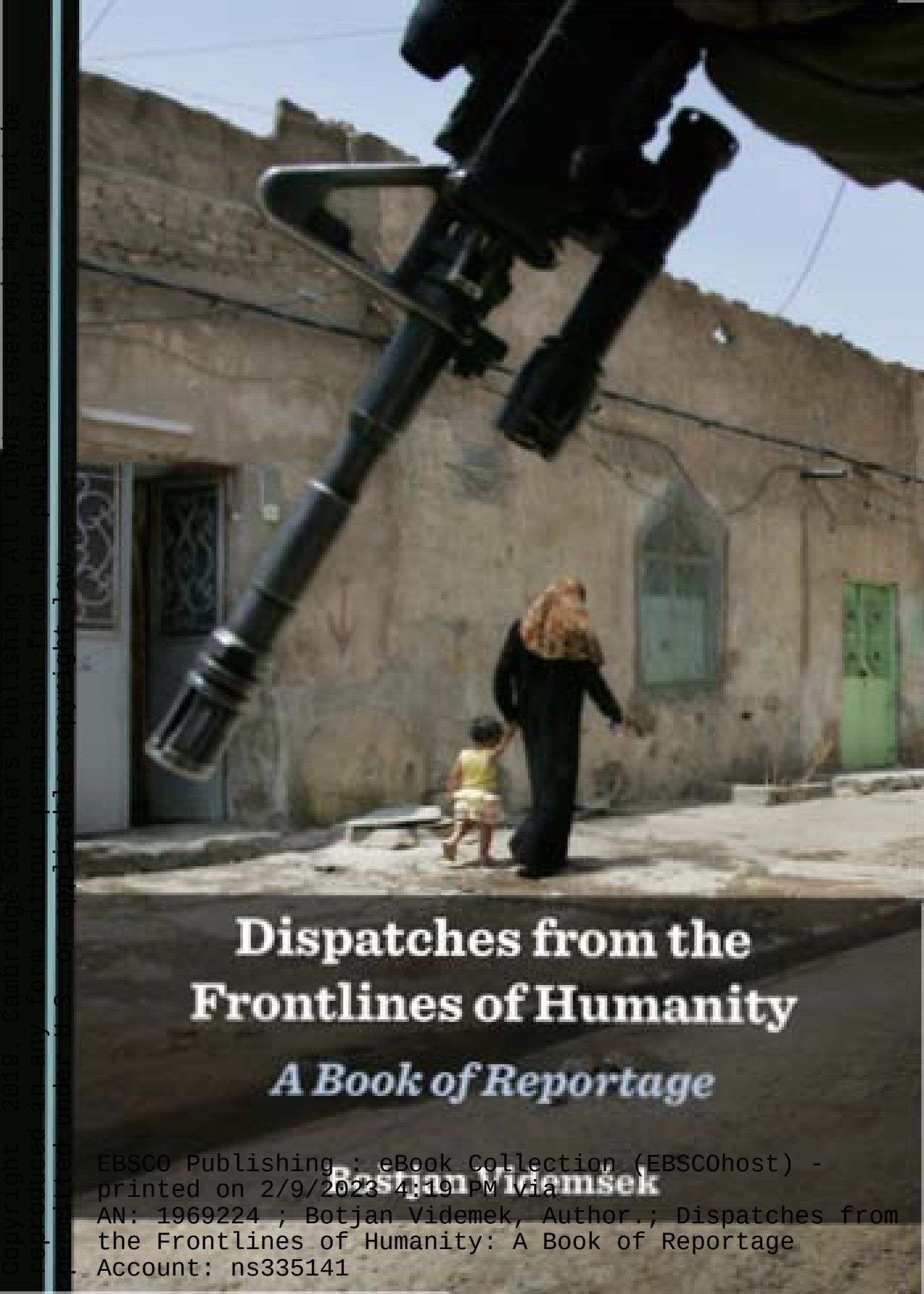

Dispatches from the Frontlines of Humanity

Dispatches from the Frontlines of Humanity:

A Book of Reportage

By

Boštjan Videmšek

With a Foreword by Khaled Diab

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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"Every place is a goldmine. You have only to give yourself time, sit in a teahouse watching the passers-by, stand in a corner of the market, go for a haircut. You pick up a thread--a word, a meeting, a friend of a friend of someone you have just met—and soon the most insipid, most insignificant place becomes a mirror of the world, a window on life, a theatre of humanity."

—Tiziano Terzani, A Fortune-Teller Told Me: Earthbound Travels in the Far East.

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FOREWORD

AN ODE TO A VANISHING ART

BY KHALED DIAB

As the title suggests, this book is an in-depth Report(age) on some of the most defining issues of our time, namely the global refugee crisis, the conflicts displacing these masses of humanity, and the causes behind them.

As the title also hints, this book is an ode to the vanishing art of the long-form feature or reportage. This is partly because many media organisations can no longer afford it, or are unwilling to pay for this kind of time-consuming, on-the-ground journalism. It is also partly because many readers no longer have the time or patience to read in-depth reports, though 'long read' essays fortunately are making a comeback.

It is essential to keep alive old-school reportage from the field because it provides a human face to the issues challenging our world. It helps pierce the bubble of propaganda with a needle of truth and, beyond the political and human, it is a beautiful craft or art form in its own right.

One thread runs through the eclectic collection of essays in this book: Boštjan Videmšek's compassion, his keen eye for the human story and his profound commitment to the human family. It is this commitment that has driven him, over the past two decades, to seek out the weak and the vulnerable, wherever or whoever they are, and to tell their stories. This has drawn him to conflict and war zones around the world, including the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa; he has also reported from the places where people escaping these tragedies flee, and followed the routes they take to reach there.

By telling these people's stories, Boštjan helps put a human face on the suffering that is too often viewed statistically and quantitatively. The lives he captures with his pen are victims of forces beyond their control, but Boštjan shows his readers that they are not "victims." In reality, they are fighters and survivors who defy popular stereotypes, struggling to rebuild their shattered worlds, and to surmount and overcome the odds thrown down in their path.

This is visible in the story of Courage, a young Nigerian woman whose name fits her to a tee: she escaped bondage in Nigeria, trekked through the unforgiving desert, almost became embroiled in the conflict tearing apart Libya, took her first trip at sea in an unseaworthy boat, and has had to battle the beasts of anti-migrant bureaucracies in Europe. Then there is the beautiful and heart-warming tale of Rami Basisah, a young Syrian violinist who fiddled Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* to entertain and console the refugees at Europe's frontier who had fled their burning homelands, and has now become a highly sought-after musician.

Boštjan started writing about the global refugee crisis, and the conflicts and challenges causing it, long before it was noticed by the mainstream media, and he continues to write about it after it has fallen off the news agenda. As much as he can with his pen, Boštjan combats the vilification migrants and refugees receive in Europe, and constantly reminds his fellow refugees of their moral and legal responsibility to care for their fellow humans in need.

In all the years I have known Boštjan, this is what I most admire about his work: his unfailing commitment to stand up for those in need and to try and compel those who refuse to listen to prick up their ears and to kickstart their hearts.

PREFACE

AN HOMAGE TO A VANISHING GENRE

In-depth investigative reporting and foreign correspondence were once the backbones of journalism. Foreign correspondents, the sort of reporters who spent months researching in the field, and sometimes faced personal risk, were the heroes of the newspaper community. The kind of reporting featured in *All the President's Men* and the new film, *The Post,* is the stuff that Pulitzer Prizes are made of. Yet this type of reporting, and the nature of the reporters who make it, is changing, or rather it is being forced to change. What was once rich, in-depth reportage is now categorized as a "long-read," the sort of article that some feel is a chore to finish, or at least requires a commitment of time, thought, energy and an unusual interest in the topic—all of which makes it a niche. Too many editors-in-chief now insist that reporters produce easy, short-reads of 800 words or fewer, even when the topics they are addressing warrant more than a cursory examination. Part of this is down to the increased consumption of news online and onscreen. However, the shortened attention spans of digital news consumers have also transferred into the print media. Aside from a handful of stalwarts (*The New Yorker,* sections of *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian* and *The Observer* among them), classic reportage is a dying art form, as is the role of foreign correspondents—the ones responsible for bringing us stories and sharpening our understanding of the world, through in-depth reporting.

This is a book of collected reports and foreign correspondence, but it is also about reporting and foreign correspondence, a paean to a vanishing journalistic genre that risks becoming its epitaph. In a time marked by a severe financial crisis and the rise of digital technology, first-hand reporting from abroad has taken a number of nasty blows. Some believe the damage might be irreparable.

Contradicting them is not easy. The financial crisis and the burgeoning of informational technologies have served as the perfect alibi for the owners of print media to, more or less, stop sending their staff on foreign assignments. A number of the world's most reputable newspapers have

closed down most of their foreign offices, shutting their readers' windows on the wider picture, and obliging reporters to google their way to foreign lands, reporting remotely as best they can. This comes at the sacrifice of colour, depth, local "feel" and know-how. The resulting articles are no longer welcome at the robust (and usually more appropriate) length of 2,000-3,000 words but must be compacted into 1,000-1,500 words at most.

While the spotlight has largely shone on the major broadsheets, the smaller and mid-sized papers' budgets have taken an even direr hit. Covering world affairs in an increasingly complex environment has thus been transformed into a mostly deskbound enterprise. It has become a matter of copy-pasting and stylistically embellishing whatever one can scrounge up from the wires, or imagining what might be happening elsewhere and projecting a cobbled-together impression into an article that readers will want to believe—or worse assume—was written by someone in the field. Some editors have simply caved to the demands of an ever more tabloidized internet and started consciously pursuing the aims of radical simplification and banalization of content. This might result in more "clicks," but at what cost?

All this put me, a long-time reporter for Slovenia's leading broadsheet, *Delo*, who has travelled for most of each year to the globe's hotspots, in a rather unfortunate situation. Like the work of so many colleagues, my craft was deemed too expensive and my articles overlong. Yet I decided to cling to my journalistic vision. And so, for the last ten years, I have fought for every foreign assignment and every major story crucial for connecting the dots in a rapidly-darkening world.

The editors came and went. Every major reshuffle meant I had to start persuading them from scratch. Sometimes I was more successful at it, and sometimes less. But in spite of all the inimical circumstances, I've somehow managed to spend as much time on assignment in recent years as I did during the previous "golden age," when the value of longer, more in-depth reports, written by people who had actually travelled to the key sites, was self-evident. With some gumption, some luck and a lot of resolve, I have been able to cover the planet's major conflicts over the last twenty years.

My concern is that I'm a throwback, a dinosaur on the brink of extinction. It's not my personal career that I'm worried about, but rather what these trends mean for journalism in general and, through it, how the world will continue to be informed or, as recent headlines about "fake news" demonstrate, misinformed.

In-depth investigative journalism is being overwhelmingly replaced by images—with some charity, we could perhaps call them "digital quotes." The most potent media weapon in the entire Iraq war was the soldiers'

photographs of the prisoners tortured in Abu Ghraib. Through them, the war exploded and took on truly monstrous dimensions. These photographs are the best possible reflection of the new mediated spirit of communication—reality shows and social networks—that have replaced the old-school approach of informing the public.

***

Professional ethics and authenticity have suffered the most. As Ryszard Kapuściński, the legendary Polish journalist and writer, said when asked about the consequences of information technology's fast development:

> The consequences are terrible. There is no future; the past is non-existing. Everything begins today, every single event is hanged in emptiness. In today's world media is like a school-board: wiping it over and over again and writing on it over and over; everything gets deleted and is being forced to start from ground zero; all over again. The lack of continuity is responsible for the past not being transformed into the history, but rather in the archaeology. The past gets the shape of a fossil immediately; without any emotional contact. This is a big weakness of a modern man; his big misfortune. One can't be anchored in history, because the past events are waning from his consciousness.

Yet the basics of quality journalism are as simple and essential as ever: you either were there, or you weren't. Or in Kapuściński's words in an interview with Bill Buford for the magazine *Granta* (Issue 21, "The Storyteller"):[1]

> Yes, story is the beginning. It is half of the achievement. But it is not complete until you, as the writer, become part of it. As a writer, you have experienced this event on your own skin, and it is your experience, this feeling along the surface of your skin, that gives your story its coherence: it is what is at the centre of the forest of things.

Marie Colvin, the legendary *Sunday Times* reporter, killed by the Syrian regime in February 2012, said it best:

> Someone has to go there and see what is happening. You can't get that information without going to places where people are being shot at, and others are shooting at you. The real difficulty is having enough faith in humanity to believe that enough people be they government, military or the man on the street, will care when your file reaches the printed page, the

[1] *Granta* (Issue 21, "The Storyteller")

> website or the TV screen. We do have that faith because we believe we do make a difference.[2]

I have covered more than twenty wars and revolts, several revolutions and counter-revolutions, military coups and the aftershocks of the global financial crisis. I kept first-hand track of all the key refugee and migrant trails into Europe, while also being able to experience the effects of climate change and natural disasters (the tsunami in South-East Asia) in real time.

I always strived to take the time to examine the seedy, often vicious, underbelly of states and societies and made sure to collect as many personal testimonials as I could. I have always believed that strong personal stories form the bedrock of good reporting, and good journalism in general, now more than ever. For one of my books, (*On the Run*, 2016), I interviewed more than 2,500 individual refugees and migrants on their way to Europe. While I am Slovenian and work primarily for the *Delo* newspaper, my work has also appeared in *The New York Times, Le Figaro, Der Spiegel, Aftenposten, El Periodico, Politico, Middle East Eye, Sydney Morning Herald*, on *BBC News* and in dozens of European and Australian newspapers and magazines. This trend away from foreign correspondence and proper reportage is a worldwide phenomenon.

My work was rarely easy, but it was always immensely rewarding. Throughout the decade, I remained faithful to the genre. The works of Ryszard Kapuściński, George Orwell, Tiziano Terzani, Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien and Martha Gellhorn, to name just a few, were instrumental in helping me come of age, both as a professional and as a human being.

I have always had a great deal of trouble with the concept of 'objective journalism'. And I certainly don't believe in *neutral* journalism. I never did and I never will.

The school of objective—or "balanced"—journalism, whereby "each side" is awarded the same space, has always been the original algorithm: one that compels you to balance your approach to the freshly raped little girl and to the paramilitary thugs who had happily savaged her.

I refuse to accept these terms of engagement. The very idea has always made me want to drop to my knees and vomit.

***

This may have something to do with my hailing from the former Yugoslavia. I came of age during the abhorrent time of the wars in Croatia

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/22/marie-colvin-our-mission-is-to-speak-truth

and Bosnia. Indeed, my war-correspondent career got off the ground during the Kosovo conflict. I was still in my early student years, and as I took in all the lies, manipulation and propaganda crackling in the ether, I was swiftly stripped of most illusions. Long before the era of fake news, fake news was alive and well, providing a suitable soundtrack to a rising tide of barbarism.

All over what used to be the agreeable and easy-going region of Yugoslavia, people were being massacred as their formerly peaceful and idyllic cities and villages burned to the ground. The reek of the corpse piles soon became etched into my nostrils. My initiation into this venerable profession couldn't have been more immediate, or brutal. By the end of my prolonged stint at the university, I became intimately acquainted with the consequences of genocide, the worst strains of nationalism and the mind-frying hypocrisy of the so-called international community.

Completely unprepared for this insight into the diabolical side of human nature, I boiled with disappointment and righteous anger. I felt I simply had to do something, to make a contribution, as weak and insufficient as it may have proven. Was this at least partly due to feelings of guilt about my generation of Slovenes having dodged the fate of its peers in some of the other former Yugoslav republics? The answer is almost certainly affirmative. I believed, and still believe, that I had to do whatever was in my power to atone for the fact that my fellow Slovenians were spared the frontline trenches, concentration camps and mass graves.

Be that as it may, as a journalist I have always been drawn to the views of the common person, who is always the one to take the brunt of world-eclipsing tragedies that he or she bears very little responsibility for. My methodology has always been centred on intense fieldwork; I have been privileged to complete thousands of interviews with front-line survivors and other victims of unspeakable calamities—most of them man-made and completely preventable. And so, I never quite managed to achieve that much-lauded sense of professional distance from the walking wounded.

Over the years, I have become convinced that the most natural outlet for this approach, by far, is the form of literary reportage.

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough," the formidable war photographer Robert Capa famously asserted. And much the same can be said of word-based reporting. If your paragraphs aren't good enough, you haven't talked to a sufficient number of people. Or, to return to Capa's brilliantly succinct assessment: you weren't close enough.

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The thirty-two feature stories contained in this book—all written in last ten years—are my tribute to a dying art form, my bow to the spirit of the grandmasters listed above, and many more. They are examples of reportage from a veteran foreign correspondent who specializes in conflict zones. At the same time, they represent a homage to the journalistic form. This book is divided into three major parts. The first, *Human Tragedy*, recounts the strong personal stories of various characters I have encountered on my assignments. Within the first part, I also want to highlight some of the individual souls who have somehow managed to hold on to their humanity despite the gruesomeness of their situation: either in midst of an all-out war, or as refugees caught in the bureaucratic meat grinder that is an orgy of systematised dehumanisation.

The second part, *Migration*, focuses on the pressing issue of global migration and the suffering of the refugees. Stories of refugees and the topic of migration have always been at the heart of my reporting. Even in high school, I felt compelled to write numerous stories detailing the fates of the Bosnian refugees who had fled to Slovenia. The articles collected in this book are the product of my explorations along the Mediterranean, Balkan and Saharan refugee routes, with a special emphasis on the personal clashes at the gates of what has become known as 'Fortress Europe', an implacable and possibly demented behemoth pursuing the policies of colossal human tragedy.

The third part, *The Times They Are A-Changing,* attempts a synthesis of previously, seemingly unconnected, strands, as well as a broader analysis of what has happened to various global societies over the past ten years. This is my attempt to sketch out the rapid changes in our societies. This is mostly done through the interpretations of the most prominent agents of these transformations. Some of the stories involve the revolution and the counter-revolution in Egypt, the revolt and the concurrent rise of dictatorship in Turkey, the profound techno-driven ideological and social changes in China, the lithium fever in corporately-ransacked Bolivia, and of course the utter social collapse and the almost understandable rise of neo-Nazism in Greece.

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As already stated, the journalism dealing with these types of subjects should never be reduced to mere fact-gathering and "objective reporting." The conscientious reporter is also one of history's witnesses; and the witness's job is to contribute to the judicial process. Our expertise and our deeper insight into the subject matter should at least sometimes oblige us to

hand down a verdict—especially at a time when journalism as we know it seems to be rapidly and irreversibly losing the war against fake news and pathologically shortened attention spans.

PART I:

HUMAN TRAGEDY: THE TESTIMONIES & DISPATCHES

CHAPTER ONE

ALL THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

SREBRENICA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, JULY 2010

Mehmedalija Alić, 49, bends over an open grave marked 413. He takes a shovel and throws some soil over the coffin inside. His son Dino, 8, tries to help his father by also grabbing hold of the shovel and applying pressure when needed.

The grave belongs to Omer Duraković, the husband of Mehmedalija's deaf-mute sister Zumra. His bones were only found a few months ago in one of the mass graves of Podrinje. Several women stand about the hole, clutching the gravestone for support and crying as if electrocuted. Their agony merges with the wails of thousands of other mourners, which resounds throughout the valley.

This is the fifteenth anniversary of the Serbian instigated genocide. Fifty thousand mourners have come to say their last goodbye to their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers. "Never again" some of them say over and over again—quietly, forlornly, something between a mantra and an imprecation. The wind carries their words off over the idyllic meadows all around us, but the echo is always quick to return to these grief-shredded people who know very well that around here, "never again" usually just means "again and again."

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"My dear Americans and the oh-so-democratic Europeans," Mehmedalija Alić murmurs while listening to the high-ranking potentates sprinkle their flowery rhetoric from the stage: "The more you defended us, the more of us got slain. And the more you now try to bring us back to Srebrenica, the less we want to come. Why can't you simply leave us be so we can say goodbye to our loved ones in peace and some semblance of dignity?"

Mehmedalija lost two brothers in the genocide: Hajro, 36, and Sejdo, 29. As the Serbs massacred people with impunity, Mehmedalija was living in the Slovenian town of Zagorje—waiting for the bureaucrats to grant his application for Slovenian citizenship. Meeting every official criterion, he put in the application soon after Slovenia gained independence. Yet, along with 25,670 others, the reigning pen-pushers simply erased him from existence. While the Chetnik hordes were slaughtering Bosnian innocents with guns and knives, the Slovenians were destroying people's lives with sheer bureaucracy. "As my family was being dragged to hell and back," Mehmedalija remembers, "I myself have been reduced to a worthless speck of dirt for the Slovenian apparatchiks to kick around."

When he was finally granted the Slovenian citizenship, he was finally able to begin rebuilding his life and started to deal with the many irreplaceable losses that his family suffered during the southern war. But then he was surprised to receive a phone call from his superiors at the Trbovlje-Hrastnik Mine, where for a number of years he'd been working as a technician.

His superiors had put him in charge of *the Dread Pit* excavation and they made the best possible choice. It was mostly Mehmedalija's personal drive that eventually exposed the unspeakable truth buried in the Pit. The Slovenian politicians, he tells me, tried to sabotage the discovery of this truth every step of the way. The underworld Mehmedalija and his workers dug into was crammed with thousands of corpses dating from 1945.

The corpses belonged to the victims of Yugoslavia's secret massacres of both verified and merely alleged Nazi-collaborators, right after World War II. Due to the geological conditions in the Pit, many of the bodies that Mehmedalija came across were in almost pristine condition. The expressions on some of their faces were as urgent as if their brutal demise had come only a few hours ago. From Srebrenica to The Dread Pit, Mehmedalija Alić had been granted a most unwelcome insight into the fetid marrow of the entire twentieth century.

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"I don't know why fate chose to play such a trick on me," he says today. "But I can tell you that I've long stopped believing in coincidence. Why did it come to pass that right before the end of my working years I had to descend into the Dread Pit and yet another of humanity's great crimes? My feeling is that some greater power put me on this mission."

As soon as he was ordered to head for the long-sealed mine in the area around Laško, he had begun to suspect that something was badly wrong.

"As I went through the documentation and read the testimonials of the victims' relatives, I was immediately transported back to Srebrenica. And then we descended right into the Pit. For months, we grinded through a number of obstacles deliberately put there to stop us. The work was highly dangerous and all the time, our flesh was crawling with anxiety. Yet every day, I was more determined to get to the bottom of this—both literally and metaphorically. With my own bare hands, I was smashing through the concrete blockages. In keeping with my background from Srebrenica, my only concern was to get down there to the bodies, no matter what the cost. At a certain point, I realised that my life's mission was to help those poor people down there get an honourable burial. I knew this to be my sacred duty—the thing I needed to do if I wanted there to be some degree of honour in my life. All the time my gut was telling me that behind the barriers something unspeakable was waiting for us. The entire dig reeked of death and evil. My goal was to help the victims' relatives and to help expose the guilty—both the butchers who committed the atrocity and the scum who tried to cover it up. Some of them are trying even today—and that is why the excavation got stopped."

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On the day of the Srebrenica massacre's fifteenth anniversary, Mehmedalija meets us in front of his old house in Potočari, one of the suburbs of Srebrenica—a ten-minute walk from the cemetery where his loved ones are buried. To keep him sane, he says, he has what is left of his family, his obsessive dedication to his work, his orderliness, and his modesty. As he tells me this, I am reminded of the holocaust-surviving father in Art Spiegelman's masterpiece, *Maus*—and Mehmedalija, who impresses me by having read the graphic novel, can only agree.

The house in Potočari was built by Mehmedalija's late brothers. Hajro, the elder one, was torn out of his mother's hands by the Chetniks, who then took him to a nearby factory where they killed him. What was left of his body was found in a mass grave in one of the nearby forests. He was buried properly only two years ago.

"What still remains of my will to live I'm basing on the memory of my brother Hajro," Mehmedalija says: "He was the most honest, decent and hard-working man in the world. He was my role model in everything. He was the one who taught me how to live, how to work, how to be kind. My life is dedicated to his memory. Not a day or night goes by that I don't think of him. You know, I'm still learning from him—even if it's only from memory. How can God let such things happen to good people?"

The younger brother Sejdo was a deaf-mute. Mehmedalija's late mother managed to smuggle him onto a bus bound for safety—the bus that was to take the women to a safe zone with only a few rape-stops on the way. But right before the vehicle took off, Serbian paramilitary troops came aboard to snatch Sejdo. "He can't talk—he's deaf and mute!" the poor woman beseeched them. "Oh, he'll talk—don't you worry!" they snarled back playfully and dragged him off the bus. His body has yet to be found.

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Mehmedalija's family has long fallen prey to the evil century's downward spiral. Two of his father's brothers, Avdag and Junuz, were killed in the Second World War; his grandfather simply disappeared; the family's homestead was irreparably burned down. Two of Mehmedalija's brothers died young while two out of his five siblings were born deaf-mutes.

"This latest genocide saw the death of twelve of my closest relatives and a few hundred members of my extended family," he says: "Clearly, the aim was to eradicate us from the face of the Earth. What was once Srebrenica is now scattered all over the world. They've stolen our land but they cannot steal our souls. Wherever we go, Srebrenica lives within us. We, the survivors, are filled with heart-rending memories. Mind you, I'm not complaining—these memories are the only thing we have left so I guess it's understandable we cultivate them so obsessively."

Mehmedalija tells me this as we stand by the foot of his older brother's grave. "Our homes have been taken over by murderers. They haven't been punished for their crimes. We're coming back here to bury our loved ones and there they are, the butchers, snickering at us from our houses, our forests and our meadows. After the war, the murderers were generously rewarded while we were being still further punished. Until every single one of these brigands is brought to answer for his crimes, the ghosts will be restless around here. No one will be able to live in peace, I guarantee you. The air here in Srebrenica seems clean and crisp, but you cannot breathe it in fully, you just can't. To be honest, that is also how I feel up there in Slovenia. There, as well, I am daily seeing people who tried to destroy my family. I see them walking in the street, I see them trying to lead a peaceful and complacent life, as if nothing at all had happened!"

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Mehmedalija was fourteen when he first came to Slovenia. The year was 1976. He was sent there because a party of well-dressed Slovenian lads

came down to his native Bosnian village, whipped out some glossy brochures and promised a much better life up in Yugoslavia's north.

His father put him on a train to Zagorje, where he had to face his first bad shock—the first Slovenian lie he had to learn to live with: instead of getting schooled as a mining technician, like he'd been promised, he was educated only to become a common digger. During these first years, the older boys beat him all the time. On several occasions, he was robbed mercilessly.

Within a matter of months, he had lost most of his illusions about the Slovenian promised land. He badly wanted to return home but he couldn't face disappointing his father. "I suffered a lot as a boy, all alone in Slovenia. All my arrivals and departures from Bosnia were marked by tears. But I was driven by the desire to prove to everyone I was made of sterner stuff than they thought."

Mehmedalija's face is cold and bitter as he recalls those years. There is plenty more he could say but he checks himself and draws back. My guess is that he doesn't want to overtax me with his grief, at least not this early in the tale. His son Dino tugs at the hem of his shirt and Mehmedalija gives him a loving little pat on the head. He's done everything he could to spare the boy his own destiny and pain. When he looks at the gifted young footballer, it is as if he sees in him every single male relative he's ever lost. That is why he always shields the boy with his own body when they walk side by side on the open road. He does this instinctively, without thinking—even when the road is clear of traffic.

"Like most people, I couldn't believe that there could be a war in our old country—especially not here in Bosnia and Herzegovina! I always thought of Bosnia as this garden of delight where everyone is able to get along without a hint of trouble. But the garden got overrun by savage beasts who trampled all the flowers and now there's not even a whiff to be caught. I remember the summer of 1991—as I was returning to Slovenia, I had no idea I would never get to see so many of my brothers, neighbours and schoolmates again! I should have known better. This, after all, was the time right after so many flags had sprung up—flags that seemed new but were really so old."

As Slovenia seceded, Mehmedalija and his family soon fell into a bureaucratic rabbit hole—a hole that came to represent the refined Slovenian version of ethnic cleansing, a hole designed to crush entire lives and souls. Yes, bureaucracy can kill as well.

In 1992, Mehmedalija went to the town hall in Zagorje to secure his citizenship. "The two ladies there spared no effort to convince me not to worry. Slovenia is a European country now, they said: everything shall be

taken care of, don't lose any sleep over it. I also wanted to get the necessary papers for my two brothers and my sister so I could save them from the war. The two ladies gave me all the required information pertaining to the various permits—and as for my citizenship, they told me to apply whenever I got everything in order."

Mehmedalija says he was absolutely jubilant at the time, reassured there would be no great difficulties with regard to his citizenship. But he couldn't have been more wrong: "I had no clue what all those crazy evil people were about to do to my family. A few weeks after my visit to the Zagorje town hall, the Serbs killed my wife's brother. My poor Nihada, she was so fond of him—when she heard the news, she just fell on the floor and fainted cold. They did it with an anti-aircraft gun, the Serbs, they blew him to pieces while he was standing in front of his own house. My wife was crushed, gutted, beyond mere devastation—but that was only the beginning."

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The Mothers of Srebrenica stand there by the graves, holding on to each other and absolutely helpless in their pain. [1] Tears spill down their tired faces. The overall anxiety is occasionally pierced by a full-blown shriek. The agony of loss, both individual and collective, finds great synergy with the stress and heat. Above it all, the prayer for all the lost souls resounds, a mantra to help them find their peace, an imprecation to ward off any misguided attempts at vengeance.

The men, meanwhile, carry 775 coffins toward the freshly dug graves—a final resting place for the 775 victims that forensics have managed to identify in the past year. This year's anniversary brought the greatest mass of moumers Potočari has ever seen—some 50,000 of them, despite the fact that seventy buses had been denied entry to this valley of sorrow, this Balkan version of *The Killing Fields*. The ones turning them back were the policemen employed by Republika Srpska—a political boon the Bosnian Serbs and Belgrade were awarded by the international community following the genocide they'd perpetrated. Republika Srpska, a political boon for the butchers who still deny anything particularly tragic ever happened in Srebrenica—save, of course, for crimes against the Serbian population.

Hague, sadly, is no Nümberg. The official Serbian history has never been rewritten to reflect the awful truth.

Leaning over the grave marked 413, Mehmedalija tells me that he never felt any real inclination for revenge: neither for the revenge against the

[1] https://www.srebrenica.org.uk/tag/mothers-of-srebrenica/

monsters who butchered with guns and knives, nor against those who destroyed lives with bureaucracy. Someday each will get his own, he says simply, surrounded with what is left of his family—distant and not so distant relatives that have flocked to Srebrenica from all over the world, from New Zealand to Florida.

Mehmedalija says a few thoughtful and tender words to every one of them. Then, very tired and barely able to repress his tears, he hugs his youngest daughter Sanela. The quiet teen has recently confronted the genocide's mind-boggling cruelty in a sombre but heartfelt school essay—a text that should become a part of the curriculum in every European high school. At least if the preservation of historical memory is to be something we pay more than lip service to.

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As Mehmedalija became the head of the Zagorje mine's safety detail in 1993, he remembered how to breathe again—if only for a moment. He was convinced that he'd finally made good on the promise he'd given his parents—that he'd fulfilled his mission and became a respectable citizen. A citizen of Slovenia.

His life was again acquiring at least some semblance of sense. He'd even been promised a bigger apartment! But then one morning, he received a call from the mine's managing director who told him that in order to move to the new flat, he needed a certificate proving his Slovenian citizenship.

"The problem," he remembers: "was that I still didn't have it! I told him that my entire family has certificate of permanent residence and that I'll promptly apply for citizenship. Yet this was the beginning of the utter ruination of what was left of my world. I had no idea what to do. Back home, the entire Bosnia was burning—death was riding atop a flaming chariot. In the spring of '93, after an endless agonising wait, the Bosnian embassy finally sent me the proof that I have never had any problems with the law, so I could finally apply for citizenship here. But it was no go. My application, can you imagine, was mislaid for five years! And I also never got the new apartment. In the fall of '93, my so-called friends from work—the ones that have been praising me and sucking up to me for years, they threw me out of the mine. I went to the managing director and asked him for any sort of job, anything at all. From his desk, he picked up a list with ninety-seven names on it. I knew many of them—and I can tell you that their only crime was residing at a workers' facility, which somehow made

them ineligible for Slovenian citizenship.[2] I left the director's office in tears, but all he said to me in parting was: 'You know, out there in the streets, there are so many better men than you.'"

Soon after that, his wife lost her job as well—in spite of her many years of impeccable service. The time directly after the secession was an era of nationalist madness, a lunapark for cheap thugs, a time when the newly sprung robber barons started revving their forklifts to plunder the communal wealth. Diligence, experience and sheer human dignity stood for nothing at all.

Mehmedalija's world had crumbled beyond repair, but a nervous breakdown was something he simply couldn't afford. Bosnia was consumed by war. Many members of his immediate family were trapped in the 'safe zone' of Srebrenica. In January of 1994, Mehmedalija finally broke down and spent a few days in the hospital. To make things worse, the family went under financially—they were absolutely bust. In the time when any sort of communication with his loved ones in Srebrenica was impossible, Mehmedalija spent a long eighteen months in various German mines and on their construction sites. He was brutally taken advantage of there as well. On many occasions, they refused to pay him what they owed him. Everything he did manage to collect he immediately sent home to his family. Part of it went to Zagorje, and part of it—through the Red Cross—to Srebrenica.

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Then came July of 1995.

"We were quick to find out what happened in Srebrenica. Mind you, we expected that the UN would do very little to protect us—but that they'd simply hand us over to the butchers, that took us by surprise. The UN let the genocide happen because we are Muslims, which means that we're somewhere halfway between worthless and a threat. Fifteen years later, things have only got worse. Some of them are now saying openly that we are burying empty coffins here in Potočari and that the genocide is something we made up! They are trying to rob us of even this final shred of dignity we have somehow managed to hold on to."

These are Mehmedalija's words as I walk with him through his native valley of death. The first time he himself saw Bosnia again was a year after the war ended. At the time, the chaos was such that he officially had no citizenship at all—even if he travelled with a Bosnian passport that listed a

[2] http://www.mirovni-institut.si/izbrisani/en/about-erasure/

Slovenian address as his permanent residence. On the Bosnian border, the guard asked him: "Where you going, Alić?"—and Mehmedalija told him that he couldn't really say. Where he wanted to go, he simply could not go: everything was turned to ash.

Most of his family had been killed, so his mission was to search for survivors. His mother and sister had somehow managed to break through to the outskirts of Tuzla. "In the tiny village of Puračić near Tuzla, I parked my Ford with its German license plates—I parked it in front of the house my mother was staying in. As soon as I opened the door, a pair of thugs stepped up to me and began threatening to blow the car up with me still in it. I calmly told them that I'd gladly do that myself if I thought it would do anyone any good. The two youths had mistaken me for a German-based war profiteer. But in the middle of my conversation with them, all my breath got crushed out of me. I was standing there next to a sagging green fence and suddenly I saw this broken old woman whom I realised to be my mother. I hadn't seen her for six years and at some point, I had started believing that I never would again. My throat was dry as a desert. My mother looked at me and I could see the tears in her eyes. Her hands were shaking. 'Is it really you, my son?' she asked me and somehow noticed that all the while, I was sub-consciously scanning the yard for my brothers. 'They're gone,' she said: 'They were killed by the mad men.' There was nothing I could do. I was shaking like a leaf... 'Mother' I was repeating over and over again: 'It is not true, it cannot be, how could anyone kill them when they'd never done anyone any harm...?' As we hugged, my mother told me how they were killed and how many other relatives had been taken away from us. My sister Hamida lost her husband and four sons. They killed twelve members of my immediate family. We lost four of my father's brothers and most of their sons. In the end, we found out that almost no one from our native village made it out alive. The Serbs proved out to be very systematic killers. Everything was planned in advance. There was this unwritten but well-respected rule that the murderer could take permanent residence in his victim's house. Many of them still live there and many come to mock us here in our sacred grief. Why does the so-called democratic Europe allow such humiliation to take place—why, if they can't bring our loved ones back, why can't they at least help us mourn in peace?"

Mehmedalija Alić has returned here many times—here to Potočari where his house still stands, though he's never seen its new owner who'd finally moved out in 2004. Mehmedalija only knows that this "owner" was one of the *courageous* Serbian fighters during the time of the genocide. In spite of everything, in 2004 he granted this man's request for his residence in the house to be extended for three months.

In the summer of 2002, Mehmedalija brought his family to this once again idyllic village. He parked the car in front of the three-story building that his late brothers had built for him. His daughter Sanela, then thirteen, walked over to the house and asked the eighteen-year-old son of the "owner" if she could touch the building. The young man just nodded and began to cry. Mehmedalija then hugged him and told him not to feel guilty. It was obvious that the boy, too, had found himself in this hell of human madness by pure misfortune.

"Look at the precision with which this has been made," Mehmedalija now sighs as he strokes the walls of the house that is once again his: "Look at all the love... My brother made this for me, yet no one lives here now. What a tragedy this is...."

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He finally got the Slovenian citizenship in 1998 and we can only imagine his surprise when, soon after that, he was put in charge of the Dread Pit excavation. "As I walked those dark and damp tunnels, I was haunted by the feeling that human souls were calling out to me for help. That they are thirsting to break free, cemented down there by evil men a small eternity ago."

Mehmedalija says that down there in the Pit, his mind was returns to the nineties over and over again—flooded by feelings he has only recently learned to master. "Around me, I mostly saw people dealing with comparatively minor, comparatively banal problems, while I was being consumed with the fury about all the evil that men do. Down in the Pit, I was the first to come across the corpses that looked alive. It was an amazing thing, impossible to describe. The first one we found we named *The Refugee*—for in his flight, he managed to break through some pretty impossible obstacles. The second one we named *The Rebel*. The third one died screaming—and since I like painting, I decided to call him *The Scream*. As we broke through the barriers in the next shaft, I found a mass of braided female hair. There were mummified bodies everywhere—bones, clothes and shoes, the place reeked like a charnel house. It seemed that beneath me, the doors of Hell itself were about to slash open through the hundreds of meters of piled-up bones. All the corpses were naked, and though they'd been covered in quicklime, a lot of their skin and muscle tissue was almost intact. Some of them were hugging, people dying atop each other. How many bodies, I asked myself—definitely at least 2,000. I made a good plan to dig them all up and reach the lower levels as well, but no one wanted to hear it. Right now, the excavation is on hold, and has been for a while. The

politicians put a stop to it; no one seems to want the truth about the Dread Pit. This truth, for them, is a second-tier subject, our president has said as much in public... and both sides are using it to feed their ideological campaigns. This is unacceptable. Those thousands of poor people lying dead down there—why, these are people who have not only been robbed of the right to live but even of the right to a decent burial!"

In the last few years, it dawned on Mehmedalija that there is no great difference between the butchers of the Dread Pit and the butchers of Srebrenica. The protocol was basically the same—with only half a century in between.

"If you come to think of it," he muses sardonically: "Srebrenica was merely the official graduation for the sons of our national fathers—the ideologues of the Dread Pit massacre. In both cases, what happened, happened with the active involvement of the democratic West, whose leaders knew only too well what was going on. The murderers are real people with easily identifiable names, and they should be tried and punished as such. Perhaps the greatest crime of these latest Balkan wars is that the history is once again being written by the criminals. Meaning the ones that have proved out to be the better killers. Yet we cannot allow their lies to eclipse the truth because this will mean that evil will have prevailed forever. We need to expose these Pits, old and new, we need to let the public know all about them. That, I'd say, is both my most pressing mission and my most effective therapy."

Mehmedalija's story was published in a book, Nobody (Nihče), *in 2013 and it served as a background for a movie* The Miner (Rudar, *directed by Hanna W. Slak) in 2017.*

Freshly dug graves in Potočari near Srebrenica, July 2010.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER TWO

SHAME

LAMPEDUSA, ITALY, MAY 2011

"The only difference between you and me is that you've got a European passport, and I've got an Eritrean one. You were born in Europe; I was born in Africa. We both love life. We both like to have a good time. We are interested in the same things, but I am unable to afford them. This is not a matter of metaphysics or high politics—it is a matter of pure chance."

Such is the view of Tareke Brhane as expressed while having afternoon tea with me at a sunny bistro balcony on Lampedusa. Tareke, 28, sports a highly flamboyant Afro hairstyle and is a living testimonial to the plight of the modem African migrants in Europe. He speaks from experience when he reflects on the European attitude toward all the incoming souls born outside the borders of the continent.

His father died in 2001, fighting in Eritrea's struggle for independence from Ethiopia. Along with his mother and younger brother, Tareke was left penniless. After its independence had been secured, Eritrea became highly militarised, and most of the male population was required to serve in the armed forces.

"They came and recruited me," Tareke shrugs helplessly. "My tour of duty was supposed to be for the rest of my life. I decided to escape. Since my desertion would have created huge problems for my mother and brother, we left together. That was in 2005."

Having decided upon Europe as their destination, they didn't lose much time finding a local smuggling outfit. It wasn't difficult at all. Their handlers told them that the easiest path to the golden continent was through Libya. But the family was soon forced to split up. The mother left for Sudan, while Tareke and his brother spent long weeks crossing the Sahara Desert to reach Libya.

"They loaded us onto an old Land Rover," Tareke recalls. "There were many of us. The smugglers put gasoline in our water so we wouldn't drink. The weak ones were thrown off the jeep and left to die in the desert."

When Tareke and his brother finally arrived in Libya, the traffickers immediately sold them off to another criminal group. "It was a classic example of slavery. I had accepted the risk because I had such a yearning for freedom, no matter what the price."

As soon as they arrived in Tripoli, they became the property of a Libyan criminal gang. "They gave us heavy beatings," Tareke picks up his tale, "and we were forced to perform all kinds of tasks for them. We were humiliated at every turn. Libya is drenched in racism. Dark-skinned Africans are seen as entirely worthless—we were treated no better than animals. Worse, actually. You know all those stories of Africans murdered in Libya? In 2005, this was my daily reality. It was so horrible it can't be expressed in words."

This unfortunate young man and his fellow freedom-seekers were seen as thoroughly expendable slaves. The traffickers kept raping and beating a fifteen-year-old girl travelling with them. After a few unspeakable months, Tareke managed to buy his way onto one of the countless fishing boats setting off for Lampedusa. The year was 2006. It was two years before Muammar Gaddafi and Silvio Berlusconi signed their 'friendship agreement' worth five billion dollars, obliging the still-powerful colonel to crack down on emigration along the Lybian coast's 2,000 kilometres.[1]

After less than a day, the motor on Tareke's boat broke down. Since all the boats were old and decrepit, this was typical of what happened on at least half of such journeys. The rickety and dangerously overloaded barge was left adrift on the open sea. All the mobile phones had long gone dead, so no lifeline was available.

Tareke and his comrades had been forbidden to bring any food or water. The days were scorching and the nights were very cold, with a frosty wind bareing down on the boat. Many of Tareke's fellow travellers fell ill. Some caved in and simply gave up.

"After many endless days—I don't remember how many—we caught sight of the Maltese coast guard flag on the horizon," Tareke continues. "What energy we had left we spent to cheer and wave. They came up to us, and we were deliriously happy. We thought we were saved. But soon after, they transferred us on to the Libyan ship returning to Tripoli. We felt betrayed. They broke every deal and regulation. But it was a common occurrence at the time."

Tareke's experience was in chilling accord with what happened in mid-2011, when some 800 African refugees drowned just off the coast of Libya. Their boat's motor broke down, too. All the while, the doomed migrants

[1] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-italy/gaddafi-berlusconi-sign-accord-worth-billions-idUSLU2921462008083l

were being monitored from passing NATO helicopters. They had also been registered on every Mediterranean coast guard's radar, yet no one came to their rescue. Those 800 poor souls fled destitution in Africa only to die of European indifference.

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After the 'Maltese betrayal', a Libyan freight ship returned Tareke Brhane and his companions to Libya. They docked at the Misrata port, the site of some of the civil war's most atrocious combat.

"We were immediately thrown in jail," Tareke remembers. "Anyone who dared to make a sound was beaten by the Libyans. There were twenty other people with me in the cell. We hardly had any food. We were beaten again and again, and some were tortured. Our women were gang-raped."

After three months, Tareke was transferred to the notorious Kufra prison in Tripoli. The situation there was even worse. "The guards would tie our hands and line us up against the wall. I was sure they were about to shoot us, but they only gave us a beating. There were about eighty of us packed in a windowless cell. The one toilet we had available didn't work. We slept on the floor, packed on top of each other. At any time, the guards could come in and lay into us with iron rods."

The young man eventually made it to Lampedusa—a small Italian island a hundred kilometres off the African coast. Since the spring of 2011, Tareke has been volunteering at the humanitarian NGO *Save the Children*. He takes daily care of the refugees at Lampedusa's centre for immigrants. So far, some 33,000 of them have arrived.

Legally, anyone coming from Libya should be automatically granted refugee status. But at a certain point, Europe chose to close its borders. Denmark and Germany decided to temporarily suspend Schengen rules. Tareke's permit is set to expire at the end of 2011.

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An estimated 75,000 Sub-Saharan Africans remain stranded in Libya. After the civil war broke out, the dark-skinned refugees got caught in the crossfire. The Gaddafi regime took to conscripting them to fill the ranks. Those who refused were imprisoned or shot. The ones who went along were sent to the battlefield and used as cannon fodder. The people of the eastern, 'liberated' part of Libya still harbour a particular hatred for the hapless refugees conscripted into collaborating with the Gaddafi regime.

Tareke witnessed women being raped in Libya. Then, he began to notice all the young mothers with newborns who began arriving in Lampedusa.

"When I was in jail," he shudders, "the raping just went on and on. The women were defenceless. Gaddafi's regime eventually decided to expel them, so these women and their jail babies were sent on to Europe. All of them have no future. How are they supposed to make a normal life for themselves here?"

Most of the young mothers lack even the most basic education and can hardly be expected to fend for themselves. The vast majority can never return home either, since they would be rejected by their communities.

"My job is to help them as best as I can," Tareke nods proudly. "They so badly need someone who can understand what they've been through. For the Italians, they're just numbers. The policemen don't give a danm about anyone's life story. They are far too busy, and there are far too few humanitarian workers around."

New refugees keep pouring in every day. "They see us as a terrible burden—or perhaps a virus ... yes, virus is the perfect word! We are the germs that have set out to overrun Europe and rob it of its way of life. I mean, come on, we just want to escape to a more or less free way of life. I say free, not normal. I've long lost the illusion I could lead what you could call a normal life. I've seen too much horror, and I know far too much to feel normal ever again."

In 2007, his confinement in Libyan prison brought on a serious bout of illness. Tareke's fever was so high that he was certain he was going to die. The guards and smugglers decided to get rid of him. The method most often used to clean out the prisons was to throw people out into the desert.

But for some reason, the guards decided to take pity on him. They took him to a hospital, which helped him make a full recovery. He was then returned to prison, where he was promptly sold to a rival criminal syndicate, which made money by organising illegal trips to Italy.

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After a short stay on Lampedusa, Tareke was sent to Sicily, where he obtained a temporary permit to live in Italy. "So the Italians gave us a piece of paper and packed us off to the railway station. But where could we go? I slept in parks and railway stations. Most days I spent looking for a job. If you observe Europe from far away, you see this wonderful image, what with the human rights and all that ... but if you're an African refugee, then you get to see a whole different side. You see the Europe of violence, intolerance and racism."

In Tareke's experience, Italy is particularly awful for the migrants and refugees. Whole swathes of the migrant journey seemed to have degenerated into modern forms of slavery.

"There is a lot that Europe gets out of us, but it gives nothing in return," Tareke feels. "The EU should genuinely try to help the African countries, not merely follow its interests like in Libya. If there was peace in Africa and a life worth living, then we wouldn't feel the need to leave our families and come here!"

In Sicily, Tareke worked illegally in an olive oil factory. As the foremen sometimes forgot to pay him, he left and became a porter in a hotel. But he was swindled there, too. He then worked in a restaurant, washing dishes for twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The job paid thirty euros per day, enough for him to get by. But then his boss stopped paying him. Out of sheer desperation, Tareke stayed and kept washing dishes for a few months. But the only thing he received were more empty promises.

From Sicily, he took a train to Rome. Since he didn't have enough money for the ticket, he spent most of the journey locked in the toilet. After disembarking in the Italian capital, he spent a few weeks living at a ramshackle immigration centre he remembers as "the saddest place in the world, with no future for anyone."

By this time, he was absolutely gutted; he was not the only one. "So many young Africans come to Rome to die. Life on the streets crushes them, destroys them! Many are starving. Most spent years getting here to Europe only to realise they had wasted their lives."

Yet Tareke wasn't quite ready to die yet. He decided he would try crossing Germany to get to the Netherlands, where a few of his relatives lived. His plan was to apply for asylum, but it proved impossible to get. Technically, one can only apply for asylum in the country that marks one's point of entry into the European Union.

Fortunately, once in the Netherlands, he came into contact with some activists, who worked for humanitarian organisations helping illegal immigrants. One of them, *Save the Children*, took him on as a volunteer.

His first assignment was to travel back to Sicily and then onward to Lampedusa. If nothing else, he was returning to the island to offer help, not to receive it.

This is where he has remained ever since. He now often puts in sixteen-hour shifts. The worst time was in March and April 2011, after the Ben Ali regime collapsed in Tunisia and Lampedusa was flooded with Tunisian migrants. Tareke's most painful moment came when he learned of his mother's death in Sudan. He believes his brother might still be in Libya, but the two of them have lost contact.

Most of the young man's time on Lampedusa is spent helping the children and juveniles who have come to Europe without their parents. Many of these children were actually sent here alone; many of them are now orphans.

Tareke frowns: "So many don't even know where they are! Europe refuses to take them in. These children come here at great expense and after indescribable suffering, only to be juggled about and ultimately discarded by a bunch of bureaucrats! I am appealing to Europe to at least help our children!"

Tareke's cell phone buzzes. More Libyan refugees have just entered the port of Lampedusa. "They'll be needing me," he murmurs, shakes my hand and leaves.

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It is Friday afternoon at Lampedusa's main port. Three speedboats owned by the Italian coast guard are crammed with around 300 refugees, just rescued from yet another boat whose engine broke down. Hungry and thirsty, the refugees finally step onto European soil after having spent four days on the boat. They look far too exhausted to feel much joy. In a daze, they follow the instructions of the surly Italian policemen, who make every effort to prevent us from communicating with the incomers.

Once again, most of them are sub-Saharan Africans. Seidu K., for example, hails from Ghana. He tells me that his journey from Libya cost 350 dollars. "On the second day our motor broke down," he recounts. "The captain told me we were sure to die if the Italians didn't pick us up. More than 300 of us were on that boat. We had some water but no food at all, since the organisers wouldn't let us bring any."

Seidu is exhausted, yet he is also happy to have made it here. Many are not. His attitude is echoed by Osais from Mali: "We were as good as dead. We're so glad they came to our rescue. There are thousands of Africans still in Libya trying to leave. It's getting harder every day. They are now openly killing us, so our only option is to escape." The price of the perilous voyage has dropped from 2,000 to 350 euros. Gaddafi's forces are trying to squeeze what they can from the sub-Saharan refugees.

The policemen and members of the coast guard wear facemasks and protective gloves. The immigrants are treated like infested meat. They are herded onto buses and transported to the centre for illegal immigrants, which is strictly off-limits to journalists. Berlusconi has promised the residents of Lampedusa that, in less than forty-eight hours, the migrants are to be loaded onto a special ferry bound for Naples, Genoa and Cagliari.

Having escaped the Libyan inferno, some of the faces on the bus are actually laughing, delighted and blissfully unaware that their European ordeal is only just beginning. "I try to warn them what lays ahead," Tareke says tiredly. "But they won't listen. I was the same: the desire to live a free life, it sort of blinds you. I guess it's stronger than anything else."

CHAPTER THREE

"MY WIFE AND CHILDREN DID NOT PASS AWAY. THEY WERE MURDERED BY EUROPE."

ATHENS/SAMOS, GREECE, OCTOBER 2013

Wasim Abu Nahi, a Syrian refugee of Palestinian descent, underwent an almost indescribable personal tragedy. It came to pass on July 21, as Turkish traffickers dropped him off under the cliffs on the coast of the Greek island of Samos. He was accompanied by his thirty-year-old wife Lamise, his four-year-old son Oday and his tiny daughter Layan, who was nine months old.

The Greek coast guard refused to provide assistance. Since Wasim's wife was injured and both his children were exhausted and dehydrated, he left them behind to search for water, food and any help he could get. He was soon arrested and imprisoned by the local police, who refused to even listen to his pleas. As he sat helplessly in his cell, a forest fire broke out on the island, eventually claiming the lives of all three of his loved ones. The police's reaction was to arrest Wasim's two Syrian companions who had sailed with him to Greece and charge them with causing the fire, even though there wasn't a shred of evidence to support the charges.

After keeping Wasim imprisoned for five more weeks, they eventually let him go. With the help of friends and local activists he immediately travelled to Athens, where he met his nephew from Sweden. Together they returned to Samos and, after a few gut-wrenching hours, found the remains of Wasim's family.

Utterly broken, Wasim travelled back to Athens, where he is now stranded. Since he hasn't been awarded refugee status, he cannot even apply for asylum. He lives with one of his Syrian acquaintances in the Exarchia anarchist quarter, which was where I met him.

What follows is his story. A story of Europe. A story of the human race.

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"My family and I, we used to live in Dubai ... but one spring I lost my job. In 1948 my parents had fled from Haifa to Syria to escape the terror. A large part of my family remains there still. My first impulse after losing my job was to return to Syria. I wanted to help. I could no longer just stand by and watch the destruction of the land and the suffering of my relatives. But my wife convinced me my first duty was to the future of our children. Layan, my little girl, was only a few months old. Returning to Syria was simply not an option. We decided we would head to Turkey and try to wiggle our way into the European Union. Our ultimate goal was to reach Sweden, because I've got some relatives there."

Wasim Abu Nehi, 36, told his story in a quiet monotone, his gaze focused on some far and unfathomable point in the distance.

Once in Turkey, some friends got him in touch with the local human traffickers. Because of its proximity to several Greek islands, the Turkish coastline is one of the key points of entry for ragged, starving refugees and migrants from all over the world, who have set out for the promised land called the European Union. Yet the vast majority of these refugees from war and unimaginable poverty are quick to learn that, for them, the EU is no Xanadu, but merely a xenophobic, racist and bureaucrat-dominated new circle of hell.

Wasim, too, was quick to admit he'd allowed his expectations to run very high.

"I wanted to go to Sweden, where my nephew could help me find some work. Everything had already been arranged, you see. My wife and children would have probably been awarded refugee status, since they had Syrian citizenship. It would have been a bit harder for me, since I've only got Palestinian papers, but I know I would have gotten by somehow."

With an audible lump in his throat, Wasim told me this on a murky street in Athens, where the ever-present marijuana tang mixed freely with the smell of grilled meat. As he related how his entire life got burnt to cinders in a single day, he kept weeping, shuddering and hugging himself for what pitiful semblance of comfort he could get.

He informed me that a psychiatrist gave him a prescription for tranquilizers, but these only made him feel worse. He reached into his pocket and produced a grimy grey cell phone.

"This was my daughter," he clicked through the pictures. "This was my son. This was my wife. My family ...." Tears kept flowing down his cheeks. He looked up into the darkening sky. In a small, quiet voice he started to pray. Then he pressed a button to summon up one final image.

"This is what we found after the fire." The picture, like a heavy blow to the ribs, revealed a heap of charred bones and some family jewellery.

"I came to Europe and immediately lost everything. I had come here to live, not to die. My wife and children didn't pass away. They were killed. They were murdered by the Greek police. They were murdered by Europe."

Clenched fists. Firmly shut eyes. This was Wasim Abu Nahi, screaming his silent, impotent pain into the void of his own personal abyss.

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"One trafficker and two male refugees from Syria—Jihad and Mohaned—were also present on the boat," Wasim eventually resumed his tale.

They sailed out from the Turkish village of Cukhuhazi at half past seven in the morning. It took them around four hours to get to Samos. "We met no one on our journey. The trafficker unloaded us beneath a huge cliff and told us this was Greece. We had reached Europe! He instructed us to climb to the top of the cliff. We shouldn't have any problem with that, he smiled. Up there, we were supposed to find a trail with someone waiting for us, a person who would arrange our further passage to Athens. There were six of us, and we only had a litre and a half of water between us. We were also running very short on food. We believed the trafficker that everything was in order. We reached dry land and started to climb. It was awfully, awfully hot. Both my children were exhausted. My wife felt very ill. But after five hours of torture we somehow made it to the top. Up there, we found nothing, only thorns and rocks. There was no trail, no path, no nothing. We were very high up, and all we could see was the ocean. But I still felt quite optimistic. It felt like we were so wonderfully close to our salvation!"

But salvation, for this fate-whipped band of migrants, was nowhere in sight.

The Turkish trafficker had chosen to dump Wasim's family on one of the most remote parts of the otherwise beautiful island of Samos. Once Wasim grasped what had been done to him, he fell into a rage.

Night descended upon the travellers, and the family ran out of food and water.

Jihad, the forty-four-year-old fellow refugee from Syria, somehow managed to get the Turkish coast guard on his cell phone. They informed him they were powerless to act, since the band of migrants was officially on Greek territory. They sent him an SMS with the number of their Greek counterparts, which Jihad immediately dialled. A woman answered and promptly told him they would all get arrested for illegally entering the country.

On being informed about the presence of exhausted and dehydrated children, the woman promised she would immediately send help. It was

agreed that, once the coast guard ship was near, the migrants would send light signals to indicate their location.

After two hours of miserable huddling on the rocks, the band of travellers indeed glimpsed a ship headed in their general direction. They immediately started a small fire.

Wasim told me that the ship eventually halted close to the coastline and flooded them with powerful light beams. "We thought we were saved. But the ship simply turned and sailed away. We didn't know what to do! We waited, and after twenty minutes the ship returned. But this time we were unable to start a fire. Our only lighter had gone bust."

They tried to signal it with their cell phones. But the vessel turned around and disappeared again. Jihad called the number they had been given, only to have the same woman answer and inform him they hadn't even sent the ship out yet, so it couldn't possibly have been the Greek coast guard's vessel.

"We all felt that was very weird, but what could we do but keep begging to be rescued? And then the cell phone's battery ran out. We decided to wait until morning. We lay down on the ground, hungry and thirsty as we were. Around five in the morning we set off in a pretty much random direction. My wife could barely walk. I was carrying both children and most of our luggage. At a certain point my wife fell down on the ground and couldn't get up. She told me to press on and get help, while she would stay there and keep watch over the children ... Those are the last memories I have of them."

Once more the man telling the story was overcome with tears. His eyes were puffy, his face deeply traumatized. His body was prone to sudden spasms, as if he were being tortured with electro-shocks from afar.

Suddenly he clutched my hand, looking even more lost and confused than before. "My daughter was nine months old," he rasped. "On October 19, my son would have turned four."

On that fateful night, Jihad, as well, was too exhausted to press on. He gave Wasim a sacred promise that he would remain with Wasim's wife and children and keep watch. Faced with an extremely difficult decision, Wasim chose to press on and seek help.

"I forged ahead. It had to be done, there was no getting around it. I kept walking for a while, then when I reached the other side of the island I descended down to the sea again. My aim was to reach the first available village or beach and alert the people to our plight. The only way I could get to the beach on the other side of the bay was by swimming. There were many sharp rocks in the water. I swam up to one of them, and then a small fishing boat came floating by. I called out for help, but the man in the boat looked away—he was probably afraid of me. The people on the shore could not hear my cries. I had swallowed a lot of seawater, and I felt very sick.

Then I saw the first helicopter swoop down to collect some water from the sea."

After that, many more helicopters and planes came to put out what he later learned was a huge forest fire. "Smoke was rising up into the air in the distance. I got so scared I almost lost control of my sanity. I started to scream and jump up and down on one of the rocks jutting from the sea. I would have done anything to draw attention to myself. And then I glimpsed a house."

Wasim threw himself into the water and started swimming for his life. When he reached the shore he was still screaming at the top of his voice. A Greek man stepped out of the house and informed him about the forest fire. The man provided him with water and some clothes, then he called the police. It was early morning, July 23.

The policemen arrived very quickly.

"They immediately arrested and handcuffed me. They wouldn't listen to anything I had to say. They took me to the local police station and threw me in a cell. Only later did they summon an interpreter. Crying uncontrollably, I told him my family was dying. I begged for his help. The man went away, and after some more time passed, a policeman came to collect me. He took me by boat to the vicinity of the place where I parted with my wife and children. That particular patch was still unconsumed by the fire, but the flames were raging all around. I asked the policeman to take me up there to dry land. But he refused. I was handcuffed, there was nothing I could do. He immediately turned the boat around and took us back to the harbour. *Why did we even set off in the first place*, I kept wondering hysterically. In any case, the policeman took me to another station."

When they arrived, Wasim saw his family's luggage lying on the ground. For a blessed instant he was convinced that his loved ones were safe. That was all he cared about. But inside the station's prison cell he found only Jihad and Mohaned. Jihad informed him that his wife had been unable to walk, so he had opted to proceed by himself.

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"Jihad was arrested forty-four hours after I left my wife and children. He and Mohaned were charged with starting the forest fire. Without so much as a shred of evidence! To this day they remain imprisoned on Samos, waiting for the trail which is some five or six months away. They put me in jail again as well. During the first nine days, they only removed my handcuffs when I had to urinate. One evening, a policeman dragged me to

his office and forced me to watch pornographic movies to break my will as a devout Muslim."

After a good long while, when they started interrogating him in earnest, Wasim finally told his story to a public prosecutor.

He left nothing out. "I cried all the time. I was absolutely desperate. Even then, I somehow knew the worst had already happened. None of the policemen went to search for my family. Finally, a UNHCR representative came to visit my cell and promised everything would be taken care of. Four more days passed, maybe five. The policemen assured me they had searched the area and found nothing. I spent fourteen more days in that prison. And then—without so much as a word—they transferred me to a local immigrant detention centre."

From there, Wasim was able to call his nephew in Sweden, who immediately made the trip to Greece. But since he was an immigrant himself, he should have obtained a special permit from the authorities. Immediately upon his return to Sweden, his passport was confiscated.

In the detention centre, Wasim was helped by a lawyer named Marianna and a Syrian activist named Aziz, who invited Wasim to come live with him for a while in Athens. Almost a month after that horrendous fateful night, Marianne officially filed three missing persons claims for Lamise, Oday and Layan. Only then did the policemen on Samos set themselves in motion.

Yet they still claimed there was nothing to be found. Wasim himself was forbidden from moving around the island; the detention centre was really just a prison called by a politically correct name. The crime committed by the poor souls locked within its walls was to have been born in the wrong part of the world. And in the European promised lands, such a crime often merits the death penalty.

After his long wait in prison, Wasim's lawyer and activist friends helped him obtain a set of papers, which entitled him to a six-month stay in Greece. Accompanied by his nephew and by Aziz, he started searching the area where he had last laid eyes upon his loved ones.

It didn't take him very long to find their remains. "Their bones and jewellery ...," he moaned, calling up the nauseating picture on his cell phone again. "This is all that was left of them. They murdered them by refusing to help them. They had more than enough time! They knew all they needed to know! We could have easily been saved by the coast guard. We found the bones a mere 200 meters away from where that policemen took me with his boat. We are now having a DNA analysis made. Once the results are in, I am going to file a suit against those responsible. Apart from legally leaving Greece, this is now the only goal I have left. I am a dead man. I don't have

any reason to go on living. They took everything from me, and there was nothing I could do. I still feel like I am drowning."

For the last time during our meeting, Wasim Abu Nehi dissolved in a spasm of uncontrollable sobs. Then he repeated: "My wife and children did not pass away. They were murdered by Europe."

Chapter Four

The Man Who went Blind because he'd Seen Too Much

Kobani, Syria/Suruc, Turkey, September 2014

During the day, the hill on the Turkish-Syrian border was as desolately sandy as most of its surroundings. The night's downpour had turned it into a heap of muddy goo. As I approached the border fence, a crowd of Kurdish men observed a battle between the Kurdish defenders of Kobani and the Islamic State fighters. The ISIS militia units were on the offensive, backed by heavy artillery. The Kurds responded with automatic rifles and the occasional home-made rocket.

A few soldiers of the Turkish army were also observing the action on the Syrian side of the border. They mostly did so from the safety of their armoured vehicles—which was a good idea, since there weren't that many of them around. Their mood was one of weary apathy.

As the battle grew in scope and ferocity, one could see some hundred Kurdish refugees lined up along the barbed wire that separated the two countries. It was heart-wrenchingly obvious that they were hoping the Turks might still let them in. The fact that they were caught in the crossfire seemed to be a secondary concern. This was yet another haunting image from a desperate struggle—yet another reminder of the savagery of Syria's civil war. As I looked on, the whole bloody mess seemed so wretchedly complex that any solution, which granted safety to the civilian population, felt absolutely doomed to fail.

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Along with fourteen relatives, Omar Issa, 67, reached Turkey about a week ago. His pitiful party, which departed from the border-town of Karacha, had managed to pitch a tent in an open field split by a muddy creek.

The tent provided a modicum of protection for no less than eighteen families. Less than a kilometre to the west, a vicious firefight between the Kurds and the ISIS militiamen raged on.

Children ignored the explosions, merrily frolicking along the creek's banks. Women caught up on the laundry, while the older men—pretty much everyone who could fight remained in Syria—sat on plastic chairs, smoking and drinking tea. There seemed to be no end to their political debates.

"As soon as the Islamic State was formed, I knew they'd be coming for us, the Kurds!" Omar told me. "To them, we're worth less than animals. We *had* to run! You understand? They'd already taken over all the neighbouring villages. Can you imagine our terror?"

They packed what they could and drove here, to the border. "Then it took them two whole days to let us pass, the Turks," Omar recalls. "Yes, okay, we do feel safe here. But the housing situation is horrible, just horrible! It's cold and it's wet, and the winter is approaching—all of us can feel it."

I spent quite a long time speaking with this traditionally dressed Kurdish elder, who only a few weeks before still grew olives and tended to his flock.

During our conversation, Omar revealed that two of his sons stayed home to fight. He expressed great concern that the city of Kobani was about to fall. In his opinion, this would spell a great disaster for the Kurds and many others as well.

"Under Bashar al Assad's regime, we were safe, but we had no freedom," he mused softly. "It was very, very hard for us. And now... well, now we are free men, but we are trembling for our lives."

The consensus among the refugees was that they were entirely dependent on the help of their relatives on the Turkish side of the border. "They have helped us a great deal, and we are very grateful," said one of those who had fled across the border. "But it's obvious we won't be able to hold out much longer. We left everything behind. We are now left entirely at the mercy of the international community. There is, of course, no lack of promises. But we are getting desperate for some actual assistance."

The majority of the Kurds who did manage to cross over took refuge in the nearby border town of Suruç. With each day, the situation there was growing more volatile.

The people in the streets were visibly exhausted, and some openly raved at the sheer inhumanity of their predicament. Only a few kilometres away, their loved ones were being massacred, and they were powerless to help. Yet a few also admitted it was little wonder that Turkey decided to close the border. After all, the population of the filthy, down-trodden town of Suruç had more than doubled over the preceding fortnight.

No-one really could tell me the exact number of inflowing Kurdish refugees. All available housing was bursting at the seams, and many of the refugees were left with no recourse but to sleep in parks and darkened underpasses. Quite a number of them pitched improvised tents in the surrounding fields. All of them were left entirely to their own devices and whatever help the locals could supply.

At the time of my arrival, precious little humanitarian relief had managed to reach Suruç, a town visibly tottering on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

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Naima Khalil, 19, introduced herself as a Syrian Kurd from Kobani. Amid the chaos of her existence here by the Syrian-Turkish border, she pined for the safety and stability provided by her school and the small collection of books she'd had to leave behind.

Accompanied by her mother, father, brother and five sisters, she made her escape a mere eight days before I spoke to her. The ISIS militiamen tightened their grip on the besieged Kobani, until Naima's father decided they could no longer run the risk of staying put. The father was all too aware of the fate of many others who had failed to flee the Sunni extremists, elsewhere.

"Our father was afraid for us, the women," Naima explained with a diffident shrug. "The ISIS men were sure to kidnap us and sell us into slavery. It's what happened to so many girls in Syria and Iraq. What could we do? We gathered what we could and ran for our lives. There's been no electricity or running water in Kobani for a while now. We suffered there for three years. We had to dig our own well. But we knew things were even worse in the surrounding villages."

A swarthy, nineteen-year-old, Naima spoke to me in commendably fluent English. Back in Syria, she and her family had managed to survive three years of constant war. Though this wasn't the general rule, the Kurds in Kobani had opted to join the Syrian revolution. During the first months of the insurgency against the Assad regime, a few peaceful demonstrations took place in the city. The government forces arrested a number of people, but for some reason they didn't bring their heel down as brutally as they did in Homs or Daara.

The summer of 2012 saw a "tactical" retreat of Assad's forces from the Kurdish territories in northern Syria. The Kurds wasted little time in forming their own local authorities and setting up a dedicated, if rather

miniscule, army. They declared an autonomous Kurdish zone and decided to name it Rojava.[1]

For Naima, this meant the end of her schooling. It also spelled the demise of her hope to study medicine—something she'd dreamt of throughout her entire childhood. The road to Aleppo, where she was meant to take her entrance exams, became "impassable". In reality, this meant the road was one of the focal points for clashes between various insurgent groups, the government forces, the Kurds and the ever-burgeoning ISIS.

There is no getting around the fact that the situation remains mercilessly complex. The sudden rise of ISIS's hate-crazed militiamen can be described as the illegitimate offspring of decades of American foreign policies, Saudi funding and a Turkish dread of the Kurds organizing.

The Islamic State fighters first decisively destroyed the Syrian insurgency against the Assad regime. Then they crossed the Iraqi border to establish what they dubbed a "caliphate". Having accomplished that, they wasted little time in getting on with the business of rooting out all dissent from their militant creed.

After the Yazidis, the Kurds were next in line.[2] Over the course of the preceding two weeks, more than 100 Kurdish villages were taken by the militiamen. Some 130,000 Kurds were forced to flee to Turkey via the nearby border, which was becoming increasingly porous. With each passing day, the chaos only intensified.

Naima Khalil was just one of the countless innocent souls caught up in the lunacy. "I am angry and sad," she admitted. "The Turkish children here are set on frightening me with their tales of the Islamists coming to murder me, while the grown men want only to humiliate me. Most days I can barely gather the courage to step out of the house where we live along with three other families."

And how did they manage to secure this accommodation? "Oh, one of my father's acquaintances sort of lent it to us for ten days. The bad news is that the day after tomorrow we have to leave, and then we'll be left with nothing. We simply don't know what to do. There's no money left. My parents spent what little we had on getting us out alive. Perhaps… perhaps we'll be forced to go to Istanbul to live on the streets. I'll start looking for work as soon as we get there."

"There is nothing I want more than to go back to school. But I guess that's just not going to happen, huh?" Naima added, before breaking down into heavy sobs. Then she summoned what courage and optimism she had

[1] https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-democracy/rojava-democracy/
[2] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-06-08/isis-yazidi-genocide

left and asked if I had some English book to lend. "Anything, anything at all," she pleaded.

As far back as she could remember, all she really wanted to do was read. "My father, he wants me to grab any chance at education life offers. Even when I was not able to go to school, I studied all the time—I studied at home, where else?" she recalled. "I read everything I could get my hands on. I don't want to be like most of my friends. Their parents married them off to ensure their safety, but losing them their freedom in the bargain. I simply couldn't do that. Not for all the safety in the world. After all, my mother Najaf has always been a fierce advocate of women's rights."

This last bit allowed Naima to regain some measure of composure and even pride. As we talked, we stood amid a vast crowd of Kurdish refugees who'd gathered here for their daily bowl of lentil soup. This brackish-looking concoction was distributed out of titanic aluminium vats by Turkish humanitarian workers.

Here in the dusty, anxiety-ravaged town of Suruç, Naima told me, she felt more trapped than anywhere she'd been before. "These local men, they are staring at me, and they keep staring and staring, and I am always looking away... and every day I get more afraid of what they might do to me. You know, this ... this is not my world. This shouldn't be my world."

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Mohammed Chechu, a Kurdish refugee from a village near Kobani, lost his sight some eighteen months ago. He claims this happened because he had seen too much horror. Along with his family, he left Syria for the border twelve days ago. His village—just like every other Kurdish village in the region—has been taken over by the Islamic State.

"Since I can't see, I hardly ever left the house," he recounts. "One day I heard shouting in the streets. People were very frightened. They were telling each other how in the neighbouring villages, the Islamists were slitting throats and rounding up the women to sell them into slavery. My greatest fear was that my blindness would make me a burden for everyone. I was determined to stay in the house, come what may, but my family convinced me to help them gather a few things and flee. We had to leave behind everything we've worked for so hard. Our house, our car, our animals ... our life."

I spoke to Mohammed inside a mosque where at least 300 Kurdish refugees have been crammed together for the past fortnight.

Many of Mohammed's relatives stayed back in Kobani: cousins, nephews, even many of his friends who have never before so much as lifted

a walking stick in anger, let alone a Kalashnikov rifle. But they knew enough to understand their fate was entirely in their own hands.

No help has yet been given to them, and they have learned to expect none. The coalition has mostly been bombing oil refineries: its priorities couldn't be clearer. Meanwhile the Kurds have been perishing by the thousands, and hardly for the first time. Given the long brutal history of this proud, self-reliant people, it is little wonder so few of its members are not willing to place any trust in the international community.

The vast majority claim they would much prefer a valiant death in battle. But perhaps their biggest problem is that, at this crucial moment in history, there is precious little unity between the twenty-five million Kurds of the Middle East, let alone a focused political agenda. So far, none of their brothers have come to the aid of the Syrian Kurds in the Kobani province. They have their own battles to fight.

"It's hard. The worst part is that my blindness prevents me from taking care of my family," Mohammed goes on. "Instead, they have to take care of me! I'm completely useless. Like myself, my wife also used to be a teacher in our school. But as soon as I lost my sight, she had to drop everything and devote herself fully to the needs of our family."

Mohammed's unseeing eyes have honed other forms of sight and insight. "For this past week, all I've done is sit around and listen to people talk. I also smoke a lot and think, think, think. I may be blind, but that doesn't mean I can't see the human pain and suffering all around me. So many people are forced to sleep in the streets. We are so cold—but there is no help in sight. Winter's coming, and things are only going to get worse. I'm very grateful to Turkey for letting us in, but now someone else should step in and help, too!"

In his most unfortunate exile, Mohammed is accompanied by three sons and a daughter. The youngest of his sons is twelve and has recently been diagnosed with a very serious type of diabetes. "No medicine is available for him here. And we also have no money for the treatment. I know he got sick because of me. And because of the war."

Throughout our conversation, Mohammed fought valiantly to keep his emotions in check, but this is where he lost control, and tears came flowing out of his sightless eyes.

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The last time Mohammed stepped in front of a class was two years ago, when the government forces temporarily left the Kurdish areas, enabling the Kurds to set up their own schools. Even then, his eyesight was starting to

fail. He is convinced stress was the main factor. He had seen so many atrocities, perpetrated both by the regime and the various Islamic militias brutalising his homeland.

The viciousness kept mounting and mounting, much like the war itself. Mohammed finally went fully blind about a year and a half ago.

"For a while, all I could see were shadows, and then not even that," he recalls. "It was… it was like a sort of death. But I didn't lose hope. After a few weeks, I regained at least some of my spirit and convinced myself there would come a day when I would see again, and then I could once more step into a classroom full of happy children, all of them willing to learn."

But it takes him considerable foresight to catch a glimpse of that distant day through the heavy fog of conflict. "You know, Syria is now seeing a generation of children who had to leave school altogether—an uneducated, traumatised generation. It is the worst thing that could have happened."

From the quiet, plaintive way he spoke, it was clear Mohammed still hadn't come to grips with all the horrors that recently befell him and his people. Yet in spite of his blindness, his deep, dark eyes kept staring right at mine, and I was startled to note how, at times, those poor sightless eyes still sparkled—and with, of all things, hope.

Almost the entire territory of Syria has now been ravaged by war, and the roads connecting the major urban centres have become the most dangerous parts of this fallen country. Nevertheless, a few months ago, Mohammed's wife decided to gather the last of their savings and take her husband to a renowned neurologist in Damascus. One day, she simply started the car and set off toward the capital.

At every checkpoint, they were stopped and questioned, and the surly men, who pointed machine-guns at them, often made very explicit threats to boot. Mohammed and his wife were stopped by government troops, ISIS militiamen, members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and a number of unidentifiable ruffians. All in all, it took them thirty-six hours to reach Damascus. They spent the night in their car, in the middle of the desert.

"My wife was able to get some sleep. I didn't. I was much too terrified," Mohammed describes the experience. "All the time, I was listening to the various noises, wondering what each of them meant. A few times panic almost had me by the throat. But I was also looking forward to seeing the specialist. I was really hopeful he would be able to help me."

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When they arrived, the neurologist saw Mohammed straight away. He examined his eyes very assiduously, and to the patient's great surprise he declared there was nothing wrong with them.

The problem is of a purely neurological nature; that much is certain.

According to the specialist, the blindness was caused by some elaborate glitch of the cells in Mohammed's brain. The patient found himself much heartened by the news, since the neurologist claimed there was an excellent chance of him regaining his sight if proper treatment could be secured.

"The return trip may have been just as dangerous as the drive to Damascus. But this time around, I was warm all over with a feeling not unlike happiness," Mohammed relates. "The very mention of the possibility that I might see again cheered me up no end. On my return, I was a different man, full of hope."

But his hopes' realisation lies at some considerable distance in space, time and opportunity. "The doctor in Damascus told me of a certain clinic in Spain, which specialises in the exact form of dysfunction I was diagnosed with! But he didn't tell me its name or location, and in all the excitement I forgot to ask. I'm glad to say that I have a relative in Spain, who promised he would help me find this clinic ... but I have no idea how I'm going to get there. I have neither the funds nor the necessary papers."

Mohammed Chechu also sent the results of his examination to a Palestinian doctor in Jordan. He is still waiting for the reply. But over the last few weeks, his eyes have regained a small semblance of their former function. He cannot exactly see anything, but he can sometimes "feel" movement in front of his eyes—and now and then he finds himself sensing a shift in the quality of the light. If he places his palm directly in front of his eyes, he can sometimes convince himself that he is able to discern a few of its features. But if an object is placed more than ten centimetres away, he can't see it at all.

"All the time I hope and pray. I want to be a man again, someone who can take care of his family, of my poor beloved wife and children, who had been so traumatised by this senseless war. In my opinion, only someone who is able to serve others can fully appreciate the marvel of what it means to be human."

Mohammed ended our conversation by apologising for being so selfish. "I do apologise for going on like this, for focusing almost entirely on my own problems. This unspeakable tragedy, well ..., the truth is we're all in it together, and our pain is only growing worse. Please help us."

CHAPTER FIVE

A GIRL NAMED COURAGE

SYRACUSE, ITALY, MAY 2015

Sometimes the name says it all.

Seventeen-year-old Courage Odafeh Loren, from the state of Edo in Nigeria, couldn't have been given a more appropriate one. Indeed, you'd have to look far and wide to find a braver, more courageous human being—or a clearer example of the toll Europe's immigration crisis has taken on African refugees.

Two years ago, Courage decided to join her mother, who had migrated to Libya a few years before the outbreak of the civil war and international military intervention, which turned that country into a failed state.

Just fifteen at the time, Courage was living in Nigeria with her aunt, who had taken her out of school, imprisoned her in her house and made her a virtual slave. Eventually, Courage couldn't take it anymore and decided to contact her mother in Tripoli. She was unable to rely on her father, since she had grown up without one.

Courage's mother was fortunate enough to have some savings at her disposal. She used the money to hire a Nigerian woman to serve as her daughter's protector through the long and arduous smuggler's route that leads from Nigeria through Niger and eventually into southern Libya, where borders are virtually non-existent. In the Libyan Desert and the no man's land of Niger, there is no such thing as federal authority. These dark and perilous regions are controlled by rival militias and organized criminal alliances that specialize in smuggling people, drugs and guns through the Sahel, one of the hottest and driest places on earth.

For some time, smuggling people has proven their most profitable venture—and little wonder, since the entire region is consumed by chaos.

It took Courage a month and a half to get from Edo to the Libyan capital. The woman, whom her mother hired, proved a resourceful and steadfast ally. Yet, on a journey as rough and hazardous as this, women are always weak and open targets. On a daily basis, the Sahel desert continues to

produce gruesome tales of mass rape and torture; people have been known to disappear without a trace.

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This part of the refugees' odyssey is often overlooked. Yet their staggering ordeal — so callously abetted by the European Union's inaction — usually begins in the scorching depths of the Sahel.

Courage was lucky. For whatever reason, the potential sexual predators she encountered on the journey opted to leave her alone. Her protector, a Nigerian compatriot named Vivian, proved to be a very powerful, influential guardian. In the end, Courage's safe passage was the exception that proved the rule. Quite frankly, it was something of a miracle.

"I was not afraid—not at all," she assured me in Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, where she was living under the twin protections of Italian immigration law and Vivian. "Yes, it was hard. It was so hot! But I was looking forward to seeing my mother after such a long time. It was all I could think of. It was what kept me going. I couldn't wait to leave Nigeria behind."

When Courage reached Tripoli, the city was in a state of turmoil. In the wake of Muammar Gaddafi's demise, the powerless Libyan authorities held little sway over a country infested with tribal militias and crime syndicates. Over the past four years, these groups have grappled for control of practically everything, from oil and water, to gun-running and human trafficking. Today, Libya has been remade into the very model of some of the most sordid forms of disaster capitalism.

It didn't take long for Courage to grasp the full precariousness of her situation. "When I got to Libya, I was very happy," she said. "All I cared about was getting together with my mother again. But the situation was far from safe."

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Sitting next to me and drinking a cup of coffee sweetened enough to suit a pair of giants, Courage spoke in a halting fashion. At times, just when I got the impression that she was about to open up, something seemed to force her to cut herself off again and barricade herself behind a brave smile.

Courage knew all too well that sexual violence against female refugees was the norm in Tripoli. She wisely spent all her time inside the four walls of her mother's rented flat.

As the fighting in the streets grew worse, her mother decided to send her teenage daughter to Europe, no matter the cost. Their first-choice destination was Italy; they got in touch with some seemingly reliable traffickers. In Libya, this was far from difficult, since the traffickers' lavish lifestyles made them all but impossible to miss.

On April 9, 2014, after a little less than seven months of hiding in her mother's apartment, sixteen-year-old Courage embarked on a supposedly sturdy old boat, manned by several supposedly reliable characters. Their destination was Lampedusa—the Italian islet which has become the traffickers' favourite point of entry to Europe, because of its proximity to North Africa.

Courage was the only female passenger among the 150 Europe-bound souls on board, all making their last desperate bid for a better life. She cast off without a protector, alone and chillingly vulnerable. This time, she recalled wistfully, she had only God to turn to in the event of trouble.

"We sailed off around two in the morning," she remembered. "Apart from the Nigerians, there were many people from Somalia and Eritrea on the boat, and some Egyptians as well. I remember it was very dark. I was so terribly afraid. I prayed all the time. This was my first time on a boat—my first time at sea, actually. And it was such a small boat, you see. We were pressed against each other, it was like being stuffed inside a can of sardines. We were out in the open, but it was still so hard, trying to get a good breath of air."

Courage's experience was rather typical for the brutal crossing that has claimed over a thousand lives in the last four weeks alone. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the toll has reached nearly 23,000 dead.[1]

As I sat talking to her, I couldn't help noticing that Courage looked at least three years younger than her actual age. Hers was a tale of bitter struggle, yet her resolve never seemed to falter. She spoke quietly, dispassionately; at times, she found herself unable to finish her sentences. Every word was an effort and sometimes she had to take in an extra lungful of air just to scrounge up the will to keep going.

At a certain point, she simply decided to leave the rest of the tale to Vivian, her Nigerian-Italian guardian angel who had arrived in Europe in the 1990s.

As Vivian recounted the unending bureaucratic battle that her young ward had faced upon reaching the European Union, Courage kept fiddling with her fashionable sunglasses. At such moments, the glaze of utter

[1] https://missingmigrants.iom.int/

alienation in her eyes still gave way to flashes of childish vivacity, though only for a moment or two.

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"Someday I'm going to be an actress," she confided at one point when I pressed for the details of her ordeal. "In movies or in the theatre, I don't really care. Oh, and I'm also very much into music."

The moment Courage got talking about her future acting career, she transformed. The shy and reserved girl instantly stepped out of the way for someone very, very different.

Her thespian aspirations, it turned out, were far from pure fancy. On May 15, she is going to make her debut at the local theatre in Syracuse, which is staging a production on the vagaries of migrant life. The very mention of the play made Courage's eyes dance with glee.

But the tale of her ocean crossing was still far from over.

The small ship bringing her to Europe—hardly bigger than a boat, really—soon got into trouble. The traffickers didn't find it necessary to furnish the ship with a captain, only with someone capable of manning the engine and keeping an eye on the boat's general course. First, the compass stopped working. Then the engine developed an ominous cough. For refugees like Courage, who had booked passage through the black market, this was a far from uncommon occurrence; when the engine sputters out for good, the passengers are usually left at the mercy of the Italian or the Maltese coast guards, which are so strapped and understaffed that, despite their best efforts, they are unable to save everyone.

This has been especially true over the last few months, following the demise of the *Mare Nostrum* operation—an efficient rescue program that should have served as a beacon for the EU's bureaucrats.[2] However, Italian officials decided to scrap the initiative, because continuing with the program would have cost them more money; this has effectively turned the Mediterranean into a mass grave.

The situation is only growing worse. At the moment, as many as 200,000 men and women are waiting along the shores of North Africa and the Middle East, for safe passage to the ever-more-elusive European fortress. Most of these refugees are currently in Libya. While poor, desperate souls are drowning en masse, an increasingly racist and xenophobic Europe is putting up more barriers and spouting even viler "us vs. them" rhetoric.

[2] http://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrun.aspx

"For some time we sailed in a circle," Courage remembered. "No one knew where we were, or where we needed to be. They told us we were lost. They said someone was bound to come pick us up. This was after we'd already spent two days at sea. We had no food or water. I was badly afraid for my life. I couldn't stop thinking about how it would feel to die. All I could do was pray."

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After another day's wait, the 150 despairing souls were rescued by an Italian coast guard vessel, part of the *Mare Nostrum* operation. But instead of taking the refugees to their original destination on Lampedusa, the Italian sailors took them to Augusta on the eastern shore of Sicily.

Before they reached land, Courage spent another three days on the military ship as it scoured the sea in search of other refugees.

"They treated us well," she nodded at me. "They gave us both food and water. And I was finally able to get some sleep. When we landed in Sicily, they put us on a bus and took us to some abandoned old building in Augusta. I spent about a week there. All the time I wanted to call my mother, but they wouldn't let me. Not even once. They never said why."

After a week, Vivian—who is employed by one of the refugee centres in Syracuse—arrived at the facility. She was accompanied by a couple of Italian humanitarian workers and activists, who had learned that an underage Nigerian girl was residing at the centre. One of the humanitarian workers, Carla Trommino, made sure that the Italian authorities placed Courage under so-called humanitarian protection: since she had entered the country while underage, unaccompanied, and repatriation was not possible for her.

As soon as she was permitted, Courage let her mother know she was alive and safe. For a while, she lived with some nuns in one of Syracuse's many churches, where refugees and migrants were still able to get help. Then she took up residence with an Italian family back in Augusta, in a sort of informal foster care arrangement. Courage started attending lessons at the local school. She was quick to pick up basic Italian, and was proud to report she could also speak some English, French and Spanish. "Only math still gives me trouble," she smiled.

But Courage's stay with the Italian foster family lasted just two months. They argued and fought, she said, and nothing was as it should have been.

Then one day Courage's life was upended by a single phone call. Last August, word came from Libya that her mother died in a bomb blast so powerful that no body remained for identification. The telephone call

smashed Courage's world to pieces. According to Vivian, she became hopelessly alienated. Vivian decided to take Courage under her wing.

"There was no other way," Vivian explained. Together with her husband, who works as a lighting technician in Syracuse's renowned Greek theatre, they did everything they could to help their ward get back on her feet. This June, when Courage celebrates her eighteenth birthday, she will be granted official permission to stay in Italy and become eligible for benefits, including health and social insurance.

"It's hard," Courage told me. "My wish is to stay living here in Italy. I have nowhere else to go. There is no one for me back in Nigeria. And anyway, I don't really want to go back. I barely even follow the news about what's going on there. I want to make friends here in Italy. But I find it very hard to make a connection. I go to school in Augusta, while I live all the way back in Syracuse. I don't get to meet many new people."

Courage hopes things will get better once she joins a drama class. "I hear some people there are older than me. But then, so what?" she grinned with a conspiratorial wink. "I did say I wanted to be an actress, didn't I?"

CHAPTER SIX

SYRIA:
RETURN TO A DYING LAND

TURKISH/SYRIAN BORDER, FEBRUARY 2016

On the cold and rainy morning, when the ceasefire came into effect, a weeping woman slowly approached the Turkish-Syrian border crossing of Bab al Salama near Kilis. It was a Saturday, and the woman was carrying a little girl wrapped in a heavy blanket. For an hour she begged the Turkish policemen to allow her back into her broken land, before she gave up.

Her aim was to take her pale and depleted little girl to the hospital in Azaz, located a mere four kilometres from the border. Yet the Turkish men refused to let her pass into her devastated homeland. The woman kept crying and stroking the poor girl, who soon passed away in her hands. It was only then, having avoided the possible consequences, that the Turks allowed her to cross the border.

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Right before the Syrian border, Turkish army vehicles turned off the main road leading to Aleppo. The blue sky above nearby Azaz was empty, violated neither by Russian jets nor the regime's bombers. For the moment, it was also clear of Turkish army artillery fire, which had inflicted a week's worth of heavy pummelling on the members of the Syrian Kurdish militia (YPG).

At the time of writing, the border into Syria was open only to heavy trucks flying the insignia of various Turkish and Qatari humanitarian organisations. The drivers were visibly frightened. One of the vehicles carried a load of bread ovens. Individual refugees or couples trickled in from the Syrian side, having set off from the refugee camps located between Azaz and the border.

Large bands of refugees rested on the grassland near the border. The majority of these were really extended families—mostly children, all of them absolutely clueless as to where they should turn to next. A few goats and a decrepit-looking horse grazed close by. The Turkish policemen simply bided their time, gazing at the sky. From the look of things, the accidental visitor could be easily forgiven for failing to notice he or she had just come up on one of the Syrian conflict's most important frontlines.

"I come from a village north of Aleppo. My youngest daughter was killed last week in a regime air raid. I buried her back home in Syria and then ran away along with the rest of my family. I myself was wounded, too—my head was hurt," I was told by a man named Ibrahim, who pointed to the blood-soaked rags on his head.

He had received medical assistance at the hospital in the Turkish town of Kilis, where the population has more than doubled since the beginning of the Syrian war. Over the past five years of armed conflict, the far from affluent Kilis has absorbed more than 120,000 refugees and has done its best to accommodate them in a decent and humane fashion. For this reason, the town is one of this year's candidates for the Nobel peace prize.

"They took really good care of me. But now I have to return to the refugee camp on the Syrian side. My entire family is there," Ibrahim clarified. From his shrapnel-nicked face, it was clear that he was lucky to be alive. His humble ambition was to find a place for himself and his family in Turkey. Yet the chances of that were looking exceedingly grim.

As things stand, Turkey is hosting more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees. Last week, 35,000 refugees arrived at the Öncüpınar crossing in the space of forty-eight hours. Suleyman Tapsiz, the local governor on the Turkish side of the border, claims Kilis and the neighbouring towns will not be able to take them in.

"Our doors are not closed. But there is no need to let these people into Turkey right now," he said. Some 140,000 people are currently stuck between Azaz and the border. Should Aleppo fall, which could happen quite soon, at least 600,000 more are expected to bolt for Turkey in a matter of days.

Even a few days ago, it looked like the Turkish army was about to take control of the area between the border crossing and Azaz, thereby preventing the strategically vital town from falling into the hands of the YPG. Without doubt, that would have been a horrendous strategic blunder, triggering a human tragedy of unimaginable proportions. According to our sources, the Turkish government has opted to take "a time out" for now—mostly on account of all the pressure exerted by both the EU and the United States; especially since NATO is as yet unwilling to risk a military

showdown with Russia. If the Turkish forces were to take over Azaz, such a showdown would become inevitable.

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Daily, the border is still crossed by humanitarian convoys, merchants, those refugees who can no longer afford to stay in Turkey and members of certain rebel groups supported by Turkey.

I managed to talk to some of the fighters who were waiting to be admitted back into Syria. Two of them, both eighteen, were members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and on their way back to the front north of Aleppo, after having spent the previous ten days in a Turkish hospital.

"We're under attack from all sides: ISIS, regime forces, Russian planes, and now the Kurds as well .... We are all alone. No help is on the way. But we shall fight until the very end," I was told by one of these two young fighters, who refused to share his name. He did relate that his family was living in Turkey, yet despite all his injuries, his only wish was to return to the frontline as soon as possible. "My friends are dying," he explained. "I am fighting for my homeland."

After the regime forces and Russian planes cut off the supply lines to Aleppo, a few hundred members of various Syrian rebel groups entered Syria from Turkey. They have done so with Ankara's official support. The Turkish authorities are desperately trying to prevent the fall of Azaz, since that would see the consolidation of all the Kurd-dominated areas in the north of Syria into something resembling a unified whole. In addition, the fall of Azaz would almost certainly spell the fall of Aleppo, the Syrian conflict's decisive battlefield.

On the Turkish side of the border, about a hundred people—mostly civilians—arrived each day to wait to be readmitted into Syria. Many of them are wounded or seriously ill, their lack of funds forces them to return home after a brief stay in one of the Turkish public hospitals.

Most of the ones I talked to were not returning to their homes but rather to temporary lodgings of some form or other. As far as the world is concerned, the heart-wrenching misery of the people who have lost their homes and remain in Syria is almost forgotten. Yet inside the ransacked land, almost half of the population is currently not residing at their normal addresses. These are the people who cannot afford to flee—not even to Turkey, let alone the European Union.

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A number of utterly exhausted people stood in front of the metal-wire barrier on the Turkish side of the border, waiting to be readmitted into their homeland. Among them, two glassy-eyed little boys sat on the concrete floor. Their heads were turning in what seemed a rather uncontrollable fashion, their eyes darted hectically all over the place. It was obvious they had been profoundly traumatised and were in urgent need of medical attention. All they had on them was one plastic bag each. Everyone else simply ignored them.

As more than 100,000 people in the refugee camps on the Syrian side of the border hoped to enter Turkey as soon as possible, a man named Mohammed Rahmo tried to convince his sixteen-year-old son to get up and rejoin the line of those waiting to return to Syria. Tears were streaking down Mohammed's cheeks, yet his son Mustafa remained seated, his gaze aggressively pointed to the ground. He kept hiding his face away from the light.

A little over a month ago, a Russian air raid on their small village north of Aleppo cost Mustafa his left eye, while the right one was severely damaged. His entire face was covered in burns. His father decided to take him to Turkey—back then, the border was still open. Mustafa underwent surgery at the public hospital in Gaziantep, but the operation was not a success. Soon after, he lost the sight in his right eye as well. His father took him to a private doctor, who told them the only procedure capable of saving the eye would cost $4,000. By then, the two of them were penniless, and their only recourse was to return to Syria.

"We have to get home. I need to take care of my family. The bombing raids have cost us everything we had," Mohammed Rahmo recounted with a heavy heart. "Our house is badly damaged. It is so horrible, but there is nothing I can do for Mustafa. We are so poor. We can't even afford to remain in Turkey. How can we possibly press on to Europe? We can't afford to buy bread. Yesterday was the last time we had something to eat. We are starving."

With a visible effort Mustafa finally stood up. Still staring at the ground, he broke into sobs and placed himself in the queue, where most of the people were not at all eager for conversation. After all, they were patiently waiting to be allowed to return to a war zone.

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A concrete wall and a small minefield now separate what were formerly two closely connected towns, the Turkish Karkamış and the Syrian

Jarablous. Today, this artificial border is one of the most unusual—and dangerous—ones in the world.

The Syrian side is controlled by ISIS fighters. At the moment, the Islamic State also controls another fifty kilometres of the Turkish border stretching westward. As far as Turkey is concerned, this area forms a sort of buffer zone with no armed Syrian Kurdish presence. For some time now, members of the YPG have been trying to take Jarablous, yet the town remains firmly controlled by the Sunni extremist militia. The area to the east, on the other hand, belongs to the Kurds.

Up until the end of last year, the border was rather peaceful. From 2012 on, 100 people or more were crossing it daily in both directions without major problems. Many of them were foreign fighters aiming to join the various insurgent groups in the north of Syria. Some of them were certainly crossing the border to join ISIS. The stretch between Karkamış and Kilis was the most porous slice of the more than 900-kilometer-long border between Turkey and Syria.

The conditions started to deteriorate when Turkey officially entered the war against ISIS. This, it is worth remembering, was after a long period of what some have termed "Turkish active passivity", which enabled the terrorist militia to grow in strength.

It certainly holds true that, for a while, Ankara found the Islamic State's activities quite useful. But then things began to change. A series of suicide bombing attacks was launched, and the geo-strategic situation grew more complicated as well. Turkey suddenly found itself in a rather unenviable position. At the same time, the Kurdish question was reopened, and in a rather spectacular way.

The Turkish authorities' first move was to shut down the border with Syria. Then they sent in heavy military reinforcements while placing kilometres and kilometres of concrete walls and barbed wire along the frontier. As numerous watchtowers heaved up toward the sky, the closing of the border severely hurt the prospects of the Syrian civilians trying to flee the war crimes perpetrated by all sides. Tens of thousands of people remain trapped on the Syrian side of the border, while some 100,000 Syrians are currently staying in Karkamış and at the neighbouring refugee camps.

On the other side of the border, the ISIS fighters have set up minefields to shield themselves from any possibility of Turkish incursions. To the Islamic State, protecting Jarablous has become a key strategic objective. The only question is why the almost seventy countries that make up the coalition against ISIS are so reluctant to attack the positions of the extreme Islamists around the small town, which has been deserted by most of its civilian population.

At the end of January, Karkamış saw the first direct clash between ISIS and the Turkish state. The ISIS fighters began to fire at the Turkish soldiers who had come to clear the minefield. Several gun shells came crashing down on the small, impoverished Turkish town. The Turkish army responded by deploying tanks. A few days later, the Turkish security forces captured a group of people from Jarablous trying to illegally cross the border. They were equipped with suicide-bomber belts and headed for Gaziantep, located about an hour's drive from the border.

Since then, Karkamış—situated in the immediate vicinity of the Euphrates River, the region's key water resource—has been plunged into a state of turmoil. The residents live in constant fear of the next ISIS attack and the Syrian war spreading into Turkish territory. The entire town has become militarised. Police cars patrol its every silent and dusty street, and if you are a foreign visitor, your every step is closely monitored, if not actively hindered.

"Life here is extremely hard. You have to be on the lookout all the time," I was told by Merwan Kaya in his small kebab shop. A year ago, Merwan escaped from Jarablous to Karkamış. "You see that street over there? If you follow it to the railway station, you reach the place where my old shop used to be. The spot is precisely 400 meters away from where we are standing now. It's incredible, isn't it? When the Islamic State took over Jarablous, things changed. My store was destroyed, and I was forced to flee to Aleppo and then to Karkamış. Now I am a refugee who lives two streets away from his former home."

As he recounted his tale, Kaya brewed us tea while his two sons prepared the food. There are not very many inns in Karkamış, so the talkative Syrian was quite pleased with his earnings. "Over here, a kebab costs about six times what it costs in Syria," he laughed, right before answering the phone. The call was from his daughter, checking in after a lengthy period of time. At the moment, she was living in Latakia, a Syrian coastal town and regime bastion.

The streets in the centre of the border town are almost deserted. Up until the fighting broke out, the residents hadn't really been all that troubled by the ISIS presence only a shot away. Less than 200 meters now separate the population of Karkamış from the ISIS positions, and many expect their town will become yet another frontline in the Syrian conflict.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD: INSIDE THE RUINS OF IRAQ'S CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

THE MOSUL FRONT, IRAQ, OCTOBER 2016

An Iraqi army private scrambled up the stairs of a heavily battered orthodox church in an old Christian town. He tugged at a rope, causing the bells above to ring—bells that had remained dormant for the two years and three months of the Islamic State's reign.

The small, 2,000-year-old Christian town of Bartella holds a special place in the hearts and minds of most Middle Eastern Christians.[1] It suffered greatly under the psychotic grip of ISIS, whose widely documented treatment of subjugated Christians included enslavement, ethnic cleansing and murder. Now, this ancient place of worship was once again under the control of a government dedicated to the free exercise of religious liberties.

But to believe with any confidence that Bartella and the surrounding villages were fully liberated would be premature—and potentially deadly. As they entered the church's vestibule, the Iraqi soldier's comrades yelled for everyone to duck. A barrage of bullets whistled and ricocheted above their heads. Mostly snipers.

It was clear that the ISIS militants refused to acknowledge their defeat. True, most of the Islamic State forces had pulled out, but a number of snipers and suicide squads had been left behind to prowl the battlefield. The town of Bartella, like vast chunks of the countryside east of Mosul, was riddled with underground tunnels, many of them infested with death-dealing ISIS berserkers—men who clearly had no intention of returning to tell their tale.

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[1] https://www.nrciraq.org/nineveh-plains-destruction-images/destroyed-and-burnt-properties-of-bartella/

Over the course of its nearly twenty-eight-month reign, the Islamic State managed to thoroughly ransack Bartella. A large portion of the Christian town was riddled with mines. The Iraqi soldiers were fearful that, despite intensive clean-up, a number of explosive devices may have been overlooked.

The soldiers attempting to reclaim the orthodox church, however, seemed unconcerned with the incoming fire and potential booby traps. Instead of proceeding with caution, they simply stormed the location—taking photographs, and dancing euphorically while ringing the bells. They had the look of men who had been through much worse. After all, for the younger ones, the war has been virtually all they have ever known.

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The briefest of inspections revealed that the old church's temporary Islamic State curators had severely damaged the structure. Some of its walls and eaves were burned; the church's tower and main gate were all but wrecked. A statue sat on a plinth with most of its head removed—whether this was due to the ISIS rulings on idolatry or the wages of battle it was impossible to say.

It became readily apparent that, under its temporary ISIS overlords, the church had become a place where even the angels feared to tread. The temple's interior was grubby and scarred, its once-ornate windows were smashed, its walls desecrated with extremist graffiti. The rooms had been looted for anything worthwhile. Last Sunday, when a grey-haired orthodox priest named Father John returned to his home town, he was quick to discover that many things were missing, especially the books and documents.

Working methodically, the father collected most of what had been left behind—just in case something of significance was still there. In one of the rooms, he had somehow overlooked a painting of the *Last Supper*. An Iraqi army recruit now picked it up and carried it off to somewhere safe.

The ISIS militants also desecrated the local cemetery. Most of the antique and medieval artefacts were destroyed. From the looks of things, the oldest houses received the worst of the brunt. Three days after its official liberation, Bartella felt like a village in Normandy on some dusty and oppressive summer day in 1944.

The old orthodox church was far from a heaven of peace. A mere 200 meters from the edifice, the Iraqi soldiers had emplaced heavy artillery to pummel the nearby ISIS positions. Their officers barked out orders as smoke rose towards the planes that roared overhead. Suicide bombers were active in the whole area.

"It was an exceptionally hard-fought battle. The place is still quite dangerous, what with the traps and the suicide attackers lurking on every step," I was informed by Ahmed Buhari, an officer in the elite Golden Brigade, which fought and defeated ISIS at Ramadi and Fallujah.

As things stood, Bartella was still stripped of civilian life. Most residents had long fled the city, and thus far, only about a dozen had returned. None were to be found inside the town, though scores of civilians could be observed fleeing the front line in trucks. Crammed with all kinds of possessions, the vehicles were headed for Erbil and the refugee camps.

And not only on account of what you could see in Bartella.

All over the surrounding area, the devastation was even worse. Coalition bombings, Kurdish artillery and the rear guard actions of the Islamic State have literally razed large portions of the eastern front to the ground. What used to be exceptionally fertile fields on the Nineveh plains lay fallow, untilled by human hands for at least two years. The roads are strewn with bomb craters. The factories have been pounded into little more than dust and rubble.

Even the birds have flown away.

Here in this place, not only the past is dying. Here—in the present tense—the future is dying as well.

Outskirts of Baghdad, April 2003. Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUICIDE BOMBERS, SCORCHED FIELDS AND ADRENALINE

MOSUL FRONT, IRAQ, OCTOBER 2016

A deserted, bullet-riddled pickup truck sat on the road that led to the village of Barzakat, some fifteen kilometres from Mosul. On Tuesday morning, the Islamic State vehicle was stopped by a squad of Peshmerga fighters, who wielded automatic rifles. Eight ISIS militants were riding in the pickup. Four of them were killed and then buried by the Kurds a hundred metres from where they fell.

The remaining four managed to get away. At the time of writing, the Kurdish fighters were looking for them in the ruins of the nearby villages.

The Iraqi and Kurdish forces have been amassing at the eastern frontline, near the city of Mosul. But while most of the troops seemed euphoric, there was also an undercurrent of anxiety. The nearest ISIS positions were a mere two kilometres away.

The Iraqi-Kurdish coalition troops were out in the open. They felt highly vulnerable to artillery or suicide attacks; the enemy could strike at any time.

Muquadem Said was an officer with the Fifth Regiment of the Zeryhwan Kurdish division: "Our biggest problems are the suicide bombers, the car bombs and the mines," he informed me. "Around here, everything is riddled with mines—absolutely everything! That's why our progress over the last two days has been so slow. Our units have to first clear out the villages. Only then can we move on."

On Wednesday, the area around Barzakat was one of the furthest eastern frontlines within the scope of the offensive.

American military planes scorched the sky above. Their main function was to bomb the ISIS positions in the city and its surroundings. Every now and then, heavy artillery joined in, pounding Iraq's second-largest city.

Smoke seemed to rise up everywhere. Over the last three days at least a dozen nearby villages were razed. The hamlets were counted as 'liberated,' even though they were reduced to rubble.

While walking around one of them, I came across a petrified little boy staring off into space. At another, all I could find was a pair of sheep. What walls remained in these settlements were covered with ISIS graffiti. Disfigured animal carcasses littered craters on the freshly bombed roads. In the middle of a two-lane thoroughfare, an unexploded rocket stuck out vertically from the sand. The Kurdish fighters had marked it with a small red flag.

Hot winds shifted the desert sands. Young men kept careening up and down the road, high on the adrenaline of what was happening and what was yet to come. Around here, driving was often the most dangerous part of a correspondent's job.

Everywhere, soldiers dug trenches or set up defensive mounds of sand. Kilometres and kilometres of grasslands and fields lay scorched as part of an ISIS plan to thwart the bombers with fire and smoke.

As I stopped by the road, two government Black Hawk choppers flew over the frontline at a dangerously low altitude. They could easily have become a pair of targets, as they completed an unnecessary manoeuvre that even the most inexperienced of pilots shouldn't be excused for attempting.

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Chaotic traffic flowed in all directions, towards the front line and away from it. Here, where they were least desirable, potentially dangerous knots of congestion constantly formed. A single grenade or rocket from the ISIS positions could easily have massacred a dozen men, or more.

Reinforcements kept rolling towards the front line, which was jointly controlled by Kurdish fighters and Iraqi government soldiers. Many of the new arrivals were volunteers, who'd simply picked up a weapon and set off to fight ISIS.

The images on the main road from Erbil to Mosul reminded me of 2003 and the first fall of Mosul, when the city became a hot destination for bandits and other types of war tourists. This time around, the chain of command seemed far from clear—as became readily apparent when a convoy of at least seventy Iraqi armoured vehicles approached the front line at high speed, bolstered by a number of black-clad, Shia militiamen.

The convoy clearly didn't have time for the chaotic traffic around it, with those at the convoy's front quick to let everyone know who had the right of way. Left and right, people threw themselves to the dirt to escape. The drivers, many of whom were refugees themselves, swerved in something akin to panic. Even the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) soldiers gave way.

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More than 10,000 KRG fighters assembled at the Mosul front line. Muquadem Said admitted that the anti-ISIS forces had "done well" so far, but also that the battle for Mosul was sure to prove a long and grisly affair.

"We've now come to a halt," the government army officer said. "Only the Iraqi army can proceed. This is the deal struck by Erbil and Baghdad. We have every intention of honouring the arrangement."

According to Said, the main objective of the offensive was the eventual retreat of ISIS from Mosul, a mission of paramount importance for the stability of the entire Middle East region. As things stood, the Kurds were not allowed into downtown Mosul. The same went for the *Hashd al Shaabi* militiamen.[1] Yet the conditions at the frontline were so chaotic that virtually anything could have happened.

Even now, in the offensive's early phases, at least 30,000 troops had been deployed—Kurds, government troops, Iraqi and Iranian Shia militiamen, as well as volunteers. But who exactly was in command of this vast and chaotic military campaign was far from clear.

"We are cooperating well," Said said. "No one is allowed to act without consulting the others. The Kurds, we know very well how to deal with them. We have a common enemy and a common goal. The majority of the ISIS forces scattered as soon as they saw us coming. They're terrified of us. They know very well what we're capable of in battle. But then they sent in the suicide bombers."

Said's soldiers did their best to set up a temporary shelter in the few nearby houses that had somehow survived the coalition bombing. During this brief hiatus from the slaughter, the engineering corps attempted to service the armoured vehicles. Most of the trucks were of American origin, though a number of the vehicles had apparently been home-made in local workshops and patched together, *Mad Max* style.

The images we gathered throughout the day, from the entire frontline, had a post-apocalyptic feel. While most of the Iraqi government troops headed on to Mosul, many of the Kurdish fighters gave in to the temptation of premature victory boasts, including a lot of flag-brandishing and rowdy renditions of traditional battle songs.

Many of them were seasoned veterans from the battles of the eighties and nineties. On average, the Kurdish fighters were older than the Iraqi government troops. Many of the latter looked disquietingly wet behind the ears, yet the brunt of the heavy fighting was about to land on their shoulders.

[1] https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hashd-al-shaabi.htm

They were the ones who would have to claw their way into Mosul's tunnel-riddled city centre, said to be heavily mined.

The real battle for Mosul was just beginning.

CHAPTER NINE

"THERE IS NO LIFE UNDER THE ISLAMIC STATE. THERE IS ONLY DEATH!"

MOSUL FRONT, IRAQ, OCTOBER 2016

At the entrance to the Debaga refugee camp, a group of boys and young men waited to return to the liberated villages east of Mosul. Some of the taller ones wore Iraqi army uniforms. All of them were Sunni Arabs, and all of them spoke of revenge.

"Our time has finally come!" one of them spit.

"The Islamic State destroyed our homes! They ruined our lives!" cried another.

The Dabaga camp, located forty kilometres from Erbil, is the largest refugee camp in northern Iraq. Managed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), it currently provides shelter for some 20,000 refugees.

At the time of writing, eleven such camps dotted the northern regions of Iraq. They were meant to provide shelter for 120,000 refugees at full capacity, about one-tenth the population of besieged Mosul.

The problem is that the number of people expected to flee the city in the wake of the intensifying offensive is significantly higher than that. In light of this fact, an additional camp has sprung up next to the old one, called Debaga Two. It is governed by the UNHCR and UNICEF.

The new camp is to be entirely devoted to the influx of refugees, sure to arrive after the Mosul offensive. As the fighting grows in scope and intensity, the frontline itself is rapidly expanding.

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"Our village has seen heavy fighting between the Iraqi army and the Islamic State. There were many casualties, and we ourselves barely got out of there with our lives. We arrived here to this camp three days ago. We

made our way straight through the minefields. It was unspeakably dangerous!"

The words gushed out of Amar Saad Nadimi, who is twenty years old. He and his accompanying group of teenage youths were adamant in their aim to join the Iraqi army and set off on a vengeful rampage.

The youngsters were waiting for transport to the frontline. They were convinced that the army would snap them up—or at the very least that one of the local militias will. They have no interest in staying at the refugee camp. They say sitting around here makes them feel painfully useless.

All of the young men at the camp were systematically checked for any ties to the Islamic State. One of those, whose review got a bit more due diligence than usual, was Ali Muhammad, 30, who hailed from the village of Haraband, near Mosul.

Ali told me that he arrived at the camp on Wednesday, following a perilous and nerve-wracking escape. It was now Friday morning, and he stood in front of the registration office, hoping for a timely permit to return home.

"I'll be brief," he nodded at me. "There is no such thing as life under the Islamic State. There is only death."

What followed was a horrifying monologue on public executions, beheadings and female torture.

"It isn't natural. It is an absolute abomination, this 'society' they've set up—and we were clueless how to behave! We mostly sat at home and kept our mouths shut. When the first opportunity presented itself, we ran for our lives."

Ali explained that he had been expecting the coalition offensive. He still hoped that the suffering might end sooner rather than later. But he had no illusions that even the liberation of Mosul would end the war.

"I fear my house may have been destroyed during the offensive," he confided to me. "But I want to get back there as soon as possible."

On Monday, following a few hours of coalition bombing, the Iraqi army's troops marched into Ali's village. He was quite happy to call them "liberators," but not everyone at the camp chose to be so generous. The protracted civil war has sown the seeds of sectarian hatred. A part of the Sunni population sees the Iraqi army as Shia, and therefore a hostile force.

This is a large part of why ISIS has been so successful across Iraq's Sunni regions. Its command core is home-grown, composed of Saddam's former officers, who are well-acquainted with both the land and the prevailing mentality of its people.

"We know what ISIS is," a Sunni sheikh from Karash informed me in a rather furtive fashion. He quickly added that he would prefer to go unnamed.

"We know who these people are," he continued, "at least when it comes to our village. When ISIS arrived in force, the Iraqi army simply pulled out. The soldiers left us completely high and dry. How can we trust them ever again?"

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"When the offensive began I was home with my family. Many of the ISIS fighters had retreated. There was a clash very near our village. And before that, the surrounding area was bombed by planes. We immediately fled for our lives."

This was the tale of Assad Hassan, 65, from the village of Nukariya near the ancient city of Nimrud.

"At first," the grizzled, bearded man began, "some twenty, maybe thirty ISIS men came to our village. This was two-and-a-half years ago. They said they would cooperate with the army and with the police. Then the army left, and the policemen remained.

"Then around two hundred more men came and killed all the policemen. It was the start of great suffering for us."

A striking sight in his white *jalabiya*, Ahmed was equally notable for the deep, dark bags under his eyes. During the twenty-seven months of ISIS reign over his village, he witnessed numerous beheadings and other forms of public executions. A bulldozer and a steamroller were but two of the favoured methods.

The Islamic State also closed down the schools. From then on, what passed for classes was confined only to the mosques. Books were strictly forbidden, save of course one. Before long, the kids were learning how to count with the help of weapons: one bullet, plus one bullet, equals two bullets.

Assad Hassan was convinced he'd only survived the ISIS abattoir and the flight from his village with God's help.

"The fighting between the Islamic State and the Iraqi army was horrendous. We hurled ourselves into three different vehicles and simply drove. On the road, the car in front of us hit an explosive device. A few of the passengers died. All my seventeen children and grandchildren survived. It was a miracle!"

Throughout the conversation, Assad spoke with quiet dignity, his tone completely liberated of all hate. He was obviously grateful that his family had come through hell intact.

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By realistic standards, the Debaga camp was peaceful and orderly. Every day more refugees arrived at the site, between 100 and 150 families on average. Before being allowed to enter, the men underwent a rigorous, but necessary, checking procedure. The risk of ISIS fighters infiltrating the premises remained high.

Small shops have set up operation in the camp. At times, business seemed to be thriving. Not that many Kurdish soldiers and policemen were around. Most schools in the camp were closed, because the governors had converted them into dormitories. As many as twenty people slept in the same room. The stretch of the ground between the old and new camps reeked of excrement and sulphur.

Dishevelled children wearing football shirts passed a ball around. Girls played among heaps of refuse. One boy, dressed in an Iraqi army uniform, leaned against a mesh fence. Young men smoked and talked politics. The radio blared news of the ISIS attack on Kirkuk. The nearby road to the frontline carried endless new convoys of military vehicles.

Ahmed Sultan approached me at the camp, a tired and visibly traumatised sixty-four-year-old theologian from southern Mosul.

"The Islamic State is a destroyer of Islam," he informed me. "They're perverting the holy texts. They are lying and tailoring the prophet's words to their own sordid ends. They are the worst kind of criminals."

Ahmed and his family of seven arrived at the camp two weeks ago. If they hadn't fled their home, the entire family would have been massacred.

"Since I am an Islamic scholar, the terrorists were very clear they wanted me to become an imam and peddle their faith. I said no. That was when our problems began in earnest."

After taking over south Mosul, the Islamic State banned the reading of books, shaving, smoking, drinking alcohol, watching Western TV programmes and using the internet. The factories and the schools got closed down. Women were forced to cover up their faces.

According to Ahmed Sultan, ISIS killed people in public, often for the most innocuous possible infractions—and sometimes for no reason at all.

"On day one of their rule, they tore the earrings from my daughter's ear. An Islamic tax, they said!"

As he spoke, Ahmed's face twisted into a smile, but it soon furrowed up again.

"Since I refused to follow their orders, they came after me in every way they could think of. They even kidnapped my youngest son for a week. They wanted to turn him into a killer, like they did with other boys his age. Yes, it's true: they take innocent children and turn them into killers. They teach them how to shoot and then they turn them against their parents."

Even after this, the theologian from Mosul refused to comply with the group's demands. They went and beheaded his nephew.

"I knew we had to get away from there," the old man remembered and started to cry.

Some of his friends and neighbours helped him to flee the city. Many of his peers did not share his good fortune and died on the journey. One day after Ahmed left, ISIS blew up his house.

"What is Daesh? They are nothing, pure nothing. They are the destroyers of towns and murderers of men," the old theologian summed up his views. He added that his plan was to first make some money as a teacher in the camp and then eventually rebuild his home. He was desperate for a chance to till his fields once more, all of which have lain dormant for the last few years.

CHAPTER TEN

THE ADVENTURES OF RAMI AND HIS MAGIC VIOLIN

KLOSTERS, SWITZERLAND, AUGUST 2017

A strong, refreshing breeze caressed the mountains high above the prestigious Swiss holiday resort. At the height of summer, the soft and fragrant grasses could barely seem any greener. Flashes of white brilliance glistened from a nearby glacier in the afternoon sun. A small cluster of mountain bikers hurtled down a steep trail towards the valley below, while a number of hikers stopped to marvel at their lunatic courage. Herds of cows munched on grass or stared off into space. Yet instead of the Swiss horns and accordions one might expect as mood music for this quintessential scene, the sound of a violin belting out exuberant Arabic rhythms rang through the Alpine valley.

Rami Basisah, 22, a Syrian refugee from the countryside between Homs and Hama, was playing to chase away his demons. He applied the bow with a series of flourishes, doing what he could to fight off his emotional flashbacks.

Rami's violin was his best friend. It was the core of his identity and his ticket to freedom, his passport to safety and perhaps even a modicum of prosperity. In his mind, the idyllic Swiss mountains around us must have formed the perfect counterpoint to the Syrian carnage that he had emerged from; you somehow could tell from a glance that Rami was present only in the most basic physical sense. It was apparent in his every move and in every note of music that issued from his fingertips.

"Something very much like this was all I dreamed about when I was a kid," Rami clarified as he put the instrument away. "You know, playing the violin before European audiences as the people clap and cheer."

The young violinist always kept his instrument with him. He never let it out of his sight. He knew very well what it had helped him overcome. But the tragedy-ridden path to the fulfilment of Rami's childhood dream has made it hard for him to enjoy his achievements.

"I can't really say I'm happy," he confessed. "To be honest, I am totally confused. I'm not sure what's happening to me, or even where I am. I mean, yeah, things are great and I'm very grateful—but my thoughts are somewhere else. More than anything, I really want to help my brother, who's spent the past three years as a refugee in Lebanon. And I want my parents and my three sisters back in Syria to be safe."

The dark-haired youth's stare was a compelling one, powered by a mixture of repressed pain and a steely resolution not often seen in one so young.

"The events are starting to overtake me," he confided. "This is becoming so huge. Everybody wants something from me, and I'm not yet fully prepared. I don't even know if I'm good enough, you see. What I want is a little peace and quiet, a true friend or two. Yes, that's right, all I want is a normal life. But everything around me has been the opposite of normal for such a long time that I can sometimes no longer tell what's real and what's not."

Following a string of happy coincidences, Rami was invited to the Swiss Alps as a special guest of the prestigious classical music festival in Klosters. Here, the traumatised Syrian musician was awarded the opportunity to play in front of one of the world's most demanding audiences.

The onlookers were knowledgeable and refined, verging on the *blasé*, but Rami still managed to take their breath away....

And not just with his indisputable musical talent.

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August 2015: darkness slowly descended over the savannah-like border between Greece and Macedonia. Startled flocks of doves swept over the wizened sunflower fields. A local hunter, dressed in an army jacket, led his three dogs through the brush. Exhausted clusters of Syrian and Afghan refugees rested under the trees and near the deserted border-guard facilities.

This was the heyday of the so-called Balkan refugee route.[1] The abovementioned men and women were waiting for permission to move on into Macedonia. Fresh groups of refugees and migrants constantly rolled in from the Greek side of the border.

At the nearby reception centre, Rami, who was twenty at the time, took his violin out of his travelling bag. Giving it a long, affectionate stroke, he went on to tune the strings. The bashful former music student at Homs

[1] http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/2546/the-balkan-route-explained

University then stepped in front of a mass of his fellow refugees, who were waiting to catch the next train to the Serbian border.

Though his friends encouraged him to abandon himself to the moment and just start playing, it still took Rami a while to work up his courage. The Macedonian police looked on in bewilderment, trading glances and wondering if they should possibly confiscate the instrument. Then one of them motioned to Rami that he was free to proceed.

The young man began playing, slowly and even somewhat clumsily, at first. A hush descended over the crowd of refugees; their lively chatter turned to primal awe. Even the police officers' faces broke into a grin when they recognised the melody. The audience's warm response had a visibly relaxing effect on the young musician. As he went on, he started playing with redoubled vigour, drawing in even the most apathetic ears.

His fingers swept across the instrument, as Rami got more and more in the zone. Stifling thoughts finally dispelled, he was guided by pure love.

Yet he was far from in a trance. He was all too aware of what was going on.

As he smiled, his face suffused a hard-boiled irony. The entire reception centre was ringing with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, the EU's official anthem. Was this indeed irony? Or maybe more of an inspired prank? A spurt of brilliant political analysis? Improvised psychotherapy? Whatever it was, even the policemen were soon keeping time with their boots.

When he finished, the audience clapped and urged him to play on. He paused for a few seconds. Then his violin gave birth to the proud and profoundly mournful tones of a Syrian patriotic song.

Rami's friends—all of them educated and urban young folk from the vicinity of Homs—were all too happy to join in. Some of them were soon weeping openly, these men and women who'd nearly forgotten that dignity still existed. The women hugged their children a little tighter to themselves.

For a few precious minutes, the ice of pain was melted by the fire of hope. Rami played on—and on. New refugees kept rolling in. It was now close to total darkness.

The astonishing concerto ended with Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. There was plenty of applause, and Rami gave a timid bow. As soon as he put away his violin, his motions grew stiff, and the contours of his face slid back into their default traumatised expression. His trance was broken and anxiety was king once again.

"Please forgive me," he smiled, still catching his breath from his exertions. "I've made a number of mistakes. I was so very nervous." Just before he got swallowed up by the crowd, we exchanged contacts and promised we would stay in touch.

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The festival in the Swiss alps was now well underway. The superb acoustics and otherworldly grandeur of St Jakob's church in Klosters had helped it become one of the event's central venues. Outside, the Swiss organisers mingled with the guests. The heavy heat was something of a drag on the mood, along with the overdressed atmosphere and the often bizarrely refined manners.

Rami, a lad from a different world altogether, stepped out of the car, besieged by doubt and fear. Confused and still rather clueless about the entire European music scene, he was about to perform in front of David Whelton—the festival's acoustics director, the long-time head of the British Philharmonia Orchestra and one of the most influential people in the world of classical music.

As we caught each other's eye, it was as if the ground beneath both our feet gave a momentary wobble.

So here we were. Rami's concert at the Macedonian-Greek border and the feature article I'd written about it had helped turn his prospects around. Now, two years on in Switzerland, that we had found each other again seemed like a miracle.

"Wow! Hey! Oh my God, this can't be happening …."

His words sounded about as shaky as he looked. Our embrace lasted a long time, our heavy limbs having grown joyously light.

Rami threw up his hand in wonderment. "I didn't think we'd ever get to see each other again! Everything is coming back to me now, everything! Well, how could I forget? The war, the Macedonian performance, and then the horrible journey to Germany …"

Prior to our brief encounter at the Greek-Macedonian border, Rami had already spent forty days on the road. Prior to that, he had been a refugee in his own homeland for two years. Now, at St. Jacob's, he told me he wanted to continue with his studies at whichever European music academy would have him.

Overall, he didn't feel like talking too much about himself or the war. "I need to do everything I can to help my brother," he winced. "Faheed fled home two years ago and went to Lebanon. As he left, he promised he'd help me reach safety. He worked so hard to get me here!"

When his brother scrounged up enough money to fund Rami's trip to Europe, he sent it to him right away. "But now Faheed's lost his job. It is my duty to help him out somehow. I owe him my life!"

Instead of focusing on the incredibly important rehearsal ahead, Rami was swept under a barrage of memories. He grasped for concentration, but

the thoughts were simply coming on too strong. For a few minutes at least, the music became what it actually was: an ancillary, secondary thing. But then Rami made a forceful effort to bring himself back. And David Whelton was soon able to determine that, at least for the moment, the young hopeful's heart could still migrate to wherever the music was.

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Rami left his homeland on 30 July, 2015. From the regime-controlled Al Bayadiya village, located between Homs and Hama, he took a taxi to Tartus, a city on the Mediterranean coast. Then he boarded a bus to Beirut along with a number of fellow refugees, none of whom he had met before.

They had to wait fifteen hours to cross the Syrian-Lebanon border. Rami had arranged to meet his older brother Faheed, a fellow musician who'd fled to Lebanon the year before. At the time, the Balkan refugee route was still open and Germany boasted an open-door refugee policy. Faheed had summoned his younger brother to Lebanon and promised he would pay for his long trip to Europe.

In Beirut, Rami collected his plane ticket to Turkey. It was very difficult for him to say goodbye to his brother again, Faheed being something of a central figure in his life. Leaving him behind was extra hard on Rami since he knew his brother also wanted to migrate to Europe but was willing to sacrifice that dream for his younger sibling, on account of his exceptional musical talent.

And so Rami Basisah was sent out as a sort of vanguard force, charged with the exceedingly important task of 'making it'—not only for his own sake, but for the sake of the entire family. His father, mother and three sisters had to stay behind in Syria.

"I played a farewell song at the airport," Rami recalled as we strolled through the idyllic Swiss mountain village, the current temporary backdrop to the mad bruising toboggan that his life had long become. "It was tough on both of us. I so wished he was on that plane with me. My brother saved my life."

The plane landed in the Turkish town of Izmir, where Rami was supposed to meet the people in charge of 'managing' his entry to Europe. But things didn't work out as planned. He first had to reach Istanbul to make the necessary arrangements.

At the time, as many as 10,000 refugees were sailing to the Greek Aegean islands daily. The smuggling business was in overdrive. The Turkish authorities were content to look the other way and leave the incomers at the complete mercy of the smuggling industry.

While Rami waited for the fateful call, he met a few of the local musicians in Istanbul, along with a number of very talented refugees. Together, they played a series of spontaneous concerts at Taksim square in Istanbul, and were met with unexpected warmth from the passers-by.

When the call came, Rami and a group of thirty-nine fellow refugees travelled back to Izmir, which was destined to become their jump-off point for Kos, Lesbos and the other Eastern Aegean islands.

It took them no less than five attempts to reach Greece. On the first one, water flooded their crowded rubber dinghy, causing it to start sinking a few hundred meters off the Turkish coast. Compulsively holding on to his violin, Rami managed to swim back to shore. Tragically, the saltwater did extensive damage to the sensitive instrument, especially to the strings.

The second time they set out, the Turkish police chased them off the beach moments before they set out to sea. Rami and his fellow refugees decided to try their luck from Bodrum, Turkey's second great launch point for refugees heading to Greece.

The third attempt saw them trying to row off by themselves, but the coast guard again sent them packing. Sensibly, they decided to regroup into a few smaller squads of eight.

On the fourth try, three smaller boats cast off together. The one Rami jumped in was powered by an electrical battery.

"We were going very slow," he recalled. "Our boat was commanded by a man from Pakistan. When we reached the open sea, water started leaking in. The Pakistani wanted to push on. In the distance we could already see the lights from Kos. We would need about an hour to get there. But the other refugees decided to force our 'captain'—a few actual blows were necessary—to turn the boat back to Turkey."

They somehow managed to reach the shore, where, in Rami's colourful phrase, they were "met by the mob". The criminals roughed the Pakistani captain pretty badly, and made the other refugees pick up their boat to set off on a night-time march.

Even though the men were armed, Rami and one of his mates refused to go with them. They knew that the boat's battery was empty and that the smugglers were likely to send the group to their deaths. They stayed on the coast and watched the sea filling up with refugee-crammed vessels. Suddenly the police appeared and snatched them.

The two of them spent the following day at Bodrum's police station. "They were pretty nice to us Syrian refugees over there," Rami continued, "But they beat the others, especially the Africans and the Pakistanis."

When he and his mate were released they had to fend for themselves. They eventually hooked up with another group of smugglers, who placed them with yet another group of refugees.

On the fifth attempt, luck finally smiled on the all but exhausted and bankrupted Rami. Since it was a Turkish national holiday, most of the policemen stayed home. And the sea was rather calm for a change.

"I was completely fed up," he remembered. "I was prepared to take some major risks if necessary. I was on the verge of really losing it. Anyway, we were going very slow again, and then sometime near the halfway mark the electric battery gave out again. This time we didn't turn back. We had two big paddles on the boat. I took hold of one of them. The other one went to a strong young guy from Latakia. As it was getting light, we sent our coordinates to the Greek coastal guard. They came to pick us up. On their boat, I saw four dead refugees from my previous group."

From there, it would have been a swift journey from Kos to the *Ode to Joy* concert at the Macedonian-Greek border. But Rami decided to hang back in Athens for a while to wait for a friend, visit some relatives and get new strings for his violin.

It was a decision destined to mark his life in completely unexpected and very profound ways.

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The Swedish philharmonic orchestra from Malmö was playing Beethoven at the great concert hall in Klosters. Along with Vivaldi, this was Rami's favourite composer. It was raining heavily outside. At times, the downpour turned so intense that the sound of raindrops pounding on the roof worked its way into the intensity of the music.

"This man—what music! What madness! Oh, the violent mood swings.... This is exactly how I feel. That's why I feel so close to Beethoven," Rami whispered to me during the concert.

He still looked pretty lost in the Swiss surroundings. Even the well-wishers who came over to pay their respects made him at least somewhat uncomfortable. This was simply not his world. After a few more minutes of listening to the music, his attention became shot and wandered off to who knew where. He suddenly became very tired. He nodded off, but his entire body gave a violent shudder that brought him to again. His first instinct was to cover the whole thing up, to pretend nothing had happened, that he had been listening all along. But he could not sustain it.

Tears flowed down his cheeks. "I would like to play on such a stage one day, too. So I can help my family," he whispered, avoiding curious looks

from the members of a high society gathering governed by strict etiquette, much like in the times of the great European monarchies.

That same day, Rami spiced up the rather sedate atmosphere at the festival sponsors' lunch with a string of Arab melodies. A few hours later, he performed at a mountain lodge in front of NGO members from all around the world, where Rami's musical performance was so brutally honest that even this garrulous and cocky crowd was left speechless.

One of the festival's main sponsors, who wishes to remain anonymous, was grinning from ear to ear. In spite of everything, inviting Rami had proven a great success. Near the end of May, his CD *Rami: My Journey*, recorded in collaboration with the Prague Symphony Orchestra and released by Decca Records, was presented on the legendary British Classic FM radio.[2] Among the many listeners who'd voted it Album of the Week was a retired businessman who went on to invite Rami to Switzerland. He had decided the young Syrian violinist deserved all the help he could get.

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August 2015, the Greek-Macedonian border:

At the time of our fateful encounter, when my colleague Jure Eržen took Rami's iconic photo, which was later chosen by *Classic FM* radio as one of the ten most iconic photographs of wartime music, the Balkan refugee route to Germany was still open. Yet it was increasingly strewn with obstacles and humiliations.

After playing *Ode to Joy* to the Macedonian border guards and his fellow countrymen, Rami ventured forth to Serbia and then on to Hungary, Austria and Germany. He was accompanied by two friends named Mohammed and Mudhar, both of whom he met in Turkey. Amid the chaos at various border crossings, they stuck together and helped each other out. In the Serbian town of Preševo the police finally broke them up. His two friends were allowed to continue, while Rami was taken into custody. After a six-hour wait at the station, one of the policemen asked him about the contents of his bag.

"It's a violin," Rami replied.

"Is it yours?" the policeman wanted to know. "Can you play?"

"Yes."

"Well why don't you play something for us?"

Rami knew exactly what to do. Relying on his tried-and-tested formula, he once again played *Ode to Joy*, this time in the south of Serbia. The policeman was so thrilled he called his wife on his mobile so she could

[2] https://www.amazon.co.uk/My-Journey-Rami/dp/B01N699NZ5

partake in the "solo concert". In a matter of minutes, Rami was issued the papers that enabled him to push on.

In Belgrade, where tens of thousands of refugees waited to begin the next stage of their journey toward the promised land, he bought a ticket for a train to Budapest. But this was a tactical mistake. At the time, Viktor Orbán and his cronies were just putting the finishing touches on the Serbian border fence, and turning their attention to the border with Croatia. It was hardly a surprise: Hungary had long begun implementing a series of systematic anti-refugee and anti-migrant policies.

Rami and his two friends had to get off the train before they even reached the Hungarian border. They crossed over via the classic route winding through the forests.

"I was very afraid," the swarthy violinist remembered. "I didn't want to go on, but my friends convinced me otherwise. Mohammed was the one who carried my violin. We walked for a long time. Then we were arrested by the Hungarian police. The three of us got separated again. I was suddenly stripped of my violin and of my friends as well."

Rami spent the next week at a small refugee camp. Talking to me in Switzerland, he didn't feel much like dwelling on this period. He was nearly devoured by mites, he said, and his allergies were killing him. Not nearly soon enough, he was relocated to a bigger camp, where he was finally able to sate his hunger, wash up and don a set of fresh clothes.

But all he cared about was resuming his journey. He escaped the camp during a changing of the guard and forged his way to Budapest. He reached the capital's central railway station at a time when the authorities had halted the trains carrying refugees to northern Europe.

"Things were pretty crazy at the station. There were at least twenty thousand of us. We were shouting that we wanted to go on to Germany. We talked to the press. A lot of good people came to see us—they brought food, drink, clothes and medicine," Rami reminisced.

Along with his fellow sufferers, he set off from Budapest to Austria on foot. After a few hours' walk, the Hungarian authorities backed down a little—at least enough to allow the refugees to use the buses. A number of perfect strangers from Austria and Germany drove over to pick them up and transport them northward in their cars. Crowds of thousands were gathering at the German railway stations to greet the incomers.

It was a time when it still seemed that European humanism, however fragile, might prevail. But this proved to be just one more in a series of tragic illusions. Like so many of his fellows, Rami was quick to grasp that Germany was not nearly ready to receive almost a million Syrian refugees: not politically, not logistically, not bureaucratically.

For several months, he was moved from one overcrowded camp to the next. At a camp near Aachen, a woman handed him a small violin and asked him to play something for her. Since he was happy to oblige, the woman made a recording of his performance and played it to the conductor of the local orchestra.

The man immediately invited Rami to take part in two different concerts, while his story began to spread across Europe with the help of various newspaper and magazine articles. Soon a number of agents were calling to offer their services, while the maestro from Aachen offered him a permanent place in the band as well as board and lodging. Rami, however, was still waiting for his asylum request to be granted, so his first serious chance at a better life eventually fell through.

An order was issued for his relocation to yet another camp, situated inside a basketball arena near the city of Lahr. "The place was crammed with people. We were virtually sleeping on top of each other. I was only able to play my violin outside or in the laundry room, where I had to compete with the rumble of the washing machines. I mostly played Bach," the young Syrian violinist recalled with an impish grin.

As rumour of his musical acumen spread, an old lady from one of the local churches came to visit at the camp. As a Christian, Rami had no problem complying with her request to come play at the church. The people in charge of it were also among those quick to recognise his indisputable talent, so they invited him to join their ranks. Yet Rami was still "in the waiting room".

In March 2016, the German authorities finally granted him asylum. Teresia and Winfred Oelbe, an elderly couple from the village of Niederschopfheim, offered him a place to stay: a room and a bathroom, free of charge.

The brunt of the young man's ordeal was finally drawing to a close. A few weeks later he signed a deal with Decca, whose executives learned both of his lengthy plight and his technical virtuosity. It wasn't long before his CD was released, consisting of his own compositions and a few adaptations.

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When all his social and concert-related responsibilities at the mountain resort were dispensed with, the visibly exhausted young man retired to his hotel room as soon as possible.

He told me he wanted a bit of peace and quiet. He needed to reflect, and the past few years hadn't exactly provided a lot of opportunity for that. Events, he let slip, were once again starting to overtake him. More than

anything he needed someone he could confide in. A good listener, someone worthy of his trust—someone who would neither expect nor demand anything of him, at least for the time being.

He gave me a rueful smile. "I'm very grateful to all these kind people," he said. "I know I've been very, very fortunate. But more than anything I'm interested in helping my brother, without whom I would never have got this far. He sacrificed everything for me! You know, I've felt so alone, much of my time in Germany. I miss my family and my friends. I really miss my old life. I'm learning to speak both German and English on the internet, while trying to get in touch with my acquaintances, who are scattered all over Germany. Let me tell you, it's not easy," he told me in the hotel room while absently fondling his violin.

He was quick to add that he was keen to avoid being perceived as a victim. Unlike hundreds of thousands of refugees and those who never even got the chance to flee, he'd been very lucky. He seemed all too aware of the fact. "My friend Mudhar, for instance? He wasn't half as lucky as I was. When he got to Germany, he started having these headaches. They kept getting worse and worse. They finally took him to a doctor, who found a tumour in his brain. His condition rapidly deteriorated, and he soon died. I miss him very much."

Rami buried his face in his hands, temporarily at the mercy of his thoughts. His body twitched uncontrollably; he stuck his head between his knees in a sort of foetal spasm. He looked for all the world like a gravely wounded child. All of a sudden, he was unable to answer a single question, not even with a syllable.

The next day he confided he had been sleeping poorly, very poorly indeed. His post-traumatic stress disorder felt all-pervasive, but nobody seemed to be interested in addressing the issue. Instead, everyone was focusing on how "hot" Rami had suddenly become—how popular. His anxiety, even depression behind closed doors was merely the collateral damage of success, right?

Yet I am happy to report a safety net has nonetheless started to form around him—an informal network of people not interested in Rami Basisah the product, but rather Rami Basisah the human being. From what I could see, these were the sort of people who had evidently experienced enough pain in their own lives to be able to understand and accept it when they saw that pain in someone else.

What was there to do? With a long road still ahead of him, Rami picked up his beloved instrument to help confront his stark realities.

"Play on, Rami," I whispered as we embraced in another temporary farewell, "Play on."

On September 19, 2017, he was booked to perform in London at the prestigious Royal Albert Hall … And if I knew anything at all, I knew I would be there to see him bringing down the house.[3]

Rami Basisah in Gevgelija, Macedonia, September 2015.
Photo: Jure Eržen

[3] https://inews.co.uk/essentials/syrian-refugee-rami-wows-royal-albert-hall-borrowed-stradivarius-violin/

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHERE TIME ITSELF HAS DIED

MOSUL, IRAQ, NOVEMBER 2017

The orange sun slowly set over the sooty ruins of westem Mosul. Nine months of clashes between the Islamic State and a coalition of the Iraqi army, Shia militias and US-led international forces have subjected the town to some of the most savage urban warfare the world has seen since World War II.

Today, western Mosul barely exists: more than eighty percent of all buildings have been razed or damaged. The old city centre is no more. The devastation in Iraq's second largest city is worse than that in Stalingrad. It covers a larger geographical area than Hiroshima during World War II.

Rubble, rubble everywhere. Entire street blocks have been turned to dust. There are bomb craters everywhere one steps, enormous piles of refuse, hundreds if not thousands of burned-out husks of lorries and sedans. The city is a labyrinth of destruction, an exitless maze that heralds the demise of the very concept of humanity.

What follows is hardly an exaggeration: high-rises that have imploded like contaminated piles of Jell-●. The all-pervasive smell of organic rot. A lone mosque braving it in the middle of an even plain, where a residential district used to be. An entire health-care complex—Medical City—razed to the ground. Someone seems to have done a passable job of clearing the main thoroughfares, but all they lead to is further images of unspeakable horror.

Let us not shy away from these images. A house, somehow unharmed, shimmering like a mirage amid the desert of nothingness. The skeletal remains of a factory and the bared foundations of municipal facilities. Spent large-calibre shells scattered across piles of sand. Tremendous heaps of impossibly twisted scrap metal, which, in a European city, might be taken for an art installation. Caved-in side streets. A graveyard with smashed headstones, regarded as blasphemy by ISIS's masterminds. Something that might once have been a football field. A small sooty palm tree that has somehow survived nine months of incessant bombs, rockets, shells, mines

and grenades. A lone emaciated cow dementedly grazing on a chunk of plastic. Splayed animal carcasses everywhere one steps. A long line in front of the only functioning gas station, symbolising the cankerous economic underbelly of Iraq's plight.

In a word, west Mosul looks like a tomb. What used to be a town is now a huge, evil crater that still imprisons thousands of innocent souls.

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Hundreds of trucks from Erbil and the northern Kurdish region are bringing in a steady stream of building materials. Yet little in west Mosul gives the impression that any sort of reconstruction is even possible. At the same time, hundreds of trucks take scrap metal from Mosul to Erbil and the Kurdish regions. Groups of men transport old bricks in wheelbarrows, all of them headed for the one huge fire sale that western Mosul has now become.

Even after a while here, it is still hard to believe one's eyes. Following a knee-jerk impulse, the mind is quick to turn from the scenes of utter desolation.

How is anything expected to live here ever again?

Yet for some, this is merely business as usual. Such as a patrol of the Iraqi Federal Police, backed up by a high-flying chopper that is treated to a bird's eye view of all this nothingness. Over the freshly sown flags and the childishly colourful religious iconography of the *Hashd al-Shaabi* militiamen, who helped "liberate" the Sunni western part of town. Over flashes of a monstrous marauding force that has long laid waste to everything in its path.

Lest we forget: in June 2014, the Islamic State convoy took Mosul virtually without a fight. The Iraqi army simply scattered to the winds, leaving behind a treasure trove of mostly American weapons. The same Iraqi army that was disbanded during the fall of 2003, turning over the entire state to the whims of religious militias, is now helping to liberate the city it left undefended up until 2014.

No.

This razed, thoroughly defeated city is not and is never meant to be free again.

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The oily, slow-flowing Tigris still occasionally washes up a corpse. Four out of five bridges that cross the river have been destroyed. Over the

remaining one, traffic sputters along in a grand slalom between Iraqi army and Shia militia checkpoints.

The Tigris' entire west bank, where the ISIS fighters dug themselves in until the bitter end, has been bombed clean. The tunnels the fighters used to move across the city have been filled in. Those west Mosul residents brave enough to have remained here fear that the underground still hides a number of "sleeper cells". And that whatever is down there can easily be spewed forth again.

Here amid the rubble, which still harbours hundreds of corpses, any sort of a sense of security is but a poor joke. Large parts of the area are riddled with mines, and there is no map.

Life—or whatever is still left of it—has been turned into a game of Russian roulette.

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A ten-year-old girl named Nada refused to let the doctors near her, at least at first. She was very afraid of them. After all, they were the ones who had stolen her left foot.

On April 4 she was loitering in the courtyard of her home in Mosul's Janjili quarter, which was completely obliterated during the last months of the offensive. The house was suddenly struck by a rocket—to this day, no one knows whose. The shrapnel hit Nada in her left foot and her jaw. Her father, Adel, took a nasty hit to his leg. A pair of her relatives died in the assault. The neighbours took them to the only functioning hospital, which happened to be controlled by ISIS.

Both of the doctors on hand ignored Nada and her father at first. All priorities were focused on the wounded Sunni militia extremists. According to numerous reports, the doctors only helped those civilians who had openly supported the self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate. Adel was left bleeding in his chair for ten hours. After that, they simply sawed off his right leg.

Nada herself was left to her excruciating pain for two days. The "doctors" could have saved her foot, but it wasn't a priority. After a while, her wounds caught an infection and started overflowing with pus. At the end of the two days, a doctor finally came along and amputated the foot. Then he sent her and her father home, even though they no longer had one.

The fighting was still far from over. The entire family moved in with the grandfather, where three other war-wrecked families already lived.

"I want to go to school," Nada told me at *Handicap International*'s rehabilitation centre in the eastern and significantly less afflicted part of

Mosul. Wearing a pretty red dress, Nada related that, before her town got destroyed, she used to go to the third grade of the local school.

As her mother held her hand, the physical therapist exercised the stump of the little girl's left foot, which was later fitted with a prosthetic device. From the way she surrendered herself completely to the therapist's gentle care, it was clear that Nada had released much of her fear of doctors. On two different occasions, she even flashed a bashful smile.

On the whole, her bright and curious eyes seemed filled with a renewed sense of confidence. After all, she had regained the ability to walk. And she was doing so well! She had been promised that she would soon depart for Jordan, where the *Médecins sans Frontiéres* (MSF) organisation agreed to operate on her damaged jaw. This means she might be able to eat normally again, one day.

Yet the bureaucrats, naturally enough, seem bent on jeopardising her trip to Amman. An all but irrelevant fact is that her family has gone bankrupt.

As to her grey-haired and bearded father, Adel? The war not only cost him his right leg. It also stripped him of the taxi he used to drive to support his family. The vehicle had been his only means of making a living. As I spoke to him, he was supposed to be on medication, but he simply could not afford it. With the help of his extended family, he is somehow able to make ends meet and attend his regular rehabilitation sessions. The second his luck runs out, however, the whole family will be facing dire straits, indeed.

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In mid-March, a nineteenyear old boy named Dawood was taking a flock of sheep off to graze. After stepping on a mine, his right hand and left foot were blown off. Some of his relatives heard the sharp detonation and ran over to where he lay mangled on the ground. Bleeding profusely, he had already lost consciousness. Yet they managed to save his life, or at least an approximation of it.

Then he was awarded a splendid opportunity.

After the conclusion of the grand military operation he and his parents visited a newly opened rehabilitation clinic. That was in the middle of June. The day we came to visit was the day Dawood could officially walk again.

"I wanted to be a soldier," he nodded proudly; the mangled child's body language resembled that of an adult in the wake of his stupendous feat. "But since I have lost an arm and a leg, the army won't have much use for me, right? Now I want to become an engineer."

Dawood carefully raised himself to his feet and made a few tentative steps. As he realized his accomplishment was yet another in a string of

successes, his eyes flashed with defiance. He employed the prosthetics that were now his right hand to take hold of a plastic cup and brought it up to his mouth.

"Now I can drink tea by myself!" he declared proudly and broke into a grin that was all the more impressive for its impishness.

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"It is very hard to find a single person in Mosul who hasn't lost a loved one or been wounded themselves. Round here, we mostly take care of the amputees. Seventy percent of the 310 people in our care had lost an arm or a leg in the raids. In total, some 18,000 people were wounded. There was a tremendous amount of amputations. In many cases, it had been done as a form of sanction—as punishment for disloyalty."

I was talking to Fanny Mraz, head of *Handicap International*'s mission in Iraq. We met at the Muharabeen primary care centre in east Mosul. The past two years she spent in Iraq have afforded her a very close view of the entire socio-political climate.

Her wards' wounds are not merely of the physical variety. Around here, signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome are so rife that they are virtually omnipresent. The trauma of nine months of savage bombardment after two years of ISIS reign—following the Western occupation as the root cause of it all—has cut deep into the residents of the ransacked city.

"So much trauma has been piled up on these people," Dr. Ibrahim Khalil of the *International Medical Corps* shook his head. "Well, at least they're now learning to speak openly about their pain—something rather unusual in these parts. Nonetheless, we are still at the beginning of our mission. So many people here need help. Some thousand souls are now taking part in our psycho-social rehabilitation programme. For them, this war won't be over for quite a while yet. All the public services having been so thoroughly dismantled, all of us here are facing a tremendous workload."

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Almost 2.5 million people lived in Mosul, before the grand October offensive. Since then, over a million have evacuated the city, especially from the western Sunni districts. A joint effort by the Iraqi security forces and the local humanitarian organisations, this was the greatest humanitarian evacuation in the history of mankind.

The evacuation may have saved a number of lives. But hundreds of thousands still lost their homes.

Some 5.8 million Iraqis were driven from their dwellings after the Islamic State spread out to claim a huge and mostly undefended chunk of territory in 2014. As things stand, 3.2 million remain displaced. 600,000 of them are from Mosul. Most of these people literally have no place to go back to. All of them are rightly fearful of returning to the crater that used to be a city—fearful of the next wave of violent vengeance, this time of the sectarian variety.

In all this chaos, everyone agrees on one single thing: Mosul will never look much like itself again.

The west part of the city remains monstrously empty. Life may be slowly flowing back into the eastern part of town, but it is now clear west Mosul has been sacrificed. It had been decided in advance that it was going to be erased. It would be impossible to describe the sheer kinetic forces employed to tear down this old and once very independent city. The immensity of the destruction can only be grasped first-hand.

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It feels like even time itself is dead here.

A pair of boys stare off into space amid the rubble, their eyes glazed with shock. Not much beside the great absence of things that used to be here is on display, anyway. The past has been erased, the present is a flat line going nowhere, and no one can begin to imagine anything resembling a workable future.

There are no stray dogs to be glimpsed. Even the smartest and toughest of alley cats seems to have been eliminated. During the final weeks of the campaign, starvation plagued western Mosul. People ate whatever they could get their hands on to survive. The Islamic State had confiscated most of the food; what was available was savagely expensive—a kilogram of sugar could set one back for as much as fifty dollars.

In a lot of places there was no electricity or drinking water. Western Mosul, especially its old city centre, was turned into a constantly bombarded open-air concentration camp. Caught in the crossfire, the city's inhabitants slowly turned into yet another tool of war.

Yet in spite of all this, some of the residents *have* decided to return. And, like the trees sprouting up through the cracks in the concrete, these people are now subsisting on crumbs amid the wreckage of their homes.

"We were very lucky. All of us survived. But we lost everything we had. My son used to have a shop in the old part of town. The entire family was depending on that shop. Now it is gone. Everything is gone."

This is the testimony of Ahmed Haji Jasim, 70, who spent the entire offensive here in Mosul. I spoke with him in the spacious and relatively undamaged guest room of his flat in the Al Rifai quarter. Mr. Jasim's family managed to survive on account of the secret bunker they built in the building's basement. During the worst of the bombardment they didn't leave their hideout for five days. They had to stay put even as they heard most of their belongings burning away above them.

"The worst of it was that we knew we could die any moment," the exhausted gentleman told me, sitting under a giant busted clock. "It took such a long time for things to calm down. We were terrified all the time. The food was extremely expensive."

Before the offensive, Mr. Jasim used to be a reasonably well-off man. Now he and his family are facing extreme poverty.

"But we're set to remain here. Where else can we go? After thirty-five years of bloody conflict I can no longer trust anyone. No, this was not a liberation. It is clear that the future for both Iraq and Mosul is going to be grim. There is too much hatred. You know, I'm so afraid for the future of my children."

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As if they hadn't already done enough, the ISIS fanatics also purposefully dismantled the local medical infrastructure. The destruction of the Salam hospital, during the first months of the fighting, is but one example.

The Salam hospital had already been the focus of horrendous strife in the spring of 2003, when I visited it for the first time. Back then, I stood in the pools of blood of the Iraqi soldiers that had perished trying to defend it and civilians who were caught in the crossfire. Owing to the sheer magnitude of the losses, the government decided to halt its military operations for a few weeks. The elite Golden Division, put in charge of most of the infantry missions, lost almost half of its men and materiel in just the first few months. This is the WWII ratio.

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"What you see here is not rebuilding. It is a resurrection."

Dr. Hasan Ibrahim, the West Mosul General Hospital's new managing director, gave me a rueful smile. Our meeting took place in his improvised office, somewhere in the maze of charred walls and gutted recovery rooms—the result of the Islamic State's strategic decision to burn the hospital to the ground.

This badly damaged wonder of resilience is currently the only functioning major health care institution in the ransacked urban desert. As soon as the Iraqi forces took control of the district on May 15, the remaining hospital staff took to "resurrecting" the facilities. The help of UNFPA and ECHO proved monumental in at least getting the stupendous project off the ground.

"We've seen almost total destruction of the premises," Dr. Ibrahim went on: "ISIS took out all our equipment. And when I say all, I mean every single piece. The demand for our services is staggering. As we re-entered the hospital, the fighting was still going on. Right here, very, very close to us. It was terrifying."

The hospital's managing director still serves as an active surgeon. In the past, he was arrested four times by ISIS thugs, and had been put on trial two times: the first because his trousers were too long and the second because they were deemed too short after he dutifully shortened them.

This was not a joke. But Dr. Ibrahim still managed to laugh as he recounted the story. He was also quick to add that he had been exceptionally lucky to escape unharmed.

"For the last two months we have been functioning as an ER unit. It's been horrible, just horrible. Even before all this madness, our staff hadn't been receiving their paychecks for three years. I can tell you they're not receiving them now! But they're still performing their duties with exemplary dedication."

As things stood, twenty-five people were "employed" at the hospital. After our interview, the managing director led us up a flight of soot-streaked stairs for a tour of the hospital's burnt-out upper floors. We ended up on the roof, where we were afforded a panoramic view of the totality of western Mosul's destruction.

"We are struggling," Dr. Ibrahim said simply and shook our hands goodbye.

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The main and only hospital in western Mosul is doing what it can to help some life go on amid the rubble.

The hospital's underground facilities may be in dire need of a complete renovation. But that hasn't stopped the staff from using them as an improvised maternity ward. Having been open since the first of June, it was allocated a team of one doctor and a pair of midwives.

During our visit, the modest premises, reminiscent of the field hospitals of yore, were a site of lively activity. It wasn't yet noon, and the world was

already two infant souls richer. That very morning, Suria Shaab Ahmad, 42, had given birth to the little girl she was now clutching to her breast, while lying on a hospital bed.

It was her fifth child. "Five is enough," Suria laughed merrily in spite of her apparent exhaustion, a mere two hours after the delivery. Then she told me that she had been escorted to the hospital by her Sixty-two-year-old mother. Suria's husband had disappeared—or, much more probably, had "been" disappeared—like the hundreds of other Sunni men who vanished without a trace.

"We come from the Bousefa quarter in west Mosul," we were told by Suria's mother, who sat patiently next to her daughter and her tiny granddaughter. "When the offensive started thirteen months ago, we were forced to run. Our house had been burned down. Everything we owned had gone up in flames. And so we moved to the old city centre."

The grandmother herself has given birth to six children. Five of them are still alive—only her son Mohammed, a member of the Iraqi army, was gunned down by extremists. His family searched for him for a long time. He had been hiding in a hole under the house the family had fled to. "It was horrible.... They had killed my son and burned down that house as well. Following the liberation we returned to Bousefa to live in a house where Daesh supporters used to live. Well, where else were we supposed to go?"

The grandmother spoke in a forceful, seemingly unruffled manner. But then she could hardly afford to seem ruffled. Both this robust matronly lady and I knew very well that the survival of an entire family hinged on her fortitude.

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"Today is a nice day. We are happy. Life is starting over again. I'm trying to pick a name for my little girl. Perhaps you've got a suggestion?" Suria Shaab Ahmad asked me.

"Al Nur," I suggested: "The Light?"

"Ha ha, that's going to be tough!" Suria smiled and kept stroking her precious newborn daughter. "We already have four girls named Al Nur in the family...."

I smiled back. "Yet still and in spite of everything," I said, "let there be Light!"

PART II:

MIGRATION:
ON THE RUN

CHAPTER TWELVE

"ARE WE NOT PEOPLE? WHY ARE WE TREATED LIKE ANIMALS? WHY!"

LEBANON, JANUARY 2014

Isra al Hosny is twenty-one years old. Seven months ago, she and her parents fled the ransacked Syrian city of Homs. Her mother and father were the ones who persuaded Isra to leave the city; her own choice would have been to stay.

Homs had already been turned into a ghost town, or better yet Syria's own Vukovar. Isra's family had spent the last two years there, living in a quarter which saw everyday fighting in the streets. This was nothing unusual, it was simply par for the course. Entire city blocks had been turned into a war zones. Everyone was running out of food, fuel and water. On some days, it felt like almost everyone was going mad with fear.

Roughly four months after her wedding, the fighting claimed the life of Isra's husband. That was the moment her two older brothers decided to join the rebel forces. At the time of writing, they are still fighting in Homs. Now and then, Isra tells me, they manage to get in touch by phone. They recently mentioned that many of her acquaintances who remained are now starving. They make meals out of leaves; they are burning up the wooden tiles from their bathrooms for heat. There is no help in sight.

"They're doomed," Isra whimpers tiredly. "The government has them surrounded from all sides. They keep bombing them from above. I will never forget the sound of those planes. I know exactly which bomb killed my husband, please believe me!"

Ten days ago, her brothers and a group of others tried to break out of the city. They had found a secret underground tunnel leading to the liberated territories. The plan was to ultimately reach Lebanon, somehow. "Oh, I couldn't wait to see them!" Isra remembers. But their attempt went horribly wrong. While the party was using the tunnel, a plane flew over and dropped a bomb exactly on target. Sixty-five people were killed.

"Luckily," Isra winces, "my brothers' unit stayed back to guard the rear. Both of them managed to survive. They are now hiding in basements. All I can do is pray."

I spoke to the brave young girl in an officially non-existent camp on the outskirts of the city of Zahle in Bekaa Valley. It is here that Lebanon has rounded up most of what now amounts to a million refugees from Syria.

"Us refugees," Isra explains, "I'm told we now make up almost one quarter of Lebanon's population." In under a second, her piercing dark eyes brim with tears, and she slouches back down again. Embarrassed, she averts her eyes and tries to apologise.

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Isra is one of six teachers who volunteer to tutor the Syrian children at the camp. Owing to 'the Palestinian question', Lebanese laws prohibit both setting up refugee camps and issuing official refugee permits. In reality, this spells a horrendous handicap for the refugees' situation, and also severely limits the effectiveness of various humanitarian organisations.

When the war broke out, Isra had just started her senior year in college, majoring in English literature. She has always adored books, she tells me—especially poetry. "The written word is something I feel quite willing to die for!"

In her case, this is not simply a high-flying turn of phrase, the kind you'd expect to hear from teenage European wanna-be-intellectuals after three beers in some trendy hipster café. With Isra, it is a proven fact. On account of the war, her college had been closed for quite a while. But three months ago, she got word that it was temporarily reopened. She made a few quick calculations that almost immediately coalesced into a plan—a vision she hesitated to share with anyone.

No matter what the cost, she decided that she would make her way back to Homs and pass her English Poetry exam.

She only informed her parents of the brazen venture just before she left. "I've always been a crazy girl!" she tells me with a shy grin. Her parents were rife with fear, but there was no realistic way for them to prevent their daughter from returning to hell. The kind of willpower this tall and slender girl has was simply unstoppable.

"It was really awful," Isra recalls, standing in front of the camp's two small classrooms. "There were so many checkpoints! The government soldiers tried to arrest me a number of times. At one point, they went and dragged me out of the car. But finally I managed to reach Homs—I really couldn't tell you how! I stayed there for four weeks. I studied by candlelight.

I was hungry, and there was shooting all around. But I did pass the exam—that part wasn't difficult at all. As soon as my mission was accomplished, I returned to Lebanon. The return trip was much easier. These days, it would no longer be possible."

As she tells me this, the girl's voice strikes me as somewhat distracted, as if she were describing some boring TV show and not telling a story that could have brought tears to the eyes of the most *blasé* listener.

From inside the school, we hear children's patter and a loud, almost rhythmic cough.

Each of the two cramped classrooms provides a reasonably upbeat and stable environment for thirty-five children, boys and girls between the ages of four and fourteen. It is obvious that the teachers—all of them young Syrian refugees—share a close bond with their wards. The facilities have been provided by a well-standing local company; UNICEF took care of the little plastic chairs, schoolbags, notebooks and pens.

At the time of my visit, this was the only school for refugees in Lebanon operating under a solid roof. Like all the others, it started out in the open, depending solely on the goodwill and the initiative of the teachers, who kept visiting the neighbouring camps to recruit children.

Depressingly, they discovered that while the vast majority of the children were eager to come, their parents didn't feel schooling was a particularly high priority right then. In the words of Roberta Russo, the UNHCR's spokeswoman who was interviewed in Beirut: "It is hardest on the children. Back in Syria, most of them had been in school. Over here, this is simply not an option for so many of them. A large percentage of mothers, for example, have been forced to send their sons to look for work. It is the only way for the family to survive. And at the moment, there isn't very much that can be done."

Russo made no bones about the gravity of the situation. "It is a terrible tragedy, so many children stripped of their education. It is a horrendous thing for the entire society, and also for its future. The Syrian children tell me how fond they had been of school, and how terribly they miss it. For them, their school days represent security, peace, stability, optimism, hope, joy and friendship. Did you know that seventy percent of the children in these camps do not leave their new lodgings even once a week? It's a shocking statistic—and in this respect, things are especially hard on the girls. Most of these children have been deeply traumatised. They need a whole lot of help, not least of all some proper psychological assistance."

Isra, too, would surely qualify for that sort of assistance. Her every move spoke of profound trauma and a long string of losses too painful to

contemplate. But instead of receiving aid, she and her peers are doing their best to offer it to the children.

"I write a lot," she confides. "I keep a diary. I write down many of the stories all around me. Who knows, maybe someday somebody will want to read them." She tells me this in the dusty courtyard of one of the world's smallest schools, as a sudden, if not entirely unexpected, peal of children's laughter rings out from inside, a loud and defiant cry of hope.

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For the past two years, Bekaa Valley—lodged between Beirut, the snowy peaks of 'the Arab Alps' and the Syrian border—has been the site of an unspeakable tragedy. While it holds true that Syrian refugees are dispersed all over Lebanon, the greatest number of them have converged in this valley, a large part of which is controlled by Hezbollah.

Last year, this Shiite movement entered the war on the side of president Bashar al-Assad. Its doing so thoroughly changed the balance of power, both on the Syrian battlegrounds and in Lebanese politics. One million refugees, most of them Sunnis, have radically transformed the country's demographics and poured much fuel on the fire of sectarian strife.

The still festering wounds of the Lebanese civil war have been reopened. The situation in the valley rapidly deteriorated last spring when, with Hezbollah's assistance, the Syrian government reclaimed the strategically vital town of Al Qusayr. In the weeks to follow, the valley saw a steady influx of Sunni extremists. Yet again, Lebanon was facing the return of deadly car bombs and suicide bombers. On the day of my visit, one of them blew himself up in the nearby town of Hermel. The toll was four killed and twenty-six wounded.

The battle for Al Qusayr was one of the ugliest in the three years of the Syrian war, itself the most savage conflict of our time.[1] After the city was reduced to rubble, the number of those fleeing for the Lebanese border went through the roof. Even now, some 3,000 new refugees get registered with the UNHCR every day. A more realistic way of looking at that number is to note that only a fraction of the entire mass has the will and the energy to get swamped in the ridiculous bureaucracy. Those who have it worst are often unwilling or unable to leave their pitiful dwellings—an ancient canvas tent on the windy barrens, perhaps, or a ramshackle cardboard hut.

One of these unfortunate souls is Mr. Assy Hassan al Khalid. The father of nine packed up his family and fled to Lebanon immediately after the fall

[1] https://ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance

of Al Qusayr. It was his misfortune to get severely wounded in the incessant fighting. On arrival, they first took him to the local hospital. The cost of the operation, which made sure he retained the control of his legs, was covered by an anonymous Palestinian gentleman. Now, together with his children and two wives, he lives in a barely standing tent, which provides scant protection from the vicious mountain winds.

"It is good that the snow has melted," Assy Hassan tells me. "If nothing else, it's a little warmer than it was."

His younger children all go around barefoot. Their emaciated skeletons are covered in what can only be described as rags. Osman, Assy's oldest son, sits quietly in front of the entrance to the tent. During the shelling of Al Qusayr, a piece of shrapnel hit him in the head. "He is not entirely himself any more. Most of the time, he doesn't say a word, and he keeps wandering around. He desperately needs help," his mother implores me as we stand and watch the boy.

"It was... armageddon. You do know what that means? The end of the world. We were attacked from all sides. By planes and by tanks. By the army and by Hezbollah. We could not defend ourselves. There were so few of us, and we were so poorly armed. We were exhausted from constant attacks. Bodies were lying everywhere. They killed my parents, then my brother was mowed down. My other brother is now rotting in one of the regime prisons. I don't have any sure way of knowing if he's alive or dead. It was terrible! Houses were collapsing left and right. My entire city is gone. Our big lovely house is gone. Our lives are gone."

Assy Hassan al Khalid needs no prompting to tell me all this. Clearly, the man is still in a profound state of shock. "We were doing well, you know! I had my trade, and there was plenty of work for all. If you stayed out of politics, the regime left you alone. But when the protests started, it all changed and we were attacked. We had to defend ourselves. The revolution? No, it was simply not worth it. So many people killed, our whole country in ruins. We will never be able to go back and live a normal life. It is no use to die for politics. Everything has gone to hell. Suddenly, our country is filled with extremists. Where did they come from? Huh? What do they want? Why is it like this?"

These sentiments were echoed by almost all of the people I talked to in the Lebanese camps. The revolution is dead. In fact, Syria itself is dead. The original rebel forces have been decisively defeated. The rebellion has been quashed—first by the regime, and then by the various extremist Sunni groups quietly backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. By now it is safe to say the revolution devoured its own children and then spat them out in a world of hurt. As a result, we are observing the greatest humanitarian

tragedy in the tragedy-choked Middle East, since the Palestinian *naqba* of 1948.

Not only Syria has been affected. Something revoltingly similar may very soon start happening to Lebanon. In this country as well, the Sunni-Shiite tensions border on irreparable hatred. This is another part of the reason why Lebanon has seen such a resurgence of its war-time economy.

Since the law states that there can be no such thing as an official refugee camp, the fleeing masses are forced to pay staggeringly steep rents for their tents or cardboard dwellings. It is a take-it-or-leave-it deal for them as soon as they cross the border. Small wonder, then, that a large number of Syrian families have been caught in a vicious circle of debt. A lot of it is being paid off by the children through slave labour, prostitution and drug trafficking.

You can see these Syrian children everywhere, roaming the streets of Beirut in a zombie-like trance and begging for alms; you can see them ransacking the dumpsters for scraps of only half-rotten food. One does feel compelled to ask: where are the humanitarian organisations? Where is the international community? Where are the Lebanese authorities? Where is the much-flaunted Muslim solidarity? One telling fact provides an answer to these questions: just three weeks ago Saudi Arabia made a generous "donation" of three billion dollars to the Lebanese army so it could buy French arms.

"We desperately need help!" I was told by UNCHR's Roberta Russo. "We need a lot of it, and we need it now! I'm not talking only humanitarian relief. Lebanon is in desperate need of broader assistance. Decisive action needs to be taken to build the necessary infrastructure and to take care of the logistics. It is crucial to agree on some sustainable way of shouldering this overwhelming burden. Ninety-seven percent of all refugees from Syria are stationed in the bordering countries. A massive international investment is crucial. At the same time, we need to do everything humanly possible to end the war."

Each month, Assy Hassan al Khalid is forced to pay the Lebanese owner of where the "unofficial" refugee camp is located 160 dollars in rent. For this shocking sum, all his family gets is the use of a few square meters of ground.

"We are up to our necks in debt," Assy Hassan tells me with something very close to despair. "We've got nothing left. We've already sold everything we could. At night we're burning up plastic for at least some warmth. My children are sick, but we can't afford the treatments. We're hungry—oh, we're so very hungry. How is this possible? There is no help. Nothing. No one even comes to see how we are doing. It is as if we don't exist. All we've got left is our faith in God and in each other."

The poor man searches my face for a response. "Are we not people?" he finally asks me. "Why are we being treated like animals? Why!"

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"I would never have joined the war if I had known what was going to happen to us. I admit this openly. I fought with the Free Syrian Army. After the initial round of protests, when the regime launched the assault on Homs, we had no choice but to take up our rifles and fight back. Up until then, we were living normal lives. Okay, no, we were not free men, but if we minded our own business and kept out of politics, we were left pretty much alone."

I am told this by a man named Maziad Khalid al Dahab in front of his temporary accommodations in yet another refugee camp west of Zahle. The Syrian government's bombing campaign cost him his right eye, and he tells me that his left one isn't too good either. The only thing he can be sure of is that there is no work for him in Lebanon. Precious little of it is available for the Syrian men who are in perfect condition, and even when they do get it, the pay is maybe half of what it used to be. "The refugee's wage" is what the angry and thoroughly humiliated Syrians call it.

"If I had known what was to follow, I wouldn't have joined the protests," Maziad goes on. "Yes, it's an awful thing to say, but it's true. We believed in the revolution. And now we no longer have a country. We no longer have anything we could call a home! We are rats now. That is what we are. Over here, they're squeezing us for all they can get."

Maziad motions toward a crude agricultural structure in the middle of a deserted field. "You see this hole here? We actually pay 200 dollars a month to live here. Can you believe that? But what choice do we have? Once a month the UN sends us a food parcel. No no, I'm not complaining, it is desperately needed, but that is all the help we get! We've got nothing, our savings are long gone. My three children are freezing. There are thirteen of us living on sixteen square meters of space! My cousin has got six children and a pregnant wife."

Maziad's tale is, at the same time, heart-wrenching and numbingly typical. Despite the war, he says his wish is to return home as soon as possible. It doesn't matter that he has literally nothing to return to. Here in Lebanon, he claims, things are even worse. Tired of humiliation and extortion, his uncle returned to Syria three weeks ago. As soon as he crossed the border, he vanished without a trace.

As we stand there talking, a large group of men approaches and joins in. A heated debate is soon underway; most of it revolves around whether there had ever been any sense in the Syrian revolution. It is painfully easy to

establish that these people have been stripped of all illusions. Idealism is now a dirty word. All they have left is a huge wasteland everywhere around them, prowled by human vultures of every imaginable stripe.

"I no longer trust anyone. Not even my relatives," I am told at another camp by twenty-year-old Zuher Mohammed, a student from Idlib. "I did fight for a while, but then I decided there was no point. My wife was killed in a rocket attack. We had been married for four months. Most of my friends and comrades have been mowed down. They were replaced by people I didn't know. They weren't even from our city. There were many foreigners among them. One day I jumped on a motorbike and headed south. All I wanted was to get out of Syria. At one of the checkpoints I was beaten by the government soldiers. I was severely injured—my spine is bent, so I am unable to work. The truth is, I'm completely useless."

The two of us are standing in a courtyard where Zuher's peers are busily mixing concrete. After he says his piece, he stares at me for almost a minute in silence. "Yes, of course I'm against the war," he says eventually. "I'm also against all extremists, against Bashar al-Assad, against Hezbollah and against the Saudis. All of them completely destroyed our country and our way of life. I am now alone in the world. I don't have anything you could call a goal or even a wish. Peace is impossible. My wife is never coming back. I will never have children."

The next day, several rockets exploded in the vicinity of a refugee camp located in one of the neighbouring Lebanese towns. Seven people were killed, many are injured.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SYRIA'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: MURDER, TORTURE, FAMINE

ZA'ATARI, JORDAN, MARCH 2014

Abdal Mohammad Barah, 35, took part in the first wave of protests against president Bashar al-Assad in the city of Daraa in southern Syria. Like dozens of his fellow protesters from this long-besieged town, he assured me the protests were absolutely peaceful. At least until the protesters were fired upon first by the regime's snipers and later by bombers, as well as heavy artillery.

"I was quick to realize it would all go to hell. And that a great war was about to break out all over the country. Six months after the protests started, Daraa was flooded with weapons. Everybody was armed," Abdal told me in Jordan, where he sought refuge status a little more than a year ago. He had decided to flee, not only on account of the war and the concomitant general deprivation, but also on account of learning he had been blacklisted by the authorities. Had he been caught, he would have been imprisoned and very probably killed. His crime? He had been among the first to help distribute medical supplies to the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

In January 2012, the first of the regime's tanks entered Abdal's village, followed by a plague of government troops. Abdal and his four brothers were promptly arrested. He spent the next five months in prison—first in Daraa, then Damascus. "They refused to believe me I wasn't one of the FSA's fighters! They employed all kinds of torture. It was unspeakable. Especially in Damascus, where thousands of men were imprisoned, some of them sixteen years old, some of them eighty!"

I got talking to Abdal at the house he was renting on the outskirts of Mafraq city, close to the Jordan-Syria border. Before the war, he informed me, he used to run a small shop for building material. "Life," he recalled, "used to be so peaceful and pleasant!" Now both his shop and his house stood in rubble, both of them burned to the ground. His past had been erased.

And his future? Well, his future was something he didn't dare dwell on. He knew all too well that the war was far from over.

During his long months of imprisonment, Abdal almost gave up. The constant torture took a gruesome toll. During those unimaginable five months, he was completely cut off from the outside world. One night, his interrogators beat him senseless again, trying to get him to 'confess' to being a terrorist. In the process, they broke his femur with a stick. When they took in his agony, they drove him to the hospital. To get permission to contact his family, he had to sign a statement that he had injured himself by falling down a flight of stairs. Once contacted, his family immediately bribed the hospital staff to let Abdal go.

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When he returned home, he was faced with a scene of utter devastation. His house was already crumbling. The village's marketplace had burned down; not a single shop remained unharmed. Members of the *shabiha*, the pro-regime militia, were pillaging whatever they could lay their hands on.[1] The entire village was surrounded. All the time, artillery shells, rockets and bombs kept pummelling the ground. Abdal came across countless corpses. His uncle, he was told, had been burned alive. It was clear that he needed to round up his wife and three children immediately, and flee the country. For him, it was either escape or death.

"I was on crutches. I could hardly move. But with the help of some smugglers, we somehow managed to make our way to Jordan. There was nowhere else to go. They took us in at the Za'atari refugee camp. We arrived when the situation there was at its roughest. The place was in total chaos. There was a fresh outbreak of hepatitis. Fortunately, I was given medical assistance at the camp. Soon, I was able to walk by myself again."

On a less positive note, it didn't take long for him to run out of money. He was then reduced to borrowing from his friends and relatives. Like thousands of refugees he got locked in a hopeless spiral of debt. His family is afforded some relief through the food vouchers provided by the UNHCR, but those typically amount to some thirty dollars per month. Abdal was also a pariah on Jordan's labour market, because he had been severely injured. Officially, Syrian refugees are not allowed to work in Jordan, but the law is widely ignored. Due to an influx of thousands and thousands of desperate Syrians, the price of labour in Jordan—much like in Lebanon—has

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14482968

plummeted. Many of the illegal labourers are children, some of them as young as six.

It is widely accepted that Syrian refugees will do anything anywhere for any price in Jordan. Because of this, the locals' initial hospitality was soon replaced by an escalating wariness. And it is little wonder, since the estimated 660,000 Syrians here now form more than a tenth of Jordan's entire population.

"I really miss my relatives, who decided to stay in Syria," Abdal told me not long before we parted. "They refused to leave because of their deep connection to the land. But sooner or later they will have to flee, and when they do, their houses will be handed over to people who are loyal to the regime. It's a vicious circle, what can I tell you ... Honestly, I can see no realistic solution for Syria."

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On the outskirts of the refugee camp lies the village of Za'atari. Over the last few years, its population has gone up from 3,000 to 22,000. Refugees reside in virtually all of the houses—as well as in front of them, in parks, by the side of the road, on playgrounds, in tents and in trailers. Owing to the refugee crisis, the regions along the Syrian border have seen a fivefold surge in rent prices. There has also been a horrific increase in the prices of electricity and water. The wells are rapidly drying up; water-related incidents are a daily occurrence. To make matters worse, the past year has seen only thirty percent of the normal precipitation rate.

"We are still trying to convince ourselves we've only come here to Jordan for a long visit. At first, this belief helped us to hang on to our sanity. But now that we know the war is far from over, it gets harder every day. We sit, we talk, we wait. The only thing that helps us go on is the fact that we've got each other," a woman named Zena told me. She hailed from the Ahmeida village on the outskirts of Homs. Along with her black-garbed friends and relatives, we sat and drank tea in one of the countless houses in Za'atari that provides shelter to Syrian refugees .

"Back home," Zena recalled, "the first year of the war was relatively quiet. Then the fighting erupted overnight. We were surrounded by government troops, and rockets started smashing into our village. Not a single house was left unharmed. We were driven from our homes. Many of our relatives were killed, until we as well were consumed with hatred. You know, I could never return to a country ruled by the demon criminal named Bashar al Assad."

Every morning, madam Zena told me, she wakes up missing her garden and her kitchen—her traditional comforting spaces that always brought her peace of mind. She often dreams of being back home, preparing a meal for her entire family, many members of which are now dead.

"I am here," she said, "but my heart has been left behind." How ironic, she quickly added, that Syria, the land that traditionally supplies the region with quality food, is now devastated by famine.

The above-mentioned famine is no coincidence. For the past few months, the regime has been deliberately and systematically starving the population. This became readily apparent when international humanitarian workers arrived in Homs and were faced with images reminiscent of Auschwitz or Manjača: barely moving corpses, people clinging onto the renmants of consciousness, thousands of men and women who had long subsisted solely on leaves, bark and grass.

"I've seen a lot, but that was by far the worst thing that had ever happened to me," I was told by an Irish humanitarian worker named Aiofe McDonell. "It was sheer hell, a tragedy of the worst possible proportions. I've been here from the first days of war; I've been here when the first Syrian refugees entered Jordan. One can get used to many things, but the state of the Syrian refugees now coming here is simply unconscionable."

Conversing with McDonnell at the Za'atari maternity clinic, I saw she was clearly exhausted. For the past two and a half years, she hadn't had a moment's rest. "When things were roughest, we were taking in up to 4,000 new refugees each day," she informed me with a rueful shake of her head. "I mean, in this day and age? You'd imagine we would have learned at least something from history, wouldn't you?"

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I was told much the same by Heinke Veit from ECHO, the European Commission's department for overseas humanitarian aid and civil protection.

"This crisis now," she winced, "it's something completely different from anything we've faced so far. The effect on the neighbouring countries is enormous. The refugees flooding in from Syria are used to a certain quality of life. They have lost so much. This is what separates them from, say, the refugees you find in Africa. And it is why they demand much more from the humanitarian organisations. They know how to stick up for their rights."

Veit, a veteran of every sort of war and natural disaster, knows what she is talking about. ECHO is well known and appreciated as one of the biggest donors of humanitarian aid in the region. It also played a key role in setting up the Za'atari refugee camp.

As things stood, around 100,000 refugees were stationed in Za'atari. Fifty-eight percent of them were children. At the time of writing, Za'atari had already become the fourth largest city in Jordan.

Over the last twelve months, the situation in the camp has improved greatly. What used to be a chaotic hole in the middle of the desert, ruled by "the refugee mafia" and gangs of frustrated teenagers, has been turned into a place that offers its traumatised inhabitants a modicum of decency. At the same time, it is clearly a place built to last—a camp whose very architecture informs the careful observer that the people in charge know very well how long the Syrian conflict is likely to last—and that even, when the madness finally dies down, that many of Za'atari's inhabitants will have no place to return to.

One man who faces daily reminders of these grim facts is Kilian Kleinschmidt, the camp's German manager. This strong and refreshingly direct man was called in by the UNHCR at a time when chaos reigned in the camp, and he was quick to rise to the challenge.

"This is the most shocking crisis I have ever witnessed," the khaki-clad veteran informed a group of journalists in his office, as he stood next to the camp's map. "And believe me, I've seen it all. What we're facing in Syria is a total collapse of society. Millions of people have been driven from their homes—over a third of the entire population! Many of those homes have been razed to the ground. As if that wasn't enough, there are many more millions who want to leave but cannot. Why? Because it is too dangerous, and because they can't afford to!"

According to Kleinschmidt, the Za'atari camp is just a tiny window into the indescribable tragedy of the Syrian people. But for men like him, surrender is not an option. Many seemingly impossible things have already been accomplished. As little as a year ago, after all, the Za'atari camp was something very much like a war zone, where foreign humanitarian visitors were met by a hail of stones from all sides as often as not

"That was only too understandable," Kleinschmidt explained. "Each and every one of these unfortunate people was angry and frustrated. Each and every one had seen horrible things. Most of them had lost someone very dear to them. Also, the camp was awash with rumours. All kinds of bombastic, hard-to-check information was coming in from Syria. Fear and insecurity were rampant. '*The West bombed Colonel Gaddafi! But it left Bashar al Assad in peace!*' you often heard them say. They felt we were guilty of many things. Tensions were running high, and they felt they couldn't trust us at all. You have to understand, many of the people here are located only a few miles away from their homes. It was and remains

profoundly frustrating for them. And if you add all that up, it was an almost ideal climate for the 'bad guys' to take control of the camp."

This is Kleinschmidt's summation of the background behind last year's riots, which created some heavy pressure for the Jordanian army to intervene. But luckily, that didn't happen, and another great tragedy was prevented.

"It's much too easy for us to forget that refugees are only human," Kleinschmidt said with a mournful smile. "And that each and every single one of them counts."

These days, foreign visitors to Za'atari no longer run the risk of being stoned. Quite the contrary: in the camp's central area, the so-called *Champs-Élysées*, business and commerce are thriving. Some 2,000 small businesses are now open all over the place—stores, workshops, coffeeshops and restaurants.

According to both the shop owners and the officials, a proprietor would have been required to fork over 5,000 dollars to the "controlled mafia", in order to open an establishment. However, there are now two supermarkets operating in the camp; the UNHCR's fresh, "corporate" paradigm is evident everywhere. The Syrians, after all, are widely regarded as an incredibly resourceful and entrepreneurially gifted people. There is nothing they can't fix, no raw material they cannot use to full effect.

As was readily apparent, they are equally skilful at selling things. After all, it was some 3,000 years ago in Damascus that the world's first indoor market popped into being. With every successful, mutually beneficial transaction at Za'atari, a semblance of dignity is restored to these battered people, and maybe even a glimmer of hope for a better future.

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"We are not doing so badly. There are about a hundred barbershops in the camp. But ours is one of the most popular!" beamed Karim al Khalid, whom I met at his seat of operations on the so called *Fifth Avenue*, Za'atari's second busiest street. Pairing up with his cousin, Karim—a bearded man hailing from Daraa—opened the shop some six months ago. Before the war, he spent eleven years running a barbershop in his home town.

"Business is okay," he told me. "We have about thirty customers each day. This is a sign that things are getting less crazy here at the camp. It's obvious the folk have begun to realize they won't be able to return to Syria for a long time, so they try to build a life much like the one they would have led at home. And regular visits to a barber are certainly a part of that!"

To Karim, the barbershop has become his home. With a razor and a pair of scissors in his hand, he said, he was often able to forget about the war.

Another person who proves that the Syrian people are born entrepreneurs is Mrs. Um Jihad, the mother of seven and the grandmother of fifteen. She, too, fled to Za'atari from Daraa, where she used to work as a seamstress, before things took a bad turn. First, her oldest son Aymad was severely wounded during the siege. (Three out of the four bullets he took still remain lodged in his body.) Then her other son fell from a truck and seriously injured his head.

It fell to Um Jihad to take matters into her own hands. As early as a few days after her arrival in the camp, the fifty-five-year-old matriarch started making T-shirts from the blankets provided by the UNHCR. Mrs. Jihad began collecting scrap all over Za'atari and somehow managed to get hold of an ancient sewing machine.

By the time I met with her, she had managed to expanded the scope of her production to pyjamas, trousers and baby clothes. She was making enough that her family, including her tattooed Bedouin mother, was able to survive. But the going was far from easy.

"I don't think I can last much longer here," she said. "I long to return home, though I realise that's simply not possible at the moment. Above all else, I want to leave this camp. My wish is to have at least a minimum of freedom and maybe some land I could call my own. For us, Syrians, this is a very important thing."

While talking to me, the chain-smoking matron's eyes kept flicking to the pigeons she keeps in a number of cages. "I like to watch them, especially when I'm nervous or sad. For some reason, they calm me down."

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At the maternity clinic close by, dozens of women waited for a gynaecological examination. Four new souls winked into existence that day in the camp. Seven hundred babies have been born since the clinic's opening day seven months ago—roughly a hundred per month.

In many ways, Za'atari looks and feels like a refugee camp for children. They are everywhere you look. Only about a fourth of them are currently being schooled, but the percentage is slowly increasing. Unfortunately, the majority still wonder around the camp, doing the worst-paid and often most physically exhausting jobs. Many of them are forced to leave the camp and work like slaves in order to help pay off their impoverished parents' debts.

Among the refugees, child labour is pretty much the norm. Though, humanitarian workers have tried to combat this by rerouting kids to the

classrooms. In Za'atari, there are five of them, and they are still not full. Even so, they present a noble and heartening sight.

"You know," Kilian Kleinschmidt summed it up: "We are trying to provide them with at least a semblance of childhood."

But many important questions still remain. One of them is: where would young Osama be able to go to school? Osama is one of the babies born during my visit to the camp. I talked to his mother Mariam, 33, a mere few hours after his birth.

She explained that her family fled to Jordan from a town called Huta, which the regime had targeted with a chemical attack. The survivors arrived in Za'atari five months ago, stripped of all their belongings. Mariam had to leave both her parents behind, since they were too starved to even attempt the journey. For a while now, she had been getting word that the parents were eating only leaves and grass. For those remaining in Syria, this has now become something quite normal, in no way an exception.

Mariam told me that she last spoke to her parents three days back. "They can only eat what they scrounge up in front of their house. They don't dare to venture any further because of the constant shooting and bombing. A week ago, my husband's brother had been murdered because he could no longer bear the hunger and decided to go out and look for food. He was immediately shot. He was the last adult man in the house. His eldest son gathered up the rest of the family, and they all fled here to Jordan."

Little wonder, then, that in a few weeks, the Jordanian authorities are set to open another camp at the neighbouring town of Arzak.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HELL IN THE AEGEAN

KOS, GREECE, JUNE 2015

During 2014 and 2015, the Eastern Aegean islands were the main gateway for refugees and immigrants seeking entrance into the European Union. The few kilometres separating the Greek islands from the Turkish coast have long been one of the Turkish traffickers' favourite points of entry; the sheer volume of those making their escape to a purported better life has never been greater.

"You know the most devastating irony of all? That we have to pay one thousand euros to get from Bodrum to Kos, while the return trip costs the tourists only ten euros," Amir Obada spat. The thirty-year-old Syrian was standing with me in the shade cast by an abandoned hotel named 'Captain Elias' on the outskirts of Kos town.

Amir hailed from the famous Christian town of Maaloula in Syria, where a bitter struggle between government forces, the Islamic State, various insurgent militias and armed groups of local Christians has been taking place for years.

When the war broke out, Amir was just finishing his chemistry studies. His father was one of the professors at the Maaloula university, which got shut down on account of the fighting. As a devout pacifist Amir refused to pick up a rifle. Remaining at home, he assured me, was not an option: his family was getting decimated in the crossfire. And so, he set off for Turkey and then to one of the Eastern Aegean islands, where a severe humanitarian crisis was devloping.

The Greek authorities were unprepared for such a massive influx of people. So far this year, the island of Kos alone has seen the arrival of some 7,500 migrants and refugees, six times the amount over the same period in 2014.

Most of them have come from Syria and Afghanistan. During the second half of May and the first days of June, Kos—still favoured by tourists from all over the world—descended into a state of turmoil. Anywhere from 100

to 500 people were arriving every day, by rubber dinghies and small sailboats.

Amir Obada was one of them, having set off on his journey accompanied by five of his Syrian friends and relatives. At the time of our interview, he was sharing a small room with them in the squalid, abandoned hotel with no electricity and no functioning toilet facilities.

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"I'm so glad to be safe. I don't know what else to say," Amir shared. "These last couple of years I've seen some things that, well …, I still can't believe I managed to escape. But I can't help thinking about my parents and relatives who remain in Syria—I think about them all the time. Unlike most of my travelling companions, I'm not married and I don't have any children. In a time of war, that is a huge advantage."

Amir proudly produced his ticket for the evening ferry to Athens. At least partly owing to the approaching peak of the tourist season, the Greek authorities recently introduced the so-called fast track for Syrian refugees. This meant that the people arriving daily were not given too much hassle. Upon reaching Athens, they were issued a permit for a six-month stay, which, for the most part, can be renewed later without great difficulty.

None of the many refugees I interviewed wished to remain in Greece. They understood all too well that the country was in a state of profound crisis, and that things would only get worse.

"I had to leave my wife and four children behind—they're waiting for me in the countryside near Damascus," Muhammad Issa, 45, told me as we sat in a cramped room filled with old mattresses, tattered blankets and empty plastic water bottles. "I promised them that, once I reached Europe, I'd do everything in my power to help them join me."

Muhammad nodded gravely. "Yes, I know it's going to be very hard. But I simply couldn't have brought them along on such a dangerous journey. It was too risky. And the children were too small."

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Some two and a half years ago, Yassin Sinno, 26, undertook a similar task—getting his loved ones safely out of Syria. He somehow managed to escape Maaloula and reach London through Turkey. The British authorities eventually approved his request for asylum. Now earning his living as a waiter in a Yorkshire coffee shop, he was free to travel throughout the European Union. He had come to the island of Kos to pick up his brothers

Mahmmoud and Hussein, who had sailed here in the same boat with Amir Obada.

"I can't describe my joy at seeing them again. We realised it was God's will for us to be rejoined, and we all cried," Yassin grinned, going on to describe how he had arranged his brothers' entire trip from Syria to Greece.

His current goal was to reach Athens and seek out one of the more competent "contacts", who could help his siblings further on their way. The official routes to Great Britain were out of the question. At the time of writing, the one remotely tenable path out of Greece and onward to Western Europe was the gruelling and extremely dangerous walk across Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary.

Muhammad Issa managed to reach Greece on his second attempt. The first time around, he was caught by the Turkish police. He was thrown in jail for two days and then released. In Bodrum and the nearby Turkish coastal cities, where the trafficking trade was booming, this was considered a routine matter.

"There were forty-four of us on the rubber boat," Muhammed recalled in the ruined hotel. "It was very dangerous. We went out around midnight. The trip only took two and a half hours. I was very scared because I can't swim. When we got to Kos, they took us in with great decency and kindness. It's just that here, where we are now stationed, things are quite unbearable. But tonight we're moving on."

Amir Obada didn't have a clear geographical destination picked out. He was more than willing to go anywhere where he could continue his studies in chemistry. His country of choice would be Sweden, yet he knew all too well that moving there might prove out of his reach.

He was quite prepared to start from scratch, too. In order to reach Greece he had had to invest a great deal of his savings. That is why, like most of his friends and companions on Kos, he took up lodgings in the filthy and dilapidated ruin of a hotel on the outskirts of Hippocrates' home town.

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In front of the hotel's main building, a few Afghan teenagers kicked around a somewhat deflated football. In a nearby meadow, a pair of cows grazed in the sun, while a number of Pakistani men were lying in the shade.

On a platform in front of what remained of the hotel, the local authorities had set up a system of pipes that supplied the residents with drinkable water and provided a place where the refugees could wash and shave. As I strolled by, some of them rinsed out their clothes and mended the decrepit shoes that still needed to carry them on the long hike to Central Europe.

"I'm not used to living like this," Amir frowned at me. "Before the war we lived very well back home in Syria. I have to admit that the people here greeted us kindly. But there are so few resources to be spared for us refugees."

As already stated, Amir chose his rundown lodgings in order to save money. "I'll need every coin I got to get me further into Europe. I have decided to walk," he informed me. "My intention is to cross Macedonia and Serbia to get to Hungary. Once there, I will probably take a train through Austria all the way to Germany. To be honest, I don't have much choice."

As he was laying out his strategy, Amir's comrades kept nodding in silent agreement. Not one of them was able to produce anything resembling a clear-cut plan. They were hoping for one of the target European countries to grant them asylum. As of yet, no one had informed them how to apply or even what basic rights they had.

In general, the presence of the international humanitarian squads on the island of Kos was much too thinly spread for comfort. The necessary infrastructure for helping the migrants and refugees was virtually non-existent. For the most part, these tormented souls were dependant on the help of local good Samaritans. Fortunately, a small itinerant team of *Médecins Sans Frontières* was on hand to provide the most basic medical assistance.

"The island was completely unprepared for such a crisis," explained Aggelos Kallinis, the local UNHCR representative. "The sheer number of incoming people is staggering. And it is only likely to increase. Right now, the smugglers are heavily favouring the Eastern Aegean islands like Kos, Lesbos and Samos. The Greek authorities are trying to help, but they themselves are struggling under some pretty heavy burdens. We haven't got much in the way of infrastructure here to help us help these poor people. So we have to improvise."

I spoke with the UNHCR envoy in front of the local police station, where hundreds of people waited every day to obtain the permits that enable them to proceed to Athens. "We've managed to enlist the help of the local community, some NGOs and a number of local volunteers," Kallinis nodded. "Surprisingly many have risen to the occasion. But the situation is still very rough."

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As if divinely inspired, the *Kos Solidarity* volunteer group has long started making daily visits to the Captain Elias "hotel" in order to distribute food, clothes, shoes and basic-hygiene items. Today, the local grassroots

humanitarian delegation consisted of a primary school teacher named Sofia, a doctor named Elena, a primary school teacher named Alexander and Jorgos, a businessman.

As they entered the premises, a huge cheer went up from the refugees, actually more like a roar that could be heard from far away. The children, some of them not even ten years old, clung hard to the visiting humanitarian workers who could barely control the surges of the starving crowd. Under the blistering sun, the locals handed out the food prepared especially for the migrants in the kitchens at some of the nearby hotels.

On this occasion, there was plenty of food to go around, enough to last the whole day. Tremendous gratitude could be felt emanating from the crowd, but also a great sense of shame. At home, these people were not accustomed to living off the pity of strangers. Quite the contrary: these Syrians and the Afghans hailed from two of the most hospitable countries in the world. If my long years of war reporting have taught me anything, it is that a country's hospitality normally bears a direct correlation to the scope of the tragedies experienced by its people.

A tired man in his mid-forties, flanked by four of his six children, observed the food being handed out from a distance. He was visibly anxious and obviously wanted to reach out to secure his fair share. Yet his pride wouldn't let him.

"I'm from the Golan Heights, right near the Israeli border. Sometime before the war I moved to a suburb of Damascus, where I started a small business. I was doing very well. I built myself a big house and got married. Everything was fine! I had a good life!" Bilal informed me rather angrily.

During the first two years of war, not much trouble reached his neighbourhood. Yet his business nevertheless ground to a halt. About a year ago, his house was razed in the fighting.

"The Free Syrian Army and the government forces were battling for control of our *mahala*. A bomb was dropped directly on my house," he recalled. "I didn't know who dropped that bomb, and frankly I didn't much care. All I cared about was getting my wife and six children out of there as fast as possible."

A distinct tremble entered Bilal's voice. He shared that he landed on Kos last Friday. Huddled at the hotel with his family, he was waiting to proceed towards Athens. The real question was: and then what?

"I don't know," he shook his head in utter frustration. "I don't have a plan. My only goal is for us to be free and somewhere safe. We had to spend quite a lot of money getting here. The trip took twenty-two days."

He seemed quite eager to describe the experience. "From Syria, we crossed over to Lebanon," he continued, "then we flew to Turkey. We had to pay off a huge number of people."

As I talked to Bilal, his wife and two youngest children lingered in a cold room at the abandoned hotel. It was obvious that the lady did not feel at all well. Not that long ago, she had undergone a complicated and dangerous surgical procedure. Her breast cancer had taken a visible toll on her, yet she still managed to endure the risky and exhausting journey to freedom.

"I can't wait for her to get well so we can all relax and start living again," Bilal murmured. "*Inshallah*, God willing!"

He still made a strong effort not to join the line formed by his fellow refugees waiting for food.

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Amid the evil swelter of the Aegean mid-afternoon, a pair of young Syrian girls simultaneously leaned against a wall and against each other. They did their best not to fall asleep, but exhaustion finally prevailed. Breathing in unison, they fell asleep with their mouths open, joined at the hip as if they were Siamese twins.

The two little girls may have been sleeping. Yet the trauma of everything they had been through was still etched deep into their faces. Only a few hours before, they arrived on Kos at the break of dawn in a rubber dinghy, accompanied by their parents and a number of other Syrian refugees.

"Hey, do you need a room? A hotel? Cheap—very cheap!" an older local woman accosted the family as they waited in line in front of the police station. The two sleeping girls' parents hesitated for a moment. They had very little relevant information regarding their immediate future, even though they had been waiting in the crowd since early morning.

"Only for one night? Just to get some rest? We want to move on as soon as we can, madam," the father replied and gently woke his daughters. Once they stopped propping up each other, they nearly collapsed from exhaustion. Their mother gave them a warm hug.

The four of them scooped up their pitiful possessions and followed the Greek woman.

This "lucky" family may have managed to escape the bloodiest conflict of our time, and its members may have just cleared the major hurdle of arriving in the EU. But their future was still criminally uncertain.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE LONG MARCH FROM SYRIA TO EUROPE

SUBOTICA, SERBIA, JULY 2015

By the side of the road leading from the small Serbian town of Kanjiža to the Hungarian border, a large band of forty or so Syrian refugees had just sat down to rest. It was early on a Tuesday evening, and the group—women, children, young men, and an elderly person—was finally getting some respite from the sun. They plucked not-quite-ripe plums from a nearby tree and checked their mobile phones, where they had stored the directions for the fastest and safest route to the border.

This, of course, was only one of the countless groups making their final bid to penetrate the fortress called the European Union.

●n the flatlands by the oily and quiet Tisa River, where we joined the marchers, life progressed according to its ancient, decidedly slow rhythms. Most of the locals had long become accustomed to the endless procession of human suffering. ●ver the last few months, Serbia had become yet another way station in a human tragedy that mere language would be hard pressed to describe.

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While they were still a few kilometres away from the border, a man in the group started to speak: "If all goes well, we'll be there in two and a half hours; we've been travelling for weeks, some of us for months."

His name, he told us, was Rami. He was twenty-seven and hailed from the north-western Syrian city of Raqq, the capital of the self-proclaimed ISIS caliphate. He fled the city soon after it was captured by the members of the radical Sunni militia.

Rami claimed he had no choice. He had received word that his name had been put on an Islamic State death list. During the initial months of the Syrian conflict, he had been working as a journalist and had decided to help

out one of his American colleagues. He had even been issued a press card by a prominent international newspaper.

This was not something ISIS was likely to forgive.

"It made no difference that I come from one of Raqqa's strongest families. If I were to stay, they would have certainly killed me, no questions asked. What was even worse, my own cousins were out to get me too," Rami reflected as we trudged along a dusty local thoroughfare. "Almost all of them had joined ISIS. Almost everyone in Raqqa had gone over to them. That is why they're so strong; Raqqa will always be their territory. And so there was no one to protect me."

Rami's first destination was Turkey, where he had to stay longer than he originally planned, since he got robbed in Istanbul. It took him a long time to earn the money he needed to press on. As soon as he was able to, he set off for the Turkish coast. In the meantime, he learned that his father had been killed, while his brother, who also refused to join the Islamic State, had been severely wounded while battling the Syrian government forces.

In the Turkish port town of Bodrum, one of the region's human-trafficking hubs, Rami met the other members of the group he was currently travelling with. That was two months ago. Since then, they hadn't parted company once.

As we walked on, Ali, 28, joined our conversation. He was a civil engineer from Azaz, a town near the Syrian-Turkish border which had seen heavy fighting between various insurgent groups, after being almost completely razed by government bombers.

"In Turkey, the traffickers robbed us on two different occasions, and we also got a lot of trouble from the police," he told us. "We sailed to the Greek island of Kos in a rubber dinghy. The boat was really small, but somehow everyone you see here managed to fit. It seems incredible that we survived. At least half of these people don't know how to swim. If the boat had capsized, we would all have died. It was horrible!"

After their arrival on Kos, the band of Syrians took a ferry to Athens. Hundreds of refugees and migrants were entering the Greek capital daily. The Greek authorities, bogged down on countless other fronts, had virtually stopped dealing with the problem. Their solution was simply to leave the door wide open. It was little wonder that the flood of refugees immediately headed for the Macedonian and Bulgarian borders. A new route to the northern countries of the European Union soon gained wide favour, starting in Macedonia and leading through Serbia all the way up to Hungary.

Three weeks ago Hungary started building a 175 kilometre long wall to stem the tide. Yet, so far, the Hungarians haven't been very successful in stopping people on the run. During the days we spent on both sides of the

border, the situation actually escalated. The threat of the immense construction project has only sped up the current rate of migration, especially through Macedonia and Serbia, where the authorities understand very well what the erection of such a wall could spell for them.

In reality, the wall is not so much of an actual obstacle for the incoming refugees as it is a clear political statement by the far-right government of Viktor Orbán.

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"We made quite a large part of our trip through Greece and Macedonia on foot. It was horrible—it was hot, and we were all so hungry and thirsty. The people there refused to have anything to do with us," Ali recalled in an affable tone, as if he were describing, say, a lovely view of the sea. "Somewhere in Macedonia, where we were generally treated very badly by the police, they herded us on to some buses which took us to the Serbian border. The entire region was full of refugees."

After a further few days' journey they reached Belgrade. "We all slept in the park," Ali continued. "Belgrade, too, was flooded with refugees. But for us, that was actually a good thing, since we managed to get all the informations we needed on how to safely cross the Hungarian border."

In Belgrade the band of refugees learned there were several viable options for reaching Hungary.

The first option was the so-called "unaided" journey, which meant travelling on one's own. The route itself was clearly defined and there was plenty of useful information on how to maximize one's chances of success. But, since the situation at the border was so unpredictable, this was considered to be the riskiest choice.

The alternative was to entrust their fate to the professional human traffickers organizing the trip from the cities of northern Vojvodina into Hungary and then onward to Austria and Germany. You could even take a taxi from the Hungarian border straight to Vienna, which, according to our sources, would set you back €400. The entire package deal for getting from Serbia to Austria cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of €1,500. For the Syrians, the cost of any of the available options was about three times higher than for refugees of other nationalities. This was because the traffickers considered Syrians to be much wealthier than, for example, your average Afghan.

To take the full measure of their predicament one must keep in mind that the refugees always faced a very real possibility of getting arrested, and that many of them had already spent most of their savings in order to reach

Serbia. A large number of them got mugged by the local criminals, their fellow refugees, or even by the police. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be a great deal of solidarity between different groups of refugees—say between the Syrian and the Afghan ones. If anything, the situation was quite the contrary.

In Serbia and the wider region around it, the trafficking sector of the local economy had already undergone a heady boom. The basic start-up was simple, the profits were huge, and the risk almost non-existent. Success was almost guaranteed if the traffickers had done their homework and made proper arrangements with the police and the authorities, who were openly aiding refugees in leaving Serbia behind as swiftly as possible.

Once you got out in the field and took in how things worked, it could hardly be more obvious which way the wind blew.

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Soon after the war started Ali lost his job in a private company. Yet he decided to stick it out in Azaz. In the summer of 2012, the Free Syrian Army gained control of the city for a while, then the Islamic extremists took over. In a flash, the dream of the Syrian revolution became but a tragic memory. What started out as an insurgency against the ruling regime degenerated into a brutal civil war. Countless people started fleeing the devastated country.

"I'm glad that I'm not married and that I don't have any children. It is so much easier for me this way," Ali related, reflecting a common sentiment among the young refugees. Still on foot, we were proceeding towards the small Vojvodinian village of Mortanoš—the last notable settlement before the Hungarian border.

"Most members of my family had fled to Turkey and decided to stay there," he added. "I, however, am young and have had a good education. I'm going to do everything I can to get a job so I can take care of my parents."

Where was he headed? "I want to get to Germany. Up there, they're sure to take us in and help us!" he astounded me with his optimism. "After all, we're refugees—we come from Syria!"

Like most members of the tattered little group, Ali was growing increasingly cheerful with every step closer to the border. As we entered Mortanoš, the entire group decided to rest. The women sat down on the grass, the children simply collapsed somewhere nearby. The men took to discussing the optimal route for the final phase of their transit through Serbia.

It was getting darker by the minute. The local plum trees quickly got relieved of fruit. The refugees knew very well that they were approaching a critical part of their journey. Not much more than four kilometres now separated them from the European Union. A gentle breeze picked up over the Pannonian plains.

"What can we do? Like everyone, everywhere, we only have one wish. To live in peace. To be safe. Look how lovely this place is. It is so peaceful and quiet! There are fruit trees everywhere!" Rami enthused, visibly buoyed up by his rest. "The people leave us alone, and there is plenty of water. I could certainly live here. You know, right now this seems like a paradise straight out of my dreams."

It was obvious that Rami was getting a little carried away, but how could anyone blame him? With every passing kilometre, he had become more like an excited little boy.

At the village's outer edge, the refugees were approached by a merry-looking elderly fellow, who offered them water from the hose in his garden. The Syrians were visibly confused. As the barking of the village dogs approached its crescendo, they kept exchanging glances. The last few years had made them forget what basic human decency looked like. At best, they had come to see it as the exception that proved the rule of its absence.

After a few moments, one of the refugees produced an empty plastic bottle and handed it to the Serbian gentleman. Then the others slowly followed suit. Bashful yet profoundly grateful smiles spread over their faces as the older man used one hand to pour the water and the other to shoo away the mosquitoes.

"You need to follow the river," the hospitable local instructed them in place of a goodbye. "But not up on the banks. You need to go as low down as possible, otherwise the police can spot you. But I haven't seen them here today .... Still you need to be very careful, okay? Good luck to you. Here, take some more plums."

It is very easy to lose one's faith in humanity. It is infinitely harder to regain it.

As we pushed on, a hush fell over the group. The closer we got to the border, the more the refugees instinctively huddled together. One of the marching men took hold of his three-year-old daughter and placed her on his shoulders. The group's one elderly man became noticeably short of breath, but with the help of a sturdy wooden stick he somehow managed to keep pace. One of the refugees took out a tattered copy of the Quran and started to pray.

Far away over the horizon, the sun slowly set for the night. To our right, we could see a stretch of dense boggy forest overlooking the Tisa River. To

the left, there was haystack-strewn grassland, a few distant hamlets and the road leading to the official border crossings and then on towards Subotica. The evening light grew softer as we trekked to the soundtrack of dogs barking in the distance. Every now and then, we could see a stork landing on a nearby field. For this particular band of traumatised souls, these were all scenes of Xanadu-like tranquillity.

"To be honest, I have no idea where we are. I can only hope we're on the right track. We really need to hurry! We have to reach Hungary tonight. And once we get across the border we need to avoid being caught by the police. That could set us back for weeks," Rami explained, his voice growing ever quieter. "Should that happen, our group is sure to get broken up … and we also need to avoid having our fingerprints taken. It would mean that, even when we reach Germany, they could simply send us back to Hungary at any time. No one here wants to stay in Hungary. Personally, I would much rather stay in Serbia because the people were nicest to us there. Everywhere else we were treated like criminals."

The swarthy young man went on to tell me he was eager to get work in Europe—any sort of work at all, as long as it would help him live in peace and safety. Ali, the blue-eyed engineer, felt exactly the same way. Both of them had had their share of the savagery of war. All they wanted was for the people of their new homeland to show a little understanding.

The members of the group weren't entirely clear on where they needed to veer off into the forest to avoid getting snatched by the police. So they decided to simply follow the tracks left by their predecessors. A trail of discarded objects led them onward. At the precise moment when their doubts about having chosen the right path were about to get the better of them, a pair of local cyclists drove down the nearby embankment. Opening their backpacks, the two men distributed a number of plastic water bottles—"For the children!"—and relayed the vital information that the border was now only a ten-minute walk away.

"Simply follow the river. We haven't seen a single policeman," one of the cyclists nodded to encourage them before their imminent ordeal.

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Seized by a mood of weary excitement, the small group of refugees moved on. In the distance, we could already see the apron marking the border area where movement is strictly prohibited.

Heavy dusk was falling over us, bringing anxiety to the faces of the advancing refugees. The mosquitoes were now out in full force. The women conferred among themselves and decided to make the children put on an

additional layer of clothing. The men—many of them had fled their country to another continent with only a small knapsack on their shoulder—were putting the final touches on the group's strategy. A number of their cell phones were starting to malfunction.

We crossed the dark Serbian-Hungarian border in complete silence. Only a few steps past the first Hungarian boundary stone the group came to a halt.

Rami put down his backpack and carefully set out on a reconnaissance mission. He spotted a border patrol a little more than a hundred meters ahead. He was able to identify one car and four policemen interrogating a small group of refugees. Two portable toilets were standing next to the police vehicle like some sort of a mirage. Business as usual? It was clear that the four Hungarian policemen would be unable to stop the entire group. We heard that the border guards here often turned a blind eye. Despite the fact that the government had undertaken the huge anti-humanitarian project of putting up the wall, the Hungarian policemen mostly treated the refugees with fairness.

But this was, of course, not something the group could rely on. The moment of truth was fast approaching. Anxiety and even naked fear returned to the refugees' faces. They had long learned that the combination of borders and uniforms could mean the difference between life and death.

The anxiety and terror on their faces was thus a matter of pure reflex—and in such situations, reason always trails far behind.

The night had fallen, but the moon mercilessly illuminated the refugees' exhausted faces. They quickly slipped into the nearby forest, from where one could hear clear signs of human life. As one would expect, our group wasn't the only one preparing for the final push into the heart of Europe. We were now officially on Hungarian soil. All the refugees needed to do to complete this crucial stage of their long journey was to evade the patrol.

The children wolfed down a few cookies and plums from their mothers' backpacks. The rest drank some water. They were all waiting for Rami's sign.

Macedonia-Greece border, September 2015.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FAKE LIFE JACKETS FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

IZMIR, TURKEY, OCTOBER 2015

Basmane Square, located opposite Izmir's central railway station, is the unofficial local centre of operations for refugees and the smugglers who profit from their plight. This year alone, half a million people have already entered Greece through Turkey. Most of them had to make a stop in Izmir, the country's third largest city, on their way to the Aegean islands.

Every evening, by ten pm or so, the square morphs into a bazaar of frenzied activity. Having reached Izmir by bus, minivan or taxi, thousands of refugees spend most of the night in anxious anticipation. They are mostly from Syria, though there are plenty of Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis and Kurds as well. The traffickers walk briskly among them, scanning for fresh arrivals and grinning like the prosperous Oriental traders of yore.

Most of the refugees I talked with had first contacted the traffickers back in Syria. Over the last few months the smuggling networks have undergone a rapid expansion. According to Europol data, some 30,000 people are now involved.[1] The industry's tentacles have found their way into every major Syrian city.

Most of the people I met at Basmane Square had somehow managed to pry themselves from the clutches of all-out war. Their arrival in Izmir marked the beginning of the next stage of their long, gruelling journey to Europe via 'the Balkan route.'

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Those who decide to leave Syria usually begin to make their plans in their home towns. The local traffickers, through a system of bribes, make sure that their wards clear all of the Syrian checkpoints on the way to

[1] https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/migrant-smuggling-in-eu

Turkey. For the most part, ideology doesn't come into it at all. Business is business, whether you are a member of the Islamic State or not.

"Once you cross the Turkish border, you have a few options," nodded Nazir, a twenty-six-year-old man from Latakia, a Syrian city on the Mediterranean coast. "The money to reach Greece through Turkey can be paid out in Istanbul or Izmir ..., well, sometimes in other places too. Here in Izmir, the three of us simply made our way to the special office called 'the insurance company.' We had to pay 1,200 dollars each for safe passage to Greece. The price was fixed in advance, no negotiation was possible. We were then issued with 'codes', or 'passwords'---our proof of having paid the sum in full. So now we're waiting for the traffickers to call and let us know when we set off. They promised we would leave today, but we've been waiting here since early morning. I hope everything goes according to plan. I talked to so many people who had been conned by the traffickers."

A reserved and unusually pensive young man, Nazir spent six years studying medicine in Russia, so he spoke some English as well as Russian. "I've always felt saving lives was what I was meant to do," he informed me with a tired self-conscious smile. Upon getting his degree, he returned home to Syria. Yet, because of his anti-government stance, he was soon forced to flee. His family helped raise the 3,000 dollars that he needed to reach Germany.

Once a refugee deposits the required sum with a so-called insurance company, he is usually issued a piece of paper that has a number used to identify him to the particular smuggler assigned to his case. The smuggler's next move is to call his superiors and secure his share of the payment.

The smugglers at the bottom of the food chain are usually refugees themselves. Most hail from Syria and Pakistan. Some are paying off debt to the smugglers above them. Others are simply trying to get by, or to save up enough money to make a dash for Europe themselves. Some of them are born salesmen. There are even a few who claim their goal is to help their fellow countrymen.

Whatever the case, business is booming. In September alone, more than 153,000 refugees reached Greece through Turkey. An average day saw some 5,000 refugees and migrants crossing the Aegean Sea, since the smugglers make a habit of cramming up to sixty people into small rubber boats designed to carry maybe a dozen. Up to a hundred boats make the trip each day. At a rate of 1,200 dollars per adult and 600 dollars per child, the smugglers rake in as much as 72,000 dollars per boat — up to six million dollars per day in tax-free revenue.

The local bus and taxi drivers, mobile operators, merchants and hoteliers also turn a handsome profit. The hotels and hostels around Basmane Square

are so overbooked that the refugees are reduced to sleeping in the hallways. Sales of used boats—and their mostly Chinese-made motors—have gone through the roof as well.

Despite the onset of autumn and its unfavourable weather conditions, the traffickers are still operating at peak capacity. The sea is expected to remain relatively calm for only two more weeks, three at the most. Then the entire industry will grind to a halt, leaving thousands stranded in various Turkish coastal towns.

Truth be told, many of them are stranded already. In Izmir, some 70,000 people have been officially registered as refugees. The town's governor, Mustafa Toprak, recently confessed that the authorities have little in the way of a plan concerning the masses gathered along the coast. In all likelihood, a large majority of the incomers will be unable to afford the next leg of the journey into the European Union.

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"I don't see myself as a criminal. I'm not hurting anybody, right? I'm helping my own people and earning some money doing it."

The man we shall call Abu Ahmad smiled.

Having met him in one of the oppressively narrow streets behind Basmane Square, I soon learned that he joined the trafficking operation in the spring. Back in Syria, he worked in an automobile repair workshop. When the anti-Assad uprising broke out in 2011, he joined the Free Syrian Army and later escaped to Turkey. He lived in Istanbul for a while, where he took up a series of odd jobs.

At the end of April, he made his first serious attempt to forge his way into Europe. He paid the smugglers the required fee to reach Lesbos, only to have his boat give out and sink. Fortunately, this happened close enough to the Turkish coastline that everyone on board managed to swim back to safety. No one received a refund. The smugglers threatened to shoot them on the spot.

This was a far from an uncommon turn of events. Over the last few months, I have spoken with many refugees who shared Abu Ahmad's fate, or worse.

And so the young man returned to Izmir and found lodging in a flat that he shared with fifteen other refugees. An acquaintance put him in touch with one of the smugglers' collectives. His newfound employers promised that they would "help him out."

This meant Abu Ahmad was given a job recruiting the new arrivals that flocked to Basmane Square. He refused to reveal how much he was paid for

each refugee he landed, but he did let on that the last three months had been profitable enough for him to be able to move to a cheap hotel.

"Every day I'm out in the streets. People are arriving here with no sound information to go on. My job is to tell them what they need to know. I never take advantage of any of my fellow refugees. I never cheat anyone. I really want to help them avoid what happened to me."

While accompanying me on a brief stroll across Izmir's "Little Syria", Abu Ahmad let slip that most of the smugglers, however, are "real crooks."

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At all times of day, the restaurants near the railway station brimmed with visibly nervous patrons. In front of the hotels, large groups of refugees waited for the fateful call. The shops were doing good business; their proprietors beamed at the crowds. At night, the thronging streets saw the arrival of an occasional police patrol. Yet, for the most part, the smugglers seemed unfazed. Even the local tourist agencies didn't try to hide their involvement in the trafficking business.

"The policemen in Izmir usually don't give us any trouble. When they do bother, they mostly crack down on the little fish and leave the bosses alone. The Turkish state has decided it is in its best interests to see as many of the refugees leave as quickly as possible. There is no reason for the police to make trouble. Things are pretty quiet. A few times the policemen demanded to see my papers, but I've never been arrested. A few of my acquaintances have spent some time in jail, but all of them have been released. Our business is rather safe and easy. Things have changed a little after the death of Alan Kurdi.[2] Many people have been arrested. This is part of why more people now choose Lesbos over Kos."

Among the many smugglers I interviewed, Abu Ahmad was the only one willing to share his story in detail. In general, the traffickers who worked the streets of Izmir and Bodrum proved quite happy to boast about their entrepreneurial prowess, but only strictly off the record.

In fact, they were usually the ones to initiate conversation. Mistaking average passers-by for potential customers is an integral part of their job; I was accosted by at least a dozen of them in the space of a week. When they realized that they had the wrong man, they didn't seem in the least bit embarrassed.

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[2] Alan Kurdi was the small Syrian boy found dead on a Turkish beach during the previous month: https://www.lifeposts.com/p/milestone/61203/alan-kurdi-memorial/lifestory/

You could find any number of these self-styled entrepreneurs around Basmane Square, or in any of the nearby bistros, which they have turned into makeshift offices.

"This year, I helped more than a hundred people cross over to Greece," a forty-year-old Pakistani man informed me. "My assignment is to approach and round up the ones who want to go to Lesbos. There are several of us charged with this responsibility. We have our own boats, all of them of good quality. Our aim is to get as much use of them as possible. We also provide life jackets for our customers, plus transportation to the boarding points."

The Pakistani smuggler also told me he had come to Turkey about a year ago. Having arrived without papers or any other sort of formal identification, he quickly earned his stripes with the traffickers' fraternity. He was now mostly in charge of the Afghan and Pakistani refugees. Since he had proven himself a trustworthy operative, his contact details also got passed along to many Syrians, who were generally known to be pickier when it came to traffickers. "The Syrians have more money, so they can afford to choose."

Like most of his associates, this Pakistani man normally spent his entire day in the streets, in a half-mile radius around Izmir's central railway station. His gravest concern was that the entire business would grind to a halt during the winter. When the seas get rougher, one of the other traffickers informed me, the focus of the operation would shift to the land border between Turkey and Greece.

"With the help of a large enough bribe," he nodded, "it is already possible to cross the border, or reach one of the Greek islands by tourist boat."

The man, a Syrian trafficker who started out in the business three years ago, also claimed that some smugglers were selling fake passports. Yet my Greek sources denied any knowledge of refugees using fake documents to reach Kos or Lesbos on regular tourist boats.

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At Basmane Square, midnight was fast approaching. Usually around that time, Izmir's Syrian refugees are ordered to get up and make their way to the boarding points for the next, and especially dangerous, leg of their journey. From the beaches and secluded coves north of town, most of them have opted to set out for the island of Lesbos.

Some prefer to head to Bodrum, a high-end tourist town two hours drive down the coast from Izmir. There, less than ten kilometres separate Turkey from the Greek island of Kos. Yet Lesbos remains the most popular choice,

despite the rougher boat trip and living conditions that have deteriorated more rapidly than on any other Greek island.

The Turkish smugglers who specialise in getting to Lesbos are also reputed to be the most seasoned and competent. A number of smugglers assured me that the Turkish coast guard's presence there is rather lax.

The taxis and minibuses quickly filled up, as the Turkish policemen looked on. The men smoked nervously, perfecting their travel plans and checking over their luggage one last time. Resting on the cold pavement, the women fed their children and tried to get the babies to sleep.

A number of men selling life jackets made their way through the crowd. "Yamaha, original, forty-five Turkish liras!" one of them shouted, parading the orange-coloured jackets that could also be bought at many of the local shops. The jackets came in various shapes and sizes. There were even special pink life jackets for little girls.

Some sellers offered diving fins and inflatable arm rings. The inner, inflatable parts of car tires were also easy to procure.

The demand for life jackets has become so great that the shops have run out of stock. According to my sources, unreliable and often dangerous imitations have quickly gathered a large part of the market share.

"Is this an original jacket?" I demanded of one peddler.

The man gave me a perfectly innocent gape. "Of course!" he smiled. "Waterproof! One hundred percent!"

I decided to buy the jacket and spent the better part of the next morning thoroughly soaking it in my hotel bathroom. It turned so heavy with water that it could have dragged down an elephant. I ripped it open and saw that it was filled with wadding material. There could be no doubt.

It was a fake.

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From Izmir, I took one of the regular bus lines to Bodrum. I shared the ride with fifteen men from Afghanistan and Pakistan who didn't have enough money to go to the Greek islands. They decided they would spend the winter in Bodrum, where they would try to find work.

Smugglers had told them they might be given a hefty discount for a trip to Kos in the following days. Those deals often end in disaster.

These men are an easy target for every imaginable kind of street thug. They know Europe doesn't want them. They're unable to get work in Turkey. For many, the only option becomes joining one of the smuggler rings.

Later that night I saw two smugglers approach the men I met on the bus. They deftly wove their way toward the new arrivals through the throngs of European tourists, who are charged fifteen euros for the short boat ride to Kos.

Refugees pay almost 100 times more for this same trip across the Aegean Sea. This year, some 300 of them paid with their lives.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU SWIM, YOU CAN NEVER SAVE ALL OF THEM"

LESBOS, GREECE, JANUARY 2016

Still shivering from the cold, even in the golden foil they were wrapped in, two young Afghan girls were having a lively chat. Their mother gazed out to sea, mostly back towards Turkey, which they departed two hours earlier in a grey, rubber dinghy.

Some twenty kilometres from the shores of Lesbos, the vessel's engine gave out. The boat rapidly started filling up with water. Fortunately, the passengers were spotted by the staff of the Spanish NGO *Proactiva Open Arms*. All of its members are seasoned lifeguards, veterans of the Catalonian and Basque beaches. Almost routinely, they make sure that the rubber boats reach the small port in the picturesque village of Skala Skaminies, where at least twenty lifeguards from all over the world are currently stationed.

"It is cold, but I'm so relieved. We were getting desperate, but now we're finally safe. I am so grateful to the people who came to our rescue," smiled a black-garbed, elderly lady from Douma, one of the Damascus neighbourhoods hit hardest by the war. Madam S had lost both of her sons to the conflict. She was accompanied on her long journey to Lesbos by her grandchildren and her eldest son's widow. They had seen and experienced it all, were visibly exhausted, and were not up to a long conversation.

"We just want to get safe. We're hoping Europe will take us in," shrugged the younger of the two boys, while he fiddled with a pile of fake life-jackets. Most of these deadly fakes, it should be noted, are actually made by Syrian children in garage factories all along the Turkish coast. The refugee children are the most dirt-cheap labour available.

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"We're all trying to the best of our abilities," a thickly bearded man named Joaquim Acedo told me as we stood in the cold winter sun. "Most mornings, we are already at sea by six when the first boats start coming in. Our first and only objective is to save lives. As for politics, it is not something I care to think about. I've got no time for that."

Acedo added a disturbing afterthought. "Reaching Lesbos from Turkey by regular ferry costs ten euros and is absolutely safe. Getting here by rubber boat costs 1,200 euros and can easily cost you your life."

Acedo is the co-ordinator of a hi-tech Spanish rescue team; *Proactiva Open Arms* has certainly risen to the occasion. "There's quite a lot of us, you know: Sea-Watch, Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders [MSF], the Portuguese coast guard, the Greek coast guard, Frontex, the Americans," the tired young man explained. "We're co-ordinating our efforts as best we can and pushing our limits every day. But we really can use all the help we can get. Especially now, with the weather improving and more and more people pouring in every day."

This was Joaquim Acedo's second tour on Lesbos since *Proactiva* joined the action in September. Each team normally serves for fifteen days before returning home utterly exhausted. All of the members participate on a purely voluntary basis, which means the ones with regular jobs have to use up their vacation to save lives.

"The worst part is when you have to decide whom you're going to save, and who is going to be left to drown," Acedo added sombrely. "Sometimes there are forty people in the water, all of them screaming for their lives. And no matter what you do, no matter how hard you swim, you can never save all of them."

Last year alone, almost 450,000 people entered the EU through Lesbos—almost half of everyone who reached the Greek Islands through Turkey. Lesbos, we should keep in mind, is an island with some 90,000 residents and an exceptionally weak humanitarian infrastructure. Despite this, it has become the EU's key entry point for migrants and refugees.

As things stood, there was almost no EU presence on the island—if we exclude Frontex, the EU agency responsible for securing the Union's external borders. The Union's key "strategic" answer to this humanitarian tragedy has been to strengthen its outer borders, especially the one with Turkey. A part of this "solution" is the recent deal with the Turkish authorities, in which Turkey agreed to take on most of the responsibility for the incoming migrants and refugees. In return, the European Union handed three billion euros over to Ankara.

Last year alone, some 350 people drowned on the perilous trip from Turkey to Greece—enough that a new location for a graveyard had to be

found in Mytilini, because there was no more room in the old one. This year, seventy souls have already been lost to the journey. This particular crime against humanity is only getting worse.

On the day I visited their venerable operation, the Spanish lifeguards managed to save more than fifty lives—lives that the European political elites and European public opinion increasingly perceive as a threat to their Christian way of life.

"But how can this be? To a true Christian, such a view should be completely unacceptable!" exclaimed Father Christophoris, an Orthodox priest who I sat down with at a smoke-filled café in the nearby mountain village of Sikaminia. Almost fourteen years ago, Kristoforis himself made the long journey here all the way from California. This was part of the reason why he now considers helping the migrants and the refugees to be the focus of his life's mission as a priest.

"The refugees have been coming here to Lesbos for fifteen years now," he explained to me over a steaming cup of coffee. "First from Afghanistan, then from Iraq, and now from Syria. Our duty is to help them as much as we can. All of us could be in their place save for the grace of God. This is our chance to choose between being good and being evil. It is as simple and straightforward as that. There is nothing more Christian than helping out a fellow human being. It is a sacred duty of each and every one of us. And it is also at the core of this great humanistic culture the EU is founded on—at least in principle."

This remarkable, blond-haired holy man is now at the heart of refugee relief co-ordination on the northern part of the island. The last time these parts saw such a tremendous influx of desperate souls was in 1921 and 1922, when a number of Greeks fled here from Turkey.[1]

"There is no compassion without direct action," Father Christophoris informed me with a wistful smile. "And that is why the contribution of the volunteers and the locals here has been priceless. They've come here from Greece and from all over the world, and their actions compensated for at least some of the state's ineptitude. They clearly demonstrated precisely what needs to be done. They did what was humanly possible to preserve the face of our civilisation."

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Most people at the Moria refugee camp were shivering, some of them uncontrollably. The nearby mountain peaks had recently been whitened

[1] https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/720

with snow. The entire heart of the Mediterranean was wretchedly cold; that made the refugees' journey even more gruelling.

Wrapped in swathes of golden foil and bluish blankets, the refugees were very grateful for each cup of hot tea handed out by the volunteers. The children clung to each other as the women wrapped themselves tighter in their shawls and headscarves. The men sought what information they could get on how to best continue their journey. Most of them were disheartened to find that, owing to a shipworkers' strike, all the ferries to Piraeus had been cancelled. For a while, all they could do was stare at their cellphones and try to come up with a plan B.

I was approached by a man named Said, who hailed from the greater Aleppo region. "We're so cold," he told me. "How much longer do we have to stay here? Is it true that Germany has already closed its borders to the refugees?"

Said had reached Lesbos early that morning, accompanied by his wife, six sons and three daughters. The eleven of them formed a close huddle. They were freezing half-to-death and most of them did not feel much like talking. These were the coldest days in recent history.

They'd had to wait nine days to cross from Turkey to Greece. They borrowed most of the money they needed to reach Europe from their relatives and had no idea how they would repay it.

"We are running for our lives. We were hoping to remain in Syria, but it was not possible. Things get worse there every day. I had to protect my children," Said explained his predicament. Unlike many of his fellow refugees, who are headed for Germany or Sweden, this hollow-cheeked man with an understandably distracted look in his eyes didn't really care where his flight would deliver him. "All we want is to be safe. We simply want to find a place where we will not be bombed every day."

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"I spent a great deal of this summer on the internet, watching footage of our people being warmly greeted in Germany," another man named Farouk confided to me. "And so I eventually decided to set out myself. I knew that if I remained in Syria, I would almost certainly be murdered. I don't have any powerful friends on either side. I've also been against the war from the beginning. But I couldn't leave my parents. They were the ones who eventually urged me to join one of the refugee groups headed for Turkey."

I spoke with Farouk under a metal awning in Mytilini, where he and some comrades sought shelter from the icy rain. The men were sifting through their options. They had no money to sleep in a hotel; the

combination of snow, rain, cold and utter exhaustion prevented them from walking the fifteen kilometres back to the refugee camp.

After a while, a few stray dogs entered the grimy pit stop. The Syrian youths twitched in something akin to panic and the freezing animals took flight, retreating under a nearby staircase.

Farouk proved exceptionally well-informed about every aspect of the so-called Balkan refugee route. Upon leaving home, he knew his chances of securing a new life in Europe were much slimmer than they would have been a few months ago. But staying put would have posed a much graver risk. The fact that Farouk hailed from Syria certainly increased his chances of making it to where he wanted to go. But the chances of him actually being granted asylum were slim-to-none.

Europe's (anti-)refugee and (anti-)migrant policies are degenerating by the hour. Across the EU's territory, several hundred thousand refugees have been waiting to enter the job market for months. Even Germany, having set an example by opening its doors wide, has eventually decided to reach for the handbrake.

In many ways, this is hardly a surprise. Angela Merkel's administration is facing increasingly bitter opposition from within the ranks of its own party. The German open-door policy is irrevocably over. As a consequence, the Balkan refugee route is being shut down.

Last Tuesday, the Austrian authorities decided that only 37,500 people would be allowed to apply for asylum this year. The measures at the Austrian-Slovenian border, where the Schengen arrangement has been a wistful memory for the past three months, are sure to get even harsher than they are today.

At the same time, the Macedonian authorities have temporarily closed the Greek border at Gevgelija. As early as last autumn, Macedonian guards along the border with Greece began to turn back refugees who were not from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

According to my sources, there is a rather substantial chance of the border soon being sealed. The way things stand, the most likely scenario is that the brunt of the burden will once again fall on economically ransacked Greece. Brussels, which recently sold its share of responsibility for the refugees to an increasingly unstable Turkey, is about to re-sacrifice Greece on the altar of its own short-sighted interests.

Anti-refugee sentiment has become the European state of mind. This is true on the level of increasingly xenophobic public opinion and on the level of the political elites, who have finally been freed from their masks of political correctness. Such a state of affairs is not only evident in the former communist parts of Europe, but also in countries like Switzerland and

Denmark, where refugees are now stripped of a part of their assets, upon arrival.

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Last Friday night, several thousand people waited in the icy wind at Mytilini's port to catch the ferries to Pireaus and Kavala. Owing to a lengthy shipworkers' strike, some 3,800 refugees were stranded on the island. More than sixty percent of them were women and children.

All over the port, the refugees sought relief from the cold. Very few of them were appropriately dressed for such arctic conditions. Some of them were forced to wait outside in the freezing temperatures for five hours or more. Almost none of them felt like talking. The only thing that interested them was the time of the two ferries' departure.

Three Afghan youths had managed to set fire to a garbage heap and were now standing around it to keep warm. They had been on the road for thirty days. "We will never go back. All three of us have borrowed money to get here. We first have to work hard to pay it back—only then can we start taking care of ourselves and our families. I want to work in the computing industry," said a nineteen-year-old named Reza from Kabul.

The half-a-dozen Greek policemen in charge ordered the great mass of freezing refugees to form three long columns. The two enormous ships were not set to leave for another two hours.

By the time the refugees were finally allowed to board, most of them were so tired and cold that they were unable to feel any joy. It was as if they were all too aware of what awaited them during the remainder of their journey.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONCENTRATION CAMPS

CHIOS, GREECE, MAY 2016

Following the closure of the Balkan refugee route in March 2016 and the recent deal between the European Union and Turkey, some 55,000 refugees and migrants have been trapped in Greece.[1] Many of them are being kept inside detention centres, where the living conditions are beyond disastrous.

The worst situation can be observed on the Aegean island of Chios, where the EU has directed the Greek authorities—who had little to say in the matter—to seal the fate of tens of thousands of people by opening up the VIAL "hotspot", where around a thousand souls currently await a decision on their status as refugees.

All of them arrived in Greece after March 20, 2016, when the arrangement between Brussels and Ankara entered into force. The ruthless bargain prevented the refugees and migrants from pressing on further into Europe, while cramming them into a number of what are effectively jails. The strategists in Brussels effectively decided to turn the already ransacked country of Greece into a sort of human waste bin, thereby intensifying the suffering of tens of thousands of people to the breaking point.

These detention centres are located on the Greek mainland and on its islands. But the so-called VIAL "hotspot" is a prison in everything but name. It quickly attained special notoriety by becoming *the* poster child for Europe's xenophobic and racist policies.

In these times of growing hatred and burgeoning neo-Nazi sentiments it is especially important to call things by their proper names. And make no mistake: the "hotspot" in question is nothing less than a concentration camp existing in our day and age.

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[1] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan

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The camp—located a twenty minute drive away from the island's capital—presents the visitor with an abhorrent picture. The refugees and migrants who I spoke with all related stories and experiences that should make the whole of Europe quake in shame. Yet the very capacity for shame seems to have been driven from the continent by narcissistic self-obsession and a highly aggressive drive to remain inside of one's comfort zone.

In the early evening, I spoke with an Afghan girl named Geza, who spoke perfect English. I met her next to a hole in the camp's fence. Many of the refugees were using the hole to get in and out of the camp, especially since the police presence was startlingly thin on account of the holidays.

"We are being treated like garbage—as if we had the plague or something," Geza informed me. "We can no longer bear this. There are worms and caterpillars inside our food. There is not enough water, and a lot of what we get isn't even drinkable. There is not nearly enough medicine, and many of us have grown severely ill. The children have had the worst of it. Almost half of everyone here is underage. We have no idea what we've done to be treated this way. All we wanted was to live in peace."

Geza then shared how she and her husband Farhan had fled both the Taliban and the Islamic State. "Please tell everyone what's happening here!" she concluded on a pleading note. "This is a crime. We are all so hungry. And we are being humiliated. Me and my husband, we have been here for forty days. Right after we arrived, we put in the application for an asylum. We were supposed to get the response ten days ago, but nothing happened. No one in this camp was given a reply. And so we are waiting. We have no information to go on. We are cut off from the world. Both me and Farhan are very scared they might send us back to Afghanistan."

This was a common, virtually universal fear among the inmates of the VIAL detention centre.

As recently as a week ago, the entire institution was hermetically sealed—until the inmates decided to organise a protest. A certain threshold had been reached, and the local authorities made the tactical decision to permit at least some modicum of free movement.

The prison is located far from both the town and the port, which is why, on the day of my visit, most of the inmates opted to look for food in the nearby villages, where all the shops were closed on account of Orthodox Easter. One enterprising local set up a vending stall right in front of the hotspot. The prices were about three times what one would pay in town, yet the man's avarice mostly went unrewarded. The vast majority of the

refugees and the migrants had already spent what money they had getting to Europe.

Most of them were also not at all eager to stray too far from the prison. One could hardly blame them for not feeling safe. The last few weeks have seen a number of far-right groups attack the refugees and the volunteers who were aiding them. After eighteen months of an open-door policy, the impoverished and economically ravaged island has finally started to cave in to the urge to lash back at the fresh influx of refugees.

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"It is impossible, living here. There are as many as twenty of us inside a single container. During the day the whole place gets unbearably hot. I am sick to my stomach all the time—all the time," I was told by a very dignified Iraqi lady named Batul Rahim, standing by the entrance to the camp.

"We have no privacy, we're hungry, and our children are exhausted," she said. "Most of them have no idea what is going on, and I think it is really better that way. I fled Mosul because of the Islamic State. They would have killed us for being Christians. All Christians were forced to escape, and a lot of them lost their lives."

With a tearful break in her voice, Batul related she was a mother of a two-year-old boy named Samuel and a three-year-old girl, Sonia. As she talked to me, both of them crouched fearfully behind her legs. "The world has forgotten about us," Rahim nodded sombrely. "Some of our relatives managed to reach Germany and the Netherlands, while we have been thrown in this prison to rot."

The grief-stricken woman also expressed her mortal fear that the European bureaucrats were about to send her back to hell. Had I opted to soothe her worries, I would have been forced to lie to her face.

Virtually all of the Syrians I encountered told me about their devastated homeland and their now bankrupted illusions of Europe. Koda, a fifty-seven-year-old Iranian from Esfahan, related how he arrived in Greece a mere four hours too late, on the very morning of March 20th, when the bargain between the EU and Turkey raised the proverbial drawbridge. That bargain seems certain to wreck hundreds of thousands of lives.

Ironically, the deal between the European Union and Turkey has been hailed as a great victory for European diplomacy. As if it has somehow solved the refugee crisis rather than gravely exacerbated it.

After the Balkan refugee route got closed and the Turkish authorities set about fulfilling their new tasks, the number of refugees and migrants reaching the Greek islands underwent a huge drop. Most of those who had

already reached Greece only to be thwarted by the closure of the Macedonian-Greek border ended up in so-called hotspots. At an improvised tent settlement in Idomeni, some 11,000 people still wait for the border to reopen. But nothing short of a miracle is likely to help them on their way.

Some 3,000 people are currently residing at the port of Piraeus, waiting for the Greek authorities to cart them off to their respective prisons. Precious few of them are likely to reach the desired goal of their journey—meaning Germany, the Netherlands or Sweden. They have made the investment of a lifetime in mustering both the gumption and the resources to flee the ravages of their war-torn lands, only to be thrown in jail. And one thing is certain: they shall remain there for much longer than only a few weeks.

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"Europe has her mouth full of human rights. If I remember correctly, your soldiers invaded Afghanistan in the name of human rights as well, true? Well, I have come to Europe and I am certainly human. But where are my rights?" asked a twenty-seven-year-old Afghan named Hekmetullah Hakani in front of the VIAL hotspot. "Me and my wife and my daughter have been trapped here for forty days. My daughter is only ten months old. This is so horrible. I simply want to go home and die there."

Hailing from the city of Helmand, Hakani had worked as a translator on NATO's ISAF mission, which earned him enough credible Taliban threats to force him to flee for his life. "They have imprisoned us here like terrorists. It is as if they don't think we're even human. We are suffering so much, and we have no idea what will happen to us. The policemen are telling us to simply wait—the ones that will even talk to us, that is. Because most of them won't. A lot of the children here are seriously ill. And we have no money left. There is nowhere for us to go," Hakani shuddered.

"Why does it have to be this way?" the former NATO translator demanded in frustration and bewilderment. "What have we done? Why does Europe hate us so much?"

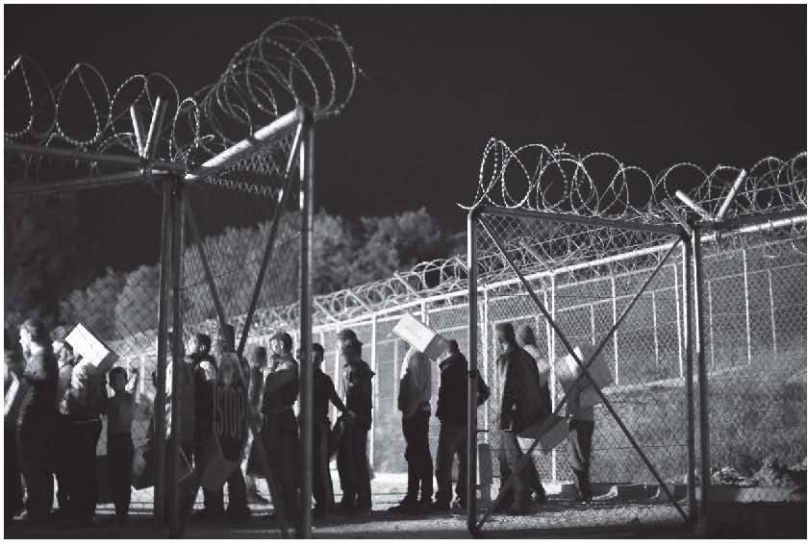
Since my encounters with these inmates, the situation at the VIAL prison camp has gone from bad to worse. Today, on Wednesday May 4, many of the refugees went on hunger strike, with some going so far as to sew their lips together.

"I'm going to kill myself. I will cut my throat on the razor-wire. I will bleed slowly. It won't hurt. I can't stand this anymore! I'm sick! Everything hurts!" screamed Hamid, a visibly broken Palestinian-Syrian, who has since become one of the hunger strikers who has sewn his lips together. "We know what will happen to us. I can see my future it the eyes of the

policemen. Or in the eyes of local people. They hate us. We are not people to them. I want to die."

Something must be seriously wrong when those who have risked their lives to escape death decide that life is not worth living anymore.

Extra police have been deployed to deal with the situation. But the answer hardly lies in finding better ways to keep the inmates locked up. After all, these refugees have committed no crime, save to believe Europe might provide them with a humane haven. Of all events, an island that has been turned into a prison is one of the key visual aids that helps us to envision our fast-approaching common European future.



VIAL "Hot-spot," Chios, Greece, April 2016.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SAHEL ON FIRE

MAURITANIA-MALI BORDER, JUNE 2016

Despite the greyish veil blanketing the sky, the desert sun mercilessly beats down. The flat and barren horizon shimmers in the noonday heat. The intermittent breeze brings no respite. It only helps to dry the last vestiges of moisture from one's eyes.

The people who inhabit this inferno move slowly. Some carry plastic cans filled with water; others try to curl up under one of the abandoned trucks for a nap; still others are headed for midday prayer. There are only a few days left until the end of the Ramadan fast. The tired faces of the children and grown men alike require no testimony to their desiccation and severe undernourishment.

Roghietou Himavi Valed is a fifteen-year-old Tuareg refugee from a small village near Timbuktu. I came across her in Mbera, a sprawling refugee camp some fifty kilometres from the Mali-Mauritanian border. Dressed in an enchantingly beautiful yellow dress that reveals only her callused feet and her infinitely gentle face, she rests under a tarp and refuses to complain.

Like the rest of her nomadic people, she was well accustomed to the casual cruelty of desert life, which only got harsher with the onset of war in 2012. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, a great flood of arms began pouring into Mali. The islamic extremist militias in Mali were much emboldened by this development and started taking over a number of towns and villages in the Sahel Desert—one of the world's hottest, driest and least stable regions.

The government army refused to come to the rescue of the Tuaregs, who had spent decades fighting for autonomy. In the wake of the European military intervention, the government forces found themselves much emboldened, as well. And so, the Tuaregs and a number of Arab tribes in central and northern Mali got caught in the crossfire.

Yet their distant plight—along with the entire Malian conflict—was soon forgotten. Tens of thousands of people were driven from their homes. Most of them fled to Mauritania, whose status as one of the world's poorest countries didn't prevent its inhabitants from offering their hospitality. And so, here is Roghietou in her enchanting yellow dress, one of the 41,000 Malian refugees scraping by in the open and virtually unprotected Mbera camp, the largest refugee camp in Western Africa.

It has been four and a half years since the Malian conflict broke out.

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"I don't remember much. We had to leave our home when I was still a little girl. But every time I hear my village being mentioned, I am overcome with nostalgia," the Malian girl relates in her quiet voice. Wisely, she has invested some of her time to take a literacy class set up by the humanitarian organizations in the Mbera refugee camp.

In her native land, Roghietou never went to school; that would have entailed a daily sixty-kilometre walk. She only learned to read and write in exile. "Here, I have everything I need. My entire family is with me. I don't think much about the future. Whatever will be, will be," the proud and clearly resilient Tuareg girl shrugs. Then she informs us how privileged she feels to be able to attend the improvised classes. Sadly, despite the humanitarians' best efforts, only 5,000 out of the 15,000 children in the camp have seized this opportunity, while nearly forty-three percent of the entire camp's population has no education whatsoever.

The rest of the children—54 percent of the camp's residents are under the age of eighteen –spend their days helping their families to survive. The six primary schools may be educating nearly the same ratio of boys and girls, yet the camp's two secondary schools are attended only by boys. Following tradition, the girls are forced to stay home. Many, some of them not even ten years old, are goaded into early marriages.

A few former child soldiers also live in the camp. The local UNICEF representatives are trying to help them get their bearings while raising awareness as to the danger of children being recruited into the various militias on the Malian side of the border. According to our sources, that territory is controlled by the Tuareg independence fighters from the ranks of the MNLA militia, a part of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad.[1] For the most part, this means that the refugees can cross the Mali-Mauritanian border without major difficulties.

[1] https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/201311395228123 26.html

Since the camp is rife with sexual predators, Roghietou Himavi Valed was very fortunate to have been taken under the wing of Osman Ag Abi.

The forty-seven-year-old teacher fled to Mauritania in January 2012. He is now in charge of the informal education program designed to help children who have never been to school or whose schooling has been violently interrupted.

"It's clear we won't be able to return home for a long time," Osman Ag Abi grimaces. "True, a number of people actually decided to go back, but every single one of them sent word we'd do best to stay here in Mauritania. There is still a war going on. The situation is very dangerous. We all know what is taking place in the Sahara desert. Unimaginable violence, banditry, jihadism, the racism of the Malian government army .... Here, we are at least safe. But every war comes to an end, and this one shall as well. Even if right now, the fighting is everywhere. The Sahel is burning...."

Osman also lets us know he is originally from Timbuktu, the mystical city in northern Mali. His urban origin has made him something of an oddity here in the Mbera camp. The great majority of the refugees hail from the nomadic countryside. The static nature of their current existence chips away at their bodies and souls every day, despite the fact that many of them fled here with their herds of cattle in tow.

"We are nomads. We follow our animals and we've got little use for infrastructure. Here in the camp, our way of life has been profoundly altered. We are stuck in one place, and we have slowly been turning into farmers. I have no idea what shall become of us. Through socializing we're getting acquainted with what they call civilization. It is not necessarily a good thing," opines a traditionally-garbed retired teacher named Ahmed Ag Hamama. He goes on to detail his flight from Mali to escape terrorist attacks, and ultimately confides that he now spends most of his days in the camp's schools.

"I am seventy-three years old," he smiles. "I will continue to teach for as long as I can. I have dedicated my life to educating these children."

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Officially, the Mbera refugee camp is governed by the Mauritanian authorities, yet their presence is virtually non-existent. The camp is located in the middle of the desert, which hasn't seen any rainfall for the past two years.

The draught is almost a palpable thing, infinitely aggressive in nature. The influx of a large number of Malian refugees into south-eastern Mauritania has only exacerbated the ever-present struggle for its painfully

limited resources. The fragile balance becomes more disrupted with each passing day.

By now almost all the bigger trees are gone, cut down for building material and charcoal by the refugees and the local population. In the desert, this Haitian approach to survival has only sped up the erosion of fertile soil and further vitiated what is left.

All around the camp, one stumbles on horrifying glimpses of a dystopian future, chief among which are heaps of recently expired yet already bloated animal corpses. Every day, thirst and hunger kill more of the goats, donkeys and cows that arrived with the refugees. Desiccated trees, which offer pitifully little shade, are riddled with black plastic bags, making them look like vultures' nests from a distance. Naked children languish under the sweltering sun, women hide under their long dresses, and men keep aimlessly loitering about and staring off into all that depressingly empty space.

Fortunately, the Mbera camp is located above a limited supply of underground water. It is this stroke of fortune that ensures the survival of the tens of thousands of refugees and the local population—at least for the time being. The underground water is quickly running out; climate change is causing the Saharan desert to spread a few kilometres to the south each year.[2]

The vast majority of armed conflicts are being fought in the world's hottest places with the scarcest supplies of water, justifying its status as one of "the oils of the twenty-first century."

Over the last few years, the crop production that sustains tens of millions of people in the especially hot and dry stretch between Senegal and Sudan, dropped by seventy percent. It is no surprise that food prices promptly skyrocketed, much like all over the Middle East. This fact is nothing less than the harbinger of an eventual all-out war in the wider region from Syria to Mauritania.

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On the most profound level, the Malian war refugees are climate change refugees as well. The tragedy of the Sahel region—a toxic cocktail of climate change, ethnic and religious strife, organized crime, the region's oppressive colonial legacy, international military interventions and hopelessly porous borders—is certain to escalate. The only question is

[2] http://www.un.org/en/events/desertification_decade/whynow.shtml

whether it shall ever even register on the map that is presented by the world's mainstream media.

The fact that they are almost completely ignored by the global public has a profound impact on the victims of the Sahel calamity. There is constant talk of food shortages among the refugees. Owing to the depletion of its budget, the UN's World Food Programme has been forced to cut its food portions to one third of what they were.

"The war in Mali is virtually forgotten. This means our budget here is in great trouble," claims Olivier Mirindi, a member of UNICEF's team in the town of Bassikonou. "Our capacities are severely limited. We were forced to let go many of our workers. Serious limitations were also placed on the amount of food we can provide. And all we expect from the future are more cuts. The situation could deteriorate to the point where lives will be in jeopardy."

Mirindi is also quick to stress the high vulnerability of the children, who form more than a half of the Mbera camp's population. The youngest are the ones facing the direst peril.

"The cuts mean the camp's very existence is under threat. Actually, the entire system of refugee relief is in trouble. And things are not at all likely to get better," agrees Sebastian Laroze, the UN Refugee Agency spokesperson for Mauritania. UNHCR's projects are co-funded by the ECHO, the EU's Directorate for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Without ECHO's financial assistance, the Mbera camp would probably have been facing termination as we spoke.

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Among those who have come to Mbera for a second time is forty-seven-year-old Fatma Mint Sidi, a woman who has spent a large chunk of her life as a refugee.

Her first stint as a refugee lasted for almost six years. "Back then I didn't have children, and my husband was still alive," she tells us as she sits chasing off flies under a sizzling tarp. When she returned, her home town of Lere—the point of origin for roughly one third of the camp's current population—was completely destroyed. And not only because of the war: climate change had done its part as well. The desert's sand had covered a good part of the deserted Tuareg town. Fatma was forced to rebuild her life from scratch.

"I realize nothing lasts forever, but I didn't expect another war. The last one had completely changed my worldview. In the old days we all used to help one another. Now I have to do everything by myself."

During our conversation Fatma seems both mournful and strangely distant. In January 2012, the moment she heard the first shots being fired, she gathered her children, her ill father and her invalid sister and ran for her life. Those gunshots were a vivid reminder of the war in 1991. She knew things were not likely to work themselves out peacefully.

One of her neighbours took her to the Mauritanian border. "You know, it's much worse now than in the nineties. There's less food and more people. The humanitarian organizations do provide some help, but there isn't enough of it to go around. Sometimes the food runs out, and I've got a large family to feed."

As she relates this, Fatma Mint Sidi slumps with exhaustion. "I don't think much about the future," she smiles mournfully. "Whatever happens is in God's hands." During my time at the camp I came to notice how most of the Malian refugees refused to discuss the future, almost as if it were taboo.

Many of the refugees I spoke to—Fatma was certainly one of them—would like to return home as soon as possible. During the first half of 2016, some 1,800 people returned to Mali, which has also been devastated by a savage draught. The possibly most vicious yet painfully apt metaphor to describe their fate is that the returnees jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

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"Between 2004 and 2009 I lived and worked in Libya," recalls Mustafa al Ensari, 34. "I was making good money. When I returned home to Mali, I was able to buy a car and a house. But then the war broke out, and I lost everything. Now, like everyone else here, I am a refugee. All of us are equally poor here. We are all in the same boat, we have all been abandoned. If I had the money, I would go to Europe."

We met Mustafa at the camp's clinic, where the local doctors do what they can for the many undernourished infants. Along with his friends, Mustafa tries to help to the best of his abilities. He says he wants to make the best possible use of all the free time. Nothing breaks a man's spirit like being passive all day long.

As the brightly-garbed mothers breastfeed their shatteringly thin babies, Mustafa takes the opportunity to debunk the myth of the Africans' mass exodus to Europe. The truth of the matter is that only those with enough money are able to afford the long and perilous trip through the Sahel to the Libyan shore and onwards to the Italian islands.

"We all want to go to Europe, but we don't have the funds. Another problem is that we're all nomads. Have you ever met a nomad with all the

necessary papers?" grins Muhammad al Maloud, 24. "All of us are in the same situation. There is no racism inside this camp—unlike back home in Mali. Back there, things are horrible."

Unlike most of his peers, Muhammad doesn't need much prompting to share his tale.

"Northem Mali is ruled by terrorism and banditry!" he spits. "The Tuaregs and the Arabs are persecuted by both the jihadists and the Malian army. We have been stripped of everything. The Bamako authorities have always neglected us. My future is my family's past. I have no prospects to hold on to. The war isn't about to end anytime soon. Our entire generation has been sentenced to a life hardly worth living. Just like in 1991. And just like tomorrow. A lot of houses have been razed. In northern Mali, every family wakes up with one goal on their mind—how to find water. That's hardly living, is it? It's why so many of the young people have joined the rebels. Those men are the freedom fighters. They are fighting for independence."

The words keep flooding out of the short and wiry Mustafa, whose ambition in the old days was to go to college.

"The war is increasingly fought by those who had lost everything. When your mother and sister are raped, you have no choice but to join the fight," he concludes on a decidedly chilly note. It is both a summation and a prediction of the shape of things to come. How could things turn out any differently?

CHAPTER TWENTY

TRAPPED INSIDE FORTRESS EUROPE

CHIOS, GREECE, JANUARY 2017

In a cave below the remains of a mile-long city wall, a small band of freezing and utterly exhausted men had managed to get a fire going. Outside, the wind is turning vicious. It feels like even the sea is exasperated, splashing onto the cliffs as if trying to smash through the huddling men's final illusions. Seeing how such dreams are already few and far between, it seems a rather daunting task, even for an ocean.

Dusk descends over the damp stone cave in Greece. True, it is somewhat less cold inside, but the men are still shaking like leaves. All of them are Algerian migrants placed at the bottom rung of the food chain here on a modem-day *Raft of Medusa*, set afloat by European anti-refugee and anti-migrant policies.

During the moments of relative calm before the wind picks up again, no one much feels like talking. These men have long lost their flair for chatting, and most of their hopes have been buried back in the Sahara, in Turkey, or somewhere at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. By now, the refugees' stories have become etched onto their faces, especially around the eyes. They gaze back at me, hopeless and worn-down—men who played the game and lost so horribly they can no longer afford to admit it.

At the moment, some 63,000 refugees and migrants are marooned in Greece, unable to either press on to the promised land, or return to their respective conflict zones.

For months, thousands have been waiting for their first interview after applying for asylum. Many have already had their applications turned down. To justify their decisions, the local bureaucrats have declared Turkey, a country teetering on the brink of war, a safe country for refugees.

The wheels of bureaucracy are excruciatingly slow to turn. Its members are, almost without exception, "only fulfilling their duties" and "obeying the law". Their collective action forms a perfect algorithm for the *banality*

of evil that has already led to the (re)birth of a new Europe, a morally bankrupt continent stripped of the last vestiges of shame and empathy.

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The Eastern Aegean island of Chios has been described as "the magical Greek island which cures all wanderlust." It is also one of the frontlines of Europe's war against refugees and migrants.

The local population on Chios has long distinguished itself with its exemplary and at times heroic care for incoming refugees. Then last spring, after the EU-Turkey deal on refugees was struck, the Greek authorities, under Brussels patronage, set up the infamous "VIAL hotspot." The first of many, the VIAL was a mix of prison and latter-day concentration camp, every bit as vile as its acronym suggested.

In no time at all, similar facilities sprung up across many Aegean islands near the Turkish coast. A few hotspots also have been set up on the mainland. Like, for example, the Moria camp on Lesbos, which is quite singular in its combination of inhuman living conditions and police brutality. The VIAL on Chios remains by far the most infamous.

On my first visit last April, the entire camp seemed poised on the brink of an explosion. A hunger strike was underway, and the authorities were struggling to quiet things down by relocating hundreds of people to the Souda camp. The improvised camp was located by the sea and close to Chios's main town. It was run by a coalition of NGOs, whose activists brought food to the refugees and helped them with the horrendously intricate paperwork.

Nine months ago, the fresh arrivals to the island were still filled with hope, enthusiasm and the will to thrive. They had somehow managed to survive both the devastation of their respective homelands and the infinitely treacherous journey to what they thought was the civilised world. Slogging through endless humiliations while grappling with the fact that their entire past had been erased, they whole-heartedly gave themselves up to the present to find some semblance of a future.

Today, with *Fortress Europe* closed and most of its land-of-refuge-and-opportunity lustre trampled into the dirt, things are very different.

True, many of the refugees have managed to make it to Athens, and some of them have gotten even further. But on Chios, hundreds of people have been trapped in shocking conditions for months.

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The mornings in front of the Souda camp see dozens of refugees come out to kill time. The camp is situated right by the sea, beside a long canal that runs next to the ancient city walls.

The men converse quietly and without much enthusiasm. Most of them don't even seem angry anymore. The muddy and bitterly cold camp has been ransacked by the flu. But even worse is the epidemic of depression—the collective form of the disease, staunchly allied with the symptoms of what is so clearly post-traumatic stress disorder.

Nine months ago, one could still discern much empathy among the locals, even though the refugee crisis had already deprived them of their tourist-based income. But since then, things have taken a sinister turn. Both empathy and hospitality have a limited shelf-life, at least when they are not actively cultivated. The masks of political correctness have now fallen, and long-dormant Nazi sleeper cells are stirring back to life.

As ever, the weak and the downtrodden are bearing the brunt of it. Less than two months ago, rocks and Molotov cocktails came raining down on the refugee camp. The message couldn't have been clearer: the island is no longer safe for the refugees and the migrants.

In the nine months following his arrival at Chios, Mustafa Alkhtyibe has become one of the most recognisable faces on the island. His excellent English and distinct flair for companionship have made him a favourite of his fellow sufferers and foreign activists. Yet the robust forty-two-year-old's fixed smile cannot fully conceal his pain.

After losing his wife and two children in an Aleppo air raid, Mustafa hasn't really stopped moving. Even here, in the Souda camp where he lives in one of the huge tents that bare the UNHCR's logo, he gets frequent flashes of paranoia. He literally can't keep still. When he tries to do so, he gets utterly crushed under the weight of his loss. His family is the one thing he refuses to talk about. Mustafa is all too eager to discuss everything else in an often unstoppable and obsessive fashion.

Apart from flashbacks to his war-tom land, he is also haunted by the future. For what future can there be for one of the tens of thousands of faceless refugees here? In Greece, of all places—a country sacrificed once again on the altar of Europe's opportunist agenda; a country conscripted into serving as the continent's human-waste dump?

The answer, Mustafa feels, is all too apparent.

"Nine months of humiliation was enough," he asserts. "I feel I am about to lose my mind. Everything here is wrong and stupid, everything. What a farce! We are worse off here than dogs without a master. We definitely get treated worse!" He spreads his hands wide. "Enough already, enough! I will do everything in my power to get away from here. Where will I go?

Anywhere—anywhere, I don't care! But it is now clear I won't be allowed to do so legally."

I talk to Mustafa in his very poorly heated tent. The words keep gushing out of him like a fevered litany. This man so clearly and so badly needs to state his case.

Before the ground opened up beneath him and swallowed his entire existence, Mustafa Alkhtyibe was the head of a successful marketing firm in Aleppo. But as soon as he starts describing his life back then, he all but falls apart with despair. From then on, all he can manage are short, sometimes almost completely unrelated sentences detailing his plight.

His most immediate problem right now is that the Greek authorities have denied his asylum application. He has already appealed the decision, and also lost the appeal. After all, the European and Greek bureaucrats happen to feel Turkey is perfectly capable of providing a safe haven.

In Mustafa's case, being single proved a further factor that weighed against him. Indeed, what a farce: the demise of his entire family had made him even more undesirable than he otherwise would have been. And the local paper-shufflers were equally un-swayed by the fact that his beloved city of Aleppo had been razed to the ground.

"It seems almost impossible now," Mustafa winces as he recalls the not-so-distant past. "But before the trouble started, I was convinced Aleppo would be spared most of the fighting. And let me tell you, I quickly lost all faith in the revolution! Why? Because all the smart people soon got arrested or escaped abroad, and were quickly replaced by extremists, criminals, radicals and idiots."

Mustafa then patiently explains to me how he is always looking for alternative routes. "Each day, at least five of my mates here move on to Athens—totally illegally, of course. But the trucks, the traffickers, the false papers, all of that cost money … and I don't have much left," he shrugs. "I'm also counting on some help from my friends. I'm one of the few here ready to stay in Greece, no matter how horrible the situation. I have many skills. I know I can trust myself to survive. But first I need to get out of this awful place."

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Mustafa is serious about getting out. Every day I spend with him, he comes up with a new plan, each one more fantastic than the last.

One morning it strikes him that his best chance for smuggling himself onto a ferry to Athens would be to bring a small dog. All of the attention

would be diverted to the dog, Mustafa reasons, while he himself might go completely unnoticed.

When confronted with the fact that even dogs need their own passports to travel across the European Union, he is completely shattered. "Oh my God, oh my God. What I want more than anything is to go to Luxembourg. Ali Baba-style, of course—there is no other way. They have so few refugees there and so much money … But to get there you need at least 4,500 Euros, and I don't have anywhere near that."

Mustafa also tells me that the traffickers have an actual menu. Business is booming, and one can get anywhere one wants, as long as one has the money: Canada—€9,000, Germany—€3,500, France—€5,000, Great Britain, €7,000.

Sneezing violently, Mustafa pours himself another coffee, possibly his tenth today.

The trouble is that he can't get much sleep at night, so instead he broods and scours the internet for possible solutions. In the morning, he feels like he'd give anything not to get out of bed. "As soon as I get up, I start losing money," he winces and finishes the coffee.

A large crowd has gathered in front of the Souda camp. The men line up for food, focused on getting their daily rations and delivering them to the women and children, who wait somewhere further back. These mealtime conflagrations have long become the emotional fulcrum of camp life, offering the only solace to a radically impoverished existence.

"I am trying not to lose my soul," says Omar al Salem, 28, from the Syrian town of Deir ez-Zor. "I'm keeping clear of conflict. I follow the rules. I don't stick my neck out for any reason. But it is no good. I'm never going to get out of here this way."

Omar has been incarcerated here on the island for the past five months. What seems like a lifetime ago, he was lucky enough to get into college just before the war started. He studied economics in Latakia, a regime bastion and thus a city untouched by most of the war.

"Life was good," Omar remembers. "If always a bit dangerous, as war-profiteering thugs had long taken over."

For a while, Omar kept busy with his studies and with a job waiting tables at a restaurant. His greatest hope was for the war to end before he completed his university education. That would free him from the ever-looming prospect of getting conscripted into the army, where he would be forced to murder friends and neighbours. His luck didn't hold out. When Omar graduated, the carnage began in earnest.

As a Sunni in a Shiia-dominated town, he felt much too exposed to even think about staying. He certainly didn't feel like helping a thoroughly

discredited regime butcher tens of thousands of its own citizens. His other option—to throw his lot in with the extremist-controlled Islamic militias—seemed just as unappealing.

So he struck out for Al-Qāmishlī, a Kurdish town next to the Turkish and Iraqi border. Even though his parents had been residing there for a while, the town wasn't safe for him. The members of the YPG Kurdish militia, which controls a large part of northern Syria, weren't exactly welcoming to a fighting-fit Sunni Arab. And so Omar opted to follow the lead of his two brothers who, eighteen months ago, had braved the gauntlet of the Balkan refugee route to reach Germany.

The expensive help of the local smugglers got him through the heavily guarded border, where dozens of refugees had recently been gunned down by the Turkish border patrols. Omar didn't have enough money to purchase "the classic" on the smugglers' menu. So he was forced to make do. The smugglers got him a free place on one of the outgoing boats, but in exchange he was tasked with steering it all the way to Greece.

Little did Omar know that his assent could very easily have landed him in jail as a sub-contractor for the smugglers.

It was equally likely that he could prove unable to navigate the motor boat. He had never before attempted anything like it in his life. The consequences could have been fatal for the boat's thirty-five passengers.

"We were about half an hour out. Suddenly, I noticed a Turkish coast guard vessel heading straight for us. The sea had turned restless, water was leaking into the boat, so I revved the engine to the max. No, I didn't feel any fear. I was running on pure instinct. The Turkish boat chose not to follow. It was only after the sea started settling down that it occurred to me how easily we could all have died."

Omar is another one of those dejected souls whose application for asylum has already been turned down. He is now awaiting the decision on his appeal, but the most likely outcome, by far, is that he will soon be deported back to Turkey. This is all part and parcel of the EU-Turkish deal. Yet as dusk gathers over the bitterly cold refugee camp, Omar tells me he still refuses to lie down and accept defeat.

"I have already risked far too much to do so," he shrugs and gives a short, humourless laugh.

He informs me that he was the only person from his boat who had not yet managed to leave Chios. He takes this as proof that it is still possible to reach Athens at least, if not the actual promised land. But getting to the Greek capital would cost him €500, and he has no money left. His parents are unable to help him. Perhaps his two brothers will be able to chip in, if

and when they make any money. Omar proudly informs me they have been granted asylum in Germany and are doing very well.

Omar is convinced that once he reaches Athens, things are bound to get easier. "I tried several times to get myself to an Athens-bound ferry, but I always got caught. I once bleached my hair so they wouldn't recognise me. But I still didn't make it. The last time around the policemen only gave me a kind smile and redirected me back to the camp. But I'll keep trying. I can't give up."

More than anything else, this young Syrian seems terrified of losing hope. Hope, after all, is the chief driving force for the traumatised survivors in camps like this all over the Greek coast. It is small wonder, then, that Europe's bureaucracy has long been waging a monstrous campaign to foreclose on every last shred of hope and rob the incoming migrants of the will to press on.

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"I could never have imagined I'd get to witness such horrible things—such utter degradation of human life," says Sharif Alimi, 28, an Afghan Hazara from the Gazni province. I speak with him as he boards the ancient bus that regularly transfers refugees and migrants between the VIAL hotspot and the Souda camp.

For the past five years, Sharif lived in Sweden. But in November he decided to return to Greece, which served as the first European port of call on his long and arduous journey to freedom. The reason for his recent return? A couple of months ago, his parents arrived on Chios after spending the last few years as refugees in Quetta, one of the most dangerous cities in the world for the brutally persecuted Hazara people.

This forced Sharif's hand. "I simply had to act. I had no choice but to come here and help my parents. I knew what they'd be facing. I was imprisoned in many European countries: all told, they put me in jail seventeen times. And without a single conviction, mind you! The worst of it was in Slovakia, where I was imprisoned for six months. Trust me, I saw very well what Europe had become. How it chooses to treat our people."

When he got word that his parents had arrived on Chios, Sharif managed to put his good job in Sweden on hold and immediately departed for Greece.

After hearing less than half of it, I am convinced that Sharif's story is worth at least a trilogy of books and movies. Over the course of the eleven years he has spent surviving as Europe's plaything, he was deported to Afghanistan, Turkey, Greece and twice to Iran. Giving up was not an option. He was treated to an insider's view of the various flavours of Slavic

policemen, the savageness of life on the Italian streets and the recent build-up of French racism. He was only accepted by Sweden a little over five years ago, and the liberal Scandinavian country, he claims, has been very kind to him. He was quick to get a job, which enabled him to get the rest of his life in order.

Today, such a feat would no longer be possible. As reported, Europe is now repatriating Afghan refugees daily, declaring them safe in a land which has scarcely seen any respite from mass butchery for the past forty years.

"I couldn't let my parents share my fate," Sharif nods heavily. "So I came down here to help get them to Sweden. So far we have not been successful, but I have no doubt that we soon will be."

Foregoing the option to sleep in a hotel, this dutiful son has been spending his nights with his parents inside the VIAL hotspot. Every single day he has to crawl in through a hole in the fence that is the best-kept secret around these parts. The VIAL hotspot is otherwise heavily guarded, but once Sharif manages to slip inside, no one finds him particularly suspicious.

Talking to him, it soon becomes clear he is totally committed to his goal. He has been through everything and more. His pain threshold has risen to a previously unimaginable level. Once you get to know him, you can so clearly see the scarred and grizzled visage of a true survivor etched onto his face.

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In the days we spent together, Sharif and his Swedish girlfriend Zara did everything in their power to relocate his parents to a hotel. Omar was set on providing his mother and father with at least a modicum of comfort and dignity, even if it meant running the risk that he would be jailed again. He was both dignified and fearless in fighting off the policemen and the fellow migrants who were out to humiliate his parents.

Without his Swedish passport, Sharif would be swiftly banished from the continent. As things stood, he was able to clutch this tiny piece of paper and keep fighting for that elusive and infinitely fragile thing called human rights.

"I have made my decision: we are all going to live in Sweden, and that is how it's going to be," Sharif tells me as we get ready to part ways. "We Afghans, we're second-class refugees, you know. Absolutely no one here has any time for us, and this goes doubly for the Hazara people. I mean, even in our own country we are mostly seen as foreigners. But what are you going to do? I know nothing can stop us now. So I guess I'll see you in Sweden, huh?"

Chios, Greece, January 2017.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FC LAMPEDUSA: NO RACE, NO CLASS, NO GENDER!

HAMBURG, GERMANY, MARCH 2017

Tahir elegantly receives the ball, gives it a plucky tap forward, and then fires off a scorching right-footer, straight toward the lower right comer of the goal's net. The goalie stretches out for all he's worth, but he comes up short. Tahir tries to play it cool. Yet after a few moments, his gentle, almost childlike face splits into an infectious grin. His joy is uncontainable, and his teammates waste no time joining in. They swap high-fives and words of praise; teammate after teammate sprints over to join the festivities.

Tahir, 22, is one of the nearly forty members of the FC Lampedusa-St. Pauli football club.

Founded precisely three years ago, the club's ever-changing roster is filled exclusively by refugees and migrants. Over these past three years, almost a hundred of them have stepped up to don the team's colours. Some of them are still here, some have been deported, and some have started entirely new lives elsewhere in Germany's prosperous north.

The whole enterprise is run by activists and retired football players from Hamburg's famous St. Pauli quarter, located on the Elbe river. Famous for its beerhalls, bordellos and wholesomely alternative vibe, this port-centred district has proven more than up to handling the so-called European refugee crisis.

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"I can't tell you how I look forward to each training session!" Tahir beams in front of the club's dressing-room right before practice.

A former student of petrol engineering in the ISIS-controlled Syrian town of Deir ez-Zor, Tahir has already been granted asylum and a work permit. He tells me he cherishes each minute he spends with his teammates.

Most of them have run the same savage gauntlet he himself has been forced to run to reach safety.

"The guys here, we have so much to talk about," he nods while tying up his laces. "But more than anything else, we love talking about football!"

At the moment, Tahir is living with a German family in Hamburg. He claims to be feeling perfectly fine. He is hoping that, come autunm, he might be allowed to resume his studies. "My parents, my brother and two sisters are living in Turkey, and I want to start helping them as soon as possible."

Back home in Syria, he spent seven years playing for a local football team. Here in Hamburg, he is quickly making his way up the ranks of the global refugee club.

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"You know, there's help and then there's 'help'. We didn't want to be the sort of people who latch onto this whole refugee thing just to clear our conscience, and then walk away the minute it stops feeling fashionable. No way! Our aim was to set up something long-term. Something community-based, something that can bring us all together for a constructive purpose."

These are the sentiments of Nico Appel, FC Lampedusa's spiritual leader and one of the five coaches who train the refugee footballers.

A graphic designer by trade, Appel herself is a football player of long standing, though she has never played professionally. For the last twenty years she has been intimately tied with the iconic FC St. Pauli squad, which boasts fan clubs all over the world.[1] Above all else, the club's legacy has always been its proudly anti-racist and anti-fascist stance—a stance that is now increasingly lacking in the stands across Europe's great stadiums.

The idea of a football club for refugees first got brought up four years ago, when a 300-strong contingent of Africans reached Hamburg from the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa. The local church took in a number of them, and the city authorities did what they could. Yet many arrivals were soon at the mercy of the streets and their own instincts.

A few of the more concerned residents of the traditionally leftist St. Pauli quarter stepped in to help. As they spent time together, the refugees and activists started playing a few matches, and the global refugee team was born.

This, it must be recalled, was all at the very end of a completely different time—a time when Germany and Europe saw the refugee question as exotic and probably quite benign.

[1] https://www.fcstpauli.com/en

Who, back then, could have imagined the tribulations of the so-called Balkan refugee route? Who could have imagined that Germany would open up its borders to the hundreds of thousands of tormented souls on the Union's borders? Who could have envisioned that the Mediterranean Sea would turn into a mass grave? Who could have predicted the quick polarization of electorates all over the continent, the proliferation of walls and fences and, naturally enough, the rise of the far right?

"All we wanted was to help these people escape the streets," Appel nods. "And so a few of us activists huddled together and started organising picnics, German language classes and a number of workshops. We did what we could to keep our new friends safe. In many cases, their papers weren't exactly in order. Many were being threatened with deportation. We decided to stand up for them, all in accordance with our slogan—*'No race, no class, no gender!'* These were also the founding values of FC Lampedusa!"

There is no doubt in coach Appel's voice as she tells me that education and inclusion are always the key. "You have to give traumatised people time and as much of your attention as you can. I am not a teacher, and I am not a social worker. But I really do want to make a difference. Over this last year, the mood in Germany has undergone a dramatic shift. Much of the initial enthusiasm is gone. It's much harder for refugees now. And this makes our job even more important."

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As things stand, FC Lampedusa-St. Pauli is a club where anyone can play. The head coach refuses to place too high a premium on talent or skill. The only truly unwanted guests in this remarkable collective are insults and physical brutality. So far, two unmanageable hot-heads have already been shown the door.

On Thursday, Nico Appel is leading a training practice at one of the FC St. Pauli's modest training grounds. She immediately stands out as the only woman in an overwhelmingly male environment.

"Oh," she laughs, "that's not a problem! These guys have no objections to being trained by a woman. All of them have mothers, right? Their mothers were the ones who'd trained them how to survive. I can tell you these young men take me very seriously indeed. They are as respectful a bunch as you're likely to meet. All of them know very well why they're here. They are so touchingly grateful to us for sharing at least some of their burden."

Words of praise keep pouring out of Appel, who incidentally turns out to be an ardent supporter of the Argentinean national team. She rooted for Argentines in the last World Cup final, even as they were being defeated by

her native Germany. How can this be? "Oh well," she shrugs and smiles, "I've always been attracted to flair and passion more than to any sort of a national component."

At the training centre that Thursday, the practice session gets underway. "Pass the ball, pass the ball, don't just dribble! Come on, Rooney, get that ball off you!" one of the Somali defenders calls out to a technically gifted and sturdily Rooney-esque youth, who has apparently "forgotten" it's possible to actually pass the ball.

Under the floodlights on the artificial training turf, things start to heat up. After thirty minutes of warm-up comes a prolonged bout of set-piece practice. Then the team separates into two joyfully clashing squads.

Half of the lads don red shirts, and the other half deck themselves out in green. The boys, whose ages range between fifteen and twenty-four, grow ever more relaxed and playful. Nico keeps nodding from the side-lines, as they work out the competitiveness out of their systems in the healthiest way possible.

This is also one of the main reasons FC Lampedusa does not take part in any official leagues. The squad only plays in the occasional tournament and a lot of friendly matches, both in Germany and abroad.

Most of the players are still dazzled by their recent visit to Barcelona, which they were only able to pull off after a hellish struggle with the reigning bureaucrats. Luckily, the almighty club from the Catalonian capital was happy to help out. Last November, the members of FC Lampedusa were greeted by Barcelona's mayor, Ada Colau Ballano, who presented them with a special humanitarian award.

The sheer glee of that visit, however, was marred by one of the team-members getting deported.

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"It was incredible! Visiting the Nou Camp has always been a dream of mine. It was an unforgettable experience!"

At the club's premises, I speak to a remarkably slim Somali eighteen-year-old named Mooto. The FC Lampedusa forward arrived in Germany a little more than two years ago, after spending months on a perilous journey.

Starting out from his village near Mogadishu, he first crossed Ethiopia and Sudan. Then he spent a few months in Libya, waiting for his boat to Europe. After the dangerous voyage—last year, more than 5,000 refugees and migrants perished at the bottom of the sea—he and his 200 fellow travellers arrived in Sicily. After a month spent in Italian refugee camps, he pressed on to Germany.

"It was hard," he recalls the experience: "But it was worth it. I never imagined I would ever again get to feel so safe and free as I do here in St. Pauli. Oh, and I never imagined I'd be able to play football with my friends!"

Mooto lives in an integration house with many of his team-mates. Back home in Somalia he played football every day, no matter how dangerous the war got.

FC Lampedusa's practices are scheduled for every Thursday night. During the week, most of its members play for other clubs. As today's session drew to a close, I noted it felt just like a training session of any slightly above-par amateur squad—only with far fewer fouls, shouts and curses. There was no rough physical contact to speak of, either on or off the pitch. I could detect very little strict hierarchy and even fewer set roles on the training grounds. Also wonderfully lacking were the authoritarian coaching interventions so plentiful almost everywhere else.

"You know, all that aggression and machismo, that's the reason I never cared to play football with men," Nico Appel nods while gently steering the session to a close. "Male football is much too competitive. Football itself is a magnificent game, offering almost boundless therapeutic and pedagogical potential."

Coach Appel is also quick to remind me how German women have only been allowed to play football since 1974. She makes no secret of the fact that she is on a mission, a humanist emancipatory quest. As a born footballer she knows the sacred game to be one of the few universal languages available: a language that can be mastered to undreamed heights or just barely stuttered along—but a language understood by all.

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The ball rapidly changes possession under the floodlights. Awesomely long passes are made, as well as a few shots from ludicrously impossible positions. Few of the twenty-odd players have much time for defensive assignments, save for the gifted and very spirited Bulgarian goalkeeper.

"No, I never before played football in an organised environment. What I know of how to play I learned on the streets. The same goes for everything else I know," a young man named Said grins as the team members rally together to try out a shipment of fresh shirts.

At his twenty-four years, Said is the oldest player on the pitch: the oldest, and by far the most noticeable. During breaks he executes a series of reverse somersaults, not unlike Nigerian forward Obafemi Martins. Before, during and after practice he smokes like there is no tomorrow. Said reached

Germany from Northern Afghanistan as early as 2011. He and Denis, a fifteen-year-old Kosovar, liven up the practice match by exchanging a number of mock kickboxing blows. Between them, not a single ball is wasted.

"Everything is different here. It's nice, peaceful, everyone's being so nice to us," smiles the slight but infectiously exuberant Denis, whose asylum application was recently denied by the German authorities. "I love coming here. This here, it's not football—it's pure joy!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"BACK HOME, ALL WE COULD HEAR WERE GUNS AND SCREAMING!"

UGANDA/SOUTH SUDAN, MAY 2017

It was lunchtime at the Impevi refugee camp and registration centre in the Ugandan West Nile province. Hundreds of children formed an orderly queue under the white tarps of the UNHCR, the United Nations' refugee agency. These children were refugees from the horrendous war raging just a few kilometres away in South Sudan. Their eyes sank deep into their emaciated faces, but they shined with anticipation. Each of them clutched one aluminium plate as they waited for their first meal of the unbearably hot day.

The heat had already glued the atmosphere into a stifling soup. Now and then, one of the boys' faces broke into a bashful smile. Their mothers stood nearby, dignified if a bit distracted, while waiting in their own long queues. Very few adult men were around, few enough that their absence was noticeable. This demographic metaphor for the world's most urgent and most under-reported refugee crisis could hardly be any more clear-cut or telling.

Uganda, with its population of thirty-nine million, is now host to more than 1.2 million refugees. Some 900,000 of them are from South Sudan.

Uganda has long been renowned as the continent's most hospitable country for refugees. Most of the ones currently staying here have arrived during the last ten months. As many as eighty-five percent of them are women and children; sixty-five percent are under the age of eighteen. Uganda is currently hosting more refugees than have entered the entire European Union, at the peak of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. According to estimates, by the end of the year at least another half-million are certain to arrive, all of them fleeing the horrors of war.

The conflict in South Sudan, the world's youngest country, is only growing in scope.

After South Sudan declared independence in July 2011, the republic swiftly found itself at war: this time, not with the Islamist regime to the north in Khartoum, but with some of its own peoples. Ethnic violence erupted near the end of 2013 following a clash between president Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar. The situation quickly escalated into an all-out civil war, marked by ethnic cleansing, unspeakable savagery, famine, pronounced disinterest from the international community and the western media—and, of course, by the endless columns of refugees that furiously fled southward.

The fact is that south is the only direction for them to run. The refugees' flight is in no way a bid for a better life, but rather a desperate scramble for survival. As far as they are concerned, there is no such thing as 'a better life': war is all they know and all they ever have known. Thousands of them have now become refugees twice over, and many are fleeing to Uganda for the third time.

"They are murdering us—they're killing us off like flies! Help!" Bill Mahas, 19, called out from a cluster of exhausted teenagers, skirted by a number of half-naked toddlers. Hundreds of refugees in threadbare clothes loitered about, waiting for the next stage of their desperate journey. The buses kept dropping off fresh loads of incomers, while trucks picked up the ones who'd managed to get registered and transported them to the camps.

"I have been here for three days," the visibly tired youth told me. "They promised we'd be sent on to a nice clean facility within a single day. But so far we haven't even been registered. We're so hungry and thirsty. We only get to eat once each day, and there is a chronic shortage of water. We sleep outside—look, over there by the garbage! The whole place reeks, and we really want to move on."

The journey from the South Sudanese city of Yei took Bill, as well as a number of friends and relatives, sixty days: two whole months of beating a path through the bushes while dodging the government troops from the ranks of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). According to various testimonies, these troops have been engaging in ethnic cleansing operations since last July.

"If the Ugandans don't want us here, let them just say so," Tobias Data, 32, joined the conversation. "We'll simply return home and die in our homeland. My wife and my son had already fled here a year ago." They first set off for the Democratic Republic of Congo, then they pressed on to Uganda. "When it got too dangerous, I went on the run myself. The government troops started killing people left and right, while our villages were also raided by the rebels and by various criminal groups. I am determined to seek out my family– but they won't let me move on!"

Tobias' father perished on the journey, which took four days. Tobias also had to watch a number of his acquaintances killed. The soldiers mowed them down with bullets and slashed their necks with machetes.

This was the second time Tobias has come to Uganda seeking refuge. The first time, he was a mere schoolboy, during the north versus south civil war. He still has fond memories of Uganda, which in 2006 adopted a special policy of awarding each refugee their own patch of land, the right to work and move freely, and the right to start a small business.

Yet predictably enough, history is repeating itself. South Sudan is being consumed by a fresh war, caused by ethnic divisions imposed from within and without, as well as by the unjust division of oil riches.

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A loose line of women lugged plastic bags of water across the red dirt. They had been walking since early morning. The children dragged heavy suitcases and carried the dry branches that their mothers would later need to cook dinner. Local youths weaved their way among the procession, trying to make a coin or two by turning their Chinese-made motorcycles into taxi services.

It was near the end of the rainy season, when northern Uganda is supposed to be thoroughly water-logged. The ground was completely dry. The wells were lethally empty. The effects of climate change had joined forces with the dogs of war—a fatal combination if ever there was one.

At present, the lives of some 5.5 million residents of South Sudan are under existential threat from famine: 5.5 million out of the nine million still left in this notoriously doomed land. Things are a bit better at the refugee camps—mostly large villages or small towns all over northern Uganda. But the hunger is still reaching epidemic proportions. According to official UNHCR statistics, two thirds of all children are malnourished, a quarter of all children severely so.

"The people here have been caught in a vicious circle. Everybody knows that things are much worse in South Sudan, while Uganda is coming apart at the seams because of its humane refugee policies. And then you have to factor in the refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Burundi. As always, it is especially hard on the children. Many of them have arrived here unescorted. Hundreds of families got separated on the road," I was told by Reika Farkas, a member of the UNHCR emergency team, as she showed me around the registration centre.

On the day of our visit, 1,600 new refugees poured in.

This was Reika's final day at the camp. Her three-month tour was drawing to a close. She clearly and bravely fought off both her fatigue and her realistic pessimism.

"This is one giant emergency zone," she scowled, "the frontline of a truly colossal human tragedy. It's hard work, and it never stops. There are so few of us, you know. And our budget has been almost depleted. All of us here, we're nothing short of miracle workers. The refugees never stay longer than three days, and we manage to get them all registered—every single one. At its worst, more than 3,000 people were passing through each day. It was unimaginably crowded and exhausting. But we've managed to set up a working system, and we've prevented chaos from breaking out. The only question is for how long."

When asked about her own country's refugee policies, the Hungarian humanitarian worker felt too ashamed to answer.

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When South Sudan gained its independence after decades of conflict with the Khartoum government, there was optimism that the world's youngest country would be able to reap the fruits of peace. Instead, it rapidly descended into openly savage infighting.

"People in uniforms started coming to our village. I don't know who they were. They came almost every day. They were killing men and raping young women. It all started very quickly, almost overnight. We used to lead such normal, peaceful lives. We tended our gardens, visited each other ...," explained a forty-five-year-old lady named Estgha Tabu.

I spoke with her as she stood in front of her cabin on the outskirts of the Impevi camp. The tarp that covered her temporary residence was patched together from wood and plastic. Like most refugees staying at the camp, she hailed from a village near the city of Yei. She had reached Uganda after several weeks of walking and hiding in the bush along with her four daughters (Viola, 17, Suzan, 15, Ataz, 10, and Sara, 6). Her first husband had succumbed to AIDS, and the second one was killed during the escape.

The visibly ill Estgha was now all the support her four girls had left. She said she couldn't really tell me how the five of them had managed to survive—and, what was more, to survive unmolested, unlike thousands of other women and girls. The bushes are crawling with sexual predators. Rape has turned into an instrument of war, sometimes even into a means of communication.

"No, I don't feel safe here," Estgha winced. "I have great trouble falling asleep. I'm so scared. I keep thinking they're sure to come after us to kill

us. Just like they did my husband. There is a lot of very bad people around. The border is very close."

Estgha told me all this while sitting on a patch of canvas in the shade provided by a dry savannah tree. Since she was a widow and quite ill, the camp's managers let her set up her residence about a kilometre out from the camp's chaotic centre. Estgha and her daughters now reside near the new dusty road leading to the border with South Sudan. The Ugandan authorities granted them the use of a plot of land measuring fifty × fifty metres.

In theory, such plots are available for tilling and are supposed to ensure that refugees don't have to fear going hungry. Uganda used to make it an official policy to allocate a 100 × 100 metre plot to every refugee family. That was the case right up until last summer's exodus from South Sudan. The farmable land quickly began to run out—not unlike the funds in the local and international humanitarian budgets. The authorities started to award less and less land. Now there is virtually none left.

"There's not much I can grow here," Estgha informed me. "The soil is full of rocks and stones, and it is also very salty. I would need an awful lot of water to get anything done. But there is not nearly enough to go around. The water has been rationed to thirteen litres a day per refugee. This is meant to cover all our needs—from washing through drinking to cooking and farming. It is nowhere near enough. It's tough for us here, very tough."

Estgha Tabu was another refugee who had been here before. She first escaped to Uganda and lived there from 1994 until 2005, when a peace treaty finally put an end to Sudan's civil war. Back then, when Estgha set out on the journey back home, she was overjoyed and firmly convinced she would never need to run again.

"Then death came for us once more. I don't even know how the new war started—nobody does! All I know is that I lost my husband and my home. There is never again going to be peace in South Sudan. Everybody is killing everybody else. It's much worse now than it was twenty years ago. Things are also worse here, in Uganda. There's so many of us they can't take proper care of everyone. And many more are sure to come."

What Estgha missed most was her expansive garden, along with her hens and her goats. Back home, she had everything she needed. She also missed her health and her youth, when she was "pretty, strong and full of energy—and now the end is coming."

She was very worried about the future of her daughters, who stood by shyly listening to our conversation. Every now and then, one of them jumped in to help with the translation; the two oldest daughters have been enrolled into the local school for refugees, but not the younger two. That would have been too expensive.

Their mother's days here are much the same. She wakes up at sunrise, gets the fire going and fixes porridge for the girls' breakfast. Owing to her poor health and her constant fear of being ousted from her lodgings, she spends a large part of the day in front of the cabin. She does the laundry and rests. She only ventures out to fetch some water and the wood for the next day's fire. The latter is starting to run out.

The sheer amount of people here has put a devastating drain on the environment. This is why the NGOs have painted red lines on the younger trees in the camp's vicinity, marking them as off-limits. The refugees now have to walk as far as ten kilometres to gather their wood.

In the evening, Estgha Tabu usually makes another porridge-based meal. Then she sits down with her daughters to enjoy the slightly cooler evening air. Another day in the refugee camp has drawn to a close. Such an existence doesn't lend itself to pondering life's great existential questions.

All that matters is survival.

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The Bidibidi refugee camp is the world's largest refugee camp, with a population of just under 300,000. As recently as a year ago, there were no refugees here—and not very many roads led across the savannah. Instead, there were plenty of trees and at least a bit of water. Now there are a great many roads and very few trees. There is no water. The wells have been sucked dry.

The camp—spread out across almost 250 square kilometres—gets its water supplies from incoming trucks. The cost is punishingly steep, and the logistics of servicing such a huge mass of people are staggering. Yet the camp's perimeter, unlike the perimeters of similar camps around the world, is not fenced in with barbed wire and watchtowers. It is also not patrolled by heavily armed policemen or members of private security firms.

Last December, the Ugandan authorities decided to stop letting additional refugees in. Half a dozen new settlements quickly sprung up in the Western Nile area. In many places, refugees now form a majority of the population. Relations with the local communities have grown increasingly strained. There are not enough basic resources to meet everyone's needs. This is especially true of water and arable land.

Uganda's refugee policy seems to be nearing a breaking point. The authorities in Kampala insist the borders shall remain open to refugees, but they are also asking for help from the international community; precious little of it seems to be on offer.

The NGO budgets are now almost depleted. In the current, crisis-riddled year, the UN has only secured fifteen percent of the money needed to properly handle the situation. The organisation is in dire need of an additional 810 million euros to shore up the funds. Much the same is true for virtually every other key source of humanitarian relief. The European Union, for example, is still 'struggling' to secure twenty million euros for the period up until 2020.

"The fact is that the situation in northern Uganda is growing worse. Yet the people—and the local authorities—remain very hospitable. They themselves have experienced war, and they know what suffering is like. Uganda is the Germany of East Africa," claims Kristian Schmidt, head of the EU delegation in Uganda.

I sat down to talk to him in Kampala. While the European Union, with its half a billion citizens, groans under the burden of a few hundred thousand people, Uganda bravely struggles on. "Despite its problems, the country persists in its open-door policy for refugees and daily takes care of 1.2 million people," Schmidt explained. "This is something the Europeans should be made aware of. Uganda needs and deserves our help. We have to support this model of refugee policies—after all, it is in our own best interest to do so. Uganda is a part of the solution."

The European ambassador to Uganda is convinced the war in South Sudan will last for a long time. This means that the flow of refugees southward is bound continue as well.

Uganda is being put under ever greater pressure. The resources are limited, while the country's own population—officially the second youngest in all of Africa—is experiencing a rapid surge of its own. By 2035, the number of Ugandans is expected to double. This means that the country will grow ever more reliant on foreign aid. Almost certainly, there won't be enough of it to go around.

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In previous times, when the number of refugees was much lower, Uganda's open refugee policy actually functioned as a successful economic model. The country was the recipient of substantial international funds, which meant infrastructure could be built. The market was expanding and new jobs were created while the countryside underwent a rapid modernisation. According to research, the refugees have already contributed much to the country's economic progress.

Now, however, things are starting to spiral out of control. Uganda is growing increasingly isolated. This is a very dangerous development.

Despite the robust state of the Ugandan security forces, the South Sudan conflict could quickly spread across the border. Memories of the blood-drenched Congo tragedy, the Burundi war and the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda are still fresh in everyone's minds. The expectation that the conflict might spread to the Great Lakes area remains a chilling prospect.

The growing tensions between the various ethnic groups are also much in evidence all over the refugee camps. At the same time, rumours are spreading of different paramilitary groups, mostly organised along ethnic lines, that recruit young people *en masse* from the refugee settlements. The young, jobless and desperate men are said to be easy prey for the paramilitaries' fiery rhetoric. And there is certainly no shortage of arms in Uganda, the hub of the arms trade in Africa—both the legitimate and the illicit kind.

To sum it up, even greater trouble seems to be brewing ahead. The EU ambassador Kristian Schmidt is not one to hide his awareness of the fact: "The key to resolving this whole mess lies in Juba. The leaders of South Sudan have proved irresponsible. We should sit them down at the same table and give them a little push to start negotiating. But it's not looking well. There is little political will to end the conflict. In reality, it is quite the contrary."

During informal conversations, a number of EU representatives informed me they were worried that the Ugandan "open model" might be on the verge of collapse. The number of incoming refugees is too great, and the relief programmes have been entirely dependent on foreign aid for quite some time. As already stated, these foreign funds are drying up—no matter how urgent the crisis.

In the European Union of today, empathy for someone else's pain is now officially no longer even a public relations bullet point.

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In front of her improvised dwelling at the Bidibidi camp, Gladys Win was making a local version of sweet fried dough. She told me she was nineteen years old and hailed from the western part of South Sudan. The air all around her grew rich with the fragrance of freshly prepared food. The aroma had already drawn in a score of starving children.

The nearby savannah road was filled with trucks and motorcycles stirring up clouds of red dust. In the middle of the afternoon, the equatorial sun was at its most excruciating.

"If I can get the flour for free, then I can actually make a little money," Gladys smiled while a friend of hers started breast-feeding her baby. Last

autumn, the two of them arrived in Uganda together. After leaving home, they spent six months hiding in the bush. They didn't feel like remembering that period. They said it was simply too much to bear.

"All I wanted was to reach somewhere safe," Gladys recalled. "Anywhere—anywhere at all. I had no idea where I was. We fled our village during a raid. I was able to get my four-year-old daughter and take her with me. There was no time to snatch anything else. My parents stayed behind. I haven't heard from them for a long time. I have no idea how they are doing, no clue if they're even still alive. My father told me to run away. He said things were about to turn very ugly for young women. What else could I do but listen to him?"

Gladys used to attend a primary school here in Uganda. Then, following her country's independence, she returned to South Sudan. Bad timing? "No one could begin to imagine something like this would happen. We should have known better. Several generations in a row have been brought up during wartime. And our rotten greedy leaders betrayed us wholesale. The Dinka people want to have it all, so they started to murder us."

Gladys violently shook her head before fully devoting herself to baking the cakes.

Her distant relative, Remo Bulem, picked up the tale of the recent atrocities. "As we were hiding in the bush, they at first killed us only with guns," the thirty-year-old schoolteacher winced. "Then when they started to run out of ammo, they whipped out their machetes. I've seen... too much. So much death—and why? The government soldiers butcher everyone they catch. By now, it is no longer possible to separate the soldiers from the rebels and the criminals. A tribal coalition has been formed to fight the ruling Dinkas. Us civilians, well ... we've become a burden to all the key players. We are very short on water, and there's been almost no food for close to a year now. The people are dying of hunger all over the place."

The recollections kept pouring out of the visibly traumatised schoolteacher. "I don't think I'll ever return to South Sudan," he concluded. "I have been informed my house was burned down, and the school where I used to teach was looted. Our village is now deserted. They also killed or stole all our animals."

Accompanied by seven of his close relatives, Remo eventually fled here to Uganda. He very much wants to teach again, but he has so far been unable to land a job. The vast majority of teachers in both refugee and 'normal' institutions are locals.

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"It is so hard for me to listen to the other refugees' tales; I keep reliving my own traumas. They killed my uncle and one of my neighbours in front of my eyes. I have not been able to find any peace here. The women, we're the ones who suffer the most. Many men escaped on their own, or they joined some armed group or another ... but we are always such easy prey," said Stella Yunimba, 26, who managed to get a job in the camp as a translator.

"I realise how privileged I am," she nodded. "I can take care of my daughter, Precious, here. But things get worse every day. I miss my husband—I haven't had word from him for six months. I have no idea where he is, or if he's even still alive. An incredible number of people have gone missing—an incredible number."

A great many of the Dinka people are on the run as well. The South Sudan conflict is far from straightforward. The Dinkas have been caught in the crossfire. The authorities in Juba, the oil and military-based rural oligarchy infected with a God complex, have been recruiting young men. The ones who proved unwilling to participate in ethnic cleansing have been persecuted.

On the other hand, the Dinka villages are being raided by members of other ethnic groups, especially the Nuer people, who—according to my sources—have been supplied with weapons and instructions directly from Khartoum. The eruption of war in South Sudan has likely pleased Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. The war criminal that he is, he may well have regarded this as a righteous punishment for the breakaway region.

The situation, in all its complexity, is a textbook example of *divide and conquer*.

"My fear is that we'll die of hunger. We have nothing left. We've been starving for months," sobbed Ms. Yar from the city of Bor, where the South Sudanese war first broke out.

I spoke with her in the huge Kiryandongo settlement in central Uganda. The emaciated lady with deeply sunk cheekbones and painfully bulging eyes could barely muster the strength for the next few sentences. "All we have known is hunger and disease. We have been staying here for two years. It gets worse every day. There is almost no help to be had. Us Dinkas, we can't get any jobs. We're trapped. There is nowhere we can go."

Ms. Yar sat on a hardened mud floor. Her relatives gathered around her. All of them were rake-thin and exhausted to the limits of their endurance. A tall deaf-mute boy, Ms. Yar's cousin, stared off into space, completely lost. Heavy clouds descended over the camp where some 52,000 people were currently residing—heavy clouds promising at least a modicum of rain.

But it was not to be: the rain hasn't fallen for a few weeks now, and it didn't fall today.

PART III:

SOCIETY:
THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GREECE:
THE END OF EUROPE

ATHENS, GREECE, APRIL 2012

On Wednesday, April 4, nine in the morning saw a seventy-seven-year-old man screaming in the middle of the teeming Syntagma square, the emotional centre of the Greek protests against the *diktat* imposed by the international monetary institutions. The old man was screaming at the hated parliament building, and his cries amounted to a seething denunciation of the fact that his debt will have to be repaid by his children and his grandchildren.

After he'd said his piece he leaned against a tree, pulled a pistol out of his pocket and shot himself in the head.

The suicide of this desperate Greek pensioner carries a heavy symbolic significance. It evokes the spirit of Czech patriot Jan Pallach, who—protesting the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia—set himself on fire on January 16, 1969.[1] It is also strongly evocative of the self-immolation of Mouhammed al Bouazizi, the Tunisian grocer whose suicide triggered the Arab Spring in December 2010.[2]

"We are the first victims of the financial world war. We have been occupied by the European markets and international financial institutions, who are out to dismantle what is left of the welfare state and turn us all into slaves. What you can see today is only the beginning of a major upheaval. They are not only taking away our way of life, they're robbing us of our dignity. The only question is who's next."

I was told this by a sixty-year-old businessman named Yannis Michalopoulos. I spoke to him inside his furniture shop beneath the Acropolis, one hour after the fateful suicide at the Syntagma square.

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[1] https://www.radio.cz/en/section/czechs/jan-palach-the-student-whose-self-immolation-still-haunts-czechs-today

[2] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohamed-Bouazizi

Mr. Michalopoulos followed the quote with a lengthy monologue on the demise of civilisation, the utter lack of hope for the younger generations, the suffering of both legal and illegal immigrants, and the obviousness of the fact that all of this had been carefully planned. The crisis, he opined, has gone on for far too long to still be called a crisis. "Big business is consistently and very successfully enforcing the shock doctrine—only it no longer confines itself to exporting it to places like Iraq, Afghanistan or Chile."

Indeed, Greece is being transformed into a classical third-world country. In March youth unemployment reached fifty percent. The welfare state is vanishing at a jaw-dropping pace. During the last few months, the European monetary institutions made the Greek politicians cut pensions by an average of 200 Euros. The minimum monthly wage fell from 800 to 568 Euros. This year alone, some 15,000 public-sector employees are set to lose their jobs. The state is being shrunk on every possible level, with healthcare and education taking the most savage beating.

Yet the private sector is even worse off. No one even pays attention to the dutiful bleatings of the once-powerful unions anymore. The owners and managers have embraced the crisis as a tailor-made alibi to cut all sorts of costs. The streets of Athens are filled with beggars and the newly homeless. A year ago, many of them were living in suburban comfort. Now, literally overnight, they have been stripped of everything. Greece is turning into a German protectorate and a guinea pig for the "modem economy", a nightmarish dogma stitched from the worst parts of American neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist communism.

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Just about every imaginable statistic paints a tragic picture. And things have turned especially sour for the young. A third of the unemployed have a university degree. In Greece, only those with health insurance can land benefits—and since most of the young can only get temporary jobs, welfare checks are but a lavish dream. No wonder the gifted are leaving the country in droves, much like under the military dictatorship of the sixties and the seventies.

You don't need to be clairvoyant to figure out what the future holds in store for the cradle of democracy. After all, eighty-five percent of its young studying abroad say that they have no plans to return to their homeland. In Greece, brain drain is a daily fact, and it is only going to get worse.

Even the unemployment offices are being shut down one by one. This is not so much because, like the governmental institutions, they've run out of

money. It is because they simply have nothing to offer to job-seekers, not even good advice.

The same goes for the humanitarian organisations. George Protopapas, head of the *SOS Children's Villages* NGO, claims the humanitarian organisations are now providing as much as half of the social services normally covered by the state. Yet even most of the humanitarians are about to shut down. They, as well, are all facing bankruptcy. At the moment, the same goes for roughly half of all Greek privately-owned companies, with tax revenues dropping dramatically and countless workers fired.

All of the above makes for one hell of a social bomb. Sooner or later, it is bound to go off.

On the other hand Greece is still one of the biggest weapon importers in Europe. According to the *International Peace Research* Institute from Stockholm, Greece has been the EU's number one importer of weapons between 2007 and 2011.[3] It has also been the German military industry's best customer. Last year, in spite of the crisis, the Greek government snapped up thirteen percent of Germany's and ten percent of France's entire weapon exports in 2011.

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Understandably, the streets of Athens are seeing the intensification of police violence. The ones getting it worst are the refugees and migrants. Amid all the rampant xenophobia, they are demonstrably worse off here than their peers anywhere else in the European Union.

In Greece, many of them are actually faring worse than back home, where they at least weren't targeted by organised extremist gangs.

Most of said gangs operate within the framework of the *Golden Dawn* movement, which is sure to gain entry to the parliament during the next general election. The members of the movement greet each other with the Nazi salute, and the swastika is an easily discernible part of their official emblem.

Under direct orders from Brussels, the Greek authorities recently initiated the construction of thirty new so-called detention centres, which are actually prisons. Their purpose is to house the soon-to-be-repatriated illegal immigrants, most of whom are currently jobless, prospectless and living on the increasingly dangerous streets of major cities.

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[3] https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2012/rise-international-arms-transfers-driven-asian-demand-says-sipri

The speed of the country's decline is at its most visible in the Greek capital's centre. Every day, Athens is more redolent of the apocalyptic vision portrayed in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*.

Omonia square, for example, is nightly turned into a savage theatre of survival. It lies a mere kilometre away from some key tourist attractions, but much of what you can see here is unforgettably gruesome.

The narrow streets are filled with junkies in their final stages: half-naked walking corpses shooting their doses into their necks or thighs. Stray dogs and prostitutes stroll among them, some of the latter clearly underage. Homeless beggars sleep in front of the *One euro* shops, which peddle the tawdriest merchandise imaginable. Police patrols chase migrants, who have long become the majority in this godforsaken part of town. Shrieks of terror are now a workaday soundtrack here. As many as twenty-five immigrants are crowded inside many of the ancient and decrepit apartments.

Many dwellings have been put up for sale over the past two years, but no one is buying. The walls are covered with posters decreeing the supremacy of the white race and exhorting the Greek population to reclaim their fatherland. Next to them, you can find the propaganda of the Greek communist party (KKE), which never really distanced itself from the Soviet school of socialism and whose younger members can often be seen wearing Stalin T-shirts.

It is impossible to shake the notion that what one can see in Greece is the shape of things to come. A dire and savage future is hurtling toward the soft and privileged Europeans—it is coming at us as inexorably as the blue planet in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*.

"What we got here is a furious fight for survival," says Dr. Nikitas Kanakis, head of the Greek branch of the *Doctors of the World*. "The police is chasing migrants. The neo-Nazis are keen to beat them up. The people who have come here hoping for a better life have arrived straight to hell. Most of the migrants have got it worse here than they did at home. I can say this with confidence, since I've worked in several warzones."

In Kanakis' view, the situation is only bound to deteriorate. "We are living in ideal conditions for the flourishing of extremist movements. The neo-Nazis are growing stronger every day. The financial crisis provides the best possible nourishment to all kinds of fascism. The refugees and migrants are the Jews of our time, the scapegoats for everything. They look different, so they can be easily spotted and accused of anything. And then their job is to prove their innocence. They have no rights at all."

Since Dr. Kanakis used to be stationed in Rwanda, Afghanistan and Iraq, he is clearly a man who knows what he's talking about. "Here in Athens," he shudders, "I'm now seeing images that I only got to see in warzones. No,

there is no real hope things will settle down. The authorities are building so-called detention centres. This reminds me of a whole different age."

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The peaceful and dignified protest commemorating the seventy-seven-year-old man who shot himself in the head started in near perfect silence. But it quickly deteriorated into what is now a commonplace scene on the Greek streets.

The members of special police units taunted the protesters with boorish impunity and got hit by a barrage of stones and a few Molotov cocktails. The wind brought over a cloud of tear-gas fired by the policemen before the demonstrations in front of the Greek parliament had even begun. People of all ages and social standings were crying, sneezing and cursing like there was no tomorrow—which, for many of them, there wouldn't be. While their lives were rapidly and irreversibly changing for the worse, they were still taking part in endless debates with the aim of finding the magic formula of viable resistance.

The demonstrations in front of the parliament have—with various halts and pauses—gone on for three and a half years. Yet so far, they have changed nothing. Fewer and fewer people tum up for the protests. Hundreds of thousands are forced to devote the sum of their energies to the most basic survival.

"I've had it up to here. It's getting worse every day. They're slowly wearing us down—they're always pushing us to determine our limits. But we have no other option than to stay on the streets and keep fighting for our rights. At this stage we really don't have that much to lose. We've become a German colony and a prisoner of the international monetary institutions. We're losing our very independence. Our country is being run by foreign banks. Even our prime minister is a banker!" sneered Bill Papadoupoluos, whom I met during a strike of medical personnel employed in the private sector.

Bill was working as a nurse at a privately-owned clinic, but he hadn't been paid for the last five months. Many of his colleagues were doing even worse. Some of them hadn't received their salaries for up to thirteen months.

"This strike was organised to force our employers into renewing the contract with our union," he said: "Most of the employers have made a cartel pact with the EU's full blessing to tum us all into wage-slaves. They took away our travelling expenses and lunch recompensation. They no longer even cover our social benefits. On paper they cut all the salaries to the minimum wage, regardless of the worker's output or education. But that

doesn't really matter, you see, since they long stopped paying us! Most of our savings are gone. Only our parents are there to help us. We cannot hold out for much longer," explained the brave, free-thinking nurse.

At the same time as the medical staff, the archaeologists went on strike as well. Greece has almost completely halted its excavation projects and thus symbolically cut its ties to its glorious past. In front of the *Greek National Bank* one could see a protesting crowd of exhausted and financially crippled pensioners. All of them were repeating the tale of how a fellow pensioner had committed suicide in their name. But many were spitting out words to the effect that it had really been murder—murder jointly committed by the politicians and various monetary predators.

That was also the gist of one of the messages left by the mourners on the now ominous tree in the middle of the Syntagma square: *This wasn't suicide. This was murder.*

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"In the space of two years," Alexis Tsipras estimates, "after a painful cycle of stabilization programs's failures, we have been led to the point where our country is so looted it is facing complete bankruptcy. In practice this spells lost lives, lost dignity and a lost future."

Tsipras, 38, is the president of the Syriza party—a coalition of left-leaning political movements. The young politician is convinced that, on pretext of the debt crisis, a brutal experiment is being conducted. In his opinion, "big capital" and the key EU institutions are testing the Greek society's capacity to function without salaries, without social justice, without public wealth.

"Should the experiment prove successful," Tsipras feels, "they will try to force the project onto the whole of Europe. But they can already see the Greek people are not going to keep their cool much longer. The parties that consented to our destitution are sinking fast. Our society is in turmoil, and the crisis has been transmitted to the rest of the European south, threatening the continent as a whole. The plan is definitely to strip Greece of all its productive resources and public wealth. The plan is for the 'indigenous' people to start working for miserable wages and without any laws to protect them."

Tsipras has little doubt about the crisis's origins. "It is definitely a plan cooked up by the international capital. But it has been wholeheartedly embraced by our national capitalists as well. Fortunately, it looks like they failed. The crisis of a country responsible for two percent of the Eurozone's GDP is now threatening to topple the entire European edifice. Big business'

greed has exceeded all limits and has actually taken on auto-destructive dimensions. The people realized this very fast, but it seems that the capitalists will be the last to get it. Resistance across the spectrum is our only hope. It will be either the markets or the people who will prevail."

The youngish leader of the Greek leftists, whom I've interviewed on several occasions, is convinced that leaving the Eurozone is not the solution. After all, that would only benefit those who have already accumulated wealth. "What we really need to do is to overturn the balance of power—to put an end to the neoliberal dogma and pave a new path for a democratic and welfare-minded Europe!"

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From the early hours of the morning, a long line of tired and humiliated people converges on Sappho Street, where the organization *Doctors of the World* hands out parcels of food and medicine. Both the Greeks, who are in the majority, the refugees and the migrants wait patiently for their meals, while policemen in bulletproof vests pace up and down the street.

There is something profoundly wrong with this picture.

Greece is quickly changing into a crisis spot. A couple of weeks ago, the German philosopher Hans Magnus Enzensberger remarked that, in Europe, only the anorexic girls are going hungry.[4] This was arrogance beyond anything that could be deemed excusable. Enzensberger not only forgot about hundreds of thousands of migrants. He also forgot about the sort of lines that can be witnessed on Sappfo Street. In the Greek capital, there are at least a dozen such public kitchens, and one out of eleven residents of this once-proud city now goes to them.

As recently as a year ago, most of those standing in such lines were refugees and migrants. Today the data provided by *Médecins Sans Frontières* shows that at least seventy percent of those queuing are Greek. No wonder that a wall near the city centre bears the slogan: "*Don't underestimate hunger!*"

The public kitchens are ill-equipped to keep up with the ever growing needs of the people who have been tossed across the poverty line like a bag of trash. The same goes for the so-called "solidarity clinics", where kind-hearted doctors offer free services to the poor without insurance. At the moment, a staggering third of the Greek population is living under the official poverty line. According to countless predictions, one out of every two Greek families will be poor in about a year.

[4] https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/B/bo12507194.html

"Does your country even have a fighting chance?" I asked the author and poet Anastassis Vistonisitis, one of Greece's most highly esteemed writers and poets. "Well," he replied, "we used to have humongous growth and countless foreign investments. We were the stars, the centre of the world. Money used to be so very cheap. We bought cars and apartments, we launched new companies. No one saved their money. It was such great fun. Happy days, right? We got the euro, the Olympic games—we grew so fast. And then the hammer fell down. Overnight. At first, we couldn't believe it. Then we gradually began to sober up. The first wave of cuts was put in effect, then the second and the third. The international financial institutions backed us into a corner. When the first representatives of the International Monetary Fund arrived to Athens, I knew we were in deep shit. Wherever those guys came, they brought only penury and destruction. But the Greeks, we are a proud people. We will not be humiliated. We shall get back on our feet. We always have. Our history is a succession of ups and downs. That's what makes me optimistic."

I first met Vistonitis in June 2004, two months before the launch of the Olympic games in Athens. He was the head of the task force charged with drafting the proposal for the Greek candidacy to host the Games. Eight years ago, during modern Greece's most heady days, he made an impression as a fellow of exceptionally good cheer. The Greek economy was growing by six to seven percent per year. Unemployment was at a record low, commerce was booming. On top of all that, the Greek football team actually won the European Championship. The whole of Athens was a starburst of joy. The Greeks were living out their ancient myths. The Greek version of *Belle Époque*.

Eight years later, Greece is rotting while technically still alive. Those Olympic memories now seem as distant as the time of *The Iliad*.

"We are not the only ones to blame for the situation we're now facing," Vistonitis remains convinced. "Almost the entire world is in debt. We are far from being the worst case, so I find it a great injustice for us to be the only ones paying the price. Oh well, a number of other European countries are sure to follow: Ireland, Portugal, Spain, even France. When those major players start taking hits as well, the entire Europe will be shaken to its foundations."

Vistonitis is an unflinching critic of the entire spectrum of the Greek political elites. "We have all been screwed by those loans. It wasn't relief, it was pure extortion. Our politicians—they're the ones to blame for the debt, not the people! The politicians have been blindly following the dictates of Brussels and Berlin. Europe should be grateful to us for accepting its rules, which are good for their financial elites and nobody else. Anyway, they

should be grateful to us, instead of humiliating and insulting us! At any moment, we could have called China for help, but we didn't! You know the Chinese wouldn't hesitate for a minute! They can't wait to get their hands on some key European ports. In a very short time, this would enable them to dominate European trade. Just imagine what that would mean for the European economy, and for the United States as well! Forging an alliance with China is the great strategic weapon we can use at any time."

Vistonitis is also careful to underscore his conviction that the entire Western world is in crisis. "We have all made a mess of things and squandered our future. It simply can't go on this way. We'll all be forced to make some sacrifices, and that is how it should be, but the European elites want to turn us into slaves working for two hundred Euros! They want to turn us into Bulgaria or Romania. And we won't allow that. We are a Mediterranean country with a long history of self-sufficiency. We'll take our future into our own hands. We have plenty of food, water and sea. Now, through our Cyprus connection, we have plenty of natural gas as well. We refuse to be enslaved by the monetary institutions. We will survive! And if Europe decides we are to perish, it is sure to perish along with us!"

Athens, Greece, November 2012.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHINA, INC.

CHINA, SEPTEMBER 2012

We stood in the University for Political Studies' memorial room. For the past few decades, this elite institution had served as a breeding ground for top party personnel—a nursery for the hardest of the hardline. A small, frail student who made jerky motions, had a waxy complexion and a Hitler-esque parting of his hair, related a number of things about the institution's illustrious past. Most of his crusading zeal, however, seemed to be derived from his vision of China's invincibly glorious future.

My journalist colleagues and I estimated the boy to be about nineteen. Even though he looked completely lost—in time and space as well as in translation—he positively smouldered with conviction.

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The student's terrifying earnestness, along with the image of his visibly exhausted colleagues staring at their computer screens in the university library, offered a fascinating contrast to the streets of downtown Beijing. During the past decade, these avenues have turned into a battleground for the sort of architects who specialize in skyscrapers, classy shopping centres and other such *Eldorados* of standardized interaction.

In China, too, shopping has been reinvented as a very basic human need, having been rendered all but obligatory for the locals and the visitors alike.

But hang on: what actually happened to communism?

If I had asked the student in front of us, his truthful answer would be: "Who cares?" To which I would only be able to reply: "I do." So I sat down with the university's deputy dean, Li Jiahua, and asked him how his school managed to adapt to the radical change of the last twenty years.

"Oh," he replied, as if it were a matter of fact. "We simply went with the flow. We have indeed been facing countless challenges. The ever-increasing progress of our country posed many questions. So we opened courses in

economics and financial management, though the brunt of our curriculum still consists of social and political studies. We discovered much of our technology was outdated. We had to answer many questions as we went along. Yet I would like to stress that moral education still remains the core of our institution."

Over the past twenty years, the very profile of the students at this ideological eagle's nest has undergone a rapid change, as well. Who used to be the submissive party-liners with a fetishist bent for military garb, have become the digital-consumer type, entirely in thrall to the dictatorship of choice. The army shirts have been exchanged for designer clothes, or at least the "original fakes" of the world's most prestigious brands. The bitter redguard face has been replaced with a cosmetic smile.

"*Love more!*" is just one of the jingles currently peddled all over Beijing by one of Europe's most respected automobile makers. The behemoth called China may have been dormant for centuries. But now, it is turning into every free-market guru's wet dream.

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The mood in Beijing can be best described by evoking a dystopian futuristic movie classic (My personal choice would be *Blade Runner* intercut with *The Minority Report*). Swarms of young people chaotically race the streets, always on the go, always in a hurry. This, of course, is perfectly expectable. While they were growing up, time in China underwent a fantastic *accelerando*; the clock is now ticking faster here than anywhere else in the world.

As you negotiate your way through the swarms, you will quickly pick up the only rule left among the pedestrian tides in Beijing: "ME FIRST!" Yet even with all the perilous commotion, the young always find the time to glance at their cameras, laptops and post-modern cell phones—a formidable array of gizmos that dispassionately record every moment, every face and every act in this consumerist underworld.

At a certain point, I simply had to stop and ask myself: with a potential intelligence database of this magnitude, why would the State even need secret police? In their hectic surgings, the streets of China's richest cities are now more uniform than they have ever been. There are also many more slogans—only this time around, they're phrased in the aggressive lingo of advertising agencies, which design them to drill straight through your frontal lobe and start cooing about unmet needs.

Love more! indeed.

Over the last thirty years, the obstacles to this rising kraken's economy have fallen by the roadside one by one. Throughout this period, the genie of unfettered growth uprooted everything in its path and deftly took advantage of all the perks inherent to totalitarian communism. The party bosses may still dutifully strike poses of enlightened absolutists. Yet they long ago became merely corporate executives in that sun-eclipsing mother of all corporations called *The People's Republic of China.*

In such an environment, workers' rights and environmental standards are third-rate subjects at best.

Again, this is perfectly expectable. The human masses and what remains of nature have been entirely subordinated to growth, which can be seen either as a cult, or as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In China, "The Future Is Now"—this is Shanghai's official slogan—but that future is unspeakably frightening. Especially when the alluring female employees of the Centre for Urban Planning show you 3D projections of what the city is destined to look like a few years down the line.

This is Shanghai envisioned as the trade capital of the universe. A science-fiction extravaganza, in which one can see all kinds of details. The people are missing. But why be so petty? After all, this *Deus ex machina* redesign has a clear-cut plan that extends far beyond the customary five years. Yet, according to the local architects, the citizen of the future will be someone who feels no pain, since he will have been socially engineered to go without basic reflexes and the capacity for reflection.

As I ponder the troubling implications, the alluring female employees at the Centre for Urban Planning keep invoking carefully selected phrases. "Harmony." "A better city". "A better life." "The digital city." "Happiness." "The future." "Now."

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The times, they're a-changin' for sure. The so-called western democracies are now no longer in a position to boss China around and lecture it on anything, let alone on human rights. The communist party has managed to invent the greatest corporation of all time—itself. This ultra-corporation is, in fact, so powerful that it can actually afford self-reflection and even some mild forms of self-criticism.

Yet at every step, the criticism is strictly limited to economic subjects. The party macro-economist, Zhao Heng, put it best in our interview when he said: "Only when we have successfully solved the questions of economy will we be ready to tackle the political issues."

This sounds like a sample of what to expect at the Party's upcoming eighteenth congress. There, the rulers will have to decide whether they will rein in the forces of private capital that, through sheer efficiency, have begun to encroach on the state-run Corporation itself. The other option available to the party kingpins will be to take off the last of their communist undergarments and wholly embrace the free market. Either way, their choice will not be easy. In both cases, they will run a tremendous risk.

One globally-experienced diplomatic source believes that the Party isn't yet ready to relinquish control, saying that "it would mean a far too severe blow to stability." As this seasoned and well-connected person opines, "It would doubtlessly unleash a tidal wave of social unrest."

Already, strikes and protests are taking place all over China. The week before our visit, 10,000 policemen brutally crushed a protest of factory-workers in the central part of the country, where the latest model of the world's most famous smart phone is assembled. The protest's net result? Due to "unfavourable tax policies" and an ever-more-demanding labour force, the western company decided to relocate its operations to Thailand and Vietnam. Every bottom has a bottom somewhere further down the line. There is always someone poorer and weaker to exploit. And so the fear of losing western clients is part of the reason why the numerous strikes and protests taking place all over China get almost no coverage at all---either here or abroad.

As I listened carefully to what the party macro-economist, Zhao Heng, had to say, I slowly gleaned some of the other reasons behind the Party's realpolitik.

"Our situation is looking healthy," he told me, "But we have problems that, if unchecked, could prove very detrimental to our well-being. For a while now, our economic growth has been experiencing a slackening. The economic indicators are not as robust as they used to be. This year, the GDP will rise by about 7.6 percent. For the economy to grow in a fashion ensuring enough new jobs, we should be expanding by eight percent. The times of double-digit growth seem to be behind us. The greatest risk of the decline in growth is social instability, even social unrest. It is something that needs to be avoided at all costs."

Dr. Heng was quick to clarify: "You understand, of course, that it is something everybody needs to worry about, not just China. Our goal is to create an additional ten million new jobs each year. Over the last few years, that goal has proved to be not entirely possible. If the growth falls under the seven percent mark, massive layoffs will be necessary."

I will say this about Zhao Heng: he is someone who has little use for platitudes. In China, this sort of honesty is an entirely new phenomenon.

Yet we would do well to shy away from unwarranted optimism. It is merely a sign of the party's omnipotence, the unchallenged sway it holds over every aspect of Chinese society.

To me, Dr. Heng looked like the ideal spokesperson for the kind of brute force that can occasionally afford to show some weakness—purely for strategic reasons, of course.

"The thirty years of steep economic growth have caused a lot of collateral damage," he continued. "We have seen a sharp increase in the difference between the rich and the poor. Most of the wealth is now in the hands of the upper twenty percent of the population. The working class earns—and spends!—very little. The poor are desperately trying to save up. They're afraid they will soon be forced to take care of their own pensions and health care, not to mention their children's schooling. Rich people, on the other hand, are not great spenders, either. Most of their needs, after all, have already been met. Also, the Chinese population is rapidly growing older. Soon our problems with a sustainable pension system will become no less acute than they are in Europe."

Dr. Heng struck me as someone who was constantly dancing his way between the basic precepts of neo-liberalism and social democracy. At the same time, he entertains no illusions about the current and future viability of the European welfare state model. After all, when faced with their first serious identity crisis, most of Europe's social democracies happily jumped ship and started indulging in the sort of neo-liberal orgy that they might never fully recover from.

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During our conversation, Dr. Heng sometimes sounded like a prophet. At other times, he came off like the American economist Jeffrey Sachs—one of the shock-doctrine masterminds—at the beginning of the nineties.

"The sheer scale of the incentives our state offered the economy greatly reduced the opportunities for private investors," he acknowledged. "Private companies do not always find it easy to get loans. In the countryside, property prices are declining—but in the cities, they are still going up! The state is selling off its land. In places, it is forced to sell at half the price. At the same time, the sale of the state-owned land often brings in almost half of the entire local budget. All in all, the land deals have proved rather lucrative for our state. In this way, the role of the government has been strengthened, and the power of the markets has been weakened. Our export has its difficulties, too. Economic conservativism is on the rise. There is no realistic chance for China's current economic model to survive. It would

only lead to prices going up, as well as to social unrest and unchecked pollution. The inevitable reform is the key. But that reform is certain to upset a lot of people."

Dr. Heng concluded our talk on a sensibly optimistic note. "Progress always brings its own set of problems," he smiled, "the sort of problems that can only be solved by further progress! As soon as the economic reform has been implemented, political reform is sure to follow. Above all else, we must raise internal consumption and secure our self-sufficiency."

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On a plateau above Bin Xian, a small city in central China, the local authorities have planted a number of orchards and brought in about 7,000 peasants from the surrounding villages. These actions were taken as part of the "reconstruction of the countryside" initiative, within the framework of what is officially called the "fighting poverty" project. All this was explained to me in painstaking detail by a trio of local party officials in a gloomy boardroom.

Seeing how China's rapid urbanisation has hugely contributed to impoverishing the countryside, where two thirds of the population still live, I asked the officials how hard their local community had been hit by the exodus to the big cities. The trio exchanged a silent glance. Then their leader almost barked a number: "5,600!" After some additional queries, I learned this was the number of people who had moved away from the neighbouring villages over the last few years.

After this meeting, we were then taken on a tour of one of the villages, which was apparently at the very heart of the local fight against poverty. Its architecture struck me as freakishly resembling the South-American colonial style—just with a few more bars on the windows. Another thing I noticed was that, for some reason, considerable effort had been spent to make the new houses look even older than the ones they replaced.

The village—a theme park in the vein of *The Truman Show*—was practically deserted. So were the nearby fields and orchards that had unusually pink apples in them. We were only allowed to enter one of the "residential units". The hallway was adorned with a plastic bust of Mao, some plastic flowers, a plastic stereo and a photograph (in a plastic frame) of an extraordinarily happy-seeming young couple.

Stepping inside, I very much doubted that the bedroom, where the damp had already caused most of the plaster to peel away, had seen many scenes of conjugal bliss.

There was a double bed, but it was made in a militaristic style and had seen so little use that a number of spiders had spun their webs right across its covers. Yet, in this house of ghosts, we were strongly encouraged to photograph the totalitarian still-life formed by a bunch of neatly stacked apples and a few stalks of corn.

"Where are the residents?" I asked our party-issued tour guide. "Perhaps they're working in the fields?"

"They're home," he blurted. "They are resting!"

But there were no people as far as the eye could see. That was the part of my visit to the Chinese countryside that surprised me the most: the emptiness; the resounding silence—what the planners of huge projects in Beijing offices like to call collateral damage.

The images of dehumanisation failed to subside even after we returned to the murky valley. The city of Bin Xian, current population 350,000, is being purposefully expanded. There is no more room for newcomers in the coveted metropolises. At the same time, industrial production in the cities like Shanghai and Beijing has become much too expensive, so the authorities are rapidly relocating it to the countryside.

In Bin Xian, this internal economic segregation has caused a rather bizarre turn of events. While the edge of the city has seen the sprouting of a gigantic five-kilometre park crammed with cheap monuments, the downtown is filled with very young prostitutes and imported-liquor stores.

In the evening hours, atrociously expensive cars arrived in front of the futuristic hotel where we were stationed—cars occupied by China's entrepreneurial *arrivistes*. Most of them were accompanied by a certain type of "companion". As a matter of routine, the rooms here offer their well-heeled guests an impressive selection of top-grade sex toys. The members of our small journalistic expedition all wondered what precisely the party was trying to communicate by putting us here for the night.

Love more?

To conclude this leg of the great theatrical production called "our guided tour of China," our minders took us to see a great modern-looking building. They told us that it serves both as an orphanage and as a nursing home for the elderly. Yet even this place was almost deserted. Only a few old men sat at a table, their faces so brown that they looked as if they had just come in from a good week's toil in the fields. They played cards with a brand new deck and beamed at us as if we were a delegation of scantily clad concubines that had come to whisk them straight off to paradise. As befits a ghost building in a ghost town, the other rooms of the structure were occupied only by silence.

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I stare long and hard at the thousands of *terracotta* warriors, unearthed some forty years ago in the vicinity of Xian. This ancient regional capital is now one of China's fastest growing cities, a morbidly polluted ant farm where thousands of identical towers have sprung up like mushrooms after the rain. The entire scene is morbidly gray. Even here in the provinces, the future is now.

As I stare at the clay sculptures, it strikes me that the Party—the Corporation—has its own set of *terracotta* warriors now: the hordes and hordes of dirt-cheap labourers who are bringing about what the officials are so quick to hail as a triumph. These latter-day legions are the Corporation's most trusted shock troops on the global battlefield, both in the economic and the political sense. Add a brand-new super-carrier, or ten, to shore up security, and now is destined to become forever.

Let us revisit the hypnotic invocations of the ever-obliging personnel at the Centre for Urban Planning in Shanghai: "Harmony." "A better city". "A better life." "The digital city." "Happiness." "The future." "Now." This is the *newspeak* of our time, which currently stands unopposed.

So unopposed, in fact, that the Corporation may soon feel the need to create a sufficiently terrifying adversary.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE LAND OF IMPUNITY

CAIRO, EGYPT, JANUARY 2013

"At that moment, I had no idea what was happening! All I knew was that there were hundreds of hands stripping me of my clothes and brutally violating my body. Who were those men? There was no way out. Everyone was saying that they were protecting me, saving me even—but all I felt was the finger-rape of my body, both from the front and from the back. Someone was even trying to kiss me. I was completely naked, the mass surrounding me was pushing me toward an alley close to a Hardee's restaurant. I was in the middle of this tightly knit circle, and every time I tried to scream or defend myself, the violence only got worse."

This is one of the testimonials of the many Egyptian women, who were sexually assaulted during the recent mass protests against president Mohammed Mursi. Nineteen of the victims decided to contact the newly founded, non-governmental organization *OpAntiSH* (Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment).[1] None of them wished to speak out in public. They knew all too well that, in Egypt's patriarchal communities, this would bring the gravest possible humiliation on them and their families.

Another assaulted women recalls that it happened frightfully fast. She was suddenly surrounded. Six men were coming at her from one side, six from the other. Their eyes appeared glazed. They started groping her, scratching at her and tearing her clothes off. In no time, she was stripped naked. It went beyond mere sexual assault. The victim is convinced that, "It was an intentional attempt to hurt me on every possible level."

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[1] https://dailynewsegypt.com/2013/07/04/opantish-at-least-80-sexual-assaults-in-tahrir-and-2-rape-cases/

"Friday, January 25, was one of the worst days on record. All the cases were really, really bad. The worst instance we dealt with involved a bladed weapon being used on the private parts of an assaulted woman," Leil-Zahra Mortada, a spokesperson for *OpAntiSH*, explained to journalists.

In November, a group of citizens founded the organization to help roll back the tide of sexual aggression all over Egypt. From 2008 until the present date, a mind-boggling eighty-three percent of all Egyptian women have suffered some form of a sexual assault, verbal or physical. Violence against women here has become nothing less than a political agenda. The new Egyptian constitution, pushed through by the Muslim Brotherhood with the help of president Mohammed Mursi, contains many elements of Sharia law and completely disregards the question of women's rights. The national parliament, two thirds of which is controlled by the Islamists, consists of five hundred male and a grand total of eight female MPs.

True, all parties running in the last election were required to include at least one female candidate on their list. But it was exceedingly rare that the female candidates were anywhere near the top of those lists.

The new electoral laws recently passed by the Shura Council (the lower house of the Egyptian parliament) failed to address the issue in any meaningful form whatsoever. The activists of *The National Front for Egypt's Women*, who had bitterly protested the passing of the new laws for weeks, were outraged. "The new legislature is merely an outgrowth of our new constitution. The constitution had been drafted by the Muslim Brotherhood. The passing of the new laws means the end of female participation in Egyptian politics," they informed a group of journalists.

Those same activists were also enraged at the Ministry of Education, which recently ordered the removal of renowned feminist, Doria Shafik, from the official schoolbooks. During the British occupation, this fearless lady was at the forefront of the struggle for women's rights, as well as for women's active participation in politics. The Islamists now in charge of the Ministry removed her picture from the schoolbooks because, in those pictures, she did not wear a veil.

"Removing Doria's picture under the pretext of not wearing her Hijab is unacceptable. Egypt's women shall uphold their hard-won rights, and will not accept any deliberate attempts to falsify history and curtail women's rights," read the joint statement by the Egyptian NGOs fighting for women's rights.

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Engy Ghozlan is a member of the Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment organisation and a veteran fighter for women's rights.[2] She claims the recent assaults will fail to stop local women from fighting for their rights and for a freer Egypt.

On the contrary: "No, we refuse to stay at home! Nothing can stop us from joining the protests. Those streets, they belong to us just as much as they belong to the men. This is our country, and we refuse to keep quiet. We are going to speak out about sexual harassment! There can be no Egyptian revolution without female participation and safety."

According to Ghozlan, every sordid assault was a matter of pure politics. "The goal is to banish women from the public sphere by physically removing us from public spaces. The assaults have all been very similar in nature. We are talking about organised violence against women!"

Ghozlan's is far from the only voice speaking out against the oppression. "The number of sexual assaults has seen a sharp increase, and the number of mass rapes as well. But the authorities failed to respond. Their only response was silence," claims Heba Morayef, director of the Egyptian office of *Human Rights Watch*. The members of *HRW* are convinced that most of the sexual violence is the responsibility of the Egyptian security forces—meaning both the army and the police.

The scope of such violence is not limited to women. Many male journalists and activists have also been assaulted. There is little doubt among the activists that these crimes were perpetrated in the interests of a ruthless political agenda.

"We refuse to let our freedom be taken away from us!" I was told by Mrs. Noor, one of the protesters at the recent march of the Egyptian liberals toward Tahrir Square. "We refuse to become a caliphate or a fascist-run country like Saudi Arabia. We will not stand for our women being humiliated! We refuse to see our youth's future being dictated by deranged old men! We, the women of Egypt, have a past we can be proud of! Now we are fighting so that the same can be said of our future! We have been marching in the streets for the past two years! Yes, we may be tired, but we will never back down!"

On a normal day, Mrs. Noor teaches English at a local high school, but that Friday she was marching at the head of the column and shouting for president Mursi to get lost. She spoke to me freely about the increase in violence against women, the staggering level of unemployment, the hopelessness taking root among younger generations and the twice-stolen revolution.

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[2] http://www.nahdetelmahrousa.org/who-we-are/our-people/engy-ghozlan

"But worst of all," she spat: "Is what we now see happening to the women! Two years ago, we flooded the Tahrir square. Now, many women won't even show their face in public without a male escort. Every day, you get to see more veils in the streets. This is not the Cairo I grew up in. This is fast becoming something like certain Gulf countries or even Iran!"

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Farah Shash, a psychologist in charge of helping the victims of sexual violence, agrees that the authorities are the first to blame. By not punishing and sometimes openly encouraging violence against women, they are conveying the message such atrocities are normal behaviour.

Mrs. Shash, who works at the Nadim centre in Cairo, is also concerned about the associations that have sprung up with the aim of protecting the women from being assaulted in the streets. However pure and selfless their motives, her view is that such organisations are promoting the wrong message. "It is unrealistic to expect our women to have bodyguards available whenever they need them. We should be protected by the state, not local militias! What we are seeing here are some of the most alarming symptoms of a failed state. We need to know that our men see us as something more than mere sexual objects and targets."

Shash's employers keep alerting the relevant ministries. Yet so far Egypt's new Islamic overlords have replied only with silence or open arrogance. "Whenever we try to debate them in parliament, they tell us that women's rights are not a priority, now should they be!" Shash is deeply disturbed by the new Egyptian constitution, which has turned women into third-class citizens.

"You must not fall into the trap of assuming violence against women is a new phenomenon around here," this brave psychologist told me. "During the final years of the Mubarak regime, the police started harassing women in a highly organised fashion. Rapes, too, were a common occurrence—rapes in public! Also, we had the so-called virginity tests being performed at police stations. The difference is that such bestialities used to be the domain of policemen, and now the army has joined in. Another difference is that the violence has severely escalated in scope. The numbers are dramatic. And the worst part is that most of the assaults go unreported. If you get raped, are you going to report it to the perpetrator—the police?"

Further obstacles are also in place. "You see, in Arabic culture, a raped woman is automatically stripped of all pride and social status. She is quite literally bereft of her future. Her family casts her out. According to the dominant school of thought, she herself is to blame for the rape. I'm also sad

to note many Egyptian men are now much more tolerant of violence against women than they used to be. We can blame this on the Muslim Brotherhood and their Sharia constitution. Make no mistake: they know *exactly* what they're doing. It is all very frightening."

According to Shash, basic human decency is slowly vanishing from the streets of Cairo. The comradeship and solidarity typical of the revolutionary days are but a bitter memory. In her view, the violence is a powerful tool of the current regime.

"The women, we're actually the revolution's victims. We are its collateral damage," Farah Shash asserts. But she is quick to add she hasn't yet lost all hope.

She is well aware that revolutions are known to devour their own children, and that serious political and economic change always takes time. "Sexually, we have long become an extremely repressed society, and the recent illusion of freedom provided many men with the license for abuse. This is of course their own warped interpretation of freedom, and also a symbolic portrayal of the true state of our society. The Islamists, using the army and the police, are constantly assaulting our way of life. They are forcing their values and their morality upon us. Their minds would feel most at home in the middle ages. The entire Egypt is hurtling into the darkness. The pressures are also mounting in our schools. Soon, every little girl will be forced to wear a veil. In Luxor, many girls' hair had been cut off. And the community is sort of accepting it, drowning in apathy. But this is something we shall fight to the last. No matter what the consequences, we are prepared to bleed for our freedom!"

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Both during and after Mubarak's reign, Egypt's women have mostly been left to fend for themselves. Few international organisations have reached out to help them, and most of the aid they have received was of a purely symbolic nature. Yet over the last few days, the international community has finally begun responding to the ever more desperate pleas for help.

Michelle Bachelet, the executive director of *UN Women*, released a statement expressing her profound concern about the escalating violence. "As a vibrant force in civil society, women continue to press for their rights, equal participation in decision making, and the upholding of the principles of the revolution by the highest levels of leadership in Egypt. *UN Women* is deeply disturbed by the gravity of recent attacks against women, including the reports of sexual assault, many of which occurred in the same Tahrir

Square in which women rallied to contribute to a better future for their country."

Mrs. Bachelet called upon both the government and the people of Egypt to immediately stop all forms of violence against women and start promoting human rights for all. In particular, the UN official underlined that, in order to safeguard the fundamental rights of women, "the Egyptian government has to adopt new laws and take additional measures as to ensure their protection and ability to exercise their rights."

Yet words are simply that: words. And decisive action seems far away. Especially if one relies on the UN to provide it.

Amira Mikhail, a local activist, believes that Egyptian society should be altered in its entirety. "The very mentality of our men and women needs to change," she told journalists in Cairo. "Policies need to be revolutionized, assault needs to be criminalized, women have to be respected and protected and not made into scapegoats. The police and the military need to start protecting them rather than harassing or violating them, and all instances of aggression need to be dealt with harshly and swiftly. This can be done through laws and the media and the re-education of our police and military forces. However, such a project requires an educated, active, and motivated citizenry. And this we simply do not have."

In Mikhail's opinion, Egypt is acutely in need of another revolution. Above all, it would have to be a sexual revolution. Mikhail draws much optimism from the fact that, over the last few weeks, the Egyptian media have finally started noticing the tide of violence against women.

Egypt Independent, a Cairo-based daily newspaper, was the first to tear down the wall of silence when it published some very graphic descriptions of the sexual abuse at Tahrir Square. "A woman was sexually assaulted with a bladed weapon on Friday night, leaving cuts on her genitals," the local reporters wrote. "In central Cairo, in the midst of what was purportedly a revolutionary demonstration. She was one among at least nineteen women sexually assaulted in and around Tahrir Square on Friday night, according to accounts collated by Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, an activist group. Several women were stripped and raped, publicly, as men pushed their fingers inside them. There were other attacks involving bladed weapons. Six women required medical attention. No doubt there were more assaults, uncounted."

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For the past two weeks, women planning to take part in the protests have been able to rely on the help of an organisation called *Body Guard Tahrir*. On the streets, its members are doing what should be the police's job.

One spokeswoman for the organisation claims that sexual violence has become an integral part of the Egyptian culture. "Such incidents are by no means confined only to the Tahrir Square. Abuses are taking place all over Cairo and all over Egypt. It is something we need to deal with, and we need to do it now! The perpetrators know very well that, as things stand, no one is going to prosecute them for their crimes. And that in itself is a powerful incentive for further assaults."

During Friday's mass demonstrations against Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood, the members of the *Body Guard Tahrir* were a welcome sight among the crowd, protecting the attending women from any sort of abuse. The group was founded by an activist named Soraya Baghat. Making clever use of social networks, she distributed video footage of organised assaults on women and followed it up with heartfelt calls for help. The response to her pleas was extraordinary.

Jehane Noujaim, the director of a documentary called *The Square*, is convinced that no force in the world will be able to stop the women of Egypt from protesting. According to her, the increasingly prevalent sexual violence is a sort of social epidemic.

"The women will continue to march on the Tahrir Square to protest as loudly as they can," she believes. "That is something that will not change. But the violence against women is counter-productive since it will only fuel our righteousness and motivate us to protest even harder!"

In several recorded instances, when on-lookers tried to intervene on the assaulted women's behalf, the perpetrators fended them off with knives. A number of mass brawls were also recorded. "Testimonies from victims and those attempting to save them paint a frightening picture. Tens if not hundreds of men surrounding the victims, with countless hands tearing off clothes, unzipping trousers and groping breasts, nipples and backsides," writes the local researcher for *Amnesty International* Diana Eltahawy on her blog. Like most other activists, Elthaway blames the brunt of the violence on the police, who have mostly turned a blind eye. Egypt has become the land of absolute impunity as far as violence against women is concerned.

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In front of the Helvan art academy on Zamalek Island in the middle of the Nile, a group of co-eds are using their day off to debate the next stages of the revolution. They are angry and disappointed because the generals and

then the Islamists tried to run them into the ground. Violence against women is something of a taboo topic, so it's hard to get anything out of them at first. The mood here, in this bastion of art and urbanity, is chillingly different than during those heady first weeks of the revolution. It is hard to escape the feeling that one of the main causes of the downbeat atmosphere is the escalation of sexual violence against women.

●mar, who calls himself "a real revolutionary" and believes Mohammed Mursi is bound to get assassinated sooner or later, is one of the ●*pAntiSH* founders. During the last three Friday protests, he was there to shield his female comrades and was injured in the process.

"I am horrified," he said to me. "Every day, it gets worse. The pressure from the Islamists is mounting. This is nowhere near the Egypt we were fighting for. The Muslim Brotherhood is doing everything it can to consolidate its power. The assaults on our women are carefully organised. The aim is to intimidate them and thus drive them from the streets. They say they're doing it for religious reasons. But it has nothing, *nothing* to do with religion. It is pure violence."

●mar assured me that he and his friends were determined to keep providing assistance to the city's women. His female colleagues were quick to jump in on the conversation. A girl named Farida told me she still went to the protests and would continue to do so for as long as it took. This didn't mean she was not terrified, since every female protester was running a very real risk of getting assaulted. "Personally, I haven't been assaulted yet—'yet' being the key word here. Unfortunately, I believe things will get a lot worse. The Islamists are trying to make us cover up our faces and get out of the streets. But no way! In spite of the pressure, we must go on! In the streets, I have already had a number of episodes where men were yelling at me, making threats about what they would do to me if I don't cover myself up. Things are turning pretty nasty around here."

Cairo, Egypt, March 2013.
Photo: Jure Eržen

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF TAKSIM

ISTANBUL, TURKEY, JUNE 2013

What looked like a beautiful dream really was just that: a dream. After a twelve-day freedom festival in downtown Istanbul, the Turkish government cracked down hard on the protesters, arrested many activists, journalists and lawyers, and obliterated the very idea of Turkish democracy. Here, too, the era of human rights is fading fast.

The utopia lasted for less than two weeks. The eventual crack-down by the police has been as bestial as it has been entirely predictable. But still, for twelve heady days, Taksim square stood as a bastion of freedom and forgotten ideals that will forever haunt Turkey's historical memory.

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On the evening of Wednesday, June 5, Istanbul's Taksim square was teeming with hundreds of freedom-loving residents of the city. They even had cause to indulge in a little dance of victory. Over the previous weekend, this tiny patch of ground provided the stage for horrendous clashes between protesters and the police. Now it was a liberated zone, where at least 50,000 people congregated every night.

After the police finally retreated, the protesters pulled off a permanent occupation. They lost little time in establishing what some called "The People's Republic of Taksim," a liberated plot of land where people came to dream of a free Turkey.

Socialists, liberals, anarchists, pensioners, gay and women's rights activists, the united supporters of the Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe and Beşiktaş football clubs, raving Turkish nationalists, Kurds (!), lawyers, businessmen, union-members and people of every other imaginable profession and affiliation arrived nightly to create an atmosphere redolent of the first days of the Egyptian uprising at Tahrir.

Everywhere, one could see evidence of brutal clashes with the police: charred buses, overturned automobiles, wrecked kiosks and small shops. Every other wall was covered in graffiti demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his clique of oligarchs from the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Many of these slogans openly called Erdoğan a fascist. Everywhere, one could see Turkish flags flapping in the wind. Giant speakers blasted either rock music or traditional Turkish war chants. In a number of key strategic places, improvised first-aid stations had been set up in case of another police raid. Tear-gas protection was paramount; the police made a habit of firing the gas straight into the crowd.

"I was here since the beginning. At first we were very much frightened for our lives. Now we are no longer afraid. We have shown them that we're strong. We know what we want. Our demands are simple: democracy, freedom, separation of church and state," explained Mrs. Zeniyet, a schoolteacher I talked to during a protest march of public servants in Taksim square.

Some of her colleagues were quick to fill me in on their dealings with the police, whose open brutality was a testament to the rising tide of Turkish totalitarianism. Yet in spite of Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule over the past decade, Turkey has seen the birth of a number of exceptionally diverse and proactive civil-rights movements, whose aims are exactly the same as those of similar initiatives across the wider Mediterranean region.

Freedom. Justice. Welfare state. An end to corruption. It was not that Turkey had only now woken up. Turkey had been awake for quite a while.

"Erdoğan started interfering with our lives," Zeniyet went on. "He started telling us how to live, what to drink, how to dress. Like some imam, don't you know! And because some of us here are used to thinking with our own heads, he made us out to be drunks, bandits and extremists! Frankly, I think he's lost his mind. I never liked him, but I always thought him a rather shrewd man. I don't know what's got into him. I'm afraid all that power and money have warped his brain!"

A colleague of hers named Hurriyet, who stood by waving her union flag, took an even harsher view. "Our government is using economic growth as an excuse to lead us into radical Islamism," she assured me. "Which is only another form of fascism and goes against every healthy principle in our society. We are not going to take that, and we're here to show it! If they want to drive us from this park, they're going to have to carry us off feet first!"

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The entire square was flush with positive vibrations. Everywhere, one could see banners proclaiming '*Everything is Taksim! Everything is resistance!*' Elderly ladies danced their traditional square dances, their grins so wide they nearly fell from their faces. The police threat was omnipresent; barbaric violence against the protesters had been unleashed in other Turkish cities, as well.

Despite the grim price, the protesters seemed to have achieved something that, even a week before, they did not even dare to dream about. The wall of fear had collapsed. And once that happens, authorities everywhere usually have a hard time putting it back up. Turkey's young and educated generations had started speaking out against the dictatorship. All of Taksim square and its neighbouring avenues had been turned into a celebration of freedom and fresh political ideas. This tiny plot of land had become the biggest occupied public space I've seen while covering all the major protests around the world over the last fifteen years.

The protesters' aim could not have been nobler: to replace the dictatorship of neo-liberal Islamism with the ethics of civic responsibility. Perfect strangers were constantly hugging and kissing each other on the cheek. The streets pulsated with astonishment at this temporary feast of freedom. Thousands and thousands of freethinkers had come here to meet each other halfway. These were certainly images of historic significance.

On that warm and balmy Wednesday night, the crowds in Taksim square kept singing songs of revolt. Both the young and the old danced in the street. Raving Turkish nationalists fraternised with Kurds. A vibe of unity had taken over the square—a vibe, it needs to be said, that had a proverbially limited shelf life. Activists handed out food, drink and clothes to thousands of protesters. Several workshops took place at once. Both political and merely amusing speeches were delivered. A small group of women did yoga as teenagers fiddled with their cell phones and listened to Nirvana. I glimpsed one man reading *War and Peace* by candlelight.

If he'd seen all this, Prime Minister Erdoğan would probably have just repeated his statement that these people were mostly alcoholics, bandits and extremists.

Despite the general merriment, the crowd still felt the bite marks of police brutality. The more enterprising of the local vendors had set up stalls selling gas masks and swimming goggles. I talked to numerous protesters who'd been dealt a savage beating. The policemen, they informed me, had fired teargas canisters straight into their bodies. Some of the beatings had been so brutal that one normally only sees such things at a movie theatre. The police had bashed and kicked women, children and the elderly.

According to local NGOs, around 5,000 people were injured during the first twelve days of the protest. Three of them lost their lives.

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"We were quite simply fed up. The authorities' scheme to replace the Gezi park with a shopping mall and an Ottoman barracks replica only lit the fuse.[1] Everyone knows that."

I was told this late on Wednesday night by an activist named Ekim, who worked at the French Cultural Centre in Istanbul. "Our government has been growing ever more authoritarian," he went on. "All it cares about is the economy and the further Islamisation of the country. There is less and less freedom all around."

According to Ekim, the Gezi park had been merely a symbol of what Turkey was doing to its citizens. "For the first three days, the situation here was truly awful. We knew what the police were capable of, but no one expected anything of this magnitude. Protesters were being beaten like the most hopeless criminals. But—and I think they've become aware of that!—it was a big mistake. Their violence and arrogance only added fuel to the fire. Pandora's box had been opened. The riots soon spread all over the country. We are no longer afraid. We are united. One week ago, Istanbul was an urban jungle, where it was each man for himself. Now we have become a community. That's a big thing, you know—no matter what comes next! Okay, so if Erdoğan comes to us with a sincere apology, if he listens to our requests and pays some respect, then we will back down. That would be a good thing for the entire country."

Everybody would like to return home in one piece, Ekim told me with a rueful smile. Everyone was hoping the authorities would not force them to turn violent. The protesters' aim was to remain peaceful until the end. Having shared this, the youth bid me a hurried goodbye, since he didn't want to miss out on the celebratory dance which, by then, had been joined by over a thousand freedom-loving citizens.

"This is only the beginning. The authorities obviously do not have a clear strategy for handling the protests. Our prime minister seems to have severely underestimated the power of the streets."

Such were the sentiments of one of Turkey's most influential female writers and activists, who asked me not to reveal her name. Thus far, she had been comparatively lucky. In a country where a freethinking disposition

[1] http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-vows-to-rebuild-ottoman-military-barracks-in-istanbuls-gezi-park-100645

was all too often rewarded with prolonged incarceration, her open opposition to Erdoğan and his cronies had only cost her her job.

"By uniting us here—and let me tell you, a week ago many of us were virtually enemies!—he has pulled off something truly astonishing," she smirked. "If I may allow myself a bit of irony, those gentlemen in Sweden should seriously consider Erdoğan 's name when the time for the next peace prize comes along! I mean, look at all these people here—together, united, with scant regard for their different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Around here, this is really something new and remarkable that bodes well for our society!"

When I talked to the writer on June 4th, she was outraged. "First the authorities apologise to us and assure us the park will stay ..., and then the next moment we're subjected to a full-on police assault. In Izmir, in Ankara, here in Istanbul as well ..., though over here we've had it a bit easier since so many of you foreign journalists have come. But what's happening is insane! A great political masquerade is taking place. The authorities are trying to calm things down. The prime ministers remain arrogant as hell, but his closest associates have all adopted a soothing tone. It is just an especially tasteless example of a good cop/bad cop routine."

According to the writer, the Western media bore a great deal of responsibility for the entire mess. "Just like the Turkish media, their Western counterparts pretty much ignored the protests for the first three days. Also, for the past ten years they have done nothing but repeat the demented mantra about Turkey being the perfect fusion of Islam and democracy. I mean, hold on: democracy? With its hundreds of political prisoners—activists, union leaders, students, lawyers and writers—Turkey is one giant open prison! The people in charge are growing more authoritarian every day! And they are accountable to no one! On the other hand, the popularity of the social networks has started going through the roof, especially twitter. And with these thousands and thousands bliplets of information floating around, it is very hard to know what is real and what is not. No one benefits from this more than the authorities!"

The Turkish writer was quick to assure me that she was not about to give in to the euphoria that usually accompanies such revolutionary advancements. "No way!" she smiled in a decidedly world-weary fashion. She had learned much from what happened in Egypt, from the way the Muslim Brotherhood ultimately appropriated the entire revolt. In her view, something very similar could happen in Turkey—at least if the protesters failed to organise politically. Erdoğan's party, after all, has taken the country down the road of heavy islamisation, which has put them on excellent terms with the Muslim Brotherhood.

"Hundreds of young Turks have been injured just because the protests piqued our prime minister's ego! The authorities deliberately provoked us. In the first days of the protests, that was their only strategy. We, on the other hand, didn't have too much time to reflect or analyze, since we've been so busy running from the tear gas. But what we can say with utter certainty is that yesterday no longer exists. There is only tomorrow. The wall of fear has been knocked down. That is what matters most," the renowned writer said to me in parting.

I was told much the same thing by the editor-in-chief of one of Turkey's leading magazines. She felt it was imperative for the young and the educated to remain in the streets. If the freethinking middle-classes went home, the protests could easily get hijacked by extremists and *agent provocateurs*. And that, the editor felt, would be the greatest present the authorities could wish for. After that, even more police could swarm the streets, and the bought newscasters could fling more mud at the protests.

"I'm really hoping we can avoid that," she shook her head, and added that Erdoğan's much-coveted apology still struck her as unlikely. "Yes, Erdoğan's apology would do much to defuse things around here. But only, of course, if the apology was honest and unmarred by political calculation. It is painfully clear that the man has gone too far. Even some of his closest allies have realised that. We demand an apology, and we demand to be treated with respect!"

As one of Turkey's leading journalists and publicists, the lady was heartened by the fact that as much as seventy percent of the protesters did not support any of the existing political parties. The problem was that the protesters had yet to organise politically—which, in the view of most of the people I talked to, was absolutely imperative.

"The prime minister enjoys a great deal of support among the conservative part of the population," she said with a great strain in her voice. "This is something we mustn't forget. It is quite possible he will try to take advantage of that. It is only through full political participation that we can stop Turkey's slide into total dictatorship. The authorities' response to these protests tells us we have struck a nerve. But it is also true that they may be deliberately sending mixed signals to the public. Whatever the case, we have a long, long way to go. It is far too early for us to be indulging in naive romantic terms like 'Turkish spring'!"

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These sentiments were echoed entirely by Elif Shafak, a writer and blogger of Turkish and French descent. Among other things, she wrote in

the op-ed for *The Guaurdian*:[2] "Calling the recent events a 'Turkish spring' or a 'Turkish summer', as some commentators were quick to do, is not the right approach. It is true that Turkey has lots of things in common with many countries in the Middle East, but it is also very different. With its long tradition of modernity, pluralism, secularism and democracy—however flawed and immature it might be—Turkey has the inner mechanisms to balance its own excesses of power. If this cannot be achieved, however, there is concern that the demonstrations could be hijacked by extremist groups and turn violent. The same concern has been voiced by the country's president, Abdullah Gül, who issued a constructive statement saying the people had given the politicians a clear message, and the politicians should take these well-intentioned messages into account."

The following words from Shafak struck me as especially poignant: "Now, after days of upheaval, it is raining gently on the burning tyres and the graffiti, and the voice of the young father who wrote the open letter to the prime minister represents the feelings of many people on the streets and in their houses: 'You called us 'unlawful', my dear Prime Minister. If you only got to know us, you would see that we are anything but.'"

Instead of engaging constructive dialogue, violence was the only response the Turkish authorities proved capable of. "I stand and watch, and a lot of the time I feel like weeping," a painter and webpage designer named Emre told me. "I never imagined such things were possible. I've been standing here since day one. There were times when I thought the police would kill us all. But we slowly shook off our fear. As soon as the police attacked us, thousands and thousands of people started pouring in towards the Taksim square—people of all generations, both rich and poor. It was amazing! Even the supporters of all major Istanbul's football clubs came together, it was a miracle! Having grown strong, we knew that we had to remain here at the square. This was our one historic opportunity! And then the police retreated. Now, the square belongs to us, and the Gezi park will not be replaced with a shopping mall. That in itself is a great victory!"

I talked to Emre next to one of the countless police barricades that blocked off the nearby streets. The young man told me that, for the large part, the protests were a confrontation between the old and the new, the progressives and the conservatives, and above all between the urban and the rural conceptions of the future. He also let me know that he had never been a political activist, but he had always marvelled at the way Turkey was perceived by many in the West as a democratic society.

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/taksim-square-istanbul-turkey-protest

"We're everything but a democracy!" he threw up his hands in bewilderment. "That is one big lie! Over here, everything has been sacrificed to the concept of economic growth! And the economy is being controlled by the people who are very close to the state—actually, it is being controlled by the state itself!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE GREEK CHILDREN ARE GROWING UP IN A WAR ZONE

ATHENS, GREECE, MAY 2014

Two and a half years ago, Doli Sotiropolu, 36, lost her job with a foreign diagnostics company. Doli lives in Athens and is the mother of an 8-year-old daughter named Nikoleta. Overnight, the young family's life was turned upside down.

The loss of her job came as a severe shock. Doli, after all, had worked at the company for the past eighteen years. Yet after the initial panic—compounded by the fear that her husband, a technician with a medical-analysis firm, might lose his job, as well—she slowly reclaimed her composure. She devoted the sum of her energies to taking care of Nikoleta and finding another job.

Over the next two years, precisely one job opportunity presented itself to her—a badly paid secretarial post with a two-hour long commute. The pay and the workload of that particular position were so horrendous that it wasn't really much of an option.

So she is still looking.

Every week, her situation grows a little worse. Doli claims she has never been one to complain. "I simply adapted and learned to cope, always working on lowering my expectations." The Sotiropolu family, very fortunate in that it isn't riddled with any outstanding debts, slowly accustomed itself to a life of extreme frugality. Again, its three members weren't exactly presented with a choice. Doli is well aware of the fact that many of her neighbours and friends are doing far worse. All the time, she keeps telling herself she needs to stay strong and focused, but the fear and the general uncertainty still often overwhelm her.

"The worst time," she explains, "was when my daughter said to me: 'Mom, you're fired!' We were playing a game, and she wasn't doing very well at it, and all of a sudden her voice got so rough and commanding. I was absolutely speechless. I didn't know how to react. It was only then that I

truly realised my position and what was happening to our country. The crisis has been the hardest on our children. And not only because of the increasing cuts to the family budget. The children are also traumatised on a much deeper psychological level. I believe they are sort of downloading the traumas from their parents. To get some sense of this, you only need to watch them play."

Dali also describes how she kept trying to tell her daughter—who kept venting her anger on her mother—that the parents who lost their jobs are worth no less than those who've managed to hold on to them, at least for the time being.

In spite of Greece's staggering unemployment statistics, losing one's job is still often a cause for severe stigmatisation. "When I started taking Nikoleta to her school and to the playground, I soon figured out what was going on," the unemployed mother confides. "In almost any game or sport, the loser gets yelled at: 'You're fired!' This is now the ultimate insult, an important part of our children's slang. In a sense, our little ones never stop playing bosses and underlings. Meaning those who have the power to fire and those who get fired. It's just one of the little clues that tell us how deeply the crisis has cut into their very souls."

Yet Doli, for one, was not content to just sit and moan about it. With a number of like-minded friends and neighbours, she formed a help group for those parents who are doing even worse. There is certainly no shortage of them around. Many children now come to school hungry or severely ill. Many families have had their electricity, water and/or heating turned off.

Here in Greece, destitution is still on the march. According to an official statistic, a third of the entire population is living on the brink, though the brink itself has become decidedly blurred. In modem Greece, few things have become as relative as poverty.

"Things are worst for the families where both parents have lost their jobs," Doli Sotiropolu sighs in summation. "I personally know of seven such cases. We do what we can to help—especially the young ones. Each month, we collect food, clothes and even a little money. This is the only way for the community to survive. But I repeat: my gravest concern is the damage already done to our children."

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A few hundred meters from the giant port in Piraeus—Greece's largest economic window on the world, long taken over by a Chinese/Qatari corporation COSCO—stands an ancient orphanage. It is more than two

hundred years old. The giant white building, which belongs to the Hacikiriakio Foundation, enjoys special legal status as a monument.

In the middle of a typical Mediterranean afternoon, the fierce sun beats down on its aristocratic white walls. The legendary orphanage itself may be deserted. Yet that doesn't mean the surrounding area isn't ringing with children's laughter. Following the earthquake of 1999, the Hacikiriakio Foundation used the building's courtyard to set up a special asylum for children.

"An asylum, not an orphanage!" the centre's managing director, Anastasia Katsilieri, is quick to emphasise, since the structure's special legal status prevents it from being rebuilt and reopened as an orphanage.

The institution now provides care for some of the children whose parents have fallen on exceptionally hard times. In the courtyard, all I can see are girls aged from six to eighteen—mostly from Greece, but also some Roma and African girls, as well as one hailing from Albania. Roughly a third of them are either migrants or refugees. Many of them have been left behind by their parents, who decided to brave their way deeper into Europe in search of a life worth living.

The only thing these poor girls can still cling to is their parents' promise that they will send for their daughters sometime soon.

The asylum's wards seem exceptionally quiet as they play. They also seem heart-wrenchingly composed and disciplined. They fail to show much interest in what goes on outside their immediate circle of play.

"Our foundation's statute is two hundred years old and very strict," Mrs. Katsilieri points out. "In all this time it hasn't changed a bit and our job is to stick to it as closely as possible. That is why we can only accept girls between the ages of six and ten. Those that get accepted can stay with us until they tum eighteen. And we may only admit them if they are in perfect health—both physically and psychologically."

To compound my bafflement, Mrs. Katsilieri explains that the parents may come and take their children home for the weekends. "These girls," adds a social worker named Leta Driva, "they're all attending school. We provide them with food, a bed and some much-needed psychological care."

The asylum was established long before the economic collapse, which transformed Greece into a third-world country. But at no time has its services been in such high demand as right now.

"It used to be we mostly took in children from the bottom," Leta Driva tells me: "This meant we mostly dealt with children who were pretty used to everything poverty brings. Now things are different. We get more and more children from what used to be the middle class, which has been hit hardest by the crisis. These kids ..., well, they're not used to the hardship

and the deprivation, so let's just say it's getting to be quite an ordeal for us social workers, too. Indeed, in the recent past the social map of poverty in Greece has been given a savage shake-up—like our entire society, I suppose."

The Hacikiriakio Foundation is a private institution. Its aim is to keep helping its protégées even after they reach maturity. Over the last few years, it helped many of them enrol in college—both in Greece and abroad.

Yet not everything is that simple. Since many of the children are referred here by the courts or the social system, their destitute parents are often stripped of much say in the matter. Does this mean that the foundation also strips these people, caught in a negative spiral of unemployment and debt, of their right to bring up their children in accordance with their wishes and basic beliefs?

"Look here," Mrs. Katsilieri is quick to protest: "We are very much against the sort of separation you're talking about! We make every effort to include the parents, and actually the entire family! It would be much too traumatic for these poor children if they were prevented from spending a great deal of time with their parents. We do what we can to help. We feel it is absolutely crucial that they go to school. And that they feel included in the social life here."

The managing director freely admits that there are problems. Many of the changes over the past few years haven't been for the good. The centre's three social workers—plus a single psychologist—are more overworked than ever. It is a rare day when all of them spend less than ten hours at their posts. They are working more and earning less. For them as well, the pressures of "the new economy" are getting hard to bear.

"Poverty is on the rise," Mrs. Katsilieri concludes our conversation before she joins her girls for lunch. "It's worse than it's ever been, but it is still not being discussed openly …, at least not nearly as much as it should be! There is still a huge stigma attached to being poor. This is especially true of the middle-class children. They need lots and lots of special attention. At school, it is still impossible for most of them to admit they're living with us, away from their parents. You know what? It is an awful, traumatic mess."

Over the past few years, the staff at the asylum started to forge ties with the teachers at the local schools that their wards were enrolled in. "We try to ease the transition for them," the managing director shakes her head, "but the first few years are always rough. Then they start to cheer up, since I can promise you that over here they get to live in a positive environment. And most of them can take comfort from the fact that their parents are always somewhere close by. It is often more of a shock for the parents than for the

girls. But what can they do? The welfare system all over the country is falling apart. And we're not only talking about the health and the schooling system! There is trouble everywhere you look. The state has opted to transfer its social responsibilities to the family and to the humanitarian organisations. It is a huge, huge burden, and I don't think we can hold out much longer."

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What Mrs. Katsilieri says above touches on a very important point. Over the recent period, government officials have had much to say on the invaluable role of "the traditional Greek family". This structure is now supposed to mend the holes caused by the erosion of the welfare state and Greece's overall helter-skelter plunge into poverty. Grandparents are supposed to take care of the grandchildren. Uncles are supposed to take care of the nieces. Ever greater social contributions are expected from relatives abroad.

But in the opinion of Katerina Poutou, the managing director of the non-governmental organisation ARSIS (Association for the Social Support of Youth), this is merely empty rhetoric. "It is a false myth, exploited by politicians so they can dump their responsibilities onto the family unit. We've conducted several surveys, and the statistics paint a painfully clear picture. Over the past twenty years, 'the traditional Greek family' has lost the greater part of its function as a social corrective. What with their low pensions, the grandparents can barely cope themselves. If anything, it is they who need aid, not the other way around!"

For the past thirty-two years, Katerina Poutou has been committed to a career in social relief. When I met her at ARSIS's headquarters, she told me things had never been worse. "Currently, all social and human rights are being redefined. Every standard you can think of has plummeted. It is all happening frightfully fast, and it has taken the greatest toll on the young. The children are absorbing an unprecedented number of negative messages. Domestic violence is on the rise, as is the general level of violence in our society. Many children are coming to school hungry. The social differences have widened drastically."

In these sorts of conditions, it is of course extremely hard to forge a stable identity. The schools are growing more and more understaffed, and those teachers who get to remain are paid less and less. "This is awful news for Greece's future," Katerina warns. "We are producing a generation of children whose values will be irreparably alien to ours. Make no mistake:

we are talking about children who are growing up in a war zone, so to speak."

These sentiments are echoed by Stergios Sifinos, the managing director of the Greek branch of the global humanitarian organization SOS Villages. Its aim is to provide relief for poverty-stricken families, with a special focus on children. The organisation now has outposts in almost every major Greek city.

"The crisis struck in earnest in the middle of 2011," Mr. Sifinos informs me. "Since then, everything has been going rapidly downhill. There isn't a single indication that things are looking up. On the contrary, the social problems are getting worse. At one of our regional centres on Crete, we used to provide material relief for eighty destitute families. Now this number has expanded to 160, stretching our resources to the limit, but the need for aid is ever so much greater than that, and it is constantly on the rise. Athens, of course, has had the worst of it—partly because of the immense number refugees and migrants living there in truly appalling conditions."

I met with Mr. Sifinos at the modem-looking seat of his organisation's regional headquarters in Athens. In recent times, he has gained a certain amount of notoriety, owing to his uncompromising public statements. These days, he tells me, he prefers to hold back. He was quick to learn that the Greek politicians and their media flunkies are all too happy to latch on to some nuance in his statements and exploit it for their own promotion.

Yet he remains adamant that the crisis' most dire consequences have been caused by political decisions. It is the politicians who bear the greatest blame for the devastation wreaked by the austerity measures. It is they who are responsible for following the siren song of the international financial institutions. And they were the ones who decided to dismantle the welfare state, plunging the country into the third world.

"Never before have we had so many people needing help, and never have there been so few to provide it," the SOS Villages managing director sums up his views. "The social services are badly underfunded. The entire welfare network has collapsed. The Greek family has been weakened as well. The poverty has been eroding our population's well-being on so many levels. We are now at the stage where some parents are pulling their children out of schools because they can no longer afford the cost of the commute, school meals, books and clothes. These children are in terrible danger of being lost to drugs and crime. They have no one to protect them. It is a jungle out there. We're bringing up a generation whose defining traits will be anger and frustration."

An especially telling detail is that, according to Greek law, organisations like SOS Villages are actually required to pay taxes on the relief they provide.

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During the first wave of the crisis, the Greek society saw a steep increase in domestic violence. Aggression seems to have been the instinctive response to escalating deprivation. The second wave was marked by a rise in depression—a debilitating medical condition that claimed entire families. The third wave, the effects of which we are observing today, is apathy.

Wherever one goes, one sees people simply giving up. They are coming to interpret both their personal circumstances and the predicament of their entire society as defeat or even "fate." Thus, silence has become their only response. Silence, and a huge spike in suicides.

Yet this is far from the worst of it. As always, the crisis has also become a breeding ground for vultures of the worst kind.

Numerous anonymous sources from all walks of life have confirmed that, over the past few years, human trafficking has become a booming industry. The international markets have been developing quite a taste for Greek-born children; in Greece, this surge in human trafficking has long become an open secret.

A valuable insight into the state of things occurred last autumn, when the Greek police raided a Roma settlement in central Greece and found a blonde-haired little girl whose real parents turned out to be Bulgarian. The parents claimed they got rid of little Maria because they could no longer provide for her, and they wanted to give her to someone who could. Of course no one believed that their little girl was simply a gift. In Greece, the trafficking system has become an open secret.

"The poverty-stricken families are getting cut off from the rule of law," claims Andreas Lupis, a family-law specialist who has been representing destitute Greek families in court for the past thirty years. "Since they are unable to afford a lawyer, there is nowhere for them to turn to. In such cases, some parents opt to simply sell off their children. Horrible things are happening."

At first, Mr. Lupis seemed reluctant to tackle the subject of human trafficking. "Some things," he was quick to let on, "are hard to prove." But I was slowly able to convince him to reveal more.

"Our problems are immense," experience has taught him to believe. "In the wake of a divorce, the court determines the amount of alimony to be paid. But so many parents prove unable to shoulder it, and there are hardly

any mechanisms in place to make sure they do. The court decisions often have no practical weight, and the state has chosen to simply ignore the entire field. There is no law worthy of the name to protect the interests of the children from deprived families. The tensions are growing worse, and the little ones are being subjected to ever increasing psychological pressures. There are many children whom their parents have simply renounced. Many more have been forcefully taken away by the social services. This is our society's ultimate defeat. And it is only getting worse."

According to Mr. Lupis, Greece as a whole entered the crisis absolutely unprepared. Hardly anyone in the country took the long-term view. Since no defences and safeguards were put in place during the boom times, the bust resulted in a general unravelling of society. The crisis brought on a number of social anomalies and pathologies that have since become commonplace, perfectly acceptable parts of life.

When prodded on the specifics, Mr. Lupis sadly shook his head. "Well," he replied, "the fact that many parents are selling off their children abroad would be a good start. Not putting them up for adoption, you see, but selling them off! We are talking full-blown illegal trafficking here, the exact sort of thriving industry so typical of third-world countries and other societies in the throes of profound systemic shock."

Mr. Lupis was just one of many sources that confirmed the existence of a growing market for such trafficking. "This is how things work," I was told by one high-placed contact, who preferred to remain anonymous. "A young girl—a student, maybe, or one of the unemployed—comes to a doctor who has been 'recommended' to her. She tells him she had accidentally become pregnant and that she wants an abortion, since she is hardly in a position to become a mother. The doctors listen to her carefully and then suggests an alternative. The girl is offered help in bringing the pregnancy to term in exchange for some money and free medical care. Many of the girls consent. The newborn babies are then immediately sold on the black market. The entire process—which involves doctors, lawyers and various intermediaries—is governed by the rule of *omertà*, the code of silence. By now, a well-oiled machine has been put into place, and everybody is paid their cut."

According to the source, there is even such a thing as an unofficial price list. At the moment, a Greek baby is worth somewhere in the neighbourhood of 10,000 euros. A Roma or a migrant baby would set one back between 1,000 and 2,000 euros. The market, most of it located within the bounds of the European Union, has its own rules and requirements. It is a system within a system. No one sees the process as child-theft. It is simply... business.

According to my anonymous sources, some of the agents, who operate within this shameful system, have lately tried to increase the supply of children by attempting to involve the local orphanages. So far, they have met with very limited success, but the orphanages, too, are under mounting economic pressure. More and more Greek parents, after all, have been opting to leave their babies on the orphanages' steps at night and flee.

"As things stand, the parents who choose to sell off their children aren't really to blame," Andreas Lupis opined. "For most of them it is highly probable that, sooner or later, the child would have been taken away from them by the state. By choosing what they choose, at least they get to make a little money. Our country has a long and depressing history of trade involving our children. After all, not so long ago the Greek children weren't even required to be registered before the age of five. This led to widespread manipulation, enabling the parents to dump their unwanted offspring without much of a hassle. Many children were also stolen. Under Greek law, all you needed for a valid birth certificate was the statement of two witnesses. And under our thoroughly corrupt system, the credibility of those witnesses was hardly ever verified. In a few hours, the child was thus given a completely new identity, and there weren't much its real parents could do. It was often a matter of a simple business transaction between two families. After the story of the blonde-haired Maria shocked the European public, things got a little better. The authorities decided to crack down on some of the most blatant offenders. But only after the media got involved."

Dismayed at what I was hearing, I explicitly warned Mr. Lupis that he was on the record. But he just waved me off, saying he was merely detailing things everyone in Greece knew were taking place.

"And if they don't know about it, well, then they should!" he concluded with a decisive smack on the table. "Of course, such things only hit the newsstands when something goes wrong. The trafficking of children is on the rise, and the current economic crisis has given it an enormous boost. What we are facing now is an utter collapse of the state and of its social institutions. I am beginning to wonder, does the state even *want* to impose at least some semblance of an order? I'm afraid too many people are profiting from the situation. And so we're only going to see more of these sort of crimes. The children are the real victims. That is something that needs to be pointed out again and again and again. But you know what? I shouldn't be too pessimistic. Over these last couple of months, some things have started to turn for the better, however slightly! The courts have started to pay attention. It just may be that the truth will finally come out!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE POVERTY EPIDEMIC IN GREECE

ATHENS, GREECE, JULY 2015

A hot summer afternoon in Athens' Monastiraki Square saw the formation of a long and silent line of people. In many ways, they were as varied a bunch as one could imagine, but they all shared a couple of things in common: their tired faces slowly blistered under the merciless summer sun; their features were etched with a profound anxiety.

A cloud of demoralized silence enveloped the scene, the sort of silence one could imagine was almost impossible to break. Yet this was exactly what happened. The spell was broken by a cry from one of the men waiting for a free lunch.

"Hey, that smells delicious! This guy can really cook!"

It would be the only meal of the day for most of the people in the line. The entire square smelled of coriander, the refreshing spice that Greeks enjoy adding to almost every dish they make. In an enormous pot next to his stall in the middle of one of Athens's most crowded squares, Konstantinos Polychronopolos brewed a sort of goulash. After losing his top-level job in tourist marketing four years ago, the fifty-year-old Konstantinos went on to establish the *Society Kitchen initiative.* That afternoon in Monastiraki Square, he'd brought enough resources to feed some 300 people.

"When I lost my job I didn't know what to do," the bearded benefactor explained, while deftly stirring the pot. "For a while I tried getting another one, but it was useless. So I finally decided to quit the entire system. I could only watch as the living conditions drastically deteriorated—here in Athens and all over Greece. Then one day, I went to the marketplace and saw two little boys fighting for a piece of fruit—and the next thing I realized was that I was the only one shocked by the sight. I knew what I had to do. I decided to set up a stall for the poor who could not afford to eat and cook the food themselves."

During our entire conversation, people kept approaching Konstantinos to give him a warm hug, shake his hand and mutter a few simple words of gratitude. He greeted each one with an ear-to-ear grin and a friendly joke or two.

Four years ago, on an otherwise unremarkable morning, Konstantinos set out for the marketplace and worked his way around every one of its stalls. He had three euros in his pocket and a simple plan in his head. He asked each vendor for a single potato, explaining his aim was to prepare a meal for the poor. Some of them may have stared at him in amazement, but the very first one gave him thirty potatoes. The next one in line handed out twenty zucchini. Pretty much all of them were eager to help.

That day, Konstantinos prepared his first stew for the poor and started distributing it to passers-by. Not long after, he became completely committed to his new purpose; his entire philosophy of life underwent a paradigm shift.

"It's not only about the food," Mr. Polychronopolous informed me with a smile. "I think it's almost as important that we simply spend some time together as friends and equals. For many of these poor people, it is extremely hard to admit they don't have the money to buy lunch. They sometimes can't even admit it to themselves. And so they're suffering from a deep sense of shame. For a long time our poverty was something of a taboo. Now we can no longer pretend. Our destitution has become our only reality. And my wish is to help these people by making them feel a little happier than before. My main values are solidarity, respect, equality and peace. That is what our initiative is really all about."

Over the last few years, a number of volunteers have joined him on the streets of Athens and other Greek cities, to help distribute the meals. Some of them got tired, he told me; some got jobs, but others were still going strong by his side.

It was clear that this empathic, streetwise chef was in a perfect position to gauge the effects of the austerity measures unleashed on the Greek people. Countless lives lay in ruins. Over a quarter of Greece's population now lives below the poverty line. In many of the formerly-thriving capital's neighbourhoods, poverty is nothing short of an epidemic.

"In 2011, I was preparing let's say fifty or maybe sixty meals per day. That was enough," Konstantinos shook his head. "Now everywhere I go I have to cook for three hundred. Each month we distribute food to around 5,000 people. In the beginning, the lines were made of let's say eighty percent migrants and twenty percent Greeks. Now those two numbers are almost reversed. The situation has rapidly deteriorated, but the world refuses to notice."

By this time, the goulash was almost ready. A pair of female volunteers added pasta to the mix and the long line of people waited patiently for their portion.

This is now a daily reality for thousands in numerous locations all over the Greek capital. Today, the line was formed by exhausted pensioners, Syrian refugees, African migrants, drug addicts, invalids, homeless persons, pregnant women, street urchins and quite a number of your garden-variety unemployed people: the type of unemployed Greek citizens, who until quite recently lived perfectly respectable and even cosy lives.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Athens has seen a sixfold increase in the number of homeless people. Since the radical-left party Syriza came to power in January 2015, their lives haven't improved one bit. They still depend entirely on the kindness of strangers—people like Konstantinos Polychronopolous who literally come to meet them halfway.

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Nearly all the members of the line got a warm hug and a few kind words, along with their steaming bowl of goulash. Konstantinos' reserves of energy seemed inexhaustible. His policy, he winked at me, was to always say "no" to the politicians and "yes" to the people.

"My philosophy is very simple. What we are doing here is an act of solidarity, and solidarity is our people's only means of fighting the system. Our opponents may have the money, but we have each other. And this is why it is extremely important we understand all the ways in which they're trying to divide us. Our aim here is to give hope to the people. Without hope there is no life. We want our initiative to help motivate others to follow our example. We don't think of ourselves as philanthropists. We're simply living our lives the best way we can. I repeat, this is not philanthropy: this is the natural human state."

In addition to setting up a number of food stalls all over the capital, this generous man has also converted his home into an "open house". The broken and the destitute are warmly encouraged to drop by any time and spend the night. He regularly organizes workshops for poverty-stricken children at his house. For him, helping others has become a way of life.

"I'm so grateful to Kostas! He's a good man. And such a wonderful cook. I often come here to eat lunch. I sometimes go to other stalls, but this one is the nicest one of all," said Mr. Mihalos, 67, after he carefully put his portion of food in a plastic bag and returned to his spot in the shade.

For a number of years now, this gallant and still reasonably well-groomed man has filled the ranks of the capital's homeless, moving from

one stop-gap solution to the next. He currently lives in an abandoned apartment he has fixed up to suit his basic needs. Not meeting the basic requirements for retirement, he receives no aid at all from the state. Like almost a quarter of the Greek population—nearly three million people—he also has no health insurance. For so many, his hand-to-mouth existence has become the norm.

"I got throat cancer and lost my job. Unfortunately, I couldn't get another one. Everything collapsed. I have been living like this for quite a few years. It is a miserable existence. You know, I'm often grateful that I don't have any children. I'd hate them to see me like this. It's better to suffer alone. It's easier to be alone when you've been defeated. I mean, what could I possibly say to them, to the children? What?" demanded the quiet and well-spoken gentleman as he wore an elegant hat and a pair of shoes that were clearly much too large for his feet.

In the early evening, after Konstantinos Polychronopolous finished handing out the last few chunks of bread and sweets, he concluded his day's work with a happy grin. He let the people who still lingered around the stall know where he planned to set it up the next day. Then, visibly exhausted, he sank down to the pavement and sat with the African migrants who wouldn't stop praising his cooking skills. He took a deep breath and lit a well-earned cigarette.

In this place of constant, bitter struggle, he nodded; in this place where so many lives had been turned into an endless chain of ●XI-s—the Greek word for N●—there was no room for politics.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"EVERYWHERE I LOOK, I SEE FEAR!"

ISTANBUL, TURKEY, JULY 2016

As a Turkish proverb puts it: "having no enemies is a sign fortune has forgotten you." On the day of the failed military coup, the goddess of unbelievably good fortune certainly had her eye on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

If the official version of events is to be believed, he certainly had no shortage of enemies. Had the Turkish special forces squad raided the Marmaris hotel—where the president was holidaying—a mere thirty minutes earlier, or if the F-16 fighter jets pursuing Erdoğan's plane had fired a single missile, Turkish history might have been reset to year zero.

Yet it was not to be. The failed putsch, which is certain to exact a heavy price on all of Turkish society, proved a miserable dud. Instead of a coup, what we are seeing is a swift and overwhelming crackdown.

For the past few years, President Erdoğan has pushed Turkey toward authoritarianism, while obsessively cultivating his cult of personality. In their act of naive, and ultimately unforgivable, ineptitude the rebelling officers of the Turkish army handed him the perfect alibi for everything that has happened in Turkey since. And for everything that is yet to happen in the coming months and years, as well.

Turkey has long been a bitterly divided society. Now it seems that the failed putsch has handed Erdoğan the keys to the creation of an outright dictatorship. No wonder he couldn't help gushing that the coup was a "gift from God".

The Turkish president certainly rose to the occasion. In the week following the failed attempt to unseat him and his party, some 60,000 people were swept up in a vengeful purge. Military personnel, police officers, judges, prosecutors, intelligence officers, state officials, journalists, school teachers, university professors and deans found themselves either arrested, fired or suspended.[1]

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[1] https://turkeypurge.com/

The purge seems determined to leave no stone unturned. This "cultural revolution" has been gathering steam for years in Turkey.

Now it is on steroids.

After declaring martial law, the authorities prohibited academics from leaving the country and suspended the European Convention on Human Rights. The following succession of purges cut to the very heart of Turkish society. Its progressive, secular components, most of whom proved all too passive during the twin rise of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Turkish economy, have been backed into a corner.

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Unlike during the Gezi park protests three years ago, Turkey's conservative majority now claims the streets. They come from those parts of the working class that have been boosted into the middle class by Erdoğan's economic policies; they have decided to throw their weight behind their champion. These people do not hesitate to answer the calls from the hundreds of mosques in Istanbul. They are Erdoğan's ultimate saviours, who, chanting "God is great," march in defence of their president and their country.

Today, still chanting their explosive *mélange* of religious and nationalistic catchphrases, they control the Turkish streets.

Having grown up in a poor family, Erdoğan is thoroughly familiar with the Turkish working class's infinitely simple and infinitely complex mentality. Indeed, he seems to have a direct line of communication to his worshippers' very souls—unlike the generals and the admirals, who apparently became frozen inside their comfort zones some thirty years ago, when the country and the world still seemed as black and white as the shirts of the Beşiktaş football club.

Even before the failed attempt, Turkey was already perilously close to a great conflict. At the moment, that conflict seems to have arrived.

Turkey is currently embroiled in two wars: one with its Kurds in the forgotten southeast of the country, the other with ISIS along the Syrian border. After Turkey did much to help it reach maturity, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has now come to haunt its former ally like a boomerang from hell. To complicate matters further, Ankara is still sending "aid" to certain rebel groups in the north of Syria. Besieged Aleppo is about to fall, and all the barbed wire, reinforced concrete and machine guns along the Turkish border will be hard-pressed to stop the tens of thousands of people making a panic-fuelled dash for their lives.

Now that Erdoğan has understandably lost confidence in his armed forces, whose chain of command has simply collapsed, Turkey seems more vulnerable than ever. And this is all at a time when the maps of the Middle East are being redrawn to the beat of a global geostrategic war that, in this region, is anything but cold.

"It was like waking up into a nightmare," says B, a foreign researcher at a prestigious university in Istanbul, who has lived in Turkey for many years. She was surprised by the attempted putsch, but not at all by the authorities' reaction. "Immediately, it was clear to me that the attempt would be a failure. And I'm actually glad. When was the last time the army brought peace and stability, right? But the reaction to what happened is what frightens me the most. Erdoğan's iron grip is sure to intensify all over our country. First from the top down, and then the other way around."

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I sat talking to B at a café near the Bosporus, next to the bridge that had been blocked by the putschists' tanks during the night of the coup on July 15.

During the attempted putsch itself, the young researcher was at a concert. She was tipped off about the events by phone.

"When I got home, all hell had already broken loose," she recalled. Thousands of Erdoğan supporters had answered the mosques' calls and taken to the streets. The situation was highly volatile. It was a face of Turkey I no longer recognised. It was an anything-goes sort of night. All those men seemed to be driven by pure adrenaline."

The way B saw it, both the authorities and their supporters on the streets had been given the perfect alibi for the purges they so craved. "What's happening now is a consolidation of power. I hope things settle down soon—they always do here in Turkey. I guess we'll simply have to learn to live with all the changes."

While cargo ships placidly moved down the Bosporus as if nothing at all had happened, B expressed a fervent belief that a close scrutiny of the authorities' actions was needed now more than ever. "We have to be particularly mindful of where the president is placing his priorities. Is it to be the economy? Foreign policy? Ideology? His ego? Religion? I believe the answers shall prove rather depressing."

All my Turkish sources seemed aghast by the scale of the authorities' response. Not a single one anticipated the sheer extent of the purges, which seem determined to shake up a number of key systems and institutions.

"All of us are in shock. We are very afraid for the country's future. The outcome won't be good," said Professor Lucie Tungul. "The optimist in me expects to see all the important positions in the country taken over by the loyalists, as the Justice and Development Party seizes complete control. But the pessimist in me is terrified the mob will take advantage of what happened to unleash a tidal wave of violence. I am afraid of pogroms. I am afraid for the minorities, the activists and the leftist. There is a great chance of escalating instability and the intensification of the conflict with the Kurds."

A few months ago, Lucie Tungul and forty-nine of her colleagues were fired from their posts at a private university. The authorities had contrived to link them with the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, Erdoğan's public enemy number one, who is blamed for masterminding the failed coup.

"Everywhere I look, I see fear. People are no longer willing to speak out. They are now mostly silent, waiting to see what happens. Many are thinking of leaving the country, finally emigrating for good," Tungul shrugged. "Everyone can become a target. We are living in highly unstable times and in a highly unstable environment. This is a polarised country where the right is on the rise. The Turkish army has been severely weakened and destabilised. The country's enemies are sure to try and take advantage of the situation."

Tungul, a Czech living in Istanbul, is fiercely opposed the attempted coup. According to her, its main protagonists should have been much more aware of the consequences likely to flow from their misguided brutality. Their basic motives still remain to be determined. Virtually all of those in the know are keeping their silence, while the ones willing to speak out are merely guessing and more or less shooting in the dark.

"I am not a supporter of president Erdoğan's policies," Tungul explained. "But he was voted in through a democratic election—regardless of the special conditions in place here last November, during the repeat parliamentary election. I am against all military coups. They have nothing whatsoever to do with democracy, and they are the very definition of violence."

In Lucie Tungul's view, many Turkish people are obviously very fond of Erdoğan. "And not only because of his Islamist tendencies. Those sorts of interpretations are plainly wrong. Turkey has other parties and groups which appeal to pious Muslims. The thing is, under his leadership the country has undergone tremendous changes. Many Turks believe he's done a lot to improve the quality of life while turning Turkey into a country of international prominence. They are convinced that Erdoğan has worked tirelessly to address the "little people", the poor and the dispossessed

masses. They admire his rhetoric unmarked by fear of the global superpowers. They believe the rest of the world must be rather envious of his leadership."

Tungul is convinced that the president's ruling party is very likely to retain high levels of support—but only, of course, if the economy recovers soon. Many of Turkey's inhabitants are saddled with huge loans and therefore desperate to keep their jobs and businesses running. Should the country hit a deeper recession, as many local experts predict, Turkey could easily descend into a spiral of even greater social and political turmoil.

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The feel on the streets of one of the most progressive and secular parts of Istanbul was one of mounting anxiety. As thousands of Erdoğan supporters flocked to the rally at Taksim square, the shopkeepers, restaurant owners and guests eyed them with palpable disquiet. Some proprietors simply closed up and headed home.

Just a few days after the putsch, at the height of the first wave of purges, hardly anyone felt safe.

Brandishing a number of national flags, packs of young men swaggered down the street, drunk on adrenaline and the sort of confidence found in numbers. Some of them zigzagged through the crowd on motorbikes and cursed those they passed by. It was clear they were the unchallenged masters of the streets. Bands of silent, black-clad women followed them, representing three different generations. Every single one of them carried a Turkish flag. The president's name kept echoing down the street.

"What we're seeing now is the worst-case scenario. The putsch attempt, which I'm still trying to wrap my mind around, only bolstered the most reactionary elements in the country," said H, a software programmer who, like most of those brave enough to open up, preferred to remain unnamed. "Mind you, if things are this bad in Istanbul, can you imagine what they must be like in the countryside? I'm afraid Turkey is quickly sliding back into the past."

At the café where I met H, a hush fell across the neighbouring tables. Some of their occupants even stood up and went inside, just in case.

At Gezi park, the crowd swelled by the minute. Three years ago this exact spot had been the site of the battle for one of the last parks in the district. Today, loudspeakers pumped out deafeningly loud patriotic music. An effigy of Fethullah Gülen hung from one of the lampposts. A number of Syrian refugee children sold grilled corn or panhandled through the crowd.

"A gang of soldiers set out to destroy our country. It was an attack on Turkey, on President Erdoğan, on each and every one of us," said Nesrin, a high-school teacher from the Bağcılar working-class quarter. "I am convinced that the putschists were not alone in this. They were guided from outside. Fethullah Gülen used to work together with the CIA. His goal is to bring down a democratically elected government. I'm here to show my support for Turkish democracy."

She told me she spent the night of the failed putsch out in the streets with her friends and neighbours. To cover any contingency, they first bought food supplies and got some cash from the bank machines. Then they joined the crowd to "fight for Turkish democracy."

But in Nesrin's opinion, the ensuing purges have been too harsh. "The authorities should punish only the people directly responsible—for some of those, even the death penalty might not be inappropriate! But the soldiers ordered out into the streets by their superiors should be pardoned," she nodded before disappearing in the crowd.

The young men proudly jumped up and down, chanting "Allahu Akbar" and firing up their Bengal torches. It was hard to shake the impression of attending a football match where the home team has accumulated a comfortable six-to-zero lead. In this highly urbanised surrounding, the rural-sounding blare has clearly come into its own again—the ominous soundtrack of Turkey's past and future on a devastating collision course.

CHAPTER THIRTY

OPEN VEINS OF BOLIVIA: LITHIUM, THE DRIVING FORCE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

SALAR DE UYUNI, BOLIVIA, APRIL 2017

Late in the morning the colours are at their prettiest, at their most intensive. As far as the eye can see, the luminous white of the world's largest salt flats blends with the tender blue of the clear skies above the alpine desert of the Bolivian Andes. The hypnotic silence, very good at relieving the burden of one's thoughts, is occasionally broken by the whistle of a mild, though decidedly chilly, breeze. The surrounding hills, some of them practically reaching the five-thousand-meter mark, are sharply reflected in the thin film of rainwater that has not yet evaporated into the atmosphere.

On a clear day and from afar, Salar de Uyuni looks like a colossal mirage. From up close, it looks like nothing less than a miracle. But it may not stay that way for long.

Along the salt lake's southern rim, industrial machinery roars with activity. Hundreds of heavy trucks come and go over the salty crust, wheezing like exhausted beasts of burden, some of them thirty or even forty years old. Diesel fumes permeate the crisp mountain air. In their wake, the trucks leave perfect brown lines on the virgin whiteness, making the lake's scores of square kilometres look like a giant bowl of *latte*.

The workers drill into the salt with gigantic rigs, aiming for the brine underneath. Lodged under colossal quantities of magnesium and potassium lies their goal: lithium, the essential power source for all the world's gadgets; the key component to fuelling the entire twenty-first century.

Visually, the rape of the innocent and extremely delicate landscape could hardly be any more brutal.

The workers, wearing the red work suits of the state-owned Comibol mining company, first load the trucks with bulldozers. The brine is transported to the nearby pools carved out in the middle of the lake. Some

of these pools are more than a kilometre wide. From high above, they look like alien rice-fields as painted by cubists after an all-night absinthe binge.

To facilitate the necessary complex chemical processes, the mineral mass is left in the sun for at least three months. When ready, it gets processed at the nearby Planta Llipi lithium factory, in what is currently still a pilot project.

Last year, the operation produced some twenty tons of lithium carbonate. The amount produced in 2017 is expected to be at least three times as high.

While these quantities may seem negligible in the wider scheme of things, the depths under the world's largest salt lake are believed to contain the world's greatest lithium reserves. According to some estimates, the Bolivian Andes contain seventy percent of the planet's lithium.

A number of studies have been done to corroborate these claims. According to the most optimistic one, as many as 140 million tons of lithium may be available in Salar de Uyuni, while the most pessimistic one—US Geological Survey---estimated "merely" nine million tons.[1] [2] Vast quantities of lithium have also been detected at the bottom of the world's oceans.

Little wonder, then, that the mining sector, one of the planet's most environmentally destructive industries, is already turning its gaze downward into the seas and scanning for new investment opportunities. But its marine schemes are still far from fruition.

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A rather similar impression—that of a long road yet to be travelled—can be gleaned from the pilot lithium factory of Llipi.

The plant is located next to the red-brown Rio Grande River. Its founding stone was put in place by Bolivia's president, Evo Morales. The socialist firebrand did so with a lot of pomp and visionary rhetoric. Back in 2010, Morales let fly predictions of great hope for all of Bolivia. The spoils of "the oil of the twenty-first century" inspired his vision of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to right a number of historical wrongs.

Soon after his ascent to power, Morales rode the crest of a leftist movement across Latin America. He nationalised all natural resources—from oil, through natural gas, to every kind of mineral imaginable. The land's natural resources, for so long the curse of the Bolivian people, were finally to be turned into a great advantage, forming the core of the national

[1] http://lithium.today/lithium-supply-by-countries/lithium-supply-bolivia

[2] https://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/lithium/

economy and all the salutary social programs Morales was aiming to implement.

Yet so far, this sweeping idealistic vision has failed to materialise. As things stand, Bolivia simply lacks enough skilled personnel to optimally exploit its own natural wealth. At the same time, the world economy has become so aggressively globalised that it is virtually impossible to thrive outside the system, at least as far as the metal, mineral and fossil fuel markets are concerned.

"Bolivia sees lithium as one of its great strategic projects. We are well aware of what significant market expansion could bring us," says Miguel Parra, head of production at the Llipi plant.

Parra meets us in his office on the shores of the great salt lake, informing us that the pilot project is about to run its course. Next April is primed to see the completion of a new lithium factory built on the lake itself. This will mean that the colossal government project of lithium extraction will enter its second stage.

It is obvious that the managers of the state-owned company are in something of a hurry. The market for lithium carbonate is booming. According to estimates, it could easily triple in the next five years. Understandably, the price of the white powder itself is surging, lithium still the most efficient battery component by far. It not only fuels our mobile phones and laptops but also gaming consoles, solar panels, robots and electric vehicles. One could easily speculate that the fate of the entire Bolivian lithium enterprise hinges on the success of the electric car. But more on that later.

"This is a state project," Miguel Parra explains: "Everything is directed from La Paz. Yes, I agree: we are moving slowly. But there is no other way. So much work has been completed, and there's still so much more to do. All technology development rests on our shoulders. The extraction process here in Salar de Uyuni is much more complicated than, say, in neighbouring Argentina or Chile. In those two countries, the salt lakes are located on lower altitudes with a much drier climate. And the lithium there is 'trapped' under considerably less magnesium and potassium than ours here."

A critical observer might certainly note that the production process in the pilot plant is proceeding at a rather laid-back pace.

Not a single kilometre of the dusty roads around the Salar de Uyuni plant is paved with asphalt. At the time of our visit, three young soldiers and two stray dogs formed the entire team guarding the country's grandest strategic project in history. With a little courage, it would be possible to drive an all-terrain vehicle across the salt flats right up to the man-made pools and testing rigs.

True, it is a bit more difficult to reach the newly built Plant 2.0—but only on account of all the water.

The new and improved plant is easily spottable from afar, and the overall impression is not one of harmony with the magnificent lakeside vista. The production area can be reached through a long, checkpoint-less, desert road that stretches across the grazing grounds of the ubiquitous vicunas. Together with the llamas and the protein-rich quinoa grain, these vivacious, ever-fretting rodents still form the staple of the local population's subsistence.

The Llipi factory currently employs 250 workers, most of them manual labourers. Very few lithium processing experts are on board, owing to a drastic shortage of them in the country. One must not forget that Bolivia remains the continent's poorest country; it has fallen on as few as three people to run the entire production line.

Yet the dreamy lackadaisical feeling permeating the project shouldn't mislead us into thinking Bolivia is asleep. On the contrary: the Bolivian parliament has created *Empresa Pública Nacional Estratégica de Recursos Evaporíticos*, a special state-owned firm for lithium production.[3] The firm is authorized to sign contracts with domestic and foreign private companies.

A month ago, president Morales expressed a hope that after production is ramped up to sufficient levels, Bolivia will be able to set lithium prices for the world—much as the major oil producers have done in the past. Could his optimism prove at least moderately founded?

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The Bolivian market is clearly opening up. The Chinese are not the only ones to have expressed an interest; the Japanese, the Germans, the Swedes, the French, the Swiss, the Koreans and the Canadians were quick to follow suit. According to our sources, the American electric giant, Tesla, also wants in on the action. Incidentally, the battery for Tesla's Model S requires as many as fifty-four kilograms of lithium carbonate, which is enough to power approximately 10,000 cell phone batteries.

In a recent report, the Goldman Sachs investment bank called lithium carbonate the new gasoline.[4] It also predicted that by 2025 the lithium market will expand to three times its current size. Eight years from now the world's yearly demand is expected to total 470,000 tons.

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[3] http://comibol.gob.bo/index.php/24-noticias-inicio/1086-gerencia-de-recursos-evaporiticos-pasara-al-nuevo-ministerio-de-energia

[4] https://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/pages/what-if-i-told-you-full/?playlist=0&video=0

The report boldly stated that a one-percent increase in electric vehicle production could increase lithium demand by more than forty percent of the current global production. Does that mean Bolivia is entering the market at an ideal time?

"FMC, my former employers, wished to develop de Uyuni in the late eighties and early nineties," recalls Joe Lowry, head of the Global Lithium company and one of the world's leading authorities on lithium. "But the governmental chaos and poor infrastructure were too much to deal with. And so Argentina ultimately got chosen. Thirty years later Bolivia still lacks both the infrastructure and the sort of government investors can be comfortable with."

If still somewhat sceptical about Bolivia as a lithium success story, Lowry has little doubt that both the lithium carbonate and the lithium battery markets are set to explode. The sharp rise in lithium battery consumption is strongly tied to a wholesale boom in what he calls "electric transport", of which the electric car is just the forerunner.

"Much of the world's population travels daily on buses and scooters and bikes," muses Lowry, dubbed by his followers on twitter as "Mr. Lithium". "Electric buses will have pre-planned routes and distances, which means the charging process can easily be worked into their daily routines. Online shopping goods, too, will be increasingly delivered by automated electric vehicles. Again: this broad transportation platform is not solely dependent on cars. Although I am not as bullish on the pace of electric vehicle adoption as some, I do believe we're past the point of wondering 'if' we're about to see significant e-transport growth. The only real question is 'when', which hinges on bringing down battery cost. In my opinion, it will happen!"

Joe Lowry also predicts that a boom in the lithium markets will have serious geostrategic consequences. Armed conflict is by no means out of the question. According to Mr. Lithium, Argentina and Chile will remain the two main players with Bolivia certainly seeing growth, as well.

In Lowry's opinion, the lithium production frenzy is also about to spread to Africa. "A lot depends on where the key investments will flow. I think you'll see more of that in politically stable areas like North America."

Having spent a number of years living in China, Lowry knows what he's talking about. "As the world's largest lithium market, China has two major suppliers: Ganfeng and Tianqi. Yet the key resources supporting those companies are located abroad, outside of China's borders. The lithium business is now a global and very interdependent one, and should be understood as such."

Lowry remains one of the rare lithium battery market analysts who refuses to believe that the completion of Tesla's GIGA Factory will

drastically alter the situation. "Tesla is a story, not the story. Yes, it is important, but it is also merely one of many important storylines in the global development of green transportation and energy storage systems."

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So far, the Chinese are the only ones the Bolivians have allowed into their grand, national project. Bolivia and China have long been on friendly terms. Perhaps just a tad naively, Bolivia's socialist president sees opening the door to Beijing as an anti-imperialist move.

For the past fifteen years, China has been gathering natural wealth exploitation concessions all over the third world. Its impact on the environment has been no less ruinous than that of American and European corporations. Analysts the world over have long noted both China's ideological nimbleness and the naked greed of many Latin-American and African leaders.

Last September, China became the destination of Bolivia's very first lithium export delivery, comprised of fifteen tons of lithium carbonate. True, the shipment was more or less symbolic. According to our sources at Comibol, Bolivia had set the price at 9,200 dollars per ton.

According to Miguel Parra, the head of production at the Llipi plant, approximately ninety percent of the plant's lithium output is sold to China. A small amount is shipped off to Sweden, and the rest is allocated to the Chinese-built lithium battery factory in Potosi. Parra is quick to add that this basic distribution ratio is not very likely to change.

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The middle part of East Germany used to be the mining heartland of the former German Democratic Republic. Along with the impact of the chemical industry, centuries of mining have devastated the environment and degraded hundreds and hundreds of square kilometres of soil, which could otherwise be utilised for food production.

A good quarter of a century after Germany's reunification, the area around Sondershausen, where the world's greatest salt mine used to operate, is very sparsely populated. The semi-deserted towns and villages are mostly occupied by the elderly, many of them retired miners. The younger generations have set out for the major cities or further on to West Germany. Small wonder, then, that the villages here, with their organised tours of closed-down mines, emanate a distinct whiff of communist nostalgia.

The place and the atmosphere couldn't be more different from the Bolivian Andes. Nonetheless, the two places have one thing in common. As the people left, the renewable energy industry reached these parts in a big way.

Endless square kilometres of meadows and deserted factory lots are now strewn with solar panels. Wind turbines have become an onmipresent part of the landscape. It feels like all of Germany is catapulting itself into a much cleaner future. In 2021 the country's last remaining nuclear plant is set to shut down. At that juncture, clean energy is planned to account for two-thirds of the country's entire energy production and consumption.

"We're in the middle of a technological revolution, although this may not be obvious to the naked eye," Dr. Heiner Marx explains at the seat of the K-UTEC company in Sondershausen. Dr. Marx is the managing director and majority owner of the company that counts itself as the heir to what, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, was one of East Germany's largest mining and chemical companies.

This mining conglomerate used to employ 24,000 people. Today—following its privatisation in 1992 and its 2008 transformation into a public corporation—the company employs only one hundred workers, mostly engineers and top scientists. The only two things it still shares with the former mining behemoth are its location and the task of closing down what used to be the world's largest potassium mine. (The process involves filling up gigantic mining chambers that stretch along endless kilometres of a thoroughly degraded underworld.)

These days, K-UTEC is a hi-tech company that operates on the global markets. It has heavily invested in engineering and the development of mining and chemical technology, while continuously consolidating its presence in the global lithium carbonate trade.

K-UTEC is also the only European company so far to have taken an active part in researching the potential for excavating and extracting lithium carbonate from the Bolivian Andes. "In 2012 the Bolivian authorities initiated a public bid for an engineering partner in lithium research and production. We decided to apply and eventually won," Dr. Marx informs me.

Five years later, with the global lithium trade still getting warmed up, the Bolivian projects are already running late. Despite all the optimistic projections and the global market surge, the projects in Bolivia are hardly progressing at all.

"The Bolivians asked for our help. So we gave them some advice. In November 2015 we presented president Evo Morales with the plan for educating the key engineering personnel. Bolivia is plagued by a chronic

shortage of such cadre. According to our proposal, the German state would pick up the tab for the education campaign. Yet so far we haven't received an answer from La Paz. I find this very hard to explain. While we keep waiting for any word from Bolivia, we're trying to optimise the process of evaporation utilised at Salar de Uyuni," the German entrepreneur and scientist explains during a tour of his shiny futuristic facilities.

While touring Bolivia, I got the distinct impression that the managers of the state-owned lithium company were aware of the urgency. But after several visits to the Bolivian Andes, Dr. Heiner Marx believes the lithium carbonate production at the Salar de Uyuni salt flats can start in earnest no sooner than two years from now. He also feels Bolivia needs at least five years before it is able to transform itself into a major player in the global lithium markets.

"It seems like the Bolivians are headed to the moon before even building themselves a rocket," Dr. Marx shakes his head. "To get anything done, they will need at least 700 to 1000 highly skilled people at Salar de Uyuni. I agree this is a wonderful opportunity for them, so they really shouldn't squander it! In any case, the production will be limited to the smaller, southern part of the saltlake and will not require vast quantities of water from other industries, so the environmental concerns are unfounded. At least for now. The Salar de Uyuni area is not only rich in lithium—you also shouldn't forget magnesium and potassium! The potential is truly amazing."

The K-UTEC company intends to keep developing the technology for lithium carbonate production no matter how things turn out in Bolivia. The firm has already established a presence in sixty different countries, taking part in virtually all of the major lithium projects around the globe: Including in Australia, currently the planet's biggest lithium producer, the United States, China and also in Argentina and Chile—both of which are Bolivia's direct rivals.

"The world is progressing in the direction of electric mobility. And as things stand, there can be no such thing without lithium. Of course new solutions are also being developed. But it will take years before lithium is forced to give up its mantle," Dr. Marx is convinced. According to him, the planet has plenty of lithium to meet the demand—especially when the possibilities provided by recycling are taken into account.

"The greatest problem is to get the projects off the ground. After that, it gets much easier. The process of lithium carbonate extraction needs optimisation, and the cost needs to be brought down. There is a direct correlation with electric car prices, which are still prohibitively steep. The required infrastructure is also a problem—above all with regard to the charging of batteries, which remain relatively heavy and not that efficient.

There are many reserves still to be tapped. And then we also have the question of the lack of political will. The war for the survival of the still lucrative fossil-fuel projects is always raging in the background. But renewable sources of energy will ultimately prevail: in Germany, in Europe, in China, in the United States. All of us will be forced to embrace them," the German entrepreneur predicts.

Dr. Marx is quick to agree that the green economy shall soon become the domain of the global energy giants that achieved dominance through fossil-fuel production. "New players are already emerging, but the majority of the energy business will be controlled by the old set. Just like in the automobile industry, which is still dominated by the richest countries. Along with some Chinese and Korean manufacturers, the largest automobile companies are sure to rule the future electric-car market—a market which will inevitably see a fast and unstoppable rise," Dr. Marx enthuses while showing off the latest technology for lithium carbonate extraction. Even in its present state, the technology enables his company to produce limited amounts of "the oil of the twenty-first century".

Dr. Marx also firmly believes that, despite its current lethargic image, the European Union of the future shall prove an important player both in the renewable energy resources market and in the global electric car trade.

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Most residents of the pueblos near Salar de Uyuni seem completely clueless about the ongoing flagship national project. Cut off from the rest of the world, they live in a near-perfect informational vacuum. As best they can, they tend to their humble, unassuming lives. They grow quinoa and herd llamas off to graze, the inhumanity of their living conditions alleviated only by their extreme hardiness and positive outlook.

"We live a few hundred meters from the lake. We are located only a few kilometres from where the lithium is produced," said Luisa Flores de Laso, a traditionally garbed local woman, as I talked with her in her small cluttered kitchen. "But no one ever came here to tell us what was going on. And what lithium production could mean for us. No, we're definitely not looking forward to the production spike. We are pretty certain that, as always, the local population will not really benefit."

This cheery and robust fifty-year-old woman used to run a hotel in the impoverished village of Villa Candelaria. Now, along with her husband Eustacio, she is making ends meet by doing odd jobs in construction. Both of them are fearful of the new plant's impact on the local population, whose survival is dependent almost entirely on agriculture.

"We saw no rain for two years!" the pair of them told me. "It has cost us this year's quinoa crop, whose price has already plummeted from what it was four years ago. The llamas have also suffered greatly. Our farming is all we have. The young people have long moved out. What will become of us if the lithium production pollutes our farmland?"

Both of Luisa and Eustacio's sons have spent some time working for Comibol on the lithium project. To be precise, they were employed by one of the state-owned company's numerous private sub-contractors. The older of the two boys is still earning his living by preparing meals for the pilot plant employees. The younger one, a welder at the drilling rigs, threw in the towel two years ago, chased off by the combination of a twelve-hour workday and a monthly wage amounting to less than 400 euros.

"The Chinese pay much more—1,200 euros per month," Luisa Flores de Laso explained. "But they have no use for me and my husband. They're only interested in 'specialists'."

Eustacio, 51, informed me he was not opposed to the lithium production in principle. However, he felt it vital that the locals should be the ones to man the plants.

"I realise very well the need for experts!" he nodded vehemently. "And few of those can be found in this sad, God-forsaken place. But there is plenty of manual labour to be done, and I think the locals should be the ones to get it. Yes, without a doubt! I also feel the company representatives should visit us and explain the environmental risks of lithium production."

After a few moments' pause, Eustacio Laso related that the company representatives had indeed already visited the small village of Villa Candelaria—but their only aim had been to commandeer some water.

"They came here six months ago, and told us they needed water for the plant. They ran a few tests and let us know they were ready to start pumping it out of the ground. We told them we hardly have enough for ourselves. But they wouldn't listen. They said the water was not ours to give, since it belongs to the state."

At this, Eustacio Laso clenched his fists in outrage. "But if we lose our water, we lose everything! We may be forced to leave our homes. We can't allow that to happen!"

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The charming village of Colcha-K is the capital of the Nor Lipez province in the south of Salar de Uyuni. It is also the local lithium carbonate production headquarters.

If all goes as planned, in a few years' time the sleepy pueblo of today stands to be transformed into a smaller, less ostentatious version of Dubai or Doha. With each stroll along its stone-paved streets, populated mainly by schoolchildren and serene-looking old men, this becomes increasingly hard to imagine. Yet lithium, "the fuel of the future", is sure to leave indelible marks on the development of the entire region.

Three places currently stand out in the picturesque village, located near a major military base: the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the football field with artificial grass and the regional government headquarters.

The last is by far the youngest addition to the trio, and is also housed in the biggest and shiniest edifice within a hundred-kilometre radius. The gargantuan government building is presided over by a flamingo statue, celebrating the mystical, long-necked bird which traditionally spends several months of every year here in Salar de Uyuni. But ever since the major works began on the lake, the emblematic pink birds' presence in the region has seen an alarming drop.

"The birds have lost their sense of peace!" one of the locals got fed up. This, as well, is the inevitable shape of things to come.

"We keep glancing at the lake," said Grover Baptista Ali, the secretary general of the Nor Lipez province. "We're scared. We see all that digging and drilling, we see countless trucks, we see Salar's eternal beauty changed beyond recognition."

As a member of the opposition party, Baptista Ali's office—unlike almost every other I visited during our stay—is completely denuded of Evo Morales *paraphernalia*. It has to be said: through all varieties of photos, busts, portraits, graffiti and other sub-genres of street art, the fiery socialist president seems onmipresent in Bolivia. After all, he is the man who declared a new dawn for the entire continent. Yet twelve years on, the first rays of sunlight have yet to warm all but a lucky few.

Baptista Ali's opposition party currently holds power in the Nor Lipez region. "I wouldn't dream of disputing that the lake's lithium means a huge opportunity for the entire Bolivian economy. It is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. But we can't let the government in La Paz skim off all the profits. The lithium revenues should be equally distributed, like the revenues created by the lead and zinc production in nearby San Cristobal. According to law, the local community is entitled to a fifteen percent cut. The rest goes to the regional government in Potosi and of course to the central authorities. Ten percent should be allocated for environmental clean-up. In 2016, Bolivia made about 1.2 million euros from lithium sales. To be honest, we here haven't got a single cent! Not a single cent!"

Baptista Ali felt no qualms in expressing his opinion that, all in all, the lithium production project has, thus far, only been a drain on the region.

It was hard to shake the feeling the outspoken young politician was far less passionate when talking about the environmental fallout, than about all the yet unreaped lithium revenues for the Colcha-K area. This was not entirely unforgivable, seeing how the shockingly under-developed region could certainly use the money to build schools, hospitals, roads and other basic infrastructure.

"As it is, we're not that enthusiastic about the lithium project. We have no reason to be. All the new companies handling lithium have little need for our people. They're interested almost exclusively in specialists. Why not invest in, say, a special institute, where the local population could be trained to work in the lithium carbonate factories? Why not open a special 'industrial zone'? We need to make a step forward! We're wholly dependent on farming and tourism. Our agriculture needs water, and there's less of it with each passing year. The area is quickly drying up because of climate change. We produce less and less quinoa, while other factors have also caused its price to drop. Much the same goes for the llamas," the secretary general explained.

Like virtually everyone I spoke to here, Baptista Ali was adamant in his conviction that water was absolutely key to everything.

"Some sort of alarm should already have been sounded," he warned. "The Llipi plant is tapping into the Rio Grande River, which has practically dried up. The remaining water is thoroughly polluted. I hardly dare imagine what can happen when the project is expanded."

Every three months the local authorities receive a report from the state-owned lithium production company. "They inform us of what they are doing and they pass on their report on how it's impacting the environment. But this is more or less a bureaucratic formality, bereft of any real significance. I really hope that, at the end of the day, the entire Bolivia can profit from all this—but I'm very much afraid history is about to repeat itself again. We shall do everything in our power to prevent that from happening. Soon, all forty-five of greater Salar de Uyuni region local-government representatives are set to gather here. After we get organised, we're heading straight for La Paz!"

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Not everyone here feels left behind by the central government. A little less than ten kilometres from the Llipi plant lies the small town of Rio

Grande, which has undergone a veritable blossoming—if such a term can be applied to what is basically a cold, cement-clad outpost for truck drivers.

Rio Grande boasts approximately 65● residents and 5●● trucks. Many of the local families own two trucks, which is the legal limit. Virtually all of the grown men in the village drive the vehicles. United under the banner of the local DELTA Rio Grande cooperative, they are cooperating with the state-owned Comibol mining company.

Everything in this eerily dull and barren townlet—really little more than a huge parking lot for trucks—is tailored to the needs of lithium production. Appropriately enough, the only establishment offering to put up visitors for the night is proudly called *The Lithium Hostel*.

Juan Carlos Ali, 44, is one of the 25● truck drivers who have spent the last five years transporting white gold for the government. Up until 2●15, most of his assignments involved transporting construction material and dirt. Then Comibol began digging up evaporation pools, and the future started looking even brighter for the drivers.

"I'm doing well. Really well," the sturdy, thick-set Juan Carlos nodded as he stood next to his beat-up bluish truck. "I'm making more money than I would make anywhere else. There's actually too much work for truckers here. And the shifts are fairly distributed among us. The cooperative is taking good care of our needs. If it was a private-owned company, things would be different."

I asked the good-natured and talkative man if he realised how important lithium could become for his homeland. But Juan Carlos just shook his head. "I don't know about that. All I know is that the Rio Grande plant is a real blessing. As long as the jobs keep going to the locals, everything is fine with me. I can only hope things remain the same in other towns and villages all over Salar. After all, it is the home region for all of us."

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The flaming sun set slowly over the world's largest salt flats. Vast and ominous-looking shadows descended over a vista of blazing white. From a distance, the lone islets looked like Egyptian pyramids, while the expansive horizon seemed to bypass the mind and directly address the soul. An icy evening wind started to pick up, swiftly cutting to the bone.

> ●ur defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others the empires and their native overseers. In the colonial and neocolonial alchemy, gold changes into scrap metal and food into poison.

These are the words used by the great Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, to describe his continent's situation a few decades ago in *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent.*[5]

What will Salar de Uyuni look like in five years' time? What can 'white gold' ultimately bring Bolivia?

Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia, April 2017.
Photo: Matjaž Krivic

[5] https://www.amazon.com/Open-Veins-Latin-America-Centuries/dp/0853459916

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE FUTURE IS NOW

CHINA, DECEMBER 2017

A mass of low wispy clouds had gathered above the frozen Amur River, the natural border between China and Russia. It felt like snowflakes might start drifting down at any minute. It was, however, far too cold for snow: the extremely remote region that borders Inner Mongolia is one of the coldest in the world. For this reason, a number of Chinese electric-car manufacturers have chosen it for their testing grounds.

The immense grey-white landscape was perfectly quiet. Yet the private testing ranges were alive with activity. The electric vehicles, many of them still prototypes, made no sound as they slid past the flag posts, skidding on ice. Their electric drives were so quiet that one could hope the unbearable racket of the great Chinese cities might be replaced by blissful silence.

Swiftly and efficiently, the Chinese engineers shuffled across the ice and the artificial snow dutifully belted out by the locals. Here in the middle of nowhere, they were taking the future for a test spin. The very future that most of my fellow Europeans still only dare to mention in hushed tones has in fact already arrived in China.

In China, the future is now.

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As little as thirty years ago the primary transportation device in this stupendously vast land was the bicycle.

The so-called "flying pigeon" held sway over the countryside and the great urban hubs as well, seeing how very, very few Chinese could afford an automobile. Once the country was opened to the world and a sharp rise in local purchasing power came with it, the car market exploded and kept expanding. Having enthroned itself as one of the chief Chinese status symbols, the automobile soon became both the ultimate personal fetish and a part of the collective identity.

At the moment some 120 million cars are jostling on the Chinese roads. By 2020, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology predicts an additional eighty million will have entered the fray.

As things stand, China makes and sells about half of the world's electric cars. Over the next two years the number is sure to experience a mighty surge. In 2017, more than 300,000 electric vehicles were sold in China—three times as many as in the United States, and more than the rest of the world's total.

Last year, the government issued a decree stating that, by 2025, every fifth vehicle on the Chinese market has to be either an electric model or a hybrid. The companies who refuse to meet this standard will be removed from the market.

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The relentless flow of traffic has long placed the great Chinese metropolises in a choke hold. This latter-day pestilence has also spread over much of the countryside.

As a result, the authorities have decided to make a heavy reduction in the issuance of licence plates, as a reasonable deterrent. But the reduction only applies to the gas and diesel vehicles, which have fallen into such disfavour that, in certain cities, you can only get them registered after winning a special-purpose lottery. On the other hand, electric cars can be registered anywhere and anytime.

A few months ago, Prime Minister Li Keqiang laid out his plan for turning the electric car into a means of fighting pollution. According to the Fitch credit rating agency, only Norway currently boasts higher subsidies for the purchase of an electric vehicle. Granted, as many as thirty-eight percent of all cars sold in Oslo this year were of the electric or hybrid variety, while in China electric cars only added up to a three-percent share. Still, three percent of such a behemoth market is nothing to scoff at. The number is certain to see a sharp rise.

From the current amount of one million, the authorities' plan is to boost the number of electric cars on Chinese roads to five million. This, according to the official projections, is to be accomplished by 2020. Yet the heavy increase in electric-vehicle production is merely one of the bullet points of the ambitious state programme entitled *China 2025*.[1] The plan does a creditable job of detailing China's ambition to become the dominant world player in a number of hi-tech industrial branches, including the production

[1] https://supchina.com/2018/06/28/made-in-china-2025/

of solar panels, wind turbine and robotics. The aim is nothing less than to complete the country's transformation from the world's sweatshop into a sort of Asian Germany.

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"Both the Chinese market and its infrastructure are ready to embrace the electric mobility explosion," claims Shan Hong Yan, the vice-president of the new-technology research institute at Geely, China's second largest car manufacturer. "We have the state's backing, and subsidies are now widely available. Our industry is finally in a position to not merely respond to the global trends but to start shaping them as well. We alone are currently prepared for the historical switch."

I spoke with Shan Hong Yan at the company's hi-tech R & D facility in the city of Cixi. This year, Geely sold just over a million vehicles on the Chinese market alone. The company, which has already taken over the Volvo, Lotus and Proton brands, also controls the majority share of the Danish Saxo bank and manufactures the latest model of the London taxi. Its current goal is nothing less than world dominance.

Fortunately for the Chinese, knowledge too is now up for grabs in the global arena. Whoever can provide the funds—and the Chinese automobile manufacturers can provide a lot—is now in a position to snap up centuries of European expertise. Geely has already brought in a number of top international experts—a third of the current workforce in its R & D department hails from abroad.

"Our company's mission used to be making cars that were available to all. Now our aim is to mass-produce the best possible vehicles suitable even for the most demanding European customers," Shan Hong Yan informed me. "But first we must build up our brand. At the moment we've got presence in South America, Asia and Russia."

Shan Hong Yan made no bones about her certainty that the gas-powered era is drawing to a swift and unpreventable end. Geely claims that by 2020, ninety percent of all cars it will produce shall be electric or hybrids. By 2030, they plan that number to rise to one hundred percent.

"We are not only developing electric cars," Geely's vice-president went on. "That wouldn't make much sense. We are also developing vehicles powered by methanol and liquid natural gas. The goal we have set ourselves is zero emissions."

Mrs. Hong Yan also explained how the company is making huge strides in the development of flying cars and automatically guided vehicles. The first serial models are supposed to hit the market as soon as 2019. As Hong

Yan puts it: "Autonomous cars are one of our top priorities. The automation of driving is currently in the third of its five developmental stages. The rules of the entire game are about to change. A market revolution is inevitable. At least a few of the traditional great players are going to be wiped out. A number of new ones seem certain to arise."

Here in the urbane sterility of its enormous R & D department, it was easy to imagine Geely as one of the mega-corporations portrayed in the famous science-fiction thrillers of yore. Its lady vice president certainly seemed well aware that the future of both her company and electric mobility in general is bound to the rise of lithium carbonate, the main ingredient in the lithium-ion batteries.

These batteries are not only primed to propel future fleets of cars, buses, trucks, bicycles and motorcycles. They are also currently powering our mobile phones, solar panels, gaming consoles, robotics and the ESS energy storage systems. Since the great manufacturers of electric vehicles can't afford to grow dependent on outside contractors, they have started to devise their own battery technology.

"The lithium-based battery is key to everything," Shan Hong Yan nodded. "Now it is only a matter of the buyers discovering how strong the infrastructure has grown. Right now a single charging session can power our electric vehicles for nearly 400 kilometres. Next year our new charging system will enable the user to power up in twenty minutes. 400 kilometres and twenty minutes are going to be the new benchmark. Along with the lower price, of course!"

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The lithium battery is by far the most expensive component in the current generation of electric vehicles. It naturally follows that the battery is also at the core of the still rather hefty price tag. Yet according to McKinsey agency data, the average price of the batteries that power electric vehicles has fallen by eighty percent from 2010.[2] It has currently settled at approximately 200 Euros per kilowatt hour. Analysts have calculated that the great increase in Chinese supply has been the main factor in this remarkable reduction. By 2020, the global supply of electric vehicle batteries is projected to add up to 260 gigawatt hours, almost doubling the 2017 tally. The official Ministry of Industry data states that, over the first eight months of the recently expired year, China built 6.7 billion lithium batteries—a fifty-seven percent increase over the same period last year.

[2] https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/metals-and-mining/our-insights/lithium-and-cobalt-a-tale-of-two-commodities

China is not only the world's biggest producer of electric vehicles and lithium batteries. It is also the leading supplier of all the main components needed to make an electric vehicle. Its bid for global dominance has come at such lightning speed that previous eras might find it incomprehensible. Lest we forget, China is also the planet's biggest producer of solar panels, wind turbines, ESS systems and drones. There can be little doubt that the Chinese state, in conjunction with its major corporations, is trying to grab the reins of the entire global supply chain.

For the past few months the world prices of lithium carbonate have been rising steadily. According to the research company Benchmark Mineral Intelligence's data for November, one ton could be obtained at a cost of around 13,500 euros from Chile and Argentina, the two countries forming the so-called lithium triangle (along with Bolivia).[3]

The Benchmark Mineral Intelligence analysts are convinced the market is primed only for sustained and possibly explosive growth. If the supply is to meet the demand, one or two new mines or evaporation projects will be required to open each year. For at least the next six months the prevailing scarcity should persist—until the second half of 2018 sees the opening of two new mines in Australia, the world's biggest manufacturer of lithium carbonate.

Roskill estimated that, by 2025, the world market will require some 785,000 tons of this strategically valuable compound per year.[4] According to the same source, 227,000 tons were available in 2017. Currently, China uses around forty percent of the global supply. It is worth mentioning that, during our visit, Chinese prospectors discovered vast new reserves of lithium in the Szechuan province, where tourists from all over the country have long soaked their limbs in thermal lithium pools.

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Meanwhile, Chinese state-backed companies are intensively and aggressively seeking out fresh deposits of lithium carbonate all over the globe. Some Chinese corporations have been known to purchase mines all by themselves. Lithium reserves are limited; the recycling process has proven slow and thus far unreliable. Therefore the "occupation" of resources provides a key strategic advantage in the global energy grab.

"Lithium is coming of age, and in a big way. It is the core ingredient for ninety-nine percent of electric vehicles, and as a result, the demand is going

[3] http://www.benchmarkminerals.com/category/lithium/

[4] https://roskill.com/market-report/lithium/

through the roof," claims Simon Moores, the managing director of Benchmark Mineral Intelligence.

The research and intelligence company has followed the developments in the world's mineral and metal markets with military precision. According to Moores, the lithium demand reached a major turning point approximately a year and a half ago, when it became clear that an electric vehicle market explosion was a certainty. Once savvier investors grasped this simple fact, a global lithium fever started spreading—and so far it hasn't let up.

"China is not content to focus on the manufacturing of electric vehicles. It is also buying up lithium-based projects all over the world and supporting the growth of battery production—all with the aim of controlling the entire supply chain," Moores is convinced. "Whoever controls the development and production of lithium batteries is set to control the entire automobile market."

All things considered, some form of lithium war is almost certainly in the cards. China may be one of the world's biggest lithium carbonate producers, but its supplies are limited. For this reason the Chinese companies have been buying shares in mining companies all over the planet---or even taking over the mines themselves. Even the automobile manufacturers have been known to do so. As examples, take the Great Wall Motor company, which acquired a share in the Australian mining colossus Pilbara Minerals, or the biggest Chinese electric-vehicle manufacturer BYD, which is currently in intense negotiations with major Chilean mining firms.

By 2025, China plans to recycle an impressive two thirds of its lithium-ion batteries, or approximately 191,000 tons of them. The recycling rate for the alternative cobalt-based electric batteries is projected to be even more efficient at seventy-six percent. This is not without good reason. For the most part, cobalt can still only be obtained in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the very frontline of the permanent world war for metals and minerals.

Even now, both major and minor producers of electric vehicles in China are doing their best to reuse the spent batteries from previous production cycles. Incidentally, the logistics of cobalt production and transport are a far more delicate matter than is the case with lithium. This is why last year, China forked out 2.5 billion dollars to secure a majority share in Congo's largest cobalt mine. Over the past eighteen months, the price of cobalt has doubled on the global markets.

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While the world media remain bizarrely fixated on the "miraculous" tale of the Tesla Gigafactory in Nevada, China is currently constructing at least twenty similarly-sized plants. The country's—and the world's—biggest producer of lithium batteries, Contemporary Amperex Technology Ltd (CATL), is building the greatest one of all. By 2020, CATL intends to increase its battery production sixfold, the goal being to reach fifty gigawatt hours.

"We may be purchasing our own lithium mine soon. Either in Canada or Australia," confided SophiaPeng, head of marketing at the Soundon New Energy company, one of China's biggest producers of lithium batteries. "We are certainly big enough to be able to afford it."

The huge corporation, seated in Mao Zedong's birthplace, obtains its lithium from China and Chile. The Chinese electric-car and lithium-battery markets are closed to the point of being openly protectionist, which causes the foreign battery manufacturers no end of trouble. Many of them have simply been side-lined in one of our era's greatest technological races, because Beijing has long embarked on a conquering rampage to secure the required resources from South America to Africa, and from Australia to Papua New Guinea.

It is this context that provides the best insight into the Chinese military build-up of recent years. Energy sources have become a key geostrategic priority, and they need to be secured and protected at all costs.

I met with Soundon New Energy's Peng at the company's futuristic premises on the outskirts of the horrendously polluted city of Xiangtan, an urban eco-dystopia in the south of China.

"At the moment the lithium market is booming," she informed me during a guided tour of the thoroughly automated facility. "There is never enough lithium to go around. That is why all the battery factories are happy to pay cash. Since Soundon is a large company, we hardly run into any trouble. But the smaller firms can find themselves quite overwhelmed. In any case the prices are only going up, and the real boom is still ahead. Our goal is to be prepared. The lithium battery and lithium carbonate markets are very unstable. We need to proceed as prudently as possible."

A substantial number of fresh players have entered the battery market over the past few years. In Peng's view, China has had little choice but to hock itself to the electric future. If it failed to do so, the country would simply have suffocated.

To be sure, one needs to be very careful when analysing the many black and aggressively grey hues of the Chinese green explosion. Currently, a staggering seventy percent of the country's energy consumption is still fuelled by coal. For the next few years at least, this is not about to change.

To travel this incomprehensibly vast land on one of its futuristic high-velocity trains is to swoop past an endless procession of chinmeys with an occasional wind turbine or solar panel thrown into the mix. A little more than a month ago, the port of Guangzhou saw the launch of China's first cargo ship entirely powered by lithium batteries. Yet ironically, this zero-emission marvel's main mission is to transport coal down the Pearl River.

So *how* green can green really be when it is powered by black or grey? "Listen …," Peng tried to explain. "For us, this is a matter of survival. We have no other choice. So far, we've only scratched the surface, but when it comes to the development of green energy we are still in the lead by a substantial margin."

Peng feels that the next industrial revolution is taking shape before our eyes. To most of Europe, it may all still seem rather exotic, but the old-continent players would do well to snap to. The lithium battery itself is of course merely a waypoint to something still quite unimaginable. But Sophia Peng is rather certain that it will dominate the market for at least the next five years.

Given the steep rise in city population and pollution all over the world, many Chinese electric-car manufacturers have decided to focus entirely on urban traffic. At the moment more than two hundred electric-vehicle manufacturers are operating in China. Most of them are producing small low-voltage vehicles whose top speed doesn't exceed forty kilometres per hour. But we can also mark a swift ascendancy of the firms focusing on futuristic urban vehicles designed to bring about an appreciable reduction of the number of cars on the urban streets, along with a reduction in car ownership rates.

The future belongs to the concept of sharing. A number of China's companies have already set up a network of car-sharing nodes across the great urban mega-cities: a bar-code scan and a negligible fee, and one is already on the road.

The scheme is simple, efficient and cheap. The next logical step is the introduction of automated vehicles that pick the customer up themselves—anyplace and anytime. This is no longer a thing of the distant future. At least not in China.

"Here and all over the planet, a new generation is slowly coming of age—a generation no longer obsessed with big cars and ownership. While, at the same time, a growing number of people simply cannot afford the larger types of vehicles, let alone an electric vehicle. This, along with two-car families, is our core demographic, "says Sam Lee, head of international marketing and sales at ZD, one of China's greatest producers of small urban electric cars.

ZD is the first Chinese manufacturer to penetrate the demanding and—at least by Chinese standards—heavily regulated European market. Working with their Italian business partners, who designed the vehicles, ZD gained a beach-head in Italy as early as four years ago.

Two years back, Milan saw the launch of its first electric-vehicle sharing hub, operating in China under the brand of Share&Go. The proud Italian city seems to have already gotten used to the 2,500 ZD vehicles reminiscent of angry fat beetles now roaming its streets. Over the next few months the chaotic traffic of several other Italian cities is primed for a similar invasion, Florence being but one notable example.

This could be described as a sort of reverse globalisation—with a Chinese company muscling in on the Italian cities that are traditionally dominated by small Italian vehicles.

Right now the small electric-vehicle market in Europe is not a very competitive one. What can be bought is shockingly expensive. The price of the ZD two-seater models brought to the town of Livomo is around just over 15,000 euros. In China, the same vehicles come at almost half-price, and the prospective buyers can also count on a hefty subsidy package.

"These days people want to travel the cities swiftly and in comfort. Plus, of course, as cheaply as possible. Share&go offers all of the above. I believe we're about to get a lot of competition all over the world," Sam Lee smiled in his ascetic, almost entirely empty office on the outskirts of the provincial town of Yinan.

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"Our aim is to spread out all over the old continent. Europe is the world's most demanding market. If we pulled it off in Italy, we can pull it off anywhere else. We are currently also present in Slovakia," Sam Lee informed me with the utmost confidence that is synonymous with China's up-and-coming young businessmen.

The ZD company assembles its own lithium batteries. Its lithium carbonate is wholly "home-grown", and its battery cells are purchased on the open market. "There is never enough of them!" Lee exclaimed several times during our conversation. "Never enough! There's a huge battle for resources."

Lee was recruited through LinkedIn and now routinely spends up to sixteen hours a day at the company. Many similar jobs in China are brokered online—often no actual interview is necessary. The demand for high-quality employees is exploding all over the country. Much like the elusively scarce

battery cells, there are never enough competent and highly-educated employees to go around.

Lee noted that the universities cannot begin to keep up with the demand. This is why the companies are also engaged in a perpetual struggle for top personnel. "The workers themselves usually give us no trouble," Lee smiled contentedly. The ones his company employs are recruited from the local environment and are usually offered three-year contracts.

"When we were getting off the ground, no one took us very seriously. Electric cars were still a rarity in those days. Many felt the future didn't hold much promise for them. During the first few years we had quite a lot of trouble with the demand. It was a good thing we were able to enter the Italian market. Then in 2016, the state here in China closed down several hundred companies on account of the pollution and embarked on its current green course. This was an enormous boost for us!"

In Lee's view, the European market is decidedly failing to keep up with global trends. With every missed opportunity it is becoming a prisoner of the past—a very dangerous position to be in, given what is taking shape in the Far East.

Right now, some 100,000 small, ZD-made electric vehicles can be found on the roads in China, South Korea, Italy and Slovakia. 40,000 of them have been produced in 2017. Business is booming. "By say 2030, the global automobile market will be unrecognisable. Battery prices are sure to fall, which means the electric car will be increasingly available to almost everyone. The process is unstoppable. Oil is a thing of the past, the present belongs to lithium, and no one can even begin to envision the future. My best guess? Solar energy!"

Peter Schwabenland of BMW is another voice who believes the future holds exceptional things for China's electric mobility. Schwabenland has been living in China for a number of years, and is currently employed by the German colossus as a sort of middle man between the German and the Chinese markets. He has also helped set up a perfect replica of one of BMW's hi-tech factories in the sprawling industrial zone of Shenyang, which has been dubbed "Chinese Detroit".

BMW was smart enough to have realized early on that China was the world's greatest electric-car market by at least an order of magnitude. The German company produces and sells 400,000 vehicles per year in China; an additional 100,000 are imported from Germany.

China, Schwabenland feels, is a very special market with a very special set of political circumstances. I sat down with him to discuss such matters at a Chinese hotel where a small German brewery (!) has also set up operation.

Schwabenland was quick to air his doubts about the ability of the Chinese companies to flood Europe with cheap electric vehicles. In his view, the old continent's market will continue to be dominated by quality, at least for a while yet. The European buyer is likely to keep on favouring the traditional brands, of which China has precisely none.

"Should Europe focus on its advantages—meaning experience, innovation and cultural background—then its manufacturers need not fear the Eastern rivals," Schwabenland is convinced. "It is also far from inevitable for whoever controls the battery market to control the entire show. The world's 'smartest' industry is far too clever for that."

For Schwabenland the electric car is hardly a revolution in the making. Instead, he believes it to be merely the missing link between the traditional gas-guzzlers and the autonomous vehicles of the future. According to him, only these will be able to truly reshuffle the deck. And here, China's totalitarian frame should provide a huge competitive advantage over the Western competition.

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From the balcony of the skyscraper high above downtown Shanghai, one can take in a view in tune with classic sci-fi lore. The digitalization, the neon, the silence of the increasingly electrified dense night traffic—and the very little space left for the supposed basic unit of society, the human being.

Shanghai may be the world's most modern city. But there is also less and less actual oxygen in this man-modified climate, which seems like a stage in a process of irreversible pollution. From what I could see down below and all around me—on the roads, in the workers' residential areas, on the outskirts of the turbocities that have made bold inroads into the countryside—it was clear that man can no longer begin to keep up with his own technology.

The Future is Now.

Shanghai, China, December 2017.
Photo: Matjaž Krivic

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MARCHING ON: IN THE SPIRIT OF ONLY SLIGHTLY-DATED SCIENCE-FICTION EPICS

NORTH KOREA, AUGUST 2018

A week ago, some thirty kilometres from the demilitarised zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas, a number of floods and landslides thoroughly rearranged the shape of the land by obliterating a number of villages. The catastrophe did not spare even the strategically vital highway that connects Pyongyang and the 38th parallel.

All the way through the military checkpoints, the wide, potholed expressway that occasionally serves double duty as a landing strip, felt quiet and all but deserted. The traffic was very light, the road being populated by many more pedestrians and cyclists than cars. People were sitting by the side of the road, or wandering along it, seemingly lost. Every now and then, one glimpsed a cow, a sheep, or a person sweeping the asphalt. An occasional crane or stork traversed the sky above.

Fields of rice and corn passed behind us, tilled by shabbily dressed men and women, who for the most part had no machinery. Ancient military trucks were parked in unlit tunnels, their lights switched off, and their beds crammed with soldiers. Military personnel accounted for the vast majority of the traffic along the region's main thoroughfares; the soldiers travelled on trucks, bicycles, or by foot. A number of the lowest-ranking ones were hitchhiking.

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At the time of our visit, the traditionally passive and submissive countryside next to the demilitarized zone was in turmoil. Violent downpours, coupled with poor infrastructure and many years of deforestation, had led to a number of landslides.

The most important road in the world's most isolated country was just one of the casualties. As usual, the party mobilised the people. This was collectivism in action, yet again making virtue out of necessity: there wasn't enough machinery to go around. Manpower, however, was a different story.

Crowds of young men, many of them children, cleared the mud and the rocks with picks and shovels, ultimately carting the refuse off in wooden wheelbarrows. The process was slow and inefficient, but pretty thorough. To boost morale, the loudspeakers kept blasting an endless succession of patriotic hymns. The men were commanded by officers of the North Korean army proportionally the largest military force in the world. At any given time, between 11 and 15 percent of the population are relied upon to fill its ranks, which roughly translates into three million people.

The workers, hailing from all over the country, were either topless or in sleeveless white undershirts. Perhaps understandably, they were not exactly bursting with enthusiasm at this latest chance to help rebuild their homeland. If anything, quite the contrary. The profoundly exhausted expressions on the faces of these long-suffering men, coupled with the ox-drawn carts and the hundreds of military uniforms dotting the landscape, were redolent of images from the tragic first half of the twentieth century on the Korean peninsula.

This was collectivism wearing the expression of individual suffering.

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On September 9th, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – the cold war's most brutally tortured and traumatised offspring – is set to celebrate its seventieth birthday

During our visit, the preparations for the momentous event were in full swing. All over the spotlessly clean Pyongyang, thousands upon thousands of citizens were drilling for the upcoming great parade, and various lesser celebrations, commemorating the birth of 'the socialist paradise on Earth:' the sort of paradise one might expect in the wake of a brutal Japanese occupation, the savagery of World War II and its continuation in the form of the global clash between the North and the South. This is the sort of paradise that has already swallowed up millions of lives and set up a sprawling system of gulags and labour camps. And also the sort of paradise that, after the collapse of the old Communist bloc, found itself bereaved of sponsors and was decimated by great famine.

This particular slice of paradise now functions according to a merciless system of caste – its high priests having long transformed their communist ideology into a religion, with themselves as the presiding deities. Lest we

forget, this utopian Eden is now speedily developing nuclear weapons, while large chunks of its population are living much like their counterparts from the seventeenth century.

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On Future Street, which stretches along Pyongyang's newest and most modern district, women in front of futuristic apartment complexes cultivate the lawns and passionately uproot weeds. In the Korean language, *mirae* means 'future', so it was only fitting that Future Street called up fond memories of only slightly dated science-fiction epics.

The long street runs in tandem with the slow-lapping Taedong River and ends at the recently opened seat of the North Korean space agency. It struck me as a terrific – even perfect – example of a modern Potemkin village. Purportedly, Future Street was home to the very finest of the country's scientists, researchers and professors – yet traffic was almost non-existent. The huge, unusually shaped buildings seemed empty – even *lonely*. Rows of Chinese-made solar panels had been set up in front of the apartment blocks, the electricity supply all over the land still not having been fully restored. Appealingly garbed girls and women were strolling down the promenade, all wearing high heels. The men whizzing past them on bicycles and electric scooters bore proud and resolute expressions. Each group was trying to catch each other's eye.

"Life is good around here. The residents receive their apartments as a gift from the state, which also means they will be able to pass them on to their children. Everything is free. Education, health care, food …," our minder explained without being prompted.

It felt like every detail on Future Street had been carefully choreographed. Except, eerily, the sound. The scenery itself may have been perfect, but the almost unbroken urban silence spoke volumes.

The design of this 'set-piece' was perfect indeed: a rare kind of urban silence that sounded noisy.

In the middle of a metropolis housing three million souls, you could easily hear the river and even most of the insects buzzing by.

It was The Truman Show, live.

If I interpreted this correctly, Future Street was supposed to represent the face of a new Korea – one that, of course, does not (yet) exist. But venture a few meters outside the capital, and the cars become bikes. The spring in the residents' step is replaced by an enervated daze. The fashionably dressed people morph into impoverished peasants; the colourful apartment complexes devolve into decrepit collective farms. The concrete

tums into mud, and the high-tech gimmickry is replaced with picks and shovels. The overflowing platters of the elite give way to flashes of epidemic malnourishment. Ideology veers off into sheer survival. Fiction becomes reality.

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Despite all of Future Street's perfectly managed choreography, something was conspicuously absent: no towering monuments to the revolution could be glimpsed around here, and no statues to the eternal presidential comrade Kim Il Sung, who passed away in 1994, and his son Kim Jong Il, who departed in 2012.

Otherwise, shrines to these twin titans adorn not merely the rest of Pyongyang, but the entire country and every North Korean home, past and present. But at least here, on the street touting the very concept of the North Korean future, bicyclists were not required to dismount their bikes and pay their respects should the two onmipotent leaders' gazes fall directly on them.

Was this a political or maybe more of a personal statement by young Kim Jong Un, who has on several occasions already indicated his vision for the future is at least slightly different from those of his two immortal progenitors?

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All of our Korean sources kept repeating that, for the past couple of years, a two-faction power struggle has been taking place here: a conflict between two somewhat different generations.

The younger one, personified by Kim Jong Un, is said to be in favour of the country gradually opening up to the world. The older generation remains eternally faithful to the revolution and wishes to restrict Kim the Third's ambitions while keeping North Korea in total isolation – even though it already appears too late for that. And this is not only on account of the mass purges already conducted by the supreme leader and military commander.

Kim Jong Un can also rely on the support of China, the geostrategic superpower whose strategic influence in the Northern part of the Korean peninsula grows more pronounced each day. Most of the products on the shelves in the Korean stores are Chinese imports.

The same goes for the cars driving down the streets of Pyongyang. The marketplaces – officially run by the state, but really fuelled by private initiative – are flooded with cheap Chinese merchandise. So-called 'free economic zones' are springing up in the country's north, where Chinese

companies have started manufacturing electric vehicles and many other things as well.

North Korean labour remains among the cheapest in the world, whereas the Chinese workers have grown prohibitively expensive over the last decade. The basic capitalist logic is as simple as ever. It has by now managed to penetrate even North Korea, the land of the so-called *juche* ideology, which celebrates self-sufficiency above else – arguably the worst farce in the long history of ideologies.

It is also worth noting that North Korea's first free economic zones were set up by South Korean corporations years ago – Hyundai being one notable example.

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To some, it might seem painfully ironic that capitalism started penetrating North Korea during the great famine of the early nineties. According to various estimates, starvation claimed anywhere between one and three million souls.

It was a time when the North Korean presence along the Chinese border began to soften, because the official border guards were starving as well. Every fistful of rice counted toward everyone's survival; countless desperate citizens set off for China and from there went to South Korea.

The ones who returned brought back food, brand new clothes or cheap technological merchandise. At first, the goods were mostly bought by the locals. The North Korean regime decided to tolerate these types of 'corrections' – thus preventing a number of additional deaths. In the same spirit, the regime at least partly tolerated all the defections across its borders.

This bold solution to the hunger problem was soon turned into big business, and the state was quick to get in on the action. Greased by all-pervasive corruption, chains of sellers and resellers began to form. They spread out all over the land. Many of their champions became the members of the new North Korean elite. Even when the hunger began to let up, the defections went on. The routes had already been set up, so it is hardly baffling that South Korea is now home to some 30,000 refugees from the northern part of the peninsula. In China, the number runs up to several hundred thousand. There is no official estimate. Many of the defectors' family members, who stay behind, are severely punished.

Over this last period, the North Korean *gulag archipelago* may have softened a bit. But it is still firmly in place.

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The Chinese motivation for asserting its political dominion over North Korea is by no means only economic. The market itself here is small and virtually bereft of any purchasing power. But Beijing is happy to use its north-eastern neighbour as a rook in the great geo-strategic chess match of our time.

North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is perceived as one of the key gambits in the game. At the moment, nobody save Japan wishes to see the swift and unchecked demise of the North Korean regime and/or the reunification of the two Koreas. For China, this would entail a savage shake-up of the markets, while it might cost the United States much military presence along the Chinese border. For South Korea, the prospect of reunification would certainly amount to a huge financial burden as well as become a huge security and political risk. It is this context that serves best for evaluating the tone of the recent meeting between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump in Singapore.

It should therefore come as no surprise that all of the relevant security-intelligence reports claim the development of nuclear weapons in North Korea is proceeding pretty much according to plan. Without ballistic missiles, the Pyongyang regime is politically dead in the water and China might become less of a geostrategic power.

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"We have pledged to honour the Singapore agreement. And we do honour it, whereas the others do not," I was told by a major in the North Korean army standing in a memorial room within the demilitarized zone commemorating North Korea's signing of the armistice of 1953.

"One day, the Koreas shall be united once more," the proud young man added. He was quick to profess his belief that his country – which, according to the gospel of Kim Il Sung, stands as the absolute winner in a war that officially never ended – was more than ready for the next round of armed conflict.

"If there is a new war, we will show no mercy," the young major spat. "Not a single American will survive, seeing how America was the one that started it all!"

Yet the sharpness of the young officer's words was out of sync with his relaxed, even pleased facial expression as he mentioned the fact that the atmosphere along the North Korean side of the DMZ was now 'extremely relaxed'. More relaxed than ever, according to one frequent visitor's estimation. The major was even more visibly gladdened by the visitors' gift

of a Cuban cigar. All the ideology, war talk and quotes from the local fantasy-history textbooks were immediately forgotten.

The loudspeakers employed by both the North and the South to trade propaganda bulletins were silent. The Southern side of the border seemed deserted. In these pleasant surroundings, where the greenery has long overgrown the war ruins, cricket song was the loudest sound.

Even on the North Korean side of the border, the DMZ has become a point of more or less symbolic importance, serving as a tourist attraction to boot. A theme park of historical madness.

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"The Western journalists come over here with the story already formed in your head. The story of how everything here in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea is horrible and wrong," I was approached by U., an elegant employee of the cultural department in charge of relations with Europe, during one of my relaxed strolls around Pyongyang.

"Well, then give us full access, open the gates and let us do our job," I proposed.

She replied with an enticing grin.

"A while back, the French came to visit and asked me whether it's true Pyongyang has only got a single subway station. You could see for yourself this is not the case. But what was I to tell them? Did they really believe themselves so important that we would hire all those people to stage a huge production just for them?"

I decided to keep my mouth shut. During my visit to the metro system, the idea of a well-managed theatrical production did in fact cross my mind. More than once during our visit to the world's deepest subway station, the platform decorated with ideological frescoes got invaded by sizable groups of soldiers. As soon as they arrived, they took their places on the train, making no room available for foreign visitors. The swift arrivals and departures of these unlikely commuters seemed to baffle even some of the local passengers.

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All around me and U, middle-aged women swept the already spotless pavement with frightening alacrity. A team of workers washed the facade of a nearby building with a water hose. A number of elderly fishermen kept casting their baits into the wide Taedong River. In front of a shopping centre, a squad of green-clad shop assistants practiced a dance choreography

meant to boost collective morale. It was like a daily ritual, a form of prayer if I ever saw one. Their faces were infused with a grim determination.

Countless groups of boys and girls, dressed in black pants and white shirts, strode across the capital's centre in perfect formations. They chanted revolutionary slogans. A number of vans with loudspeakers cruised next to them, blasting communist hymns. Fresh squads of junior supporters were always entering and departing from the scene. One group, consisting of boys only, was commanded by a girl maybe two years older than them. The seriousness and sternness of her visage was a sight beyond my powers of description.

U gradually let slip that she had studied classic French literature and that she simply adores Victor Hugo. She could discuss Balzac, Flaubert and Alexandre Dumas for hours. Her favourite book? "The Three Musketeers!" She yearned for the opportunity to augment her book shelves with the works of Albert Camus, but access to modern culture remains restricted even for the elites.

It was only over the last few years that things started to change when the rise of the USB stick and other modern storage technologies enabled the influx of foreign movies and e-books. The South Korean radio stations did their part as well. The most important effect was confirmation of the outlandishly fanciful notion that the world outside North Korea indeed existed. The blockade that has remained firmly in place for seven decades keeps crumbling fast. Especially for the elites, who have access to the world wide web, however limited it may be.

All this is taking place right under the stony gazes of the two greatest leaders the world has ever known. For the time being, one is only allowed to take photos of the statues to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in tandem and in their entirety. The omission of the tiniest part of the sacred whole formed by the two of them is sacrilege, not unlike portraying the prophet Mohammed in the Shi'ite branch of Islam.

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U. was fortunate enough to have visited Paris twice, both times, of course, on official assignment. To this day, she remains thoroughly enamoured with the language and the entire French culture. The two visits had left her dazzled, but also rather shocked. "So many beggars... so many people sleeping out in the streets... But what architecture! At any rate, I was able to learn that what you see in person doesn't always rhyme with what you read in books."

So, to try and read between the lines, would she care to move to France? "No!" she gasped sharply, explaining how life in Pyongyang has undergone a notable improvement over the last five or six years.

"The city is now much livelier than it used to be," she added contently. "So many things are happening!"

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Despite the official line on the women forming the very heart of the revolution, North Korea remains a rigidly patriarchal society. U. may have been the type of urban girl who could be transplanted into any of the world's capitals and instantly feel at home. Yet tradition still obliged her to move in with her husband's parents after the wedding. The sons take care of the family, and the daughters are seen as a sort of currency. U. was immediately conscripted to shoulder the vast majority of the household chores.

"Well, I'm rather used to it now," the thirty-year-old laughed in a guarded manner. She told me that the Saturdays are her greatest joy, since that is the day when she and her friends are able to visit one of the restaurants in the elite part of Pyongyang. Ever since end of the Korean war and the ensuing great renewal, when the razed city was rebuilt from scratch, it has served as a refuge for *the chosen ones* – the upper caste in charge of perpetuating the regime.

Without a shadow of doubt, North Korea is undergoing a process of accelerating transformation. Its burglar-proof doors may have been welded shut for decades, but they are starting to give. At the moment, the crack is just wide enough to let in a ray of light or two. Yet for some, even this might have a blinding effect, seeing how living in the dark tends to weaken one's eyes.

One illusion can just as easily be replaced by another. This is why the international community, which has done so much to add to the Korean plight over the years, should approach the problem with utmost caution, if a certain gentle touch is asking too much.

The process of negotiation needs to be a gradual and tranquil one.

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