

# North and South - And a Traveler from In-Between

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**Tutek, Nikola**

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### **Instead of an Introduction (Starting from the Middle)**

The Balkans is an especially unique place on Earth. It is really a difficult task to compare it with any other part of our world, but I would take the risk of comparing it with the Caucasus. The Balkans comprise dozens of linguistically related and non-related nations sprinkled in a seemingly random manner all over the mostly mountainous peninsula. In reality, nothing is random or spontaneous about that. Their placement in space (and not only space) is a result of thousands of years of warfare, power games, ideological and religious indoctrination, violence, and, to a great extent, trade, cooperation and intermarrying. All these nations and their respective languages are crowded between the high mountains, powerful rivers, deep lakes and crushing seas; all of them representing their own *national truth*, all of them carrying their own type of hatred and love. That is the reason why in this land many hilltops are crowned with castles. Each castle has displayed dozens of different flags, depending who the master was at the moment. Each castle wall has seen thousands of deaths by wounds, disease or hunger, and some of the walls contain the bodily remains of the enemy. What for? So that we would have history books filled with *national history*. So that we could rename places and call them differently in our own language. Furthermore, castles are great for tourism - they are money machines, and tourists love them. Romantic selfies taken upon a meter or so of soil which covers tons of bones and still rotting blood.

But the key questions among the nations of the Balkans is surely the following:

'Who was here first?'

Because someone was. Some nations are sure that their forefathers were the aborigines of the peninsula. Some claim that they came later but the land was already empty due to evil Romans. And then some claim that we are all descendants of the aborigines, just to varying degrees. I would not be surprised if all of them were mostly wrong, and all of them just a bit right. One fact is for sure: The Balkans was populated even before humans by Neanderthals. So, arrows have been flying through these woods for a long time. And just like Americans, Spaniards in South America, Canadians, Australians, etc., most of the nations of the Balkans have that complex of getting there too late and seizing other people's land. That complex is manifested in hundreds of different ways, some of them even being incorporated into the notion of *national pride*. In that respect, Rhaeto-Romans (in all variations), Albanians, and Greeks are a bit different because they undoubtedly regard themselves as the original peoples of the Balkans, and they rather take on the role of the historical victim than that of a historical conqueror.

Although modern genetics is telling a different story, the majority of the people of the Balkans remain firmly anchored in their traditional postulates: We are all nationally pure and homogeneous, we all righteous, we are all brave conquerors/tragic victims, we are all better than the others. We will sooner or later receive our justice. In reality, all of the people of the Balkans have spent the vast majority of their history as slaves to other white people. Some nations reached short term independence, mostly when big powers got bored and tired of killing them and investing in high mountain wars. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the nations of the Balkans started on the path of independence, and on a long and successful mission of becoming Europe's poorest and most backward region. The inflamed appendix of Europe. The Balkans, the abused child of Europe enters puberty. People who have experienced suffering in long lasting, devastating slavery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century started practicing their sovereignty in the most unlikely of ways. People so complicated in their profound experience, and so simple in their utter stupidity.

If you are a person from the Balkans and you are visiting Iceland for the first time, absolutely nothing can prepare you for the culture shock. That is only understandable. It was by a great coincidence that just a few months after Iceland I had a chance to visit a culture in the southern extreme of the Mediterranean - Lebanon. Although being strikingly different from the Balkans, Lebanon nevertheless seemed to be culturally and historically closer to me than Iceland. And the distance between Iceland and Lebanon seemed as a never-ending journey. I am extremely grateful for being able to compare the North, the South, and the thing in the middle.

Allow me to share a part of my vastly subjective experience.

### **The Battle of Iceland**

It was plus +45° C on my Mediterranean terrace as I read the email sent by the organizers of a scientific conference (on Canadian culture) in Akureyri, Iceland. In the email they strictly warned the conference participants, including me, to take warm jackets, although it was summer in Akureyri. I read that sentence twenty times while big drops of sweat kept falling down my forehead. It was just one day before departure. In my typically self-confident but, nevertheless, superficial Balkan manner I thought: 'A jacket takes a lot of space in the bag. And summer is summer everywhere. It can't be that cold. I'll take only one warm pullover. I mean, it *is* in Europe.'

A decision I regretted instantly upon arrival.

Cold or not, the scenery was breathtaking. The black colors of lava, and those specifically

Icelandic shades of green and brown, which collided with the blackness above and beneath the waterfalls, kept my face stuck to the bus window. I was sleepy and exhausted but had no intention of missing even a second of the Icelandic landscape. And I watched. No castles. No wide, boasting roads. No dramatic highway bridges built on IMF loans, and so typical of the poorest European countries. No visible attempts to subordinate nature with large chunks of reinforced concrete. Just timid, mostly wooden, beautifully painted houses (with large SUVs parked in front of them, some of these cars being as big as the houses; I learned later that these cars are a result of sheer necessity in Iceland, and the shovel attached to the rear is not a matter of tuning but rather good sense). Great roads but just wide enough to serve the everyday needs of inhabitants. And virgin nature around, untouched, proud and content. I had a feeling that the Icelanders and their nature constantly cuddle each other. That's all they do, they cuddle. And both the people and nature know when is the right moment to safely pull back the hand, stop cuddling, and let mutual respect do the rest.

Somewhere above Skagarfjörður the bus stopped and I got out. The first time I'd experienced the Icelandic wind. I was told this wind was far from its maximum galore, although it was already stronger than anything I've ever experienced in Europe, including our infamous eastern Mediterranean bura (or bora) and the brisk northern winds of the Baltic Sea. And, yes, I was frozen again, but happy to discover one interesting thing: You can eat Icelandic air. It has a wonderful smell and the taste of Earth's untouched north and breathing it is close to the experience of eating skyr for the first time. I could see a fjord, and a dark sea. Icelandic horses on the field far away. There were black peaks of mountains that looked like the teeth of a dragon sleeping on his back with his mouth wide opened. There was me eating the air. I suddenly realized how really wonderfully different Iceland was.

I arrived in Akureyri around midnight. The bus stopped at the central bus station in front of the Hof. I got out of the bus and right away I was frozen. The bus driver asked me where my hotel was. I told him the street, it was some 400 meters away. The bus driver told me: "Hop in, you'll freeze". He started the bus and drove me a few streets further at the beginning of the Hafnarstæti. Mind you, and official Icelandic transport bus. I couldn't believe it. I started thanking him and then I noticed he was a bit annoyed. Later I realized that you don't need to thank too much in Iceland, you don't even have to ask. People just help when they feel that help is needed.

I realized right away that Icelanders don't fall for empty words, phrases and formal courtesy. They just do what they feel is right. And their feeling of righteousness is deeply rooted in them through their culture, tradition and history. I was never a fan of traditionalism in the continental sense of the word, but in Iceland the air is different, and so

is tradition. Because of the rough climate and isolation, the core of any tradition in Iceland is based on mutual help. In other words, without any fallacy of politeness, a traveller constantly feels as though surrounded with members of loving and caring family. You don't have to know a word of the language.

I got to know about the hostel on Hafnarstæti through an Icelandic friend of mine I met via the Internet. Owners of the hostel, who were my friend's relatives, greeted me in a way that would not be considered whole-hearted in the Balkans, but they right away gave me a big discount, helped me to settle in, and started treating me as one of their own. After a few days there, I felt like a part of the team. As if I was a part of the family or, at least, employed by the hostel. Following my friend's tip, I went to the Icelandic Red Cross center and purchased a wonderful traditional Icelandic wool jacket. I paid three times less than what I would have paid in the center. I was proud but instantly bothered by that fact. In a conversation with the hostel owners and employees, I tried to express that in a self-justifying joke. I said: 'Hah, I'm a real Balkan opportunist: a day in Iceland and I already raided the Red Cross'. No one laughed, and there was a long moment of confusion. Then, as if he felt my Eastern European mentality infected with all sorts of inferiority complexes, the owner of the hostel told me: 'Relax. We are all relaxed here. And we all buy cheaper when we can. We are not crazy to do any different'.

Relax. Indeed, a key word in Iceland. I saw nervous people; I heard people raise their voices. But it would all soon pass, and life continued without any drama. It was just like the Icelandic wind; it came unexpectedly kicking up dust and stones, and then it would disappear even faster leaving the scenery equally beautiful.

The other thing I noticed about Icelanders right away was their deep, unscrupulous and opened self-criticism. Where I come from, we generally still feel like we have to prove to Western Europe that we too are Europeans. We very often hide our weak sides and consider them shameful. One big part of our existence is occupied by gluing tons of cultural make-up on the face of our intellectual decay and especially the burlesque inefficiency of our economy and deeply corrupted society. On the other hand, Icelanders, a nation incomparably richer and more developed than mine, were entirely comfortable claiming that they were an unhappy nation of utter weekend (and not just weekend) alcoholics, adulterers and villains, led by a weak and corrupted government. Nothing could have surprised me more. I listened to what they had to say about themselves. What I concluded is that Icelanders on average really do not look "violently happy", as Björk would have it, but their sadness is perfectly softened by all of the great aspects of life in Iceland, and these aspects are numerous. They seemed to me more down-to-Earth than depressed. There is a problem with drinking in Iceland, although the extent of that problem could not be compared with

anything we have on the continent. From Scandinavia and Iberia all the way to the Balkans and the Caucasus, alcohol consumption is a huge problem. Most Icelanders are at least decent enough to typically drink Friday evening and over weekends in designated bars. And yes, some of them drink until they fall off their seats, and then they are carried home. But I never saw groups of young people lying drunken and unconscious in a park, for example. Not to mention tons of heroin syringes covering public spaces like pointy flowers - you can't see that in Iceland. As far as their marital and extramarital practices are concerned, coming from a culture terribly suppressed by a mostly false and hypocritical understanding and practice of faith, I found their way of life much more original, straightforward and morally acceptable. I never met villains in Iceland in any possible sense of the word. While I am sure that corruption exists everywhere, in Iceland as well, I will not lose time or energy on even trying to compare the level of institutional corruption in Iceland and continental Europe, not to mention Eastern Europe.

I did not try to contradict them because I noticed one thing: Their open self-criticism is an efficient way of coping with their problems, and, more importantly, an important tool in repairing the damage and keeping their social problems under control. Successful self-correction through unbiased self-criticism: this is a complex personal skill and an essential social virtue, which even some developed continental European societies still have to adopt and/or perfect.

One thing drew my attention, an apparent lack of ill-tempered nationalism. Icelanders do not seem to compare themselves to anyone. Not in the way we do that on the continent at least. Around them is the sea. Furthermore, they have accepted an enormous number of foreign workers (for the most part from Poland), and I saw quite a few Icelanders walking in the streets with spouses from different countries, races and religions. I spoke with some of the foreigners, Poles and Croats to be precise, and they told me only good things about Icelanders and their attitude towards foreigners. One Croatian immigrant I met in the hostel told me the following: 'No one asks you where you came from, they just want to see what you can do. If you work fairly, you will have everything. If you break the rules, you have nothing to look for here. This is a different world.'

While people of the Balkans quite often insist on their national purity, Icelanders will openly and proudly tell you that the Vikings formed only one half of their national genetic pool. Apparently, the Vikings, on their way to Iceland, stopped in Scotland and Ireland to borrow a certain number of females. These Celtic women provided the other half of modern Icelandic cultural identity. Hence, the amusing idea of mountain trolls seems to be much more important for the Icelandic cultural identity than an idealized image of a Viking warrior. You can quite often see troll dolls in shop windows, on streets, in souvenir shops,

and in the windowpanes of private homes. Vikings seem to reside mostly in museums, books and in the names of several bars (this is, at least, what I experienced in Akureyri). I can easily imagine that, if the people of the Balkans inhabited Iceland, they would be ashamed of traditions connected to trolls, but they would have streets named after Vikings, with large Viking monuments on every square. These Vikings would be fierce warriors with swords, cutting off the heads of every possible enemy. Especially heads of the Danes, the ex-colonists, disregarding the fact that Danish rulers and Vikings were separated by at least nine centuries. But Iceland is not such a society.

Another thing about Iceland impressed me, and that is the absence of the national flag. You can buy it in all souvenir shops, but you can rarely see it on buildings, even governmental ones. I bought an Icelandic flag, and looking at it in the evenings, I wondered how many Icelandic flags remain on the island, and how many travel with tourists around the globe. My guess was that only one small portion of the flags stays in the country. In the end, I had no idea where the urge to buy the flag came from in the first place.

On my way back from Akureyri to Reykjavik, I took a tourist bus that takes travelers on a longer road through the center of Iceland. In the bus, stuck over the driver's head, I saw a small Danish flag. That really intrigued me; this kind of behavior would spark debates in the Balkans. I mean, the flag of the ex-colonist! So, I approached the driver and asked why the Danish flag was waving over his head. He got confused, he stared at the flag for a moment. Then he asked: 'This is a Danish flag? I didn't know that. I am from Poland. I just drive the bus'.

The feature of Icelandic society that has utterly won my heart is their trust in basic human goodness. We have all watched documentaries about desolate parts of the world, untouched by human civilization. In these parts of the world animals are not afraid of people, but they often approach them out of curiosity. I had the same feeling when observing young Icelanders and children. Children would approach foreigners without fear, and they seemed so confident in their surroundings. My Icelandic friend had arranged that I meet with her son, which I did (although at the moment she was at the other end of the country). We went rowing shortly in a boat in the middle of the fjord. Then we ate an ice cream. Her son was everything that a child of his age should be, a curious little prankster, but every now and then he would turn into a serious and extremely well informed interlocutor in English. I was amazed by this balance of childish carefreeness and responsibility and maturity of a grown up. The same happened when I spoke with the son of my colleague whom I met at the conference in Akureyri. His son, a boy of nine years, who is, just to mention, multilingual, told me about the games and sports he likes, and then he told me about his job as a porter in a hotel. In Iceland, children can have grown up jobs, and they are paid fairly for that.

Listening to his childish laughter interrupted by his briskly sharp and serious thoughts of a responsible member of society, I couldn't help wondering how they achieve that in Iceland. And I thought that this is how children must have been, at least a little bit, in my country some hundred years ago, not because of excellent education and responsible upbringing but rather out of necessity that arose from poverty and hardship.

Children in Iceland are real children, mischievous and playful, but at the same time they are responsible, and in every way efficient parts of the society. How come a twelve-year-old boy goes rowing alone in the fjord with a stranger, engages in an interesting two-hour conversation, and then hurries home because his job is waiting in the morning? I compared that with the upbringing we have back home. First of all, we are over protective parents, and the first thing we teach our children is not to trust strangers, actually, not to trust anyone (although I cannot blame the parents for that). An important part of that is implanting in them utter doubt about the society and the establishment as such (and I don't blame parents for that neither). Secondly, our schooling system molds them in a way that suppresses their creativity, critical and independent thinking. Growing up in our society basically comes down to surviving and learning to cope with numerous forms of open and tacit types of humiliation imposed by people, by peers, by bureaucracy, by the establishment, etc. Your success is measured according to the level of your acquired resistance to humiliation. We insist that children stay childish as long as they can, and responsibility... We are never taught how exactly to take on or cope with any responsibility. In my country it is not rare that children stay with their parents until the age of 40. Of course, this is closely connected with the state of our economy, but still, so much could be improved.

Reflecting on my Icelandic experience, the way Icelandic children are brought up was maybe one of the most impressive things I saw in that country. Icelandic children are fully integrated into their society at an early age. They feel absolutely safe in the society, hence their childish joy of living, but on the other hand, they very early learn how to contribute to society through meaningful and useful work. Ever since I visited Iceland, I'm thinking that this is a societal experience and upbringing I would wish for my children.

To summarize the most striking features of life in Iceland, I will make a very personal claim that Icelandic society displays that wonderful streak of an intuitive society. Intuitive society in the sense of a group of people with a developed higher sense of societal responsibility, the appreciation of justice, humanity and natural surroundings, actually, to the point where most of the forms of the repressive apparatus become redundant. Social proofs to this claim are abundant, and in the political sense, the strikingly clear sign of highly developed social intuition in is the Icelandic Pirate Party (a movement for direct democracy which is



intrinsically related to intuitive societies) which at one point in 2016 won more than 14% of votes in the general elections.

I remember how, upon the news that the Pirate Party won enough votes to send representatives to parliament, the reaction in my country varied from disbelief to mockery. I myself could not believe how that could have happened, and I thought that the rise of the Pirate Party had to be mainly preconditioned and sparked by the shocking experience of the collapse of banking and the economy from 2008 to 2011. While that might be partially true, only after visiting Iceland have I gotten the full picture. The fact is that Icelandic society already is a partially intuitive society, a society so complex and well balanced that every freedom and justice movement finds fertile soil there. In that respect, it is enough just to look at the Icelandic attitude towards female rights. The truth is that Icelandic society is decades ahead of any other European society. The size of the society and their relative isolation have surely been factors which Icelanders were able to turn to their benefit. I believe it will take decades for other European societies to grasp the level of the intuitive society now existing in Iceland, and even more decades to implement it.

I would add here that I spent ten days in Iceland, and I never saw a police officer. In 2018.

Meanwhile, people of the Balkans still vote mostly for their serious parties falsely divided into the so called left and right. They continue giving their support to people they do not trust but they consider them less harmful than some other people. They continue living in the fog of empty nationalist rhetoric that gives full license for the political opportunists to continue spreading their web of crime and corruption. Meanwhile, more and more potential immigrants from the Balkans dream about finding their future in the west and north. I understand them fully.

People I met in Iceland asked me: 'How does it feel to live in a country surrounded with hostile neighbors, squeezed behind the land borders that are so often visited by the demon of war?' I did not try to fully explain the hate and bad blood that flow through every creek in the Balkans, in every pit, under every stone, and forms waterfalls over every elevation in the Balkans, just like volcanic and glacial waters do in Iceland. I couldn't explain it fully, even if I wanted to. Especially not to Icelanders. Icelanders took over an uninhabited island. They did not cause a genocide of any other nation upon their final settlement. From the very beginning they were blessed with a clean start. And then, although colonized by Denmark, they were left out of all the carnages that Europe produced and went through. Furthermore, when the British army took over the island during WWII, Icelanders largely profited from that moment in history as well. And today Iceland is one of the most developed and richest nations in the world. What I told my Icelandic friends basically comes down to following:

*'You are lucky to be surrounded by the sea. So lucky.*

*History has spared you.'*

There is a history museum in Akureyri. It is situated in a vast modernist villa which, with its symmetry and sharp edges, somehow sticks out from its surroundings (and, of course, reflects the architectural outlines set by Mies van der Rohe in his Villa Tugendhat in Brno). I read that the villa was built in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a German family, obviously in favor of the modern building style and the Icelandic landscape (which is interesting and somehow contradictory; while the general public in Germany in those times largely idolized Iceland and its culture, they were quite negative towards modern architecture and art in general). Taking into consideration that the family is no longer there, and that the house is a museum, I gather that's a way that Icelanders successfully closed that monstrous chapter in Europe's history on their soil (while, let's be fair, a large portion of the European continent still lives in the year of 1945).

I was thinking how a history museum so far north could possibly look like (just under or barely in the Polar circle, depends which claims stated by Wikipedia you accept as true) and what can it offer here in this history-free land? I came to the museum just at closing time. However, a young curator of the museum (she herself being a child) decided to keep the museum open for another half an hour just for me. And that half an hour changed everything.

I soon learned that the Vikings tried to inhabit the island three times but the island kept on killing them. After the final successful colonization of land, the remaining population was several times almost annihilated by the climate, diseases, and hunger. Icelanders lived in horrible poverty for centuries, constantly under the threat of freezing, hunger, and, strangely enough, fire (the city of Akureyri was hit by devastating fires several times, and most of them seem to have started in bakeries). According to the data revealed in the museum, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland was one of the poorest countries in the world. All the way up to WWII a large portion of the people lived in dugouts, dwellings dug in the dark Icelandic turf. During WWII, when the British arrived, and later the Americans, Icelanders started trading with them, they learned the English language (almost all Icelanders are fluent in English), they got rid of the Danish rule entirely (only in 1944), and that has sparked a speedy development of the economy. The rest of the century Icelanders dedicated to successfully becoming one of the richest nations in the world.

I realized that my country was actually much more developed, much richer and better off than Iceland probably all the way until the fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And since then, Iceland

has gone further, and my country became one of the poorest in the EU. All this new information shocked me. I was speechless, just staring at a photograph of children taken during carnival. I was pulled out from my thoughts by the young curator who now politely warned me that the half an hour had passed a long time ago. I realized I was totally and absolutely wrong: Iceland was not spared by history. Not at all. Their entire history was, and still is, a battle. I realized now that the battle of Iceland was one of the fiercest in the history of Europe. It was the battle against the elements and nature, the only battle people can never entirely win.

Iceland also had to be fought for, and its conquest claimed more people (compared with the overall population) than in any other nation in Europe. And houses dug in the soil, warm springs, tiny horses, and most of all, strong expanded families, these were Icelandic castles.

The enemy of Icelanders were not others who brought death, but rather death itself.

I continued my walk up the slope behind the Museum. Being an almost typical Croatian, I wanted to take a walk in the city graveyard, because here we believe that this is the final and the crucial step in getting to know a place. A visit to the field of death. The oldest part of the graveyard followed the pattern of other European graveyards - at the beginning were old, dignified but totally solemn monuments marking the remains of Danish rule. Even if they bore Icelandic names, their promise to rest in peace was written in Danish, or, at least, in Danish orthography. And then a great surprise: I saw, in the newer part of the graveyard, Icelandic flags everywhere. Almost all of the graves were marked by one small national flag stuck in the ground. The graveyard looked like a field of flags, a field full of blue, red and white flowers (I did see a few Danish, Norwegian, and one Finnish flag as well). A nation which rarely uses their national flag among the living, uses these symbols of colorful cloth to mark what was left of their dead. It all became clear to me.

There is no land that hasn't been fought for, by sword, by word, or by central heating of some sort. And this wonderful land, Iceland, was one of the rare places on Earth morally and practically worth fighting for.

### **Lebanon Refuses (to) Disappoint(ment)**

First I saw it from the air. It was night, the lights disclosed the shape of the coastline. As the airplane approached the city, even from the high altitude I could feel the luxury and grandeur of Beirut. Before the war they used to call it 'Paris of the Middle East'. They also dubbed Budapest 'Paris on the Danube'. I could never really understand why should anyone compare other cities, especially those in the East, to Paris in the first place. This is how the

world works, I guess, in constant collaboration of the feelings of superiority and fear. By naming an alien place after something you consider yours and supreme, the fear is reduced and superiority is set to thrive. Beirut looked nothing like Paris to me. It was Beirut.

I was overwhelmed with joy upon the news that the second part of the Saudi crime serial, in which I had a role of an American mafia guy, would take place on set in Lebanon. When I told the people close to me that I would travel there, they became anxious and their faces darkened under a shade of worry. They told me that this part of the world is not safe, if nothing else, because it was too close to the war-torn Syria. That made me even more determined to go there.

I saw armed people at the Frankfurt airport upon boarding the airplane. Special forces, all covered and wrapped up. I could not help noticing that the soldiers were present only at the gate where the passengers for Beirut were boarding. They checked us all thoroughly. Passengers bound to other destinations were strolling down the corridor behind our backs and observing in astonishment. When they saw the word 'Beirut' on the display, I saw their face expressions change into a large *Aha!* sign. Travelers to Beirut have to be checked, naturally.

I saw soldiers again in the airport in Beirut. They were armed lightly and seemed utterly uninterested about what was going on. It was much warmer than in Frankfurt. The young woman at the customs asked me about the hotel where I was staying. I told her I didn't know the hotel's name. She told me that in that case I could not enter the country. I hastily connected to the airport Wi-Fi and called the assistant director. He said: 'Just give them this name'. I gave them the name of a hotel I eventually never visited. The young woman smiled and I was in.

At the exit there was a guy waiting with my name written on a piece of paper. I approached him, and, without many words, I found myself in a black van. Behind the windshield, there was a paper with the Arabic inscription saying 'Ehktiraq' or, translated in English, 'Infiltration', which is the title of the crime serial we were shooting. In this instance as well, a familiar name has cured some discomfort. I was the only passenger in the van.

We passed by some crumpled looking palm trees, then through an underpass made of massive concrete blocks, and then the astonishing beauty of night time Beirut struck me as a sudden light after darkness. Although it was late, the traffic was quite thick, and that gave me the time to observe the wonderful buildings and squares were passed by. The driver was silent. He lit the second cigarette even before we reached the center.

Again, I pushed my face against the window. The center of Beirut seemed as an otherworldly mixture of traditional and modern architecture. And, what surprised me a bit, streets were riddled with sacral objects belonging to a variety of different religions. If I would fall into a temptation of comparing Beirut with other places, I would say it looked to me like a mixture of Athens, Rome, and Tunis, but then again, it looked nothing like any of these places.

Once we passed the strict center, I first saw buildings whose facades bore the scars of the civil war. I remembered growing up in the 80' and watching this terrible war on the TV. In those times Beirut was a synonym for death and destruction, and its Holiday Inn the symbol of the war. Little did I know that I would live through in many ways a similar conflict in my own country just a few years later. Splinter holes in walls look the same all around the world.

The traffic got even thicker on the half-highway that connects all the Lebanese coastal towns. I noticed right away that the quality of the road could not support the bravery of some drivers. The traffic looked like a deadly mixture of chaos and speed. The driver was getting more and more nervous, I heard bitter words coming out of his mouth together with the cigarette smoke. I thought it was a right time to start a conversation in my broken Arabic and a bit of gesticulation. 'Is it always like this?', I asked. To put it short, the driver told me that road safety and the death toll are one of the burning issues in the country. Every day people die on Lebanese roads, good people that would otherwise build the future of this land.

'Roads have killed more people in Lebanon than any war.'

And just when that thought was about to sink in, we saw a large shadow over the opposite side of the highway, a few hundred meters further from us, a shadow that quickly disappeared, and then produced a loud crash. On the road where people drive up to 150 km/h with a half a meter distance between vehicles, only luck will prevent chain crashes when someone suddenly kicks the brake. And that's exactly what happened; the driver pushed the brake violently, I grasped the seat in front of me. We stopped. Sounds of honks, and very soon sirens. After waiting for about twenty minutes, we started moving slowly towards the place where the accident had happened. It took us a half an hour to make that few hundred meters. The driver opened his window and looked left. There was a sight of total destruction on the opposite side of the highway. It seems that one of the cars hit the rear part of the other car in high speed, which propelled that car into the air. The flying car then fell on another moving car and then bounced over to our side of the highway. The driver shook his head in disbelief and lit another cigarette.

It was a horrible scene. However, just like holes in walls, all car accidents look more or less the same. But one thing I will never forget; there was an older woman standing in middle of the highway, trembling, crying, and shrieking. She was constantly calling the name of God, which in Arabic translates as Allah (Arabs of all religions have only one name for God, and that's *Allah*, and it can be found in the Arabic version of the Bible as well. Contrary to the western media, there is no need to get paranoid just upon hearing the word uttered by any Arab). I think she was the one who caused the crash, the driver of the flying car. She stood there and shrieked. In one moment, a younger man left the group of men he was standing with near another crashed car, and he approached the woman. She cried once more: 'Allah!' In that moment he hugged her and tapped her on the back.

I was shocked. Absolutely shocked. Coming from a place where even parking disputes can result in shootings and dead people, I was shocked to see that one of the afflicted people hugged the culprit. It was me who now said: 'God, are they hugging now?' The driver of our van continued nodding his head. He then muttered: 'Crazy people'. He threw the cigarette butt out of the window, and we slowly left the scene of the accident. The sounds of sirens became more silent; it was all behind us now. The driver looked at me in the mirror and said: 'Welcome to Lebanon.'

Due to some technical issues, the shooting was postponed for a couple of days. I didn't mind at all. I stayed in a wonderful hotel built right on the beach in the center of the city of Jbeil, also known as by its ancient Phoenician name Byblos. I took long walks in this ancient city. I saw the ruins of the Phoenician town and the port, I visited old Christian basilicas, mosques and the bazaar with narrow streets full of life. It struck me as a place where people live in peace and harmony. A lot of people, because Lebanon is a very small country with a population of over 6.8 million. More than a million of them refugees.

I've noticed right away the freedom of movement and expression. No one stared at no one, no one asked questions. I could walk freely everywhere, even in the shabby part of the town, and I never felt unsafe or even unpleasant. At one point I got hungry and I decided to go far further from the center to find a traditional Lebanese restaurant, not a touristic place such as those displayed in the center. After a longer walking I didn't find any restaurant, so I asked an old man sitting in front of his thin but high house (in this way builders win space on a crowded land) to help me. 'Are there any restaurants here?', I asked showing with my hand towards the East and the mountain slopes. He nodded his head in a bit worried manner. 'Yes, well... yes', he replied and also pointed towards the East with his hand. I walked further and crossed the highway on a pedestrian overpass (practically the only and definitely the safest way to cross roads in Lebanon because zebra crossings are almost inexistent and very dangerous) and got uphill to the eastern suburbs. I asked another man

about a restaurant. He said he didn't know of any. I've noticed a large shopping mall a hundred meters away, and asked him if there was a restaurant in the mall. He said: 'Yes... yes, it has to be.' I asked for the reconfirmation: 'In the shopping mall?' The man looked towards the ground and said in a hesitant way: 'Yes... on the second floor. Or somewhere.'

So, I went to the mall just to learn that it had no second floor. The security guy laughed at me for ten minutes. I asked him if there was a restaurant nearby. He answered in French: 'Not that I know of, but there has to be at least one somewhere.' I walked further, more and more uphill. I thought, 'if I continue like this, I would very soon have my lunch in Syria'. And then I gave it the last try. An old woman. I asked her about a restaurant. She told me: 'Go to the center. It's full of restaurants.' I told her: 'I want something not so touristic.' The woman replied: 'But I also eat there, in the center.' I shrugged my shoulders. One last try. 'Do you know of any traditional, family-type, smaller restaurants around here?' The woman asked: 'Here?' and she looked uphill towards the place where the last houses were slowly disappearing in the Mediterranean macchia and rocks. She sighted, looked to the ground, and she said: 'Yes... there has to be. Somewhere...'. And she left. By that time, I knew there were no restaurants around at all. All the restaurants were in the center. I enjoyed the view of the city that I had from the hill slope, and then I returned to the hotel.

I made friends with all the people working in the reception. It wasn't hard, they were wonderful young people. I helped them decorate the Christmas tree because it was that time of the year. By the way, the biggest Christmas tree in the world is erected in Jbeil, and it is made of high metal construction covered with empty green water bottles. After three hours of unsuccessful search for a restaurant, I returned to the hotel and grabbed a bottle of water at the reception desk, took a long sip and asked the young woman who worked there: 'Why is everybody here lying?' She was shocked. 'Who's lying?' and then I told her my restaurant story. She smiled, although she obviously felt a bit unpleasant. She told me: 'They are not lying. In Lebanon there is Yes and Yes. One means No. This is so because nobody wants to disappoint you.'

You have to know which *yes* is *no*. It's not hard if you're not a silly tourist trying to implement your logic on the clarity of an ancient place with a troublesome history like Jbail. The young woman at the reception also told me: 'You can eat in the center. These *are* real Lebanese restaurants, and no one will cheat on you. And anyway, you can eat anything and anytime in the hotel restaurant because the film production had already payed for everything.' Was I walking in vain. Not quite. It was a great experience on so many levels.

It was almost Christmas, and just a few days before the Independence Day. The sea was still warm and the beach full of swimmers. I took a long swim and then some selfies in the sea

just to make my friends freezing back home a bit jealous. There were both men and women on the beach, and surprisingly enough (or not?) one day there was a Polish Catholic priest on the beach. He was talking to some young people. Trainer aircrafts of the Lebanese Air force were constantly flying over us in various formations preparing for the Independence Day celebration. I observed them lying on the beach and sunbathing.

One day I was on the beach, and I entered the sea. But just when I was about to start swimming, I heard that horrible sound. The sound that you hear once and never forget it. It was coming from far away, but I had no doubt these were explosions. I thought maybe there was a military practice somewhere in the hills. I haven't heard these hellish sounds since the war in the nineties. It really messed up my day at the beach. I returned to the hotel earlier than planned and opened the Internet. The news spoke about a strong bombing of Aleppo that had happened earlier that day. I asked at the reception if it was possible to hear explosions on the beach in Jbail. 'Of course', they told me, 'We hear that almost every day. The sounds of bombs from Damask, Aleppo, all the other Syrian cities in a hundred kilometers range from the border.' I felt bad about the fact that people were dying a few hundred kilometers away while I was swimming in the sea and sunbathing.

Lebanon is crowded. It is crowded for the last 6000 years or so. There is no place in Lebanon, except maybe on the high Lebanon Mountains, where you can dig in the ground and not find the traces of ancient buildings (which is partially true for some parts of the Balkans as well). Pieces of ancient ceramics and brick are everywhere; people have lived here continuously for so long that you can hardly start building and be the first on that spot. As far as culture and history is concerned, this is heaven, ground zero of what we call the *western civilization*. As far as ecology is concerned, the early settlement and development of the area had one very sad result: The coastline from the Sinai Peninsula all the way to Hatay is built up. That means that you could walk along the seaside from Egypt to Southern Turkey without ever stepping off concrete (of course, that could be possible only if the politics in the region would be different). In Lebanon I came to a horrifying realization that the entire Eastern-most part of the Mediterranean is one long concrete pathway. In Lebanon there are smaller patches of original coastal vegetation between the cities, but these parts are minuscule. 6000 years of history and 6.8 million people had taken their toll. Even the symbol of Lebanon, the cedar tree, now grows only in some parts of the highest mountains.

Just for the comparison, Lebanon has the area of 10.452 km<sup>2</sup>, while Iceland covers the area of 102.775 km<sup>2</sup>, making Iceland almost exactly ten times larger. But the population of Iceland is 360.000 people compared to Lebanon's 6.8 million (just for reference; Croatia: 56.594 km<sup>2</sup> and the population of about 3.9 million). Such a small country like Lebanon boasts three main religions divided into numerous subgroups. Actually, roots of both



Judaism, and especially Christianity can be found in Lebanon. Bible was allegedly named after Byblos, today's Jbail. From here Christianity spread in the region and to Armenia. It was here where the Romans got infected with Christianity which they then took to Europe in a very changed, in a way, simplified form. Today Christianity is usually regarded a *true European* faith, actually, that has been the credo of many rightist movements in the 'old' continent. But the truth is that the Middle East is much older, and that all the three monotheist religions were established by the forefathers of the local people that today live from Egypt to Turkey, Iraq and Yemen. I spoke about that with some Lebanese Christians and I got the feeling that they feel a bit puzzled by Europe's usurpation and modification of their faith, and they generally perceive Europe's treatment of Syrian refugees as appalling (those who knew about that treatment; there seems to be a media blockage regarding the information on the fate of Syrian refugees in Europe). However, they are proud of their alliance with the Pope of Vatican, and they practice various polite and unobtrusive ways to show that. The Muslims I spoke with in Jbail had only good words for their neighbors of other faiths, and whole Muslim families were delighted to make photos with the giant Christmas tree. I also had a chance to meet several Druze men who told me, with a large smile on their faces, that they were 'a little bit of everything.'

Besides the Arabs, there is a large Armenian minority, and various smaller ethnic groups in Lebanon. I have witnessed that many of the workers at the construction sites were from the Philippines and other countries of South-East Asia. I wondered how did an extremely bloody civil war happen in a such a society like the Lebanese one? People were generally reluctant to talk about the Civil War, but those that did speak about it emphasized the fact that most of the war was instrumented from outside of Lebanon, particularly from Israel and Syria. I could feel a bit of bitterness when they spoke about the role of Syria in that war, nevertheless, they were more than opened to help the Syrian people who are today afflicted by a somehow similar conflict. Lebanon learns and forgives.

One of the people I met on set in Lebanon told me an interesting story. During the war there was an unusual number of Lebanese soldiers killed by Israelis in one particular part of Beirut. These killings were done with amazing accuracy and from far away, as if the Israelis knew the exact movement of Lebanese forces (belonging to some of the ideological/religious fractions). It was later discovered that the Israelis had a spy in the street. Literally in the street. It was a local beggar that Israel had installed in one busy street long before the war. The man who told me the story laughed as he asked:

'And who sees better than the beggar?'

The Independence Day was an extremely well balanced and tasteful celebration. There was

very little cheap national pathos so prominent for such manifestations in the Eastern Europe. In the port of Jbail they made a water wall (pumped out of the sea) on which they projected a film about the national history. It struck me how little was shown of wars. People watching the projection on the water wall hugged each other, families and friends, sometimes chanting and singing. I felt the love that they had for the place where they lived in, and I experienced absolutely no negative or destructive feelings. I, and other foreigners, were constantly cheered by the smiles of the local people. There were no *us* and no *them*. In such an atmosphere I was taken over by the good vibes and I felt proud and satisfied to be a part of this celebration.

A lot of the interesting cultural input came from the stuff of the hotel. They were mostly young people, half of them refugees from Syria. Most of them had a burning wish to escape from Lebanon, and those who did not dream of leaving Lebanon (or at least returning to Syria) expressed their worries about the future. These young people were painfully aware of the deepest problem of modern Lebanon, and that is corruption. They were quite opened and articulated about it, and they believed that changes were on the way (at the time I revised this text, the Lebanese Revolution of 2019 had already happened, and the corrupted government has fallen giving place to unstable coalitions and partially the military). What amazed me is the fact that the Syrian refugees had an idea that they were genuinely welcome in Europe, and that Europe was easily reachable. I told them about the human traffickers which rob people on their way, I told them about boats full of people that capsize in the sea, about fences along borders, about refugee camps and violent police forces. They were mostly ignorant of all this. 'But why would they do that to us?' one of them asked me in utter disbelief.

I will remember my stay in Lebanon for yet another thing. This was when I, for first time in my life, experienced the power of fake news. One day, it was before the Independence Day, I came down to the lobby and found some actors from Serbia standing there (there were quite a few actors from Serbia and the whole of Balkans because we shot one part of the project in Belgrade). They were visibly agitated and afraid, and some of them were fully packed to leave. I asked them what was the problem. They told me the war had started, and that Israel had crossed the southern border in the morning.

'This is a small country; they will be here in a few hours, just like the last time!'

I can't say I wasn't afraid. I asked them to show me the news, and they opened some Serbian on-line portal. And really, it showed the right date, and it said that Lebanon had been invaded. My first thought was to somehow get to Cyprus over the sea. Then we heard the airplanes. There was a silence. But I recognized the sound. I came out to the terrace and

saw Lebanese trainer aircrafts. I looked down on the beach, there were swimmers there. Why would they train for the celebration and even swim in the sea if the war had started? Are they so calm about the whole thing? Actually, that would not surprise me.

I went to the reception and asked the young woman there if we were in war. She was confused, then she started laughing. Then, in a bit worried manner, she checked Lebanese news online. Then she called home. 'No, no war today,' she said.

In that moment, the assistant director appeared in the hotel lobby. They asked him about the invasion. He nodded his head and said: 'Impossible. It is Summer. Never in history have they attacked in Summer. We make wars in Winter only.' It turned out that the news was totally fake and launched as a decoy in Serbia on a day when the country faced some political instability.

Summer or not, we were happy that there was no war. The hotel staff was laughing at us and our naivety. In order to amuse them even more, we decided to give them an improvised performance. One Serbian actress took on a role of the invading Israeli army, while I, a Croat, acted the Lebanese forces. In a macabre parody that resembled fencing in Bollywood productions, I was victorious, and I forced the Israelis out to the hotel's terrace. There we were served coffee and fresh fruit salad.

Lebanon refuses to disappoint.

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