enlightenment, lies only a few miles from Buchenwald, one of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps. It is also a beautiful region with rolling hills, forests, and rivers, a landscape of fairytale, lyric poetry and music.

I thought of the empty spaces once occupied by Jewish inhabitants, the murdered Ukrainian children and the faces of young people flushed with anticipation I had conversed with so warmly twenty three years ago. A sudden explosion of fury shook me and I had to leave Leutenberg immediately. Heart pounding I rushed to the station, not to miss the next train, and dragged Donald behind me, who kept begging me to slow down. I stamped my feet impatiently on the platform.

I had expected the approaching visit to Bosnia to be the difficult part of the journey, resurrecting memories of half-finished projects and justified resentment from people we had worked with there disappointed at our failures. In fact Leutenberg turned out to be the low point. The weather could not have been kinder; the sun made the autumn colours glow with even greater intensity, and the rolling countryside beckoned seductively: 'This is the best place to live. Come and stay. Make your home here,' sang the emerald fields, the shadowy glades and cosy valleys where onion domed churches cloaked in black slate preside over clusters of pretty old timbered houses and farms. Nightingales used to sing here on warm

summer nights, inspiring my favourite composers and poets such as Joseph von Eichendorff. In spite of this beauty, or maybe because of it, I could only feel overwhelming sadness at truth and history buried and forgotten, the stories untold of lives brought to a brutal end, a present situation which drives the young generation away from home, and a future where the retired elderly people die lonely and are buried by those remaining. At the core of this beauty, old culture and fecundity I found deadness.

The deliberate burial of history alarmed me. Now that Europe is more inward looking and nationalistic than for over half a century, fortress like and proud of heritage, it struck me as significant that the continent is unwilling to examine past truths. It repairs buildings and makes them beautiful in a cultural heritage manner. But these have become tourist attractions, and remain most of the time locked and empty of living tradition and even people.

The priest at Leutenberg told us that a few years earlier an elderly woman from the Ukraine came to visit the mysterious graves in the cemetery. Like the imams' tombs remaining untouched out of local superstitious fear in destroyed Balkan Muslim graveyards, so these tombstones commemorating children, each name beautifully engraved under a red Soviet star, have not been removed or defaced, and are a permanent reproof and sorrowful reminder that something terrible did happen here once. Maybe the woman visitor could tell the story, but no one knows who she was and where she might be and even if she is still alive. She had wanted to visit the place before dying. In present unified Germany the presence of these inscribed gravestones seems strange, certainly unexpected. At one time up to quite recently, they told of a country linked to a different empire. Soviet presence used to be part of everyday life. I imagined the old lady travelling from the Ukraine, and walking past the old church up the forest path to the cemetery, crunching dry dead leaves as we did, and suddenly coming across a piece of home, a familiar script and a memory of a different time.

I also thought of my Jewish godmother Gabi, expelled with her family from the town by Nazi sympathising neighbours who then took over her house and property. Gabi returned as an old woman to this beautiful childhood Heimat, prompting me to make my own first visit. The neighbours like everyone else refused to talk to her. Only the Gute Quelle Gasthaus welcomed the first person from outside Germany who had ever visited Leutenberg in living memory. Having only recently moved to the area, the owners knew nothing of the town's dark history.

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AN ELECTRIC CHAIR

We bought a scarf and a cap in Weimar, which is all that can be said about our visit to a city famous for its cultural history but is now a mausoleum. The uncluttered design of the spacious boulevards and parks suggests an empty canvas on which the great minds of the past could write their thoughts, but I did not feel the presence of Goethe or Schiller, their astounding insights into the human condition and bold imagination, in the way that I do sense Bach's presence in Leipzig's Thomaner Kirche. We would have preferred to stay in neighbouring Erfurt with its higgledy-piggledy streets knotting around the centre, attractive medieval houses and an impressive cathedral rearing up from a grand flight of steps above a market place the size of several sports stadiums. A major European trade centre for centuries, merchants from every direction would have come here along with farmers bringing herds of cattle, flocks of sheep as well as all kinds of produce. Now the space is occupied by market traders, dotted about with room to spare. I had looked forward to visiting Weimar, hoping to sense the presence of great minds from the past, but missed the domestic bustle of Erfurt, and found the atmosphere arid in the city where Goethe wrote *Faust*.

Back in Erfurt Donald sat for a while in Meister Eckart's chair in the Prediger Kirche. Our friend Mathew Fox, who founded the Creation Spirituality movement in America and stayed with us every time he visited the UK, told us that far from enjoying a moment of quiet rumination sitting in the same seat he felt powerful bolts of electricity exploding through his whole body. This 15th century mystic gave early expression to a holistic interpretation of the world, and was also a firebrand. I let Donald experience spiritual electrocution in peace and explored the grotesque carvings to be found in shadowy corners of the church.

On our first day in Erfurt we chose the Fairtrade Cafe opposite the Prediger Kirche for refreshment and came across for the only time on our visit to Thuringia what I had experienced twenty three years earlier: a friendly atmosphere in which the owner and his mother talked to me enthusiastically about life in Germany since the unification. They were moved to hear my story and planned journey to Leutenberg. The mother found an album of old photographs. Our conversation reminded me of those I had enjoyed all those years ago on my first visit. Her son looked the ideal Aryan, favoured by the Nazis, tall, slim and blonde. However, in complete contrast to the severe robotic stereotype in helmet and jackboot, this young man's handsome face beamed a welcoming smile. His friends gathered and sat on a sofa facing the counter with its display of cakes made by the mother. The atmosphere

reminded me of my Coffeehouse in Charlbury, a place for stimulating talk and home cooking. I also used to keep a sofa by a small fireplace. People who wanted to have conversations with me would sit there, watching me prepare lunch: elderly ladies escaping the loneliness and boring routine of home, musicians relaxing after a master class, actors taking a break from rehearsals in Stratford, and friends updating me on their personal crises. This Erfurt coffeehouse shared with mine an unorthodox lack of a barrier between owners and customers. Conversation flowed freely across the counter and at quiet times I would even sit with them, as did the young man and his mother. This had been my aim and it came as a pleasant surprise to find a similar ethos somewhere else.

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Two encounters kept us busy in Munich, so we never got to visit the Pinakotek where as a youth I had been inspired by the Altdorfers and Rubens. The panoramic vistas of the former and the extravagance of the latter knocked me for six, especially the Last Judgement oil sketches in which masses of naked bodies tumble and writhe in sensual abandon. However the meetings gave greater and deeper pleasure. Hartmut's friend, Dr Ingrid Krau, who had gone out of her way to help Ari in his time of trouble turned out to be another lively 1970s activist, defying her years with the kind of enthusiasm and thoughtfulness that should inspire a new generation who need it. This love-in lasted all morning. The second meeting came as a pleasant surprise. Anel Alisic, one of our main colleagues on the Omarska project described in my book *a white house: from Fear to a Handshake*, left a message on my iPhone to tell us sadly he could not meet us in Bosnia, because he needed to be in Germany: in fact that very day in Munich. None of us could believe the coincidence. The moment he knew we were there he jumped on a tram and spent the rest of the day with us.

I had been nervous about meeting our colleagues from the Omarska Memorial Project in the Prijedor region of Northern Bosnia, because we never finished it as planned. There should have been a memorial at the mine to those murdered in the killing camp during the Bosnia War, but our funders, the mine bosses, stopped the project, and there is still no memorial. I feared that our colleagues, who had put themselves on the line to work with us, at considerable danger, and even, as it turned out, at cost of work and money, might have felt resentful. I expected to be shouted at. In the meantime, the journalist Ed Vulliamy, whom I respect hugely, tore into us critically in his book about Bosnia, attacking our naivety and ineptitude. Part of me felt this criticism to be justified, although painful. In his book he

accuses us of collaborating with the bosses, and most unforgivably for not working with actual survivors from the killing camp. This would have upset Kemal Pervanic, Rezak Hukanovic, Mirsad Duratevic and Muharem Murselovic who all survived the torture and killing by the skin of their teeth, let alone several women who had been raped and tortured at Omarska, and all of whom had taken a major part in the project. Ed Vulliamy should have checked his facts. Still, he criticised us correctly for being compromised by Mittal Steel, which was then the owner of the mine, and despite the unfairness and inaccuracy of his judgement I still feel guilty at having failed the survivors and all the people we worked with. Our process has always been to bring sides together, in this case perpetrators and victims, which meant talking with Serbs as well as Muslims, and involving both sides in the memorial. In fact the young Serbs who joined the project turned out to be the most enthusiastic advocates for the memorial. However, many Muslims who had suffered terribly at the hands of the Serbs, including close friends of Ed Vulliamy, resented any Serb presence in the process. We did not try hard enough to persuade them. This error has weighed heavily on me ever since. So I waited for Anel with trepidation. The first to join us on the project, he had taken his time before making that decision and then persuaded his best friend Zoran Djukic, a Serbo-Croat, to work in partnership with him. He needed to be able to trust us. Throughout the process he remained thoughtful, careful and dedicated. His opinion mattered more than anyone. So you can imagine my relief when on arriving at the hotel he immediately rushed to embrace us, thrilled to see us again.

Apart from some greying hair the last ten years had not changed him. He looked better, less drawn and stressed, perhaps because he had secured a well-salaried job building a network linking medical research with doctors searching for the best treatment. Zoran now worked for him on accounts. An unpleasant story lay behind their present employment, and had to do with their involvement with the Soul of Europe. Zoran's previous dairy business in Banja Luka had flourished for years. When he decided to expand the business, the authorities pulled the rug from under his feet. They waited for him to invest his savings in new equipment and premises then without warning closed his whole business down, giving no reason, and leaving him bankrupt with a wife and child to care for. He knew the reason. They were punishing him for working with us on the Omarska Memorial project. Fortunately his best friend Anel persuaded his bosses to take Zoran on, and both of them seem to be secure now.

Anel brought us up to date on the notorious mayor of Prijedor, who is a significant figure in my book *the white house*. This time it seems the mayor is in hot water from which he will not

be rescued as easily as in the past. The scandal involves the mine company owners. It also involves Pero Bukejlovic who is a major character in the first Book of *Dust*. We had known him as the Minister for the Economy and later for a few years as Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska. The story illustrates how multi-national businesses take advantage of local corruption. In his eagerness to improve the economy of his region, Pero Bukejlovic signed a deal with the global mining company, then known as Mittal Steel, to run the Omarska mine and also its large treatment plant at Zenica, giving them favourable terms: favourable and apparently illegal. Mittal Steel needed only pay a fraction of the taxes for exporting the iron ore they extracted from the Omarska mine. Now the Republika Srpska is suing Arcelor Mittal, who will brush it off, insisting that they signed in good faith. To complicate matters, the mayor of Prijedor where the mine operates has been accused of arranging for tax to be paid on only a fraction of the iron ore being transported, and benefitted financially by helping Mittal Steel make substantial profits from the deal. He is now exposed and hitting headlines to an extent that this time the government could be brought down. Even the Teflon-coated mayor might not survive, although when a large cache of arms had been found in his garage while we were working on the Omarska Memorial project, he managed to make an excuse and escape punishment. He still has the top politicians of the Republika Srpska, including the President Milorad Dodik, in his pocket. However the International Court of Criminal Justice, now based locally in Sarajevo, is on his heels about supervising atrocities during the Bosnia War. Again he will evade justice by simply declaring he doesn't recognize the ICC or its jurisdiction in Bosnia.

Anel told us all this with glee, and for a few moments we allowed ourselves to bask in the glow of hope that politics might change for the better in Bosnia. Since returning from our journey, Dodik is once again threatening independence for the Republika Srpska during the scheduled January 8th public holiday to celebrate ten years since the signing of the Dayton Accord which created the Republika Srpska, an event that will be boycotted by the rest of Bosnia, although the Croats are in favour because they plan secession of their part of the Federation of Bosnia and unite with Croatia. These threats destabilize Bosnia.

Anel reassured us that Dodik is losing support from most of the country, with the exception of his power base in Banja Luka and the family town of Laktashi. He faces opposition from all other political leaders.

Bosnia, as ever, teeters on the edge. The European Union put in charge of this region prides itself on there not having been another war, but by pushing all the problems under the carpet, it is making the same mistake as Tito did after the Second World War. When the region collapses again, as there is every sign of it doing economically and politically, then the fighting and massacres will be worse than before, because all sides are prepared.

Anel had some sad personal news: the death from prostate cancer of his uncle Muharem Murselevic, known affectionately by everyone as Mursel, who had been tortured in the Omarska killing camp but instead of emigrating after liberation stayed on in Prijedor as a Muslim representative of the Assembly. We remembered this amiable man on one particular occasion facing a group of young Serbs who had chosen to be part of the Omarska memorial project. He stood in front of the white house and told them what had happened there. The teenagers did not know where to put themselves, unable to take in the horror of his story. They stared at the ground, turned their backs on him, wandered off and kicked at the weeds. It seemed for a while that they wanted to abandon the project, but it turned out that his words inspired them, and they began working with increased determination on designs for a memorial to the murdered Muslims. These were young Serbs whose families disapproved of them having anything to do with the project.

Mursel had attended the same school as Mayor Pavic and President Dodik, both already then planning political success and becoming wealthy. Mursel tried to build bridges with his former persecutor, and on another memorable occasion the mayor accepted an invitation to attend Mursel's birthday party along with many of the people involved in the Omarska Memorial project. There is film of everyone singing popular songs, drinking and smiling ecstatically with flushed faces. Everyone thought this party a triumph for the project, but I felt a chill, remembering a similar film shot before the Bosnia War of another gathering of Serb and Muslim neighbours to celebrate a wedding. While toasting each other the laughing Serbs were also warning the Muslims that the next day they would have to massacre them, which is exactly what happened because the Bosnia War had started. After Mursel's party the mayor forced Mittal Steel to cancel the project.

Mittal Steel brought our work to an abrupt end in a messy manner. The mayor had put pressure on the mine owners which left them no choice but to wind up the project. Our commission came to an end. We could not help the survivors and the young Serb volunteers anymore. Before being dismissed Anel and Zoran, still officially managing the project, were

invited to Mittal Steel head offices in Rotterdam. This time Anel went into detail about what happened. All we knew was that they returned home empty-handed. Mittal Steel had cunningly invited those representatives of the Muslim community who refused to go along with our process of including Serbs as an important part of the process. Mittal Steel knew that these representatives would be hostile to Anel and Zoran. The Rotterdam staff left Anel and Zoran alone with them to decide on a plan of action that everyone knew could not be agreed. The mine owners then washed their hands of the project, blaming the failure on the disagreement between the Muslim survivors. Anel shrugged this unpleasant piece of history off as something he had become accustomed to with international organizations and businesses. He assured us that he and Zoran enjoyed their time exploring Rotterdam. However I guessed they must have felt demoralised, and their decision to enjoy themselves was a way of relieving pain. I still feel a burning anger at the mine owners' behaviour. We had done them a big favour by bringing Serbs and Muslims together to at least acknowledge each other, even if reconciliation could not happen yet, and we succeeded in relieving community tensions around the mine. As Ed Vulliamy correctly pointed out we had been used by the mine owners. The memorial would have completed the process, but the mayor intervened. I still cannot forgive this mighty and phenomenally wealthy global company for playing a dirty game with our staff and so putting the blame on them for the project's failure. The representatives who disapproved of our inclusion of Serbs in the project insisted on taking the project further by themselves, ignoring our process. As predicted, they achieve nothing. Anel told us that in the intervening years the mine company has created a hill of rubbish and mine detritus in front of the white house, the place of murder and torture, so it is now hidden from view. There seems to be no chance of a memorial while the mayor is still in control of the region.

On our way to Banja Luka we would meet Mirsad Duratevic, one of the leading members of the project, and someone with more authority to speak than anyone because he survived torture in the white house, when a sympathetic Serb friend helped him escape. Our meeting with Mirsad is described later in this letter. Anel told us that Mirsad is now a leading member of the Prijedor Assembly. This is an impressive achievement for a man whom the Serbs tried to kill, who became a refugee in Germany, then returned as soon as the war was over to reclaim his home and family lands, which the Serbs had burnt to the ground, even the fruit trees. He steered his decimated and traumatized community into rebuilding their village and constantly fought the Serb-run council for rights and amenities. When we knew him ten years

ago, his village lacked electricity or water because the major insisted on blocking connection, saying that Serbs only should have priority with amenities.

Late in the evening we wandered with Anel through the crowded streets of central Munich, past dozens of Middle Eastern restaurants and cafes. Normally reserved, thoughtful and saying little when we knew and worked with him and, after years of minimal communication, Anel reveals unsuspected emotion, an effervescent delight at being with us. He embraced us both with a passion and a hot kiss on our cheeks before disappearing into the Underground Station.

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Buoyant after this meeting we set off for Zagreb and Bosnia with no sense of dread.

However the reality of Europe hit us straight away. Outside Munich station stood Syrian families, mothers in niqabs looking stressed and young men pacing around trying to find a solution to lack of home, food and work. Then on Salzburg station I witnessed the scene from Dante's Inferno described earlier.

The refugee crisis dominates the continent. Eastern Europe and the Balkans are running the agenda because these malfunctioning countries need to find a way of coping with only Germany and Austria offering ever diminishing assistance. Other countries, in particular the UK for whom I had to make ceaseless apologies, wash their hands of the problem politically and economically. I see and am part of a relatively prosperous Europe. There is enough to help but no political will and not enough humanity. Volunteers and small agencies help what they can, but the suffering is not alleviated.

While those refugees lucky and persistent enough to have arrived gather in mounting confusion at Munich's main railway station, the trial of Beate Zschäpe, the German right-wing extremist and an alleged member of the neo-Nazi terror group National Socialist Underground (NSU) continues in the same city. She has become a popular figure, even a star, because of her part in the campaign to kill Muslims in Germany. A celebrity with substantial support despite being a mass murderer and proud of her activities, she enjoys fame and comfort which contrasts with that of the refugees she and many in Germany would like to send back to the Middle East. Dr Ingrid Krau described to us how Beate Zschäpe charms the judge and manipulates justice during the trial. Whatever the outcome she will be punished leniently, just as Nazis responsible for large scale massacres and atrocities committed during

the Second World War lived out their years of incarceration comfortably in contrast to the punishment inflicted on student protesters and leaders of the Red Army Faction whose treatment violated the Geneva Convention, with psychological and physical torture in isolated conditions that lead to suicides. Right-wing criminals are always treated better than those from the left, because the right is seen as nationalist, patriotic and obedient to the state. Nazi criminals were only doing their duty; the Brejviks and Zschäpes are judged as at worst misguided, their views permissible but maybe they shouldn't have taken to murder. Dr Ingrid Krau told us that the trial is revealing how deep these extreme nationalist roots go throughout German society. They had been invisible and ignored for decades, so the revelation has come as a shock to the liberal sections of the population.

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The rail network in Germany failed again, and the train from Munich to Zagreb was therefore mostly empty of passengers. The young man serving us coffee, having no one else to look after, talked to us eagerly, explaining how the refugee crisis now means cancellations and curtailments, which affect his hours and therefore his ability to pay for PhD studies in Fulda where he has a wife, child, house and orchard. He wanted all the refugees to be welcomed. 'There is room for everyone here,' he declared.

Only a few people joined the train at Salzburg. The guards could not guarantee its arrival at Zagreb. In fact shortly after crossing the border with Slovenia we were told that the train would stop before the border with Croatia, at the small town of Brezice. A bus took us from there to Zagreb.

Because night had fallen we did not see the refugee camp there. However at the border crossing with Croatia where we were told to leave the bus and wait in line for our passports to be checked, we could not miss a large army tent erected on the forecourt.

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The Sheraton Hotel in Zagreb brought back memories of weekends spent writing reports about the Omarska memorial project, two days we insisted on before returning home and domestic distractions. With not much else to do I used to lie on the bed in my room and watch episodes of *Midsomer Murders*, which for some reason were popular on Croatian daytime TV. In a kind of daze I would think about what we had learnt about the killing camps in Bosnia, the traumas suffered by victims and perpetrators alike and at the same time try to

identify anachronisms in these imitation Agatha Christie thrillers which mix old-fashioned stories about class, money and bad sexual behaviour in English bucolic settings with contemporary accessories such as mobile phones. I am in general bored by this kind of low-brow and snobbish detective fantasy back home, but in Zagreb these films exerted a nostalgic charm: a never land of British tradition which regularly include a village fair at which invariably and predictably a murder will be committed. In the same way that specially prepared meals meant to bring families together in soap operas are destined to end in shouting and violence, so a village fair in crime stories presages chaos and doom for someone. The only time this cliché works for me is in *Night of the Demon*, a film version from the 1940s of MR James' *The Casting of the Runes*, at which the erudite villain ruins a children's outdoor party by conjuring up a storm. That scene is about the power of the imagination, and for me the high point of a classic film which explores the human propensity for creating mayhem. The only let down is the appearance of the devil at the end, even though it is an impressive creation. There is no need for such a diabolical presence. It should have been left to the imagination. The externalization of psychic disturbance undermines the point of the story which shows how people can be persuaded to accept a belief that not only gives them the power to destroy others but also themselves.

This is not a Pelz digression. Zagreb brought back these memories; how TV films meant only to entertain provoked me into thinking about the human condition, how to make sense of the absurd violence of recent history, and its consequences which we were asked to help resolve.

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A DREAM OF CHAINS

Here is another Pelz digression which isn't one.

Before travelling to Zagreb I had planned to make a sentimental detour and visit the Alpine valley I describe in *The Face of a Child* where in my childhood I had spent several idyllic summer holidays staying with a farmer family, the Trogers. Finally I decided against the return, knowing it would be disappointing. Sometimes it is best not to revisit the past.

However I would have liked to see again the picture of a small pine tree standing against the background of the valley's main mountain, the glacier-covered Habicht, Hawk, I had painted there and given to the family.

However just last night, I had a vivid dream of returning to the Troger Valley.

I rarely dream such a clear and resonant narrative.

Donald and I were climbing one of the mountains above the Trogers' village and came across a farmhouse where people remembered the family. The cows in the meadow under an overcast sky looked uneasy, expecting some oncoming disaster. A tightly packed herd of white horses suddenly rushed past in a terrifying stampede. Then a storm broke over the mountain.

We ran for cover in the farmhouse and began to talk with the people who were happy to reminisce about Mother Troger, her son Peter and his wife Inge. There had been trouble and it hadn't ended well. (It's possible in my dream I was remembering how Peter used to involve neighbours in litigation about property, which saddened me because for me Peter, the man of nature, always seemed above such petty materialism.)

The dream then changed abruptly. We were driving somewhere in Austria. Donald made a mistake and turned the car in the wrong direction so we faced oncoming traffic. He managed to steer the car to safety along the verge and a police car stopped us. Officers ordered us out, no explanation given. I assumed we were being punished for the mistake, but then began to realize we were in deeper trouble. The police silently but forcefully made us enter a roadside restaurant where a large crowd of what seemed to be refugees, white Eastern Europeans not from the Middle East, stood in a corner, being intimidated. I couldn't be certain from where they came exactly. The police made us sit down, and still not telling us anything, chained our feet to the chairs. Then I knew we had been arrested for a crime bigger than making the wrong turn, and I woke up.

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Sometimes books, articles and films trigger such a dream. I had just watched the classic horror film *Island of Lost Souls*, based on the HG Wells' story about a scientist who believes he is God, with Charles Laughton giving a mesmerising, soft spoken and insinuating portrait of an erudite white man who considers himself superior. In this subtle but savage indictment of colonialism, Laughton 'civilizes' animals by making them more human, more like him. He even teaches them civilized attitudes, like not being cruel, not shedding blood, and obeying the law. He however is allowed to break the law and in a desperate attempt to protect his empire orders a killing. This upsets the precarious balance he has tried to create in his Prospero's kingdom, and the animals, confused by this double standard turn rebellious and

slaughter him. The image of Laughton swinging a bull whip at the creatures he has created and subjugated led by a scary Bela Lugosi, and the way they tear him to pieces is upsetting enough to trigger any nightmare. The disturbing imagery and message led the film to being banned for decades. The film resonates today in particular, as the consequences of imperial colonialism, especially its double-standards, are now being visited on our continent.

My dream is also a reflection on my journey through Europe that has become a fortress continent under siege from within.

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The moment we crossed the border into Bosnia the intensity of emotion, beauty and personal interaction overwhelmed me. Bosnia hits you in the solar plexus. Be prepared for that. This country is unique in Europe. It has not joined the homogenized modernity of the rest of the continent. Serbia does the same for me. Even the landscape stirs with the wildness of the mountains, cragginess of ravines, thickness of forests where wolves and bears roam and natural untidiness. This is not tamed nature. Bosnia is also the land of great rivers that surge in full flow from towering rock faces. These past years they have been malevolent, flooding their banks and destroying towns, villages and homes. Normally they flow calm and wide along broad valleys, or foam violently through narrow gorges.

Adnan's wife Samra who accompanied us on the drive reminded us how important rivers are to Bosnia. Her favourite is 'the wild Una', which passes through Bihac, our first stop. It never struck me as wild because the landscape is peaceful rolling hills and farmland. The waters rarely foam but move placidly and broadly, bordered by avenues of trees. This calm is deceptive. The river is deep and moves powerfully, like the Vrbas which we came to know even better during our time in Banja Luka. The corrupt government of the region is planning to harness the power of the Una and create a dam which would destroy large areas of countryside.

Two years earlier in Sarajevo we had already met and established good relations with several young activists from Bihac who spearheaded the Plenum movement in protest against government corruption. They were mostly young women, including Aida Seydic who hit the headlines and was unfairly attacked by the government for inciting violence when in fact she had stopped it. Just as the crowd of demonstrators prepared to attack the municipal building she had stood up and stopped them.

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ALEXANDER SCHLACHT: 'SHRINK-WRAPPED IN FLAGS'

Now comes yet another digression, relevant to our work and is about killing. Long rail travels give time to think. This digression began on the journey, then went underground and is emerging now that I am writing the letter.

The comedian Eddie Izzard says that despair is the fuel of terrorists and hope is the fuel of civilization. In fact I would amend that to despair being the fuel of all kinds of war. Terrorists are talked about as though they alone are killing and committing barbaric acts. There is an assumption that because the West considers itself to be at peace and more civilized than other parts of the world, we therefore do not kill or commit atrocities, even though we have the most sophisticated and destructive arsenal in constant deployment.

I keep quoting Ovid and his insight into how it is ignorance that fuels fear. This leads to the despair which fuels barbarism, whoever commits it.

Our years in the Balkans brought us face to face with the despair and the consequences of what that led to. So whenever I return, the brutal side of human behaviour hits me with ever increasing intensity.

Aron my Jewish Serbo Croat friend from Zagreb once told me his own despair at the bloodthirstiness of the Balkan male. As a child he once witnessed a relative go to a shed in the garden to slaughter an animal, maybe it was a calf or a lamb. The grim smile of satisfaction afterwards on the face of the man, the pleasure taken in slaughter, horrified him. 'There is something sick in the Balkan male,' he told me.

Adnan told me a story about his father Farouk during the Bosnia War, behaviour that traumatised his son, just a teenager. Farouk is my age exactly, and we were born at the end of the Second World War, so neither of us experienced the terror and reality of war for fighters and non-combatants alike. This story touched me personally, because I empathised. Farouk is a far braver man than I am. He had to protect his family from Serb militias who were moving from apartment to apartment block in Sarajevo, killing everyone they could find. As the Serbs approached, Farouk wrestled with himself. What should he do? He had a gun. If he used it the danger would be an even more violent response from the heavily-armed militia. He might kill one man and the rest would kill the whole of Farouk's family. If he

didn't use it and they found it, then the danger could be equally great. So he kept going into the garden to bury the gun. Then changed his mind and dug it up again. He did this several times while the danger came closer. Adnan told me he would never forget this for the rest of his life. The Serbs were drunk on blood, camaraderie and brandy, which is how they coped with being ordered to carry out massacres. In fact they were also being traumatized by the violence they inflicted. So Farouk knew he could not reason with them, or stop them.

It turned out that Farouk was cleverer than the militia. At the last minute he called the terrified neighbours in his apartment block together and they hid at the end of the corridor down which the Serbs were storming, banging doors down with their weapons. At a given sign all the men in Farouk's group roared out at the top of their voices that they were ready for the Serbs. 'Come on!' they shouted. 'We are waiting for you!' The Serbs fled.

Farouk and I belong to the generation spawned at the end of the worst war the world and particularly Europe has ever witnessed. We are the maligned 'baby boomers'. We grew up with the trauma that war inflicted on our parents' generation. This led to the 1960s, the decade of clamour for peace, flower power and the birth of liberation movements political and sexual. At the same time our parents' generation continued to wage wars across the world, in Latin America, South America, the Middle East and Far East, notoriously in Vietnam which became a graveyard for young soldiers from our generation.

Since then Europe has disengaged itself morally from the rest of the world so it actually believes it is not at war anymore, that peace and civilization have triumphed. What happened is that we are used to waging proxy wars in other places, far away from our own continent. The Bosnia War came as a shock. We continued to fight enemies elsewhere. The effect of this disengagement from the rest of the world is that generations after mine and Farouk's will not know the physical reality of war. It is entertainment, shock and awe on television screens at remote control.

All this thinking brought back my own childhood experience. People born after me do not understand the pressures older generations had to face: the command to be a soldier and be ready for war, to fight, to kill and be killed. In my day this pressure, still prevalent but more as a way of 'supporting our brave boys' who choose to do this dirty work, was presented as patriotism. Arundhati Roy analyses patriotism with scalpel precision when she considers the meaning of the word 'refugees'. She describes these people as not only escaping war but also being driven by politics and circumstances from their land and home in their own countries,

‘exiled from everything they have ever known – their language, their history, the landscape that formed them’. Referring to these ignored people she concludes: ‘Unfortunately, in imaginations that are locked down into a grid of countries and borders, in minds that are **shrink-wrapped in flags**, they don’t make the cut.’ This is how I felt as a child about the pressure being put on me to be a killer. At that time of my growing up any man not prepared to fight and kill was considered weak, degenerate, unpatriotic and shameful. He certainly could not be considered a man.

This indoctrination since the earliest patriarchal societies established class and strict systems of obedience in which waging war became the most effective tool of subjugation. Avarice and power struggles legitimized conflict. Our knowledge of matriarchal societies shows that collaborative systems of communal care were favoured for survival. The question remains as to why these communities permitted take over by patriarchies.

Generations since up to my own were brought up on Homer’s *Iliad*, Thucydides *Peloponnesian Wars*, Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* and an indulgent nod to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, presumably as light relief. But even Ovid’s major source of inspiration for all manner of artists ever after ends with a lengthy description of the gruelling battle between the Gods and the Centaurs. All these texts go into harrowing detail about the act of killing, and role models like Achilles are described as drunk on blood and violence. Ovid conveys a sense of tragic waste and pointlessness. His story makes the bitter point that bloodbaths are generally started for the pettiest of reasons. Such celebrations of male brutality carry on today in video games, but all at a safe remove, preparing a generation to kill with a remote control, no need to suffer pain or discomfort. The classics were meant to educate and prepare men for hand to hand battle, the hacking of swords, the wrestling to the death and above all the conquering of fear.

I had hoped to find time in Munich to visit the Alte Pinakotek which contains a masterwork that made an indelible impression when I first saw it: Albrecht Altdorfer’s *Alexanderschlacht*, known as *The Battle on the Issus* but more accurately translated as the *Alexander Massacre*, celebrating one of Alexander the Great’s most significant victories in Asia. The painting is epic in size, scale and detail: a terrifying if admiring depiction of war. It is Germany’s High Renaissance version of Tolstoy’s detailed and also harrowing description of the Battle of Borodino in *War and Peace*. In both, the painter and the writer focus on the clash of massive armies and what that means for the people in the eye of the storm. In both battles the armies are stubborn in attack, cannot move each other and continue the slaughter

which is not stopped. The violence worsens as attrition takes over. Alexander is in the middle of the fighting, leading his army. This is why he is a celebrated war hero. He at least had the courage of his calling and was prepared to suffer and die, to share the pain, blood and sweat of the soldiers whom he relied on, and who followed him therefore ever more willingly, inspired by his bravery. Tolstoy describes witheringly how Napoleon stands apart from the battle, observing from a distance, and because he feels no pain or fear, does nothing to halt the unnecessary slaughter. Borodino did not end in victory for either side, but weakened the French army even more than the Russian, and led ultimately to the defeat of Napoleon's campaign.

War leaders today sit at an even further remove. They direct operations from the comfort of homes and offices and go nowhere near the battle, except for a photo opportunity when it is safe to do so.

I wanted to stand again before Altdorfer's epic painting, which sets the battle in a cosmic perspective, as though being watched by the Gods. The clash of armies takes place under a sky that reflects the drama below, dark clouds swirling, hemming in a fiery sunset. The magnificence of nature adds a cosmic dimension to the battle.

Both Altdorfer and Tolstoy see glory and elation in war, heroism and the thrill of bloodshed. Breughel allows none of that in his bleak canvas *The Triumph of Death*, in which not only humans have become battling skeletons but the earth itself is burnt and laid waste like an ecological disaster. The sky, shrouded in smoke, sheds no light of comfort on the scene. The few recognizable humans remaining in the foreground are demoralized and depraved like characters from Joseph Conrad's most disturbing stories of colonial skulduggery. Breughel depicts with precision how war destroys humanity and the earth.

Glory of war persists but in sentiments such as 'our brave boys' 'doing work they love' which bear little relation to the messy reality of modern warfare. Post traumatic stress disorder gives an indication of the price paid by 'our boys', as well as being shot, blown up or injured: the mess of war, and what was once explained dismissively by people not on the ground and safely far away from the mayhem as 'stuff happens'. The grisly reality of modern warfare, rapes and torture, echo ancient battle behaviour in which victors made a habit of sodomising those they defeated, not for pleasure but to inflict ultimate humiliation and make propaganda. Think of the notorious Abu Graib photographs, the familiar images of

Guantanamo, and now the taunting barbaric videos from ISIS which deliberately imitate that humiliation with orange jump suits, sacks over the head and masks.

Along with the propensity of communities to genocide, the manner in which societies are prepared to sacrifice its young men in the prime of life has preoccupied me all my life. This readiness of government as well as insurgency movements to manipulate youth disaffection and violent urges indoctrinates young men into joining death cults and willingly giving their lives for causes they only vaguely understand.

Insurgencies and revolutions persuade people that killing can be justified. But what about training and asking young people to fight for a war that is political, that has no justification, or a justification that cannot be trusted? As a young man I might have found the courage to kill fascists out of fury for what they were destroying and who they were killing, including my grandparents. After the defeat of Nazism as a global threat I could not be persuaded to fight, even if I had the courage because I know that there are more effective and certainly less lethal alternatives to resolving national and global disputes and differences, be they political, racial or religious.

This preoccupation of mine explains why in my final series of paintings I focused on the image of the soldier, eventually putting the young man to sleep and bringing him peace and comfort at the moment of his greatest vulnerability. Not one of my soldiers is imagined. They are all real people, and many I knew personally.

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Returning to Bihac reminded me of cases of post traumatic stress disorder I encountered there, and described in what is for me one of the most distressing chapters of *Dust*. The young soldiers on all sides of the terrible Bosnia conflict, with its killing camps, mass rapes, torture and all kinds of atrocities, did not have the luxury after the war of therapy to heal stress. Boris Davidovic in his *Serbian Diaries* observes the behaviour of killers, and his book is necessary reading for understanding the contradictions in the Balkan male, on the one hand affectionate and needy, and on the other capable of unspeakable barbarism. His observation is all the sharper because the subject matter is daringly intimate, a record of his sexual misadventures.

The story of Denis Arifovic, the director of one of our first Bosnian projects to establish a business and civic forum is told in more detail in *Dust*. Denis and his friends opened my eyes

to the human catastrophe of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which in Bosnia still receives no treatment let alone attention. 'Just get on with your life' is the general attitude, in the manner of fighters returning to their home countries at the end of the Second World War. These soldiers who witnessed the worst of war were never given the chance to process the horror of their experiences. This suppression of psychic pain led to family dysfunction. My generation knows at first-hand many such examples. After the two World Wars Europe focused its attention on economic recovery rather than healing trauma. However when I first came to Bosnia in 2000 the country's economic, social and political collapse which the international community failed to deal with meant that Denis Arifovic and his friends as well as coping with war trauma had to contend with the immediate pain of unemployment, and were desperate to leave the country. PTSD was not even on the agenda. Those like many of my generation who have not witnessed war first hand can have no concept of the trauma it inflicts on all who take part. I listened to Denis narrate his experiences of fighting. This sensitive young man, a musician and artist at heart, found himself in hell. He watched his fellow fighters kill and burn, trying his best to avoid being involved. One story he told me stood out because it made me think of what my behaviour might have been in a similar situation. He and his fellow fighters were caught in a trap, surrounded by Serb militia. His commanding officer told them to lie low, make no noise, and be prepared to shoot even at the cost of their lives. One of the fighters had a breakdown. In sheer terror, which is how I imagined I would have reacted, he threw his rifle away, leapt out of the hiding place and ran screaming like a banshee down the hillside. The Serbs shot him to bits. After the shocked silence which followed his telling of this story, Denis sighed and observed drily: 'You can't escape your fate. Those bullets had his name written on them.'

We did by chance meet one of Arkan's tigers, the soldiers that committed the worst atrocities against Muslims during the Bosnia War. In 2000, on our first visit to Serbia, we stopped at a roadside restaurant just across the border with Hungary. A gypsy orchestra played for an anniversary party, the atmosphere raucous and also old-fashioned. The leading violinist bent over the blushing women while playing sentimental tunes with throbbing vibrato. Our driver talked for a long time with the young man employed to keep an eye on the cars outside. The youth could not have been more than his mid-twenties, and therefore a teenager during the war. He looked at us with soft eyes and a gentle smile. Perhaps his looks deceived, because he claimed to have fought for Arkan, who disbanded his militia after the war, leaving the young man unemployed. This restaurant popular with football clubs happened to be owned

by Arkan, which is how the young man got the job. I'd imagined Arkan's tigers to be thugs like the intimidating glaring gangsters we saw and avoided on the streets of Belgrade, so it came as a surprise to come across such an unlikely soldier. We needed to continue our journey to Belgrade because of an early morning appointment with the Patriarch, so I could not question the young man myself. I wanted to know how he felt about what had happened, and what he did. I couldn't imagine him killing anyone, let alone commit atrocities. On their own these young men would probably not hurt a fly, but in a group he became capable of anything. I wanted to find out how the violence affected him: had he been traumatized too.

These stories, many of which I write about in *Dust*, are what make any return to Bosnia a particularly intense time for me: the horror and tragedy all mixed up with the warmth, generosity and beauty of the people.

AIDA, DRAZANA AND DINKO

Fifteen years later it came as a shock to me that people in the Bihac region are still yearning to leave their country, but I had not expected this from brave committed Aida Sejdic, one of the star representatives of the Plenum movement whom we met in Sarajevo two years ago, when we first initiated this project of national dialogue.

Before Aida's bombshell we had spent a useful lunch meeting several NGO leaders enthusiastic about Adnan's New Society project, the centrepiece being a national dialogue between NGOs, people who had taken leading part in the Plenum protests and others, but excluding politicians. We came to encourage him and had already raised some money. The basic aim was to continue the conversations among young people to tackle corruption and the country's dysfunctional politics and economy. Both the EU and the politicians it supports resent this challenge. The EU had already dismissed the protest leaders out of hand and refused to meet them, saying they had no political mandate, and were prepared to meet only politicians in power with a murky mandate, corruptly gained: one of the main reasons for the protests. Bosnia's dysfunction is less important for the EU than congratulating itself on there not having been another war. The project aims to force the EU and the politicians hanging on to their well-paid posts to listen and make changes to make Bosnia function.

We learnt from Dinko, who runs a media channel NGO devoted to civil action, and Drazana Lepir, who runs a social centre, that despite the failure of the Plenums, the protests had changed attitudes, especially among the young. People are not scared to talk as they used to

be, even though anyone challenging the politicians is accused of being criminal, and are therefore shunned by the EU, the one authority they should be able to appeal for support and help. Adnan's project of national dialogue would force all those in authority to take peoples' concerns seriously.

Aida had been enthusiastic, but within minutes of arriving, declared she had lost faith in her country. She wanted to leave and move away as far as possible. These were the words used by Denis Arifovic fifteen years earlier. He dreamed of emigration to Australia. If he could have moved to a distant planet he would have done everything to take a space flight.

Bosnia has already lost far too many of its best qualified, ambitious and intelligent people. The country simply can not afford to lose Aida. Even Adnan had spoken to us earlier about taking his family away from the country. On his own he would stay, regardless of the hardship, corruption (which meant losing his TV anchor job because he refuses to sign up to the political party which controls it) and bleak future. But he does not want his three children to be deprived of opportunity. The self-interested politicians running the country with the support of the EU would not mind the loss of these brilliant young people who pose a threat to their position and privilege. All the more reason therefore to stay and fight them.

We spent the meeting explaining the process of dialogue and the need for Aida and Adnan to stay on, unite and establish national dialogue for change. Our words came too easy. Although Aida still has work, the poor pay means that she and her husband barely survive. Aida like Adnan cannot be bought, which makes them precious. A Human Rights Institute based in Vienna had invited Aida to a conference and offered her money, along with representatives from other Plenums. Those from Zenica, Gracanica, Bosanska Krupa and Srebrenica applied and received funding. Suspicious of political interference Aida refused, wisely as it turned out, because once the funding came for the other groups, they stopped protesting. Money paid for their silence. Aida wants to change the way people think about politics.

I focused all my attention on Aida, knowing her importance to the national dialogue project, and desperate not to lose such a gifted and charismatic person. I spoke about the psychology of depression, how she would be inhuman not to feel despair in her current situation. She appeared to gain confidence, but time will tell. The situation in Bosnia is febrile. For all the EU smug reassurances that peace reigns in Bosnia, that the communities are not killing each other, this is a country from which educated, talented and ambitious people want to flee. When spirited Aida sees no hope then this country is in a bad way. Meetings with people like

Dinko, Drazana and Aida leave me incandescently furious with the EU, the well-paid, comfortably secure, indifferent, apathetic and above all ignorant officials who look down superciliously at the people they are supposed to help.

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Bosanska Krupa is situated in the thickly forested and craggy mountains of Northern Bosnia between Bihac and Banja Luka. On our first visit in 2000 we found a town in ruins. The bridge in pieces and round the main square the mosque, Catholic and Orthodox churches in ruins, all of them dynamited. They used to offer a striking image of multi-cultural harmony. To my delight all three religious buildings have been restored. In our hurry to reach Banja Luka we passed too quickly for me to take a picture, but people all over Europe need to see Bosanska Krupa as it stands today, the three buildings communicating with each other again across the square.

In Banja Luka the three main religious buildings stand too far apart for such a telling image. The new Orthodox Cathedral built in traditional style rears imperiously between the government and municipal palaces, towering over them both. The Catholic Cathedral cowers in comparison. Then suddenly we caught sight of the Ferhadija Mosque, a moment that catches the heart. Even without knowing its terrible recent history the modest grace of this beautiful building effortlessly holds the eye. The Orthodox Cathedral with its extra tall tower and weighty stone walls bullies into submission. The Ferhadija quietly seduces. Why on earth would anyone have wanted to destroy it? One day we may find out because Donald discovered the whereabouts of the man responsible for blowing it up. He is in jail in Denmark on a long sentence for war crimes, not only for this still incomprehensible act of vandalism.

Our Winter Newsletter gives more detail about our meeting with the new mufti and in particular his acknowledgement of our part in making the restoration possible. I expected a more monumental building, but the mosque is in fact a miniature, now thought to be by one of Sinan's pupils, and an echo of Sinan's more celebrated Sulejmanija Mosque in Istanbul built on a more massive scale, although in the same style, the domes hovering weightlessly, giving an impression of stone become spirit. The Ferhadija's modesty is its main charm, like a sylph arousing feelings of protectiveness. I had not expected the interior decorations to be so colourful, with no hint of brashness, the hues relating subtly to each other, the work of a skilled artist. There are Orthodox cathedrals with similar finesse, though not in Banja Luka. The Ferhadija reflects the unostentatious, intimate yet intense beauty and staggering artistry

of the great Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, at Peja Pec, Gracanica and Decani Decan. This is no accident. The Ferhadija's architectural mastermind Sinan came from a Serb Orthodox family. He converted to Islam, not so much out of compulsion but because the Ottoman Empire offered opportunities for ambitious architects. He would have known the masterpieces that are the Kosovo monasteries, built a century earlier, and the relationship between Ottoman and Orthodox Christian structural styles has long been noted; in particular the dome features.

Standing in front of the elegant entrance porch under the celebrated inscription that welcomes people of all faiths, I could not remember how the space looked when we first arrived in Banja Luka and looked at a flat piece of waste ground. Now it seemed as though the mosque had never gone away. The architects and builders of the restored mosque incorporated the old stones that had been found at a waste tip outside Banja Luka, so old and new are bound together in harmony. Harmony is the essence of the Ferhadija, like a perfect chord that sounds perpetually and resonates across time and space.

I stood by Ferhad Pasha's fountain, the idea of which inspired the title of the first part of *Dust*, and remembered the start of the arduous journey which brought all sides together at the Coventry Centre for Reconciliation to engage with each other on difficult and intense discussions to resurrect and redeem their city, and that established conditions for the rebuilding of the mosque. Now we saw the fruit of that preparation and took off our shoes before stepping onto the soft carpets inside the mosque. I thought of Mirza Basic, one of our Coventry Consultation translators, and his description of the mosque as he remembered it before his family were forced to flee Banja Luka. He told me how just looking up and being inside made him feel calm and at peace, forgetting the stress of life outside. I also remembered the traumatized congregation fourteen years ago meeting in the Islamic community centre next to where the mosque should have been standing, looking at us with appeal in their sad eyes, holding arms out to us beseeching our help. The memories and now the joy at seeing the resurrected mosque brought tears flowing uncontrollably down my cheeks. Fortunately I could hide them behind my iPhone as I snapped pictures.

I am often asked by sceptical friends why on earth I should be interested in rebuilding a mosque, knowing that I am not a man who takes part in religious activities, that I have a mixed heritage of Judaism from my family background, Christianity from my father who converted and became a Church of England vicar, and secular influences from the world

which raised me. It is a question to which I answer instinctively: 'Exactly. That is why.' In other words I put the question back to my friends. I remind them that I am an artist, and approach life not with piety but from the perspective of the imagination and being creative in my attempt to understand and to feel at home in a world that humanity devotes so much time and energy to exploiting, abusing and destroying. Destruction like a wild fire can be an opportunity for new growth. But the destruction of works of art like the Ferhadija by Christians during the Bosnia War, the Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan, Palmyra by ISIS, historic vandalism in the civil and religious wars that laid waste to Europe, including the UK, as well as across the world, the despoliation of colonial conquest which seeks to erase former cultures, all of that is about the killing of the imagination. That explains my immediate reaction: the absolute necessity of restoration, to show that destruction is not the final word and that a vandalism which takes a few minutes cannot be allowed to wipe out for ever the hours, days and years of craftsmanship and artistry. Maybe only an artist can understand this obligation, but since I have always believed that all people are artists at the core of their being, then all people can surely understand.

The resurrected Ferhadija is a corporeal vision that transcends faith, and the bigotry and cruelty of organized religion. The beauty of the architecture is about hope and the resilience of the spirit that makes sense of life and the universe in a way that is naturally denied our frail mortal bodies. It expresses the peace of eternity. This is why such buildings, for all faiths and communities, are more important to people than their own mortality.

When people question my devotion to this kind of project they are implying unconditional support for Islam, or in Kosovo for the Orthodox Church, which makes me reflect uneasily on the consequences of what I am doing. I am constantly aware that one of the main sources of bigotry towards minorities, other faiths and other communities is to be found in mosques and churches around the world. This observation is too glib. As well as inspiring the imagination that transcends human behaviour, among the most tolerant, generous, forgiving and open hearted attitudes can also be found in mosques and churches.

What I also learned in my time in the Balkans is that religion represents a shared community to people in a way that the Anglican and Catholic Churches in the rest of a rapidly secularising Europe have long been unable to do. For these communities in the Balkans mosques and churches represent their soul, the core of their culture and personal identity. People there were forever telling us that the destruction of their places of worship traumatized

them more even than the murder of their families and friends. Mosques and churches are eternal symbols of peoples' mortal lives and immortal souls.

When investigative journalists report on the unforgiving bigotry of the Russian Orthodox Church, Anglican Churches in Africa and mosques even in the UK let alone the Middle East where people who do not or cannot conform to rigidly held dogmas face death by stoning, hanging or being thrown off buildings, incarceration, lashings, being beaten up and humiliated on the streets, then doubts creep in as to whether I should be supporting these religious communities at all. However I am also aware of the possibility that my presence alone: who I am, my behaviour, my actions, belong in a long tradition of those who change attitudes by persuasion, example and friendship. It is the method trail-blazed by Gandhi, and although anathema to prevalent political attitudes, which continue to loudly declare that only redemptive violence, invasion and war can solve problems, is the only way.

As we left Banja Luka we passed the graceful Ferhadija Mosque again and noticed crowds of people gathering for worship. It seems as though the Muslim community in Banja Luka is growing again, or more prepared to be visible. The mufti had told us that Serbs were also making donations to the mosque. While we were talking to the polite soft-spoken young man, polar opposite to the irascible bellowing former mufti, Muslims and non-Muslims came up to us to shake hands and express their gratitude. The non-Muslims expressed a mixture of sorrowful shame for the destruction, that it had been allowed to happen, and relief that the heart of the city beat again. There is a justified fear that the mosque could be destroyed again. The Serbs who carried out wartime atrocities warned the Muslims of this: 'You can build it again; but we will blow it up again.' For the time being the town welcomes the Ferhadija.

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Now we had to hurry back to Prijedor and meet some of the main participants in our project to build a memorial at the Omarska killing camp, a project that is still far from finished.

Late autumn cast a misty pall over the blood-soaked landscape, the Kozara mountain range on the right which witnessed the gruelling battles of attrition between Nazis and partisans during the Second World War, then the slaughter of Muslims and Catholics fleeing Serb attack during the Bosnia War. In *Killing Days*, Kemal Pervanic's harrowing account of his incarceration in the Omarska killing camp, he describes the terror of these refugees more gut-wrenchingly than any other writer I know. I now thought with regret how he ended up

distancing himself from our process of reconciliation, having grown fond of him and his South African wife, who came to visit us in Devon. We introduced him to Serbs on the project, and he got on well with them, but at one stage he disagreed strongly with our approach, and we made the mistake of not taking his concerns more seriously. Pressures of finding solutions were no excuse. He had been traumatized by all that he witnessed and went through, and we should have taken better care of him. Now we passed the road to the killing camp on our left, and then the village nearby where Kemal's brother lives having returned home immediately after the war to rebuild what had been destroyed. The brother rightly felt that he could not allow murderers to terrorise him or stop him making his home where the family had lived for generations. Kemal, a delicate, long-haired sensitive man with the ascetic demeanour of a monk, moved to the UK to live with his wife. The brother, robust and stubborn, and protected by a large loudly barking intimidating Alsatian on a rattling chain, would not be budged from the place of his birth.

We passed the town of Kozarac on our right, where returning Muslims had rebuilt their destroyed homes and expanded. We had begun our project here invited by the redoubtable Emsuda Mugajic at the Peace Centre she established after the war and which hosted discussion meetings among survivors. We met Anel Alisic at one of these meetings. Without him and Emsuda our project would never even have lifted off the ground.

Apart from a number of new Saudi-funded mosques, Wahabi rather than the traditional attractive Bosnian Ottoman style, sprouting all over Kozarac, two Serbian Orthodox churches also stand, but incongruously side by side, one old, the other new. Structural problems are the given explanation; however the impression is of the Republika Srpska marking Serb territory with emphasis.

Kozarac stretches up the hillside towards the Kozara War Memorial to the partisans slaughtered in their battles of attrition with the Nazis. The mayor of Prijedor took us there specially to deliver his version of history. Standing in front of the large slabs of granite on which were inscribed the names of killed partisans, he gave a speech about the myth of Muslim betrayal of Serbs, who alone shed blood to save their country from fascism. We could see the names on the slab immediately behind him which completely contradicted his thesis. All of them on this particular slab were Muslim names: Osmanovic following Osmanovic following Osmanovic.

We passed two more killing camps, on the left the school at Trnopolje, where women, mostly girls, were systematically raped by Serb soldiers, and on the right on the outskirts of Prijedor the factory at Keraterm where men were held before being sent to the Omarska mine for further incarceration torture and murder, and where we saw a huge German oven, a kiln, which reminded us of Auschwitz. This knowledge taints the ordinary town of Prijedor with horror, emphasised by oppressive numbers of the black marble war memorials dedicated solely to Serb soldiers who died in the battle against Islam.

Memories brought depression but also glinted with fleeting sparks of hope. At one point, after Rezak Hukanovic's documentary film detailing the process of torture and killing at Omarska harrowed me I needed to play the piano to regain some equilibrium. Zoran managed to persuade the head of the Prijedor Conservatoire to allow me to use the school's grand piano. A caretaker showed me into the room, and only later did I discover that the man in shabby jacket and trousers was the principal. Only Bach would do, and given the unfamiliar instrument I crawled through some fugues using the sustaining pedal, which I normally avoid with Bach, till I felt hope returning. Now I remembered the young Serbs who joined the project out of curiosity and loyalty to Zoran and Anel, and who then experienced a steep learning curve about what their parents did and were keeping silent about. These teenagers became the most ardent supporters of the project to build a memorial. Then there were the survivors, people who humbled us with their desire for reconciliation and determination not to travel the road of revenge. We were about to meet two important participants of the project: Katerina Panic, one of those bright young Serbs, who has since become a respected independent journalist, and Mirsad Duratevic, a Muslim survivor whose quiet strength of character made an indelible impression.

We arrived at the La Pont restaurant on the river outside town, and I half expected to meet the mayor again, whom we once bumped into as we climbed up the steps and he came down them. The unexpected encounter had the same shock as suddenly meeting the devil, but in fact he had looked pleased to see us and gave us a friendly greeting. On this visit we noted how the streets of Prijedor seemed relatively empty, and whereas ten years ago there were always people drinking and eating at the restaurant, now nobody sat at the tables. The town seemed to be dying.

Then I caught sight of the figure of a lean man waiting next to his car and looking at us with unusual intensity, dark sunken eyes glowing and a smile slowly creasing his face. Even

having not seen him for ten years ago I immediately recognized Mirsad, with just a few new grey hairs showing, but as charismatic as ever.

Mirsad radiates an angelic quality that I have only seen in those who have endured hell. The suffering heaped on these survivors cannot even be imagined. Claude Lanzmann gives examples of this phenomenon in *Shoah*, his classic documentary on the Holocaust: survivors of hell whose serenity of demeanour makes all those round them, who have not suffered in the same way, look mean, pinched and tormented. Hieronymous Bosch painted a striking image of a transcendently peaceful Christ with dagger thorns jabbing into his head, looking at us from the centre of the composition with an expression of transcendental peace and loving forgiveness, encircled by grotesques, fists clenched, their faces contorted into grimaces of furious hatred. Bosch is telling us: these are the ones suffering and in hell, not Christ. The mufti of Banja Luka during the Bosnia War made a similar observation after the destruction of the Ferhadija Mosque, pitying the Serbs responsible, describing them as ‘imprisoned in the concentration camp of the mind’.

During that war Mirsad, then a teenager, witnessed the slaughter of all the other male members of his family, shot outside their home. Taken to Omarska and tortured in the notorious white house, he only survived because the father of a Serb schoolmate took pity and drove him hidden in a truck to the Croatian border. The seventeen year old had to cross the River Sava, over which all bridges mined, and managed to escape to Germany where he lived till the war ended. He married a woman who had escaped from his village, then moved back to Prijedor to rebuild the family home. Appointed as the community leader he spent the next years struggling to restore amenities. When we met in 2004 they still did not have running water or electricity, because the mayor blocked progress, in order to discourage returnees. Mirsad had to keep a tight reign over his community to prevent them from carrying out revenge attacks in spite of provocation. For instance when the local Serbs destroyed a bridge so the Muslims could not reach their fields, and so would have to make a detour of many miles, Mirsad stopped his community from doing similar damage to Serb property. Every day he passes people in the streets of Prijedor who murdered his family, and remain unpunished. This threatens to break his spirit, as he ruefully admitted to us, but despite all this provocation Mirsad remains calm and thoughtful. He invited us to his home to meet his wife, mother and aunt, the only survivors of the whole family, and they prepared us a traditional Bosnian meal with home grown salads, cheese from the cow and fresh baked breads, almond biscuits and coffee served as for royalty. His two young sons were playing

outside, and he told us how he had stopped them from using toy weapons. Fixing us with his steady gaze he said softly but firmly: ‘war is not the answer.’

Bosnia is a heart shaped country in the middle of the Balkans. Many people do not even know that it is part of Europe. Even though on the edge of the continent, it is not as far as Greece which in terms of culture will always be one of Europe’s most significant sources and influences. Knowing Mirsad I can’t help be astonished how despite the recent war turning Bosnia into a place of the worst of what human beings can do, and moreover having been a victim, he is the best of what human beings can be. This place had been a heart of darkness in Europe, and yet so many of the people were among the most humane we ever came to know. For me the ‘heart of darkness’ is not in Bosnia, but in Northern and Western Europe, a place of cynicism and devious self-interest. At the end of Joseph Conrad’s famous novella, the narrator brings the reader home from the ‘dark’ continent where colonialism showed its worst colours. We assume that the title refers to that place on the river in the depths of the jungle where exploitation and profit take precedence over civilized human behaviour. It comes as a chilling shock to realize in the novella’s final pages that the title is referring as much, if not more, to the urban centres made rich by spoils of empire. Conrad makes no comment but haunts us with the image of the dead colonialist’s widow spending the rest of her lonely life in a place that is both dark and heartless.

Since we last saw Mirsad he has become a leading member of the Prijedor council, which means he deals directly with the mayor. Although Mirsad’s position on the council as the token Muslim in a Serb-run municipality as stipulated by the Dayton Accord, does not give him any leverage of power, which the mayor has no intention of sharing, Mirsad is however turning out to be a thorn in the mayor’s side. Katerina Panic joined us for lunch, as enthusiastic and supportive as ten years ago, and brought us up to date on the local news. She confirmed that the mayor has been implicated in the Arcelor Mittal corruption scandal, involving non-payment of millions in taxes: 70% not paid. The company insist they signed an above-board agreement with Prime Minister Pero Bukejlovic in 2004 who surrendered to Mittal Steel hard-nosed terms not only to the disadvantage of the Republika Srpska, but as it turns out, in a way he was not allowed. We knew Pero Bukejlovic who came to the Coventry Consultation in 2001, desperate to attract any investment at whatever cost to the country. Mittal Steel came as a godsend. The mayor of Prijedor had benefited by taking cuts and bribes. The Republika Srpska is in the process of taking the steel company to court, and as I write Arcelor Mittal is threatening to remove all their business from Bosnia, putting hundreds

out of work. Anel had already told us that the company knew that the mines were almost exhausted so if the company's bluff were to be called they could leave without loss. However Katerina knew the company wanted to open another mine in one of the sites we visited ten years earlier, described in my book *the white house*. We were taken there by the then mine manager of Omarska, who wanted to show us how Mittal Steel was planning new operations. In this large abandoned old mine Mittal Steel hoped to revive I distinctly felt the presence of mass graves. When I went for a piss away from the road I looked over a reservoir and noticed scraps of clothing, children's coats and caps, cardigans and pants strewn over the shrubby slope descending to the water. At the time I dismissed these as old clothes being dumped. At the time all over Bosnia the roads and rivers were tipping sites. However an uneasy feeling told me something sinister had taken place here. Katerina and Mirsad confirmed my suspicions. Three new mass graves containing scores of unidentified bodies had been discovered recently at this very site.

The mayor was in the slow process of being persuaded to allow a memorial for these murdered people, but he insisted on permits being necessary. Only memorials dedicated to Serb soldiers from the region, those killed fighting Croats in the Bosnia War, did not need such a permit. But the mayor persists in disapproving of and blocking memorials for Muslims, murdered as opposed to being killed in battle. He blocked the memorial we were planning for Omarska, and now also these new ones. He refuses required permits. For him the murder of Muslims had been justified in a war intended to ethnically cleanse Bosnia of all its Muslims. Meanwhile the mayor is under pressure from other scandals which may this time bring him down. He is likely to escape Houdini-like again. He tries to negotiate with Mirsad. Without success: Mirsad does not fear him. The mayor has met his match.

Glimpsing a chance of completing our memorial project for Omarska Donald suggested bearding the mayor at his office on our next visit, just as we did when we first came to Prijedor, parking ourselves outside his door until he agreed to see us. At the time we were being employed by the mine owners, so the mayor felt under obligation to see us. He also wanted to look us over, identify our weaknesses and use them to his advantage. He opposed a memorial to killed Muslims absolutely. As it turned out we were more successful at bringing Serbs and Muslims together than he expected which meant he had to resort to blackmail. He threatened Mittal Steel with disruption at the mine, frightened them and scuppered the memorial. This time he could refuse to see us. However Mirsad thought it a good idea and offered to go with Donald. In fact he was determined. The two of them, both persistent,

stubborn and unafraid, might actually make a difference. It is a good feeling to know that the door had not been entirely shut on this project.

*

ZORAN

We met another hero of the Omarska Memorial Project later that evening back in Banja Luka.

The Atina used to be a chrome glinting smart hotel frequented by travelling politicians and gangsters, so sleep would be disturbed by loud sex, grunts and shrieks, doors banging and high heels clattering down corridors in the middle of the night. At least the hotel used to be busy and full with several young members of staff to look after the needs of guests. Now just a single slip of a girl managed everything. The hotel saved on electricity by dimming lights and we were the only people staying. It is possible that new hotels were taking custom away from the Atina, but I had the sense that it reflected the reality of life in the Republika Srpska, a region alienating itself from the rest of Europe by refusing to cooperate with the rest of Bosnia. President Milorad Dodik, whom we had met ten years earlier at a memorable lunch together with the mayor of Prijedor, an occasion described in *Dust*, made no secret of wanting to turn the Republika Srpska into an independent country. These political shenanigans are moving influence from the European Union to Russia, which means fewer international organizations are operating here and the hotels barely function. It used to be difficult to find a table at the Castle Restaurant that overlooks the River Vrbas and has always been one of Banja Luka's main attractions, now more so being situated across the road from the Ferhadija Mosque. On this visit we seemed to be the only ones having a meal, with a few locals gathering for drinks in the darkest corners.

We knew Zoran as a young sportsman, a glamorous local football star with a shock of black hair and piercing gaze that focused steadily on whoever was speaking as he listened quietly before giving a carefully considered comment. He and Anel were close friends. Zoran chose Anel to be his best man, and both employed each other at various stages of their working lives. We had arranged to meet him at the Atina, in the bar where apart from us, a solitary man drank beer in a dimly lit corner. Another man arrived and stood in front of Donald who mistook him for someone being a nuisance. 'You don't recognize me!' Zoran cried with a laugh. Indeed we hadn't. We looked at his head now bald, and his once lithe athletic frame

thickened by inches. Then we met his penetrating gaze and the ten years since our last meeting melted away.

My Balkan and American friends are alike: they only relate to me when we are together. There is an intensity of emotion and conversation as though we were the most important people in the world to each other. Then, when we have all parted there is complete silence until the next meeting however many years later. This contradiction is interpreted as lack of genuine interest or friendly feeling. I enjoy and am used to long and deep correspondence with friends who mean most to me, but these are not from the United States or South West Europe. Since leaving Bosnia, despite several messages and queries I texted to Mirsad, Zoran, Aida and Anel, I have not heard anything from them, but I know that the next time I visit Bosnia, they will be totally there for me. Adnan is the exception, but then he is working on the project with us.

Zoran listens intently, thinks until he is ready and then speaks the truth in a loud clear voice, however hard the message. His intervention at a crucial gathering of mine-workers at Omarska, when he castigated his fellow Serbs for lying and not facing up to what happened and what they did in the war, moved the course of our project on to the fast lane. This time he told the truth to us, a foreign NGO working in his country. We talked about the danger we put him in and he confirmed my fear that he had been punished for involvement with the Soul of Europe. 'I knew the risks,' he reassured us, 'but there is no doubt that working with you made my life difficult.' The local authorities bankrupted him when he tried to expand his business and now, with a wife and baby to keep, he works with Anel for an international organization selling pharmaceutical research. Meticulous and thorough, with a keen head for figures, he had arranged a successful conference for the Omarska Memorial Project to crown a year's work with us. 'I love details,' he declared, emphasising each word. This explained his success as a businessman until the local authorities forced him into bankruptcy. The mayor of Prijedor resented the success of the conference which brought Serbs and Muslims together to agree on cooperation and share plans for a memorial at the Omarska killing camp. His destructive intervention put an end to this cooperation. Zoran had always warned us about the mayor. 'You must understand,' Zoran would repeat time and again, focussing his laser eyes on us in case we missed the importance of his words, 'the mayor controls everyone and everything. But everyone and everything.' He and others summed up Balkan politics succinctly: 'Italy has the Mafia, but here the Mafia has the country!'

However hard we tried not to make mistakes, and we made many, we always understood the danger we were putting Anel and Zoran in, and made it a priority to pass every decision by them. They would have to pay the price, and whatever we decided, they needed to agree and feel secure. This part of the process of peace building cannot be over emphasised.

Awareness of this situation made me nervous of returning to Prijedor and Banja Luka, fearful of what might have happened to our colleagues who had also become our friends. Katerina's, Aida's and Mirsad's smiles, Zoran's joy at meeting us again, as well as Anel's unrestrained affection, reassured us, as did Bishop Komarica at our final meeting in Banja Luka before we left Bosnia.

The bishop's courage is legendary. He crossed battle lines daily to try and stop the persecution of his priests and congregations. One occasion especially illustrates his fearlessness. Ordered out of his car on a journey back from Prijedor and frogmarched to a forest clearing a group of Serb soldiers surrounded him and cocked their Kalashnikovs. He calmly went from one to the other, said a prayer, blessed them individually, then calmly removed each firearm and laid it on the ground. After that the authorities placed the bishop under house arrest.

Showered with awards from all over Europe after the Bosnia War he discovered that these prizes were gestures to silence him, but he persists regardless of no one listening, and notwithstanding ill health, heart trouble and overwork. He became one of our closest friends and strongest ally in Bosnia. There are more details about him in *Dust*.

He welcomed us as warmly as ever, even after ten years absence. We sat round the table in his reception room, walls covered with awards, photographs, paintings and tables tottering under artefacts rescued from Catholic churches destroyed in the war and listened to a familiar litany of low morale among his clergy. 'Don't crawl,' he tells them. 'Your spine is broken but you must stand up.' However clergy numbers are diminishing. In the war his priests were being killed, and now fewer are being ordained. As usual the bishop attacked the internationals for rewarding the criminals and not being much help. Even charities were drying up. The few priests he had could not be paid because congregations were too small, and often non-existent.

'The honest truth is that the wound has not healed,' he told us. 'Please keep Europe informed. If you don't heal a body it just gets sicker. Time is working against people in need.'

Despite this bleak news he remained optimistic and determined, seizing the opportunity to bend our ears, knowing that ours remained open unlike those of most other internationals who visited. I noticed his exhaustion and most of the time conversed with him in German. He had just returned from Rome but perked up straight away when I spoke about *Dust*, and how it contained all the stories he told us. He understood the overriding importance of these stories being set down. At least history would not be forgotten.

Generous as ever he then loaded us with bottles of fruit brandy and we left for Zagreb with the assurance that despite the dangerous situation in the Balkans and in the world generally, at least all our projects were continuing. The mufti of Banja Luka had invited Donald to initiate inter-faith programs at the Ferhadija, as we always planned; Mirsad would accompany Donald to the mayor to make sure that at last there would be a memorial at Omarska, and we were once again talking and planning with Bishop Komarica.

Only the Orthodox Bishop Jefrem had removed himself from our lives, although he would surely appreciate our work with the great historic churches of Pec and Decani in Kosovo. Many times he tried to deflect us from our work in Banja Luka by pointing out the suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and telling us to focus our attention there. At our last meeting ten years ago he broke with traditional Bosnian hospitality, always keeping the door open, by declaring to us emphatically that the Muslims had imagined all their suffering, and that he ‘did not see any reason why we should meet again.’ Those who read *Dust* may imagine how much this disappointed me, because we had established a rare connection with the bishop for whom I felt sympathy and affection despite his abhorrent views.

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Once again we counted the hawks perched at equal distance every few miles along the motorway to Zagreb. Each bird patrolled its territory, waiting for carrion on the road. I associate that journey with hawks and the elation and exhaustion from intense times in Bosnia. The hawks look ragged, and might even be stuffed: they sit so still on the fences and branches they might have been nailed there.

Trains were being cancelled to Vienna because the refugee crisis meant closure of borders, but we did not want Adnan to drive us to Austria because his wife Samra found a lump in her breast which meant they needed to return as fast as possible to Sarajevo. Luckily it turned out to be an infection which meant surgery, but not cancer. The next morning early a bus took us

to Slovenia and from there the journey reminded me of the one I made in 1992 around Eastern Europe, standing on weed-strewn low platforms of small provincial stations, waiting for delayed trains and hauling up steep steps to embark.

When we eventually set off from the Austrian border town of Spielfeld for Vienna I happened to be looking out of the wrong window, but Donald saw the car park turned into a refugee camp, with tents and women in niqabs queuing to be registered under the supervision of armed guards.

Whereas the train to Zagreb had been almost empty, the one to Vienna was packed, perhaps because others had been cancelled. Two young Middle Eastern mothers piled into our compartment with babies and luggage and we immediately jumped to the conclusion they were refugees. From their gossipy conversation I deduced they were not refugees but wives from wealthy families living in Vienna. They did not respond to our smiles, and ignored us for the whole journey while the children clambered all over the compartment.

All good people agree,

And all good people say,

All nice people, like Us, are We,

And everyone else is They:

But if you cross over the sea,

Instead of over the way,

You may end by (think of it) looking on We

As only a sort of They!

Rudyard Kipling.

HYPOCRISY AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Returning to the wealthy West as I had done twenty two years earlier, arriving in Vienna from Poland, I experienced the same deflation of spirit and tension of a ruthlessly competitive society in which people look suspiciously at each other. I had felt more at ease in dimly illuminated Krakow, drab Katowice and smoke-filled carriages occupied by migrating young men and noisy families with heaps of baggage and lively human interaction.

After a friendly meeting with Erste, a bank-funded organization that helps finance building civil society in places such as the Balkans, where the director respected our work and looked forward to hearing from Adnan, we took a taxi to the headquarters of KAICID, a Saudi funded interfaith organization. Had we considered more carefully, we should have guessed that the notorious Saudi Salafist branch of Islamism would have no serious interest in interfaith. But because of a friendly encounter at a Kosovo conference between Donald and KAICID's chairman, at which the chairman, impressed by Donald's presentation on the panel they were sharing, invited him to Vienna with a hint of financial support for our Balkan projects, we felt that we could not leave any stone unturned. We needed to meet the chairman himself however, because he might at least have remembered Donald's talk at the conference and felt some obligation to keep his word, but when we arrived at the elegant headquarters just off the Ringstrasse we were told the chairman could not be there to see us and a deputy would take his place. The subsequent meeting with Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer turned out to be the second low point of our journey, deeply unsettling, not just because of its pointlessness, but for what it said about Saudi involvement in the Middle Eastern crisis, and Western deference to this politically devious country.

KAICIID , the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. KAICIID, is headquartered in Vienna, Austria; and in its own words *has major objectives of facilitating intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a humanely strategic forum for cooperation, communication, partnership and information exchange - thereby building understanding and mutual benefit among peoples of the world.*

Crucially, KAICIID has further goals of promoting human rights, justice, peace and reconciliation plus acting against the abuse of religion as a means to justify oppression, violence and conflict; promoting abiding societal cherishment for the preservation and sacredness of holy sites, as well as respect for religious symbols; including focusing on compassionate issues pertaining to: the dignity of human life, preservation of the environment, ethical matters, poverty alleviation and religious education. Its guiding principles recall that the founding document of KAICIID cites principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially, "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" - with emphasis on "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion".

I quote all this from the KAICIID website in full because its hypocrisy beggars belief.

Remember this is an organization funded by Saudi Arabia, governed by an oppressive dynasty and one of the most repressively fundamentalist branches of Islam which still denies rights to women, executes gay people, and imprisons, tortures and flogs dissidents. This is a country unapologetic about its denial of human rights. The aims of this organization contradict in every detail the country's ethos and strictly held traditions.

The KAICIID office is a fortress off the Ringstrasse in a prosperous part of the city centre close to the Danube Canal. We entered through several heavily locked gates, porches, courtyards and doors each one unlocked several times by a severe looking porter built like a bouncer, and waited in a grand hallway where a flight of marble steps curved elegantly up to the next floor. The staff consisted of a number of women who appeared to be enjoying their billet in Vienna, with little to do except keep the place clean.

For all its elegance and size the offices were strikingly lacking in furnishings and decorations, as though about to be occupied or perhaps even be vacated. There were no books, leaflets or information, no pictures, photographs or maps.

We sat waiting for several long minutes in a reception room with a large empty table, bare walls and windows draped in net curtains. I looked out over an empty road and had entered an Edward Hopper painting.

When Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a large man, arrived, the women brought us undrinkable instant coffee served in elegant small cups, which in the professor's hands looked even tinier. With an indulgent smile he listened to our presentation about the Soul of Europe's work, and our part in the rebuilding the Ferhadija Mosque, the success of which meant we could continue our major project to encourage interfaith initiatives, as we had always planned there. We also spoke about the importance of national dialogue in Bosnia and the purpose of our visit to Vienna being to secure funding for these projects.

The professor then launched into a long presentation, one he probably gave at every conference he attended, and being a rich Saudi, he would be invited to many. He announced to our surprise that he had successfully achieved all our projects everywhere in the world. We were small fry. He represented his country as a peace-builder all over Africa, Asia and the Middle East. He worked tirelessly on peace and inter-faith projects even in Iraq and Syria, moreover with positive results. At that point my eyes clouded over, my brain began to boil with incipient insanity, and my whole body stiffened with fury. The Saudi organization had

successfully brought peace to Syria and Iraq he told us. He was even dealing with the Islamic State. Words stuck in my throat, because there seemed to be no point in asking why, if his projects were so successful, people were continuing to be slaughtered there: towns, cities and villages razed to the ground, refugees fleeing in millions, minorities being persecuted and wiped out. I studied the look of smug self-satisfaction on his puffy face as he lifted the tiny coffee cup to his pursed lips with plump fingers, and remembered a terrible line in the *Decline and Fall of Ancient Rome* which still shocks with its bigotry about what Gibbon imputes as racially endemic dishonesty and deviousness in a Middle Eastern general becoming emperor of Rome: 'He was an Arab, and therefore a thief.' I thought about the massively lucrative arms trade between the UK and Saudi Arabia, weapons no doubt responsible for the deaths of hundreds if not thousands of civilians across the region. This man could tell bare-faced lies secure in the certainty of inviolable financial ties which meant his country could get away with doing what it liked. The West might criticize Middle Eastern despots elsewhere, but Saudi Arabia remains untouchable. The West is as complicit in the hell of the Middle East as the Arabs.

Donald did not respond either, it being clear that there could be no sensible honest conversation, certainly no funding for our Bosnia projects which were of no interest whatever to the professor and that this visit had been a complete waste of time. We couldn't wait to get away and left the marble fortress with leaden feet and weak hearts.

We dragged out bodies across the road and the further we crawled on the short distance to the city centre, the heavier our legs felt. It took us almost two hours to walk just a few hundred yards.

The rest of our time in Vienna remained anchored in physical exhaustion and mental despondency, not just about the failure of our mission, but about the realization that politics in the West and East now make sure there will be no peace or resolution to global crises. Hypocrisy, deception and lies based on self-interest govern decisions. Donald recalled all the similar meetings we used to endure when the Soul of Europe began. Brussels bureaucrats and MEPs, businessmen and other rich people warned us not to meddle in the Balkans, patronised us and sent us packing empty handed and with withering homilies stinging in our eyes about leaving problems for politicians to solve, because they know best.

WIEN, WIEN STADT MEINE TRÄUME.... VIENNA VIENNA, CITY OF MY DREAMS

I consider myself to be fortunate in having once known Vienna at its most human and approachable when it used to be a relatively neglected capital city, still recovering from war and partition, stuck at the most distant corner of Western Europe on the border with the Soviet Union. The city I knew as a child was a glamorous shell of Hapsburg imperial memories, no longer the influential city of Joseph Roth's novel *The Radetzky March* with its pungent evocation of attention to class and honour, the care over appearance, morals and social behaviour thinly covering an underbelly of disaffection and impropriety. The arts, sciences, philosophy and social communality that crossed ethnic boundaries then came into full bloom before nationalisms and war brought summary destruction of that flowering. The post-war Vienna I knew had no pretensions. Shattered by events and cowed by the threat of communism only a few miles down the road, it focused on a rich cultural past, celebrating it in unforgettable musical performances and exhibiting the art that had amassed there through centuries of acquisition. Vienna might have been a beautiful shell, but it also illustrated the warning Shelley gives in *Ozymandias* about the rise and fall of empire. I claimed ownership of the centre, spending hours in the almost empty museums, and wandered all round the suburbs into the Vienna Woods and enjoyed the provincial aspect of the city despite its anachronistic imperial Baroquerie. Now the city is busy and pretentious again, a magnet for Europeans from every direction. For a few short years after the collapse of the Soviet empire the migrants from Eastern European countries made the city exciting, bringing a sense of danger not felt so strongly there since the black market days of *The Third Man*. They imported life, energy and sexiness: the coolly attractive blonde girls slender and long-limbed, the men athletic and staring fiercely with ambition. Those heady messy days are also long gone. Now smartly dressed tourists wander in crowds passed designer shops stuffed with clothes and industrial quantities of Mozart Balls. The migrants have transformed into businessmen and assimilated into the Viennese bourgeoisie.

I miss the depopulated squares at night, the half empty coffeehouses and the chance to see the greatest artists in the musical world give performances of my favourite operas at reasonable prices and with no fear of the seats being sold out.

The route from the KAICIID offices to the city centre happened to pass my grandmother's flat from which half a century ago I used to walk briskly in every direction looking forward

to what I might come across unexpectedly. The same buildings are now cleaned up and in good repair, but everywhere feels cold and inhospitable. However one favourite place to my pleasant surprise has not changed in all that time. My grandmother used to take me to Cafe Heiner on the Kärntnerstrasse, that has always been the main pedestrian precinct shopping street in the city centre. I would have expected the cafe to have remodelled itself to suite the brash glitzy new times, but it is exactly the same classic Viennese coffeehouse, intimate, small-scale, with crimson plush velvet cushioned seating, candelabras, newspapers on cane holders, and most important of all, the best cakes in the world. I defy anyone to find better. The waitresses lifting small elegant silver trays with china cups and pots deftly above their shoulders wear the same dirndls, white socks and sensible shoes as decades ago. Cafe Heiner manages to feel like a best kept secret because it doesn't advertise itself. In fact it is quite easy to pass by unnoticed on this busy street. The front is small, although the cramped window space is full of tempting sweets and indications of what can be ordered inside. It is old-fashioned in a way that no one should even want to change. For those in the know the best place to sit is upstairs where the lay-out is such that although it can seat dozens of customers, the tables are just far enough apart not to feel crowded. It is possible to have light lunches there, such as cheese toasts and salads with Austrian specialities like ham in aspic, but the main attraction is the wide variety of cakes made fresh on the premises and displayed under a wide glass canopy in the centre of the room. I have my favourites such as the creams with whirly mounds of fluffy chestnut topping, or densely textured intensely flavoured poppy seed gateaux that come with a necessary large dollop of 'Schlag', a light whipped cream that somehow tastes better than anywhere else. Here I used to sit for hours either with my grandmother or on my own, reading, writing and drawing. No one rushed me. Even now people enter the magical space and look entranced. This is a piece of the best of old Vienna that is timeless.

You can imagine the relief arriving at Cafe Heiner after schlepping our bodies in snail-like motion from our dreadful meeting with the Saudi professor. The friendly hard-working waitresses bustled around us with the familiar tea service and silver trays, the toasts, the salads and the sublime cakes.

However I must have been in a wretched state in Vienna because I could not summon the energy to do what I most certainly would have tried with all my might in the old days. The Russian diva and singing actress Anna Netrebko happened to be performing Tatiana in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* at the Staatsoper. In the old days I would have queued and

fought for a ticket, even the cheapest, just to get a glimpse of her, in a role she would have made interesting and characterful, bringing new insights. She would have turned the naive and fragile Tatiana into the fearlessly passionate character Pushkin and Tchaikovsky intended. I could imagine how she would deliver the climax of the letter scene. But my exhaustion meant I did not even have the energy to enquire about tickets let alone schlepp myself to the opera house. Probably a good thing for my purse, because tickets are now unaffordable except for the very rich. To take a seat is now even more of a social activity than it ever was, rather than a cultural one. I remember in the old days bumping into like-minds, identified immediately by moth-eaten jackets, jumpers and baggy trousers, excitedly discussing music and interpretations in the interval while the rich and bored paraded their jewels and furs around. In those days I felt privileged to see some legendary performances, at the conservative traditional Vienna Staatsoper on which the country lavishes the kind of budget other less lucky but more belligerent nations spend on building arsenals for costly military action.

Instead of listening to and watching Anna Netrebko we met Father Zvonko, the young Catholic priest we came to know and admire from the parish of Presnace outside Banja Luka, where during the war the previous priest and his assistant nun were murdered in the kind of barbaric fashion favoured by Serb militia who wanted to spread terror as well as violence. The soldiers then burnt the church down. The corpses were left in the priest's chapel, and the floor is still stained with their blood. Then in his twenties Father Zvonko had to care for a traumatised flock and start to rebuild the church and community. We were more than impressed by his courage in the circumstances, hard work and resilience. Fortunately others recognized his gifts and much to his bishop's dismay who did everything to keep his best priest in Bosnia, Father Zvonko left for Vienna and then to Rome for further studies. In my opinion he deserved every break that came his way. His good looks, fitness, intelligence and strength of purpose would always win him friends in the Catholic Church.

He had changed little in ten years, but looking thankfully less stressed than when he used to wash in a bath stuck in the middle of a weed covered patch of land in front of the priest's house at Presnace, entertained visitors in a small kitchen with a sink full of crockery and cutlery, slept upstairs in a room open to the elements because the roof still needed repair, and coped with the demands of his parish with tough decisiveness and occasional flashes of sardonic humour, all the while supervising the pilgrimage church being rebuilt by the whole community, Muslims alongside Catholics and Serbs too who were ashamed of what had been

destroyed in their name. Such responsibilities and Spartan way of life would fell most normal people but made Father Zvonko even stronger. He gave no indication as to how he dealt with the appalling trauma of what happened to his predecessor, except that when after moving to other posts outside Bosnia he disliked discussing the past or his time in Presnace, brushing aside questions and focusing resolutely on the future.

The Archbishop of Vienna now looks after him and has appointed him to take charge of a large parish in the city suburbs, one with all the familiar inner city problems of neglect, mixed communities, and now refugees, a job for which he has all the qualifications.

This time Father Zvonko opened up more about his time in Banja Luka and particularly fraught relations with Bishop Komarica. I felt for both of them: the bishop trying to hold together his decimated diocese with ever shrinking communities and stop the drain of its best people, and Father Zvonko grasping any opportunity offered to leave. This is the dilemma of Bosnia ever since the war, and still. We had asked Bishop Komarica about Sister Mirna, a dentist and school teacher among her many professions, and one of his most capable assistants. She too had left Bosnia and worked now in Croatia. It is a pattern to which people pay insufficient serious attention: how countries devastated by war and then punished by the international community for being failed states, haemorrhage the very talent, energy and vigour they need to rebuild and become viable on every level, above all economically, but also socially. This pattern of international behaviour illustrates the ingrained cynicism and brutal self-interest of modern politics, which tolerates failed states in order to preserve colonial control over them. Then those who advocate such cynicism and self-interest express surprise at retribution when these states implode and give birth to movements determined to exact revenge.

We took Father Zvonko to a restaurant on the Weihburggasse near the city centre, a street which appears in Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* and where Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke have one of their long getting-to-know you conversations, delving and niggling at character defects, repartee that brings them ever closer and deeper in love; but this being one of my own stamping grounds in Vienna, I always knew it to be a romantic location perfect for such emotional developments.

We ordered supper in an intimate crowded traditional restaurant where the tables are decked with starched white linen covers, candles and silver. When the food came I began to tuck in while Father Zvonko was still rapidly crossing himself. Gently and with no recrimination he

asked whether we said grace. Actually we normally do have a few seconds silence before a meal, eyes shut, but less for prayer than for settling down. Donald then delivered the grace I always loved as a child, my father intoning: ‘The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord ... and thou bringest them their meat in due season...’ My childhood imagination was transfixed by the image of a world of eyes fixed steadily on this invisible but all-seeing deity, who then offered a choice of roasts.

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THE FOUNDATIONS ARE ROTTING

One room at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is devoted to Breughel the Elder. I did not have the time to see the Altdorffer *Alexander Schlacht* in Munich and was determined not to miss *The Tower of Babel*, which I wanted to show Donald, having made it one of my centre-pieces of *Dust*.

Breughel depicts nature in all its splendour, with attention to detail and not gilding the lily, while at the same time subtly, rather than tendentiously, offering subversive and challenging commentary on the human condition. One has to look intently to grasp them. His paintings are about everything: society, politics, war and peace, life and death, man’s place in the world.

Breughel’s *The Tower of Babel* offers particularly disturbing revelations. The story is a parable about man arrogantly defying the spirit of creation, whether God, nature or the perpetually mysterious universe, to claim sole mastership of the universe. Travelling through a continent built on centuries of scientific progress we observed and experienced at first hand the fabric of a proud European civilization fraying and coming apart, from the five hour delay in Brussels past chaos at every national border because of the refugee crisis no one can handle, to our final night in Paris where at the hotel in the middle of the night a false fire alarm emptied all the rooms, and elderly people in night clothes stood for several hours shivering on a cold November night, a situation that struck me as symbolic. Just over a week later home-grown European terrorists went on a killing spree in the nearby streets.

My father used to point out how Breughel’s picture depicts the foundations of the massive tower crumbling and needing repair while construction continues into the clouds. It is these at first easily overlooked details that give the painting its significance. Satirical points are also made about the ruler who inspects progress on this colossal vanity project while the architects

kneel abjectly before him. Meanwhile the tower overshadows the humble dwellings of those building it. Breughel lets us see the yawning discrepancy between political ambition, which is ultimately self-destructive, and what life should be about: namely living and making a home in nature that as his other famous seasonal paintings on display in the same room show is challenging enough. The Tower of Babel, in the Old Testament as well as Breughel's terrifying illustration, is about the inevitable cataclysm that comes from human kind's hubris. Overweening pride, the notion that man can completely understand and control the universe as if it were a machine, exploring, discovering and forever stretching the limits of science and knowledge while paying scant attention to the social and political rot under our feet, can only bring about destruction. This is the case now more than it ever has been. We can land on distant planets but are unable to resolve the crises of human behaviour in our city centres.

My reactions to the Breughel paintings this time were underscored by hearing Mozart's Requiem performed enthusiastically by a group of singers in coats, woolly hats and coats in a chilly Stephansdom. For all the sorrow in the mass, Mozart's music is ultimately peaceful, conciliatory and also defiant and even triumphant. Light will shine. Death is not the final answer.

In Paris we listened to Faure's requiem, my father's favourite because as he pointed out there is no angry God and no threat of punishment. Mozart's would not have been performed originally in the Stephansdom, where the gothic space and echo blur the clarity of melodic line and counterpoint. Faure however intended his requiem for the colossal Babel like space of the Madeleine in Paris which reduces people to ants, but where Faure's heart-easing harmonies are made even more exquisite by the cloudy acoustic, the composition as it were disembodied, substance become spirit.

At the same time as we sat cowed by the vast columns and dome of the Madeleine, around the corner the smiling terrorists were making last minute plans for their suicidal massacre mission. The music floated into the clouds, while at the base of the tower the rot was already biting deep into the foundations.

Peter Pelz

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