

Café Europa

Vienna seems to be very popular in Sofia, judging by the *konditoreien*, or coffee shops – there are at least two named after it. Through the window of one of them, on the Boulevard of the Tzar Liberator, people can be seen sitting at small, round cast-iron tables painted white. The coffee served there is not the traditional kind, called ‘Bulgarian coffee’ (or Macedonian, Turkish, Serbian or Greek coffee, depending on where it is drunk), roughly ground and cooked in small brass pots. Here the coffee is prepared differently and served in big cups with whipped cream and cinnamon or chocolate on top, just like in Vienna. There are also several kinds of ‘Viennese’ cakes and tarts sitting in a glass cupboard lit by a neon strip, which turns a yellow vanilla cream cake into a greenish one and gives a sickly grey hue to the peaches and strawberries on the tarts. They are nothing like real Viennese cakes, elaborate, rich and opulent; in fact, there is nothing in this café reminiscent of the big European city, except its name.

The other ‘Viennese’ coffee shop looks a bit better. It is

small and the walls are painted in pastel pink and café-au-lait. Youngsters are seated at round, fake-marble tables, most of them drinking tea, probably because that is all they can afford here – the prices tend to be Viennese, too. But the nice thing about this café is that with your tea you get a small biscuit on a paper doily, just as, I suppose, it is served in Vienna. This kind of sophistication is very new in this part of the world.

Yet when I am in Vienna, or any other Western capital, I am not usually conscious of how tea or coffee is served, perhaps because I take it for granted that it will be presented in a certain way and therefore I don’t pay any attention to it. For me it would be a surprise only if it were served in some other, strange – say, Eastern European way – a single kind of black tea only, or several cups produced from a single teabag, with no milk let alone lemon, spilling over into the saucer. And, most likely, the teacup would be white with a blue rim, like the ones you get at school or in a factory canteen. In Sofia, however, elegant presentation has a Brechtian alienation effect. Because it is not expected, one notices it immediately. Indeed, the whole of the Café Wien projects a certain image of Western Europe – pastel-coloured, over-decorated, clean, cute, orderly, even if that image does not necessarily have anything to do with reality.

Tirana is no exception to this trend of giving foreign names to just about any place. Café Europa, and there seems to be more than one, is situated in the centre of the city. It is a kind of kiosk, one of 2,000 similar constructions of glass and metal that grew up there in just two years. On a sunny day you can see a lot of people sitting outside it in white plastic seats, drinking an excellent espresso. I can only suppose that these plastic seats, which would in the

West be thought in bad taste, are considered both elegant and exotic in Albania, since such furniture was neither produced nor even seen in the country until recently. The customers are mostly young men, smoking heavily and listening to booming loud rock or disco music. Imagine a friend asking you where you are going, and you say, 'I'm going to the Europa.' Sounds good, doesn't it? To sit like that, dressed in a faded pair of jeans, and wearing your hair long, must be one of the most important and most visible elements of new freedom to them.

Bucharest does not lag behind Tirana or Sofia. It has a lot of small private shops, not very beautiful or expensive, but whose names clearly suggest Westernisation. Even if it is only a hole in the wall, it will have a name like Point West. Any food shop will be a supermarket, regardless of the fact that as it stocks only about twenty products, it can hardly be considered a market, much less a supermarket. And nearby, if you want, you can enjoy your coffee in a café with another very evocative Western name: Hollywood.

If you find yourself on any of the main boulevards of Budapest, you will inevitably notice that almost all the shops are owned by large foreign companies – McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Shell, Benetton, to name just a few of the better-known ones. It is hard to find any Hungarian-sounding name among them. You have the feeling that you must be in Vienna or Paris – except that the buildings are a bit too shabby, people are dressed differently, the streetcars are a little too crowded, and there are still many old Trabant and Lada cars driving around. But I am sure that in no Western European capital can you buy sweets in a shop with a name like Bonbonnière Hemingway. The owner must be an admirer of the writer; or perhaps he is not aware that it is a writer's name, but just likes the sound of it.

In Prague, Zagreb, Bratislava or Ljubljana and other Eastern European cities, towns – even villages – you can eat, drink, sleep, dress or entertain yourself in places with Western European and, to a lesser extent, American names. Bonjour, Target, Four Roses, Lady, The End. This is such a widespread phenomenon that in extremely nationalist countries, such as Croatia, voices are already being raised in protest. A journalist on the main daily newspaper there expressed his serious concern, reasoning that tourists visiting Zagreb might be confused, and think that they were in England instead! This would be laughable if it was not the subject of serious discussion in the Croatian parliament, where a representative has proposed a law that would oblige all firms to use Croatian names.

But what that journalist did not understand, of course, is that this is precisely the point of Western names: to create the impression that you are already in the West. No nationalistic ideology could stamp out the desire to prove that Zagreb and Croatia belong to the West, not even the introduction of such an absurd law. On the surface, this practice seems merely a trick to attract customers. But it has a deeper significance in that it symbolises how people in these countries see themselves – or rather, where they would like to see themselves. Nowadays, across Eastern Europe, revolution no longer consists of introducing democracy and a free-market economy; this has already happened. It might not work as was expected, but it is there nonetheless. Instead revolution is seen in small, everyday things: sounds, looks and images.

Foreign names are an excellent shorthand for conveying the message of this revolution. Simply by using such a name, you are presenting not only an image, but a whole system of values, too. They also reveal a longing, a desire to

belong to a preconceived idea of Western Europe. At the same time they serve as a kind of a barrier, because they seek to deny the old communist Eastern Europe. In fact, there can never be enough signs to indicate and emphasise that indeed this is not the old, communist, poor, primitive, Oriental, backward Eastern Europe any longer. Can't you see that we belong to the West too, except that we have been exiled from it for half a century?

If you asked a child riding a broomstick what it was doing, the child would answer, without hesitation: 'I am riding a horse.' For that child, a stick is a horse. It is as if by merely calling something by another name, you are able to transform it into what you want it to be. By usurping God's power, you create an illusion of an instant Paradise. And no one has yet told the infant Eastern Europe that a wooden stick is not a horse.

Imagine the opposite situation, a sudden flood in Paris or in London, of names like Tirana, Durres, Belgrade, Orient, or even *Napredak* (progress) or *Pobjeda* (victory) – typical communist names. It is not that such establishments don't exist in Europe's capitals, but the very few that do are sad meeting places for nostalgic emigrants. They in no way represent a desire to be different, to be a part of Eastern Europe. In Vienna, one Café Europa, in the Karntnerstrasse, the city's main pedestrian zone, is a part of The Hotel Europa. The other Café Europa is an obscure bar near Mariahilferstrasse, dark, noisy, stinking of beer. There is also a third one near the Belvedere Palace. None of them represents any kind of culture, because there is no need for a special kind of representation. There are no extraordinary cultural values attached to either the name or their decor.

In 1990 – when Croatia, as a newly independent state, wanted to distance itself as far as possible from the other,

non-European part of former Yugoslavia, from the Serbian enemy – the most beautiful cinema in Zagreb was renamed the Europa. Its previous name, for many decades, had been the Balkan. All of a sudden, the old name was seen as a symbol of the past, of primitivism, of the war, of something 'non-European'. The new name is heavily loaded with a complexity of positive values. In the first place, it is a symbol of a more distant past. It indicates that Croatia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire until the end of the First World War, while Serbia, situated deep in the Balkans (Croats don't view their country as being part of the Balkans), was under Turkish rule for 500 years. It is also intended to suggest that Croatia always belonged to the more developed part of Europe, and to the Catholic religion, as opposed to the Orthodox religion of their neighbours. It represents Christian tolerance, civilised behaviour and bourgeois values. 'Europa' encapsulates what the people aspire to, not what they really are – as if by changing the name of a cinema we can at a stroke remove ourselves from the Balkans and enter 'Europa' whatever that means.

In using such a name as Europa, there is an assumption that everyone knows what we mean by Europe. One thing is sure: it is no longer the name of an entire continent. It describes only one part of it, the western part, in a geographical, cultural, historical and political sense. Europe has been divided by the different historical development of its component parts, communism and most of all by poverty. Some formerly western countries, like Czechoslovakia and Hungary, found themselves in the Eastern bloc. Now it looks as if all of the ex-communist, Eastern European countries have the same almost palpable wish to push that dividing line as far to the east as possible, so that

eventually Europe will be a whole, undivided continent. Yet it is this desire itself which forms the current dividing line. The West does not feel the need to belong (it just is) or to allow the countries standing at its threshold to enter. It waits to pick the lucky ones who will meet its standards and join the European Council, NATO or some other of its institutions.

So, what does Europe mean in the Eastern European imagination? It is certainly not a question of geography, for in those terms we are already in it and need make no effort to reach it. It is something distant, something to be attained, to be deserved. It is also something expensive and fine: good clothes, the certain look and smell of its people. Europe is plenitude: food, cars, light, everything – a kind of festival of colours, diversity, opulence, beauty. It offers choice: from shampoo to political parties. It represents freedom of expression. It is a promised land, a new Utopia, a lollipop. And through television, that Europe is right there, in your apartment, often in colours much too bright to be real.

Yet all this doesn't get us very far in terms of definition; it simply explains the desire itself. The negative approach is perhaps more useful: Europe is the opposite of what we have, and what we want to get rid of – it is the absence of communism, of fear and deprivation. The Bosnian writer Djevad Karahasan describes Hotel Europa, an old Austro-Hungarian establishment in the middle of Sarajevo, as a geographical and cultural point where West and East met. The hotel was destroyed in the shelling; Europe thus disappeared from Sarajevo. It left Sarajevo because most of the country, the city, and its people left, too, deceived by Europe. So Europe has many faces, and we should not forget that.

Is anyone today able to say where Europe, and all it stands for, begins, and where it ends? Does the new political reality call for a broader definition? Perhaps the idea that an Eastern European country has to deserve Europe, that it has to qualify for it in some way, is now becoming too conservative. After all, in the United States a hundred years ago, black people were *a priori* excluded from the definition of that continent. Today, the Afro-American population and its contribution to the United States cannot be separated from America itself. Perhaps there is something positive and valuable that the Eastern European nations have to contribute to the Europe of today. Is it arts, multi-culturalism, diversity in general? Is it the model of the moral politician, represented by Vaclav Havel? Or is it the most important human skill of all: the ability to just survive in impossible conditions?

Europe is not a mother who owes something to her long-neglected children; neither is she a princess one has to court. She is not a knight sent to free us, nor an apple or a cake to be enjoyed; she is not a silk dress, nor the magic word 'democracy'. Most likely, Europe is what we – countries, peoples, individuals – make of it for ourselves.

Invisible Walls Between Us

I looked into my passport and panicked. My American visa had just expired. Funny enough, it was not because I was about to visit the United States that I panicked: it is a habit I have as a citizen of a former communist country. I simply know that when I have a one-year multiple-entry American visa, it is much easier to enter any other Western European country. My experience of many years tells me that.

But now we are in the year 1995 and I no longer live in communist Yugoslavia, but in democratic Croatia. Similar is the case of Romanians, Poles and Bulgarians, for that matter. Why, then, has my fear of borders not gone? Why do I feel as nervous going west as ever before? What has really changed for we Eastern Europeans when we cross into Western Europe in the post-communist era? We believed that after 1989 we would be welcomed to an undivided Europe, that we would somehow officially become what we always knew we were – that is, Europeans. Finally, we would join the others, the French, the Germans, or the Swiss. But we were wrong in nourishing

that illusion. Today, the proof of our status in Europe is easy to find. It awaits us at every western border crossing in the stern face of a police officer looking down upon us, even if he doesn't say a word.

This look has not changed. I know it by heart. I remember it from before – police officers at border crossings have always looked at us in that way. They knew perfectly well that this look would make us nervous, because we always had to disguise the amount of money we possessed, or to lie about the dying aunt we were supposedly visiting or just about that hidden bottle of home-made plum brandy. Then there was look number two: the screening, X-ray officer's look, suspecting everyone of wanting to get illegally employed in his country, if not – God forbid! – asking for asylum. Once you have felt that look of suspicion, you don't ever forget it and you can recognise it from miles away.

Perhaps I myself have no right to complain too much about crossing borders. I first left Yugoslavia in 1957, when I was eight years old. With my grandmother I visited an aunt in Italy. I still recall that the aunt had to write a letter of guarantee: there was much talk about it in the family – would it arrive? Would it be good enough for the authorities to let us out? I was old enough to know that not many people could travel abroad at that time, and that I was privileged. So even before the journey began, I felt elevated by the mere prospect of it. I told all my friends, all my classmates and our neighbours about it. My aunt and uncle came in their car to pick us up in Ancona. I was sick all the way to Naples – I had never travelled in a car before. All I remember from that trip is that terrible nausea. Nevertheless, when we returned home a month later, I was triumphant. It was worth it; I had 'seen the world'.

more casual type, I too experienced all sorts of searches – everything except the final indignity of a gynaeological examination. (Yes, I have stood naked in that little cabin that exists at every border crossing.)

Travelling abroad in those days, I had to take so many things into consideration, whereas a citizen of Western Europe did not have to pay a single thought to such concerns. This, I think, was what marked the real difference between us.

But in spite of all the difficulties, travelling was important to people from Yugoslavia, because we could do it, while the others in Eastern Europe could not. It was also a kind of rebellion against the communist state, making ourselves vulnerable to the ‘contamination’ of Western ideas and lifestyles. Today I see it did not work in that way. My generation in Yugoslavia was the first to travel freely, but we were already so hypocritical, and believed so little in communist ideology, that travelling abroad could not really influence us. Besides, precisely because we did travel, we knew that we were not welcome in Western Europe. But that inferiority complex was balanced by the fact that the citizens of other communist countries could not travel. It was enough to go to Prague or Budapest to feel superior. This was a big mistake, for now a cynical twist of history has turned the former Yugoslavia into the most troubled place in Europe and our apparent superiority has been destroyed.

However distrusted, discouraged or even humiliated I was when travelling, I took every chance to go abroad. I went to recharge my batteries, to buy books and see movies, to meet interesting people. Travelling for me assumed almost mythical proportions. I needed to do it because, in my mind, staying in one place all the time was almost equal to dying, and I struggled hard to scrape

together the money to make it possible, at the expense of a better standard of living at home. Even today it is hard for me to decline an invitation to a conference or to lecture in a country I have not yet visited. I simply feel obliged to go; I feel I have no moral right to refuse such an offer. It is easier now, because if I am invited, usually all my expenses are paid. But it doesn't mean that anything has really changed.

My husband is Swedish. It is not important to me that he is a Westerner, except when we travel together. Recently, we were both invited to Oslo, Norway. My preparations for the trip did not run parallel with his. All my husband needed to do was to reserve a ticket and pack his suitcase at the very last moment. But I had to start much earlier, by calling the embassy in order to find out if, as a Croatian citizen, I needed a visa. In this case I did not, but when a visa is required I will need to know how long it takes to get one (a Canadian visa, for example, takes two days, because you have to travel from Zagreb to Vienna to get it), and how much it costs, as well as what documents I must present in order to get it – a student ID, a letter from my employer, a photocopy of my bank statement or written proof that I own property in my country. That is not always the end of it: some countries, like Great Britain, need further proof, that is, a letter of invitation. Someone has to act as guarantor for you – being from Eastern Europe, you are not to be trusted. Even today they are reluctant to believe that you are visiting their country on a business trip, let alone as a simple tourist. This always brings back to my memory my aunt's guarantee letter from that visit to Italy almost forty years ago.

In January I witnessed a humiliating scene at Heathrow Airport in London. An elderly Croatian couple had been

interrogated because they were going on holiday to Barbados, with a stopover in London. Tourists from Croatia going to Barbados? Whoever heard of such a thing? The couple went into lengthy explanations, presenting their tickets, their hotel reservations, their visas, and perhaps their money, too, all in perfect order. In their voices I recognised the same anxiety and frustration I had often felt myself. One could tell that the young, arrogant customs officer at passport control automatically assumed that no one from that part of the world could possibly be anything other than a potential immigrant and, therefore, a danger.

My long preparations for a trip abroad are not the only difference between my Swedish husband and me. When we approach a passport-control cabin at an airport, he can just flick his passport and the official will wave his hand and let him pass without even bothering to look at it. Or, lately, he has even been able to choose the entrance for 'Domestic and EC' travellers, rather than 'Others', as I must do. The invisible wall between Easterners and Westerners starts right there, in front of a glass window with a small opening. The officer first takes my passport and inspects it carefully, as if he is not sure whether it is a forgery or not. Then he checks whether my name is on the list of dangerous criminals or other wanted people. His first question is: 'How long do you intend to stay?' It is usually enough to show him my ticket, and he does not go on asking questions. If he does, I know that he will ask me: 'How much money do you have?' This question makes my blood boil. Does the fact that you come from Western Europe automatically qualify you as a well-off person? But I am well prepared for this response, too, so I suppress my rage and show him the traveller's cheques that I carry with me solely for this purpose. If he still insists on asking me where

I am staying, I show him a letter of invitation, indicating that, after all, I am *invited* to his bloody country, not an intruder. This might – just might – gain me some respect, but even so it is a false respect: he still mistrusts me because he thinks that the letter might be a fake. By now, I feel poor, smeared and embarrassed, and that is the mood in which I take my first steps in a Western country.

Do I need to stress that my Swedish husband does not have to answer any of these questions? Simply, he never gets asked them.

Perhaps this is what Purgatory is like, I say to myself as I am about to pass to the other side. My eyes, accustomed to border-crossing scenes, glance at a small group of gypsies, Albanians or Bosnian refugees, separated even from us in order to be really humiliated. And as I look at them for a moment, I know, they know and the police officers know that barriers do exist and that citizens from Eastern Europe are going to be second-class citizens still for a long time to come, regardless of the downfall of communism or the latest political proclamations. Between us and them there is an invisible wall. Europe is a divided continent, and only those who could not travel to see it for themselves believed that Easterners and Westerners could become equal. The simple truth, which I can read in the police officer's eyes, is that we are not. Moreover, it seems to me that the citizens of the new democratic countries are suspected even more than before, since more of them are able to travel abroad than in the past.

I am worried about my marriage. If this kind of segregation goes on for too long, I will have a hard time convincing my husband that I have married him for love, and not just to have him standing behind me at some passport control at a Western European border in order to say the magic words: 'She is my wife.'