

Mapping a transnational memory:
the case of person N.N.

threads, traces

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Prelude

Turkish coffee around 1975

Today I was supposed to take a train to Berlin. I have postponed my trip for the third time. The following few days, I am working from home to fit the current global crisis and its motto: stay at home/work from home. However, the subject(s) of my investigation planned for Berlin are meant not to work from home, and in the process, many of them will not come back home.

While reading John Berger's "A Seventh Man", the documentary essay published in 1975, I was hooked with a photo detail. It shows a skill that I have recently learned to do: preparing the 'original' Turkish coffee for one person. I thought, at least this, I should know how to perform to get closer to a sense of displacement that previous generations of migrant workers – in this case from the former Yugoslavia, or, Bosnia to be more precise – have tasted. It is a part of detective inquiry regarding my mom's father, who has spent his last years of life as 'Gastarbeiter' in West Berlin.

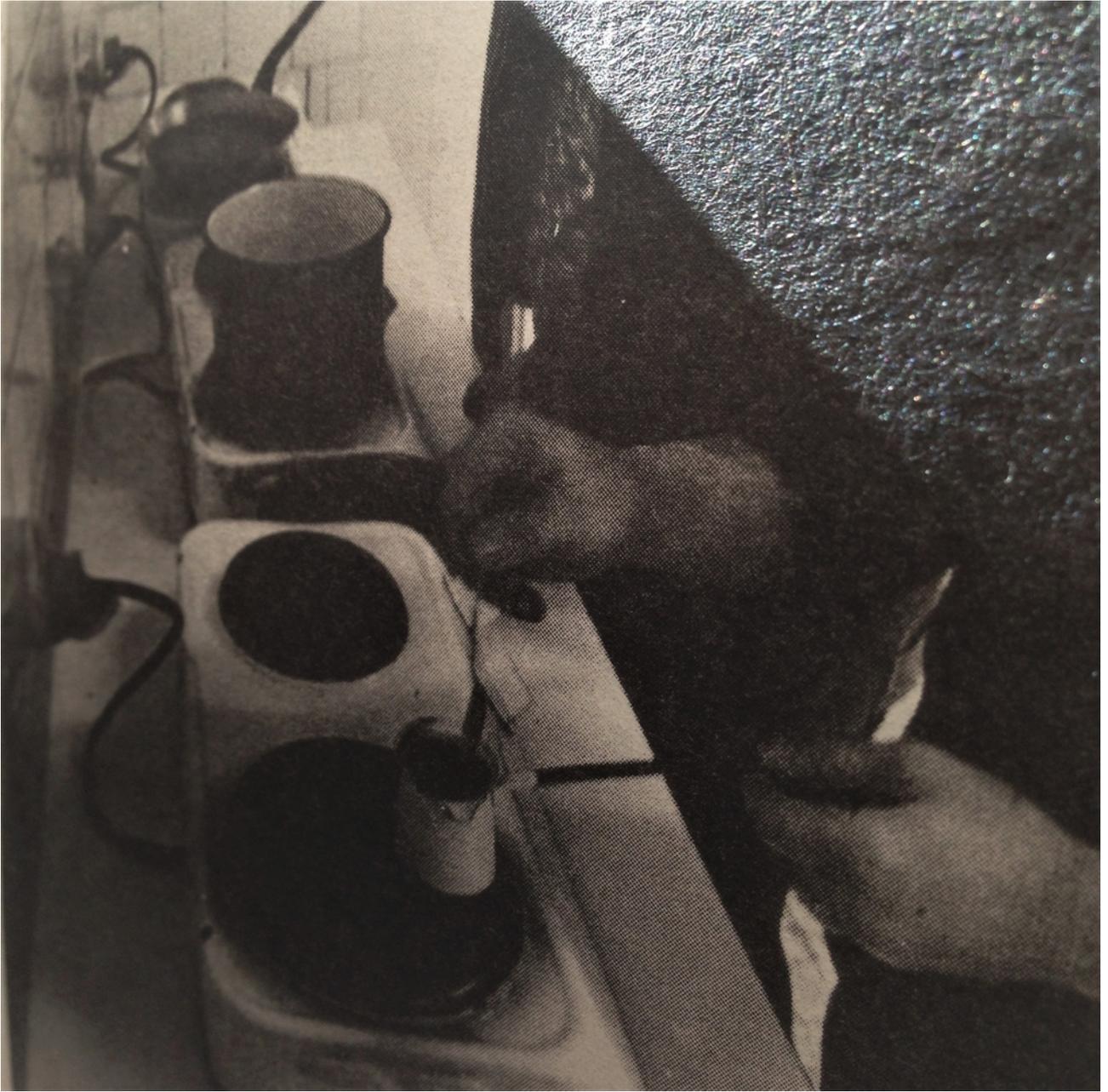
Coincidentally, his time in Berlin corresponds to the period that John Berger went to collect the materials for his essay about migrant workers in West Europe. There are some further coincidences and parallel histories with other personalities spread throughout different moments of this and the last century, but also other epochs. Perhaps too many of it. There are layers of family affairs to be recovered and reconnected as a part of cross-border memories... specifically, in this case, they are at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, just as the skill of making a solitary Turkish coffee.

Thus, today I am ordering the raw materials I have collected during my pre-research during the last four seasons between the Netherlands and Banja Luka (in Bosnia) before my departure to Berlin.

Ps.

Berger's collaborator & photographer for 'A Seventh Man' was Jean Mohr.

Utrecht, May 11, 2020



Introduction

The map as a departure

I have drawn a map for investigation of a transnational memory: *the case of person N.N.* I will continue it as the text-image entries of a sequence that overviews a vertiginous grounds. It will need continuous corrections, trimming, sharpening, and rewriting. The task is to balance the selected everyday details and familiar situations with the abysses of impersonal time. It goes together with the legend of the 'angel of history' - when we find a safe residency from where we can rethink the pails of ongoing disasters.

The map of the investigation is a helpful device. It has the legend, as a very compressed and relatively intuitive short introduction. However, the map, even as a simple sketch, is in itself always a provocation. To draw any line of demarcation on highly contested grounds, in this case, the 'old' Europe, provokes multiply heresies. This is certainly the case in the area of the recent civil wars in the Western Balkans. Or, many might be offended that somehow Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia are included in the 'Balkan triangle' (or any other kind of Balkan contamination). Drawing a line between Amsterdam and Berlin, which are traditionally cooperative capitals of increasingly open / less contested northern regions, also might be suspicious as well. On the map, these two cities are two upper tips of the 'German triangle'. Its southern tip is ending in Banja Luka, previously a provincial town, and now next to Sarajevo, another capital inside of a triangled puzzle called Bosnia and Herzegovina. Banja Luka, my former home city, is in multiply ways (post)colonial. Not accidentally, the strait geometry of two triangles meeting at Banja Luka resembles the colonial geography. The straight lines and fused geometric shapes are cutting decisively through any cultural and geographic borders, guided by fast reasoning of external power games.

The straight lines on this map represent operational fields and trajectories of a transnational or trans-border memory. This memory goes through all obstacles since it is in its turn formed in thin air and – for its producers as well – opaque process. As the memory is not contained by personal boundaries, it also does not hold onto national borders or political limitations. Repressing it in a system of geometrical shapes serves the purpose of marking it in this world, in this case, by bringing it on the surface of a printed map. Yet, the 'living memory' remains inaccurate; as the subjects who recall it, it is alive and in the process of becoming. As a fleeting thing, it is switching between macroscopic and microscopic levels of existence. In short, it is an ongoing montage to be continued.

Tomorrow, May 15, I will depart at 10:54 to retrace the line: Amsterdam – Berlin.

Utrecht, May 14, 2020



Legend

1. German triangle / archeological approach
2. Balkan triangle / dialogical reconstructions
3. Additional cultural and political influences, the five circles:
 - o. Peripheries of Russian Eurasia
 - o. Vienna - half way Amsterdam-Istanbul
 - o. Bari - stop between Venice-Istanbul
 - o. Peripheries of Anatolian Eurasia
 - x. Out of frame: Kristeva (and Kiš) in Paris

May 18

At level zero

A large sheet of paper on the highest shelf happened to be a drawing, a tightly woven system of lines. It is a map without color or textual demarcations. Tiny lines spread like a web to capture the course of guest interventions in the city. Upon my arrival, after crossing the Dutch-German border with a mask on my face

– as was required by the states of virus emergency –

I scanned with my host, Aleksander, through the apartment. Surely, we have talked about other kinds of mapping, the experiments capturing space-time by the irregular structure of recollections.

*

The serial image-texts that I am publishing here refer to the points of the triangular shapes shown on the map here above. I expect to re-familiarise a few traces, a few photographs, a few recollections, a few books, and a few other realities of the search for the missing and (un)familiar person marked by the initials N.N.

I start somewhat outside of the map at level zero, or, the New Year celebration. The next entries will refragment the photograph made at the end of the year 1975. Previously to my Berlin trip, at my new home in Utrecht

– that still feels like a temporary residency in a city where I do not belong –

I have divided this old photograph into three new frames. It is an image that I have occasionally reviewed for a few decades now. It contains three familiar faces. The three slices of the old image, now waiting to reappear, seem to be cut by abstract aesthetic reasoning. Yet, the cuts serve a practical purpose. By reviewing the fragments separately, I have a bit of a new distance to see something that has become too intimate. The opposite might be true with someone not familiar with the photograph. The sequence of isolated details, a mini-narrative, might push the surface of the image closer to a viewer's mind. In both cases, the cuts between the fragments are the openings in the fabric of a particular space-time.

As a way of preview, I have included the contours of the photo above as I retraced it some 15 years ago. For some reason, I did not trace the face of the person on the left. She was N.N.'s wife and a widow at the time. Perhaps the reason was my need to idealize her – now and as a child.

0



Q



May 22

Quarntined

The other morning I have attempted to improve my German by re-reading the first pages of the experimental book from the 1920's Berlin: 'Einbahnstrasse'. I have compared the original text to my Dutch copy at the point of advice regarding the recollection of dreams. I do sleep very well here, but I have no dreams, or, I do not recall anything. Not yet an intruder, I am slightly above the surface among the monuments and tectonic shifts of Berlin's history. I went for a bike ride yesterday evening.

'Not touching anything on my way!'

Experienced biker but here just clumsy - the traffic is out of any proportion I am used in the Netherlands. One thing seems to be the same; the locals on their bikes are openly annoyed by a newcomer getting in their way. I went down the street, along the Landwehr canal, to find Rosa Luxemburg's monument smeared by layers of black paint. The signature was a few steps away.

'National Sozialismus heilt corona!'

My actual plan was to bike to another spot nearby. Surprisingly, the Nazi's spray felt just as a mild shock comparing to my encounter with the statement on the square called Walter Benjamin. Later, I dug up online that I wasn't alone in experiencing it as a textbook example of fascist architecture. This neo-antique two flats monument stripped to its bare essence was finalized in 2000. It consists of two symmetric blocks too high for the size of the square and, in this way, compressing it into a temple without a roof. The buildings are painted in greenish-grey, recalling in me further militant associations. The square named after the famous exiled Berliner is an ongoing scandal. As I have now learned, it is not a small detail, or a footnote, that it served during the Third Reich as a 'shelter' for forced labourers. Any sign to commemorate those people would be on its place here. But, the inscription to accompany the architectural statement was the quotation of poet Ezra Pound. Not a detail that it was not Walter Benjamin. Also, it is not a small detail that Ezra Pound, in his later years, became a psychotic propagator of Mussolini's fascism. Finally, the inscription was removed in January of this year. Intended as simple, uniform and solid, the grim architectural statement still stands. What went wrong, how is it possible that it was built even after protests by residents in 1995?

*

I am informed that, while in Germany, it might be wise not to engage publicly in controversies of the historical present. For any German person, this is unstable ground, and it might be rude in my position of the outsider to go into this. I have understood that a locally born person, who is not yet totally German, is not expected to deal much with this stuff neither.

I am thus back to my quarantine. Or, let's say, I was not outside at all – I have viewed Walter Benjamin Platz via Google street view, and I have talked with Magali about Rosa Luxemburg by phone. I am back to level zero of my raw material: the snapshot from 1976. As a way of introduction, and as mentioned here above, I said to re-read this (un)familiar image produced about one year after the disappearance of N.N. in Berlin.

0a



May 24

Update:

Shortly after my previous entry, Aleksander announced the news: quarantine rules for travelers within the EU are lifted. So I cycled to the Mitte to test my architectural expertise 'in the shadow of widely spread wings'. I was defeated before I got to the 'real thing' from 1936, the building of the former Ministry of Aviation. The phantom has appeared in shopping malls, in housing complexes, in offices and official buildings, in old palaces. While retreating to my residency, I saw it in a miniature next to the entrance gate. The style topped with the Roman imperial eagle seemed to be neo-classical already before Christ.

Today I stay inside

Among the appearances in the peripheries of the sliced family photo are two histories:

1. In Yugoslavia, at the time of the 1976 snapshot, Christmas was treated as obsolete and backward, if not reactionary, tradition. The official ideology of "brotherhood and unity" has pushed Christmas into the clandestine margins. At the same time, the Christmas tree was diverted to the much older, pre-Christian and pre-communist New Year tradition. It was unintentionally reset to its pagan magic at the darkest time of the year. The trees were sacred before the borders of the Roman Empire were established.
2. Saint Nicholas has traveled from Asia Minor through the Catholic South and the Protestant North to the colonies across the Atlantic. A hybridized Saint – under the guise of Santa Claus – was reintroduced through Coca Cola campaigns back to Europe. Annually reenacted ritual is still an exciting addition to the family-friendly version of Christmas. In the 1970's Yugoslavia, Coca Cola was imported together with repackaged legend of Saint Nicholas. The suitable time for him to appear with the presents was New Year's Eve.

*

In addition, parallels have been noted between the two missing family men. They are the negative image of each other, the thesis and its antithesis:

1. N.N. is a migrant worker, selected preferably for unskilled and/or hazardous labor. He has his reasons to expose himself to humiliating procedures of underpaid work abroad. As a construction worker on the limits of legality he is an outsider per default. At home, he is a trouble – a runaway from the parental house, a former sailor and a resistance fighter, twice imprisoned for rebellion against the authorities.
2. Nicholas is adored religious and holly man, highly respected for his miracles at sea and for saving girls from prostitution. The patron saint of the harbors is especially appreciated for providing marvelous gifts for the good children or otherwise punishing the bad ones. He is a righteous caretaker, fatherly authority coming from afar and operating beyond rules of local everyday life. In short, he is a foreigner as well.

0b



May 27

Goblen

'Goblen' is Turkish version of French 'gobelin', the word for a meticulous needle-guided intertwining of colored threads that (re)produce an image. The photo fragment (0b) contains at least two memos regarding the visible part of locally framed *goblen*:

1. How I recall, the 'goblen' was hand-stitched by a housewife in her intimate retreat. With a needle, she has countlessly and meditatively reentered the idea of an iconic image.
2. What I recall, the sunflowers were painted to decorate a Dutch painter's home abroad. He has imagined his house with the guest room for the visiting migrant artists.

*

The eyes of a female person are gazing under the 'goblen'. She looks at the camera and holds the glass in the gesture of toast. Her face is veiled by a cut, as in the case of needlework above her. The cut sharpens her gaze. She is the wife of N.N.'s son, the man in charge of remembrance of N.N. However, during my pre-research, the others in charge of family secrets were female members. N.N.'s wife is the one who has embroidered 'goblen'. I will need to recheck this with my mom, N.N.'s daughter.

Following are two author's that provide orientation on the female perspective on history:

1. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book "The Second Sex" / Volume I (1949):

[I]n large part, woman's history is intertwined with the history of inheritance ... the owner alienated his existence in property; it was more important to him than life itself; it goes beyond the strict limits of a mortal lifetime, it lives on after the body is gone ... Cultivating paternal lands and worshipping the father's spirit are one and the same obligation for the heir: to ensure the survival of ancestors on earth and in the underworld. ... when woman becomes man's property, he wants a virgin, and he demands total fidelity at the risk of severe penalty; it would be the worst of crimes to risk giving heritage rights to a foreign offspring ... the crime of high treason.

2. Julia Kristeva, in the novel "Murder in Byzantium" (2006)

Europe does not imagine how much she is integrated into imaginary realm criss-crossed by abstruse and gracious paths, paths that have made it fertile without its least knowledge or recognition.

Kristeva's book rethinks the complex histories of borderlands between Europe and Azia. Specifically, it restructures Byzantine legacy for Europe today and Byzantium as Europe's repressed Oriental self. This historical, philosophical, and psychoanalytical novel is essential external guidance to my research of family memory in the frameworks of broader history.

7



May 30

Update:

I called my mom on the phone. No, her mom did not make 'goblen' with flowers, and no, her mom was not a housewife. During N.N.'s stay in Berlin, her mom had a variety of precarious jobs next to domestic labor. She had five children with N.N., and 'goblen' was produced by the third child. My mom was the oldest and felt as if she was already a mom.

In our talks, last October, we estimated that N.N. was 'Gastarbeiter' for about six years. Before his final disappearance, he already has been missing for a few weeks. And so, his oldest son has traveled to Berlin. He spoke a bit of French. He managed to find N.N. in a hospital recovering from an accident. A large concrete ceiling has collapsed in front of him.

Disposable Materials

John Berger and Jean Mohr have finalized "A Seventh Man" at the time of N.N.'s last days in Berlin. Browsing through this book has brought me closer to N.N.'s life as a migrant worker. The intention of the book was announced in 'A Note to the Reader':

To outline the experience of the migrant worker and to relate this to what surrounds him – both physically and historically – is to grasp more surely the political reality of the world.

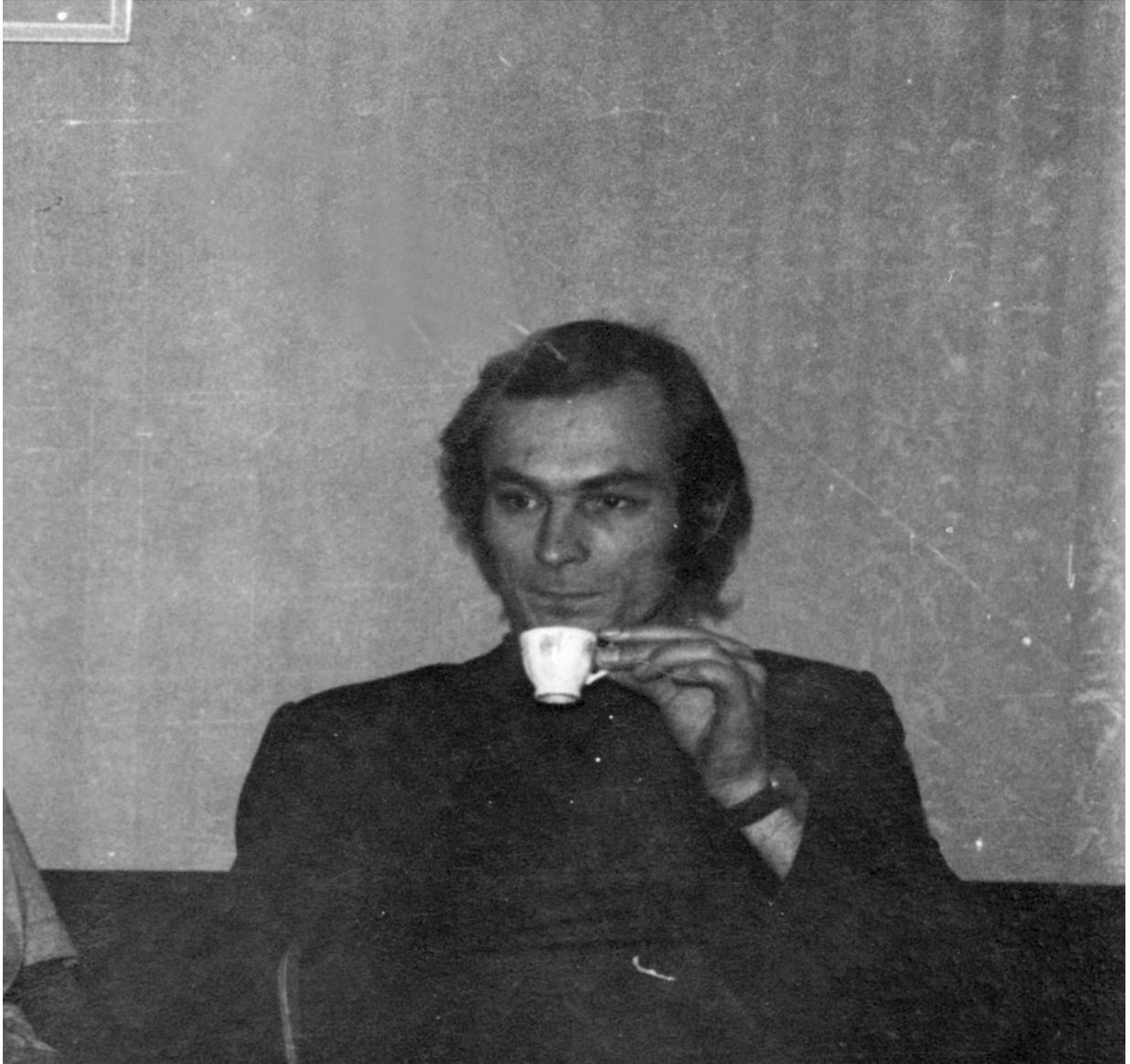
In his preface, added in 2010, Berger writes that the first publication was neglected or not taken seriously in West Europe. On the other hand, it was intimately read in the Global South and the countries where the migrant subjects came from. He notes that the book resembles a family album in a way that consists of short sequences and puzzle pieces of life stories. However, later in the book, he is aware that migrant workers do not talk about the details of their life abroad. He also knows that the family albums contain pre-selected moments, a mix of staged portraits and spontaneous celebrations, smiles and toasts. I bet there is no photograph of solitary life of a 'Gastarbeiter' included in any family album. The montages of glimpses of every day serve to confirm the positive identity of a family.

Berger's book is rough testimony of all stages of migrant existence. Exceptionally hard, I find the scenes of recruitment procedures. The bodies of the potential workers are measured, tested, and processed like cattle. There is a similarity to military recruitment. However, the soldiers are reshaped as patriots to proudly serve as disposable materials in times of war. Thus, family albums include photographs of happy soldiers. Berger's record contains the scandal of degradation of nameless migrant's lives.

*

At the end of 1974, the oldest son went for the second time to look for N.N. Then, after the new year, he stayed a bit longer to regulate his father's funeral in Berlin. Last time we talked about this, he smoothly switched to the anecdotes of travel with his friends to Paris. Many issues regarding N.N. in Berlin remain obscure. I am curious about the buildings on which he worked, in particular those consisting of large concrete ceilings. A lot of buildings in Berlin look massive to me. I took a sample at the entrance of a passage with the sign of Saturn. It belongs to a relatively recent shopping mall, not far from my hallucinations – noted on May 24 – around the former Ministry of Aviation.

0c



Jun 1

Moving Image (0c)

At the beginning of N.N.'s employment as 'Gastarbeiter', the Yugoslavian filmmaker Želimir Žilnik is in Berlin to receive the Golden Bear award. Four years later, in 1973, the severe 'communist' censorship shifts Žilnik back to Germany. In exile, he produces a series of films concerning 'Gastarbeiter' existence. He gets also noticed by the 'liberal' censorship. In 1976 he was denied the visa extension.

N.N.'s mind, I guess, was not on the spot to catch these 'fancy' cultural-politics.

*

The husband of mom's sister has recently sent me a bunch of old snapshots. He is an unofficial family photographer now busy with digitalizing old photos. Among the pictures, I have detected an unknown face. N.N. was not a part of our old family album. I was told his eyes were of a different color, something evident in the two unknown ID photos. The portrait of a young soldier, in particular, resembled the face of N.N.'s oldest son.

In Berlin, my work table is covered with dark green leather-like material. It looks like a school board. It is the table to make a chalk drawing. To refamiliarise myself with N.N.'s face, I drew first his son's face. The result is not great. Anyhow, a forensic sketch is always an attempt. I have erased it and drew over the traces. It was another failure. A part of my effort to animate the memory that escapes the limits of 'my tribe'.

*

I tend to forget that for many years I did not drink coffee. Anything that would resemble coffee would remind me of cultural rituals to which I wished not to belong. After escaping from family and the collapsing 'communist' state, life was supposed to feel free.

N.N.'s son is holding 'finčan' (or 'fildžan'). The little cup with coffee resonates some of the Byzantine pasts and other locally related empires: Ottoman and Habsburg. His Paris and Berlin times are behind, and he does not have plans to revisit these places.

*

Two additional coffee statements from a diary of person revisiting Paris and Berlin:

1. *After Paris, nothing is more reassuring than the sight of a Berliner enjoying a coffee on a terrace on a beautiful summer day - he and his coffee, that's the absolute!*

2. *Whether in Paris or Berlin, I have not had a single cup of coffee, however small, that was 'real', 'ordinary' - and that did not emerge from the abyss in an infinite Void.*

(From Witold Gombrowicz's "Paris-Berlin Diary", 1966)

0d



N



1a



Jun 8

Tiergarten Fairytales

In the years zero, I used to visit Berlin. Each time I did not go too far from my sleeping place. This is how I never got to Tiergarten. Now I am every day there, a short walk from the residency. This gardened wilderness was retraced in "Berlin Childhood around 1900" by exiled Walter Benjamin. It is his compilation of recollections that intimately remap pre-nazi Berlin. In here, Tiergarten is inaugurated as a testing ground for the surrealist way of getting lost in the city. Similar unplanned strolling through the urban landscape is later practiced as the art of 'dérive' in the streets of post-war Paris.

The way into this labyrinth, which was not without its Ariadne, led over the Bendler Bridge, whose gentle arch became my first hillside... Benjamin's recollections still walk around some of the royal personalities of Tiergarten. These are the faces and snouts one revisits when in the park. In translation 'animal garden', Tiergarten was a part of the vast hunting grounds, the exclusive property of the family Hohenzollern. It is the dynasty that has made Prussia significant and robust, the cornerstone of future Germany.

One of the first Hohenzollerns to take care of his peoples' welfare was Frederick the Great. For instance, he has introduced potatoes to help feed his domains. The healthy new subjects were needed to be born, to defend and enlarge the nation to come. The Great was an educated man, an admirer of art, philosophy, music, and French culture in general. In contrast, the activities that relaxed his father were exercises of manhood, such as maneuvers of his collected 'giants', beer-drinking sessions, and hunting. After his father's death, it was Frederick's great pleasure to redesign Tiergarten as the large public park. Still today, this is the biggest oasis in the city – there are both joggers and slow walkers, and others in need of a green tranquility shot.

In Tiergarten, among hopping wild bunnies, occasionally, one might land in the lap of the family Hohenzollern. Perhaps not the most comfortable place. Frederick had a traumatizing relation with his royal father, indeed. It culminated early by the execution of Frederic's lover, the officer with whom he attempted an escape to England. A few steps from bombed and burned Tiergarten, two-three centuries later, another supremely maniacal father got stuck in a rabbit hole. He was plotting the details of suicide. The authority gazing from the concrete wall of his tiny underground office was the portrait of Frederick the Great.

*

In the introduction map, the eastern point of the 'German triangle' will be marked as 1a. While looking for traces of mom's lost father, I have landed here at sensitive hereditary grounds. Or, I am parked at the same unresolved issue pulsating underneath one's feet at each of the three points: in Berlin, in Balkans, and in The Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Here (was) an attempt to condense the content of a present-day fairytales:

To rule modern society by a private dynasty seems retarded idea. Yet, at peak times, the neoliberals are bending. The storm is now substantial at the transits of the former Byzant. However, the restoration of the lost domains calls for a decisive authority. Every day people anywhere will not question the purpose of 'bread and circuses'. The intruders – the evident others and the ambiguous ones – are marked (...) among hopping bunnies again.

F



Jun 24

Modern Tiergartens

Until the age of photography, the ruling classes were composing large-sized family albums by assigning painters. In turn, their portraits have marked the historical periods. Relatively recently, the capture of individual faces is democratized by the new media. The commoners were included in archives of history through the mediation of technologies of mass reproduction. Simultaneously, the easy capture of individual faces has eased the biopolitical regulation of populations. The explorations of codependent selfies now feed the newest face-processing tools. When the possibilities of data-based portraiture are accelerating, the suspense of the future needs a moment of retrospective.

*

While biking along the corner of the flea market in Amsterdam, in the shadow of so-called Stopera - or the 1980s city hall build on the ruins of the Jewish district - I have spotted a colorful detail. A face gazing. From the asphalt, I have picked up the biography of Frederick the Great. I suspected that he might be related to my new project. It is one of the books I took for a closer look in Berlin. Unsurprisingly, the biography contains decadent affairs and fairytale-like extravagances. After all, it regards the lifestyle of the royal family.

The book opens with the curious notification regarding Frederick's two older brothers. Both died as babies: one after his baptism with a massive crown that was put on his head; the other withered away after the cannons announcing his birth were fired too close to his cradle. The episodes of Fredrick's upbringing follow. As he was *a thin, slender boy whose face was nothing but two big blue eyes*, it wasn't easy to reshape him into the ruler of the expanding kingdom.

The evolution of German dominance among competing European nations happened to be at its core business of a succession of various Frederick's, or, to be more precise, Hohenzollern's dynasty. The territories of the kingdom were de facto enlarged family gardens, a patchwork of multi-cultural pockets in need of constant care. The defense and maintenance of the new borders demanded homogenization of subjected people. In contrast, the royals amid their competitions and territorial wars were exchanging marriage partners across the borders. However, the excessive limitation of the 'blue blood' participants meant that they made a significant international but a relatively small inbreeding family.

Today, the codependency between the identity of a people and its desired weeding gardeners seems intact. The acceptance of a decisive autocrat is most evident in oligarchies across Eastern Europe, but also on the surface of the modern American dream. Over there, the new style of governance is an ongoing four-year spectacle: mediagenic scandals revitalize the magic of autocratic extravagance. Regularly fed by the semi-religious rallies, these are the rituals of 'bread and games' provided by the king caretaker. What might seem funny to a distant observer is the demonstration of adoration and loyalty to the master. The ordinary mortals who make resentful crowds long to be weeded from: scary aliens, sneaky intellectuals, fake journalists, bad artists, and other traitors.

T#1



Jun 29

Treasures

Last year I interviewed the five of N.N.'s children at their homes, in Banja Luka, and at a location near Ljubljana. It is a complicated sequence, not yet adequately processed. The following selection relates to the 'crime' mentioned on May 27 in the quote of Simone de Beauvoir.

In the conversation with my mom, or his eldest daughter, N.N.'s life path appears to be marked by a legend of his father, who, before his birth, disappeared in the First World War. N.N.'s decision to leave to work as a 'Gasterarbeider' in Berlin did not seem alien either. He ran away from his family home at the age of twelve. Soon after, he got employed as an apprentice by an Austrian carpenter. The carpenter played the role of substitute father, and he learned N.N. the German language.

*

In the conversation with his eldest son, in Banja luka, I was told that after participating in the struggle against German occupation, N.N. resigned from his officer position. In the new socialist Yugoslavia, he planned to open a carpentry shop. For the veteran partisan to chose entrepreneurship was the ideologically wrong move. The two prison detentions, next to constant relocations of N.N.'s family, followed the series of business downturns. Finally, he departed to Berlin in 1968.

*

Little is known about the person from whom N.N. inherited his name. N.N. senior arrived as a child, around 1900, to the new territories of the Austro-Hungarian empire: Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was part of the emigration from Galicia, the most eastern colony of that same empire. Since diasporic subjects are keen on preserving cultural identity, N.N. senior married a girl of the same background. It is believed that he worked as a carpenter. Then, he was recruited by the Austro-Hungarian army and sent to war in Galicia.

*

In the interview with his eldest daughter, or my mom, I realized that N.N.'s mom wasn't exactly waiting for her husband to return from the war. She got involved with a local guy who escaped the army. Since she was pregnant, N.N. needed first to be born before she could remarry with her lover. It was only after N.N. himself disappeared in Berlin that his daughters tried to reconstruct the details of his mom's love affair. They suspected that N.N.'s father might not be the man whose name he inherited.

*

In my interview with his youngest son, in Slovenia, the idea that N.N.'s name and surname did not match with his biological father was doubted. In the meantime, I had new evidence. My girlfriend, who worked at a DNA sequencing company, has arranged the DNA test for me. Since both of my father's parents were also coming from Galicia, the analysis showed most of my genes matching this particular region of nowadays Ukraine. The rest was unspecifically designated as the Greek-Balkan thread.

B



M





July 5

Almost there

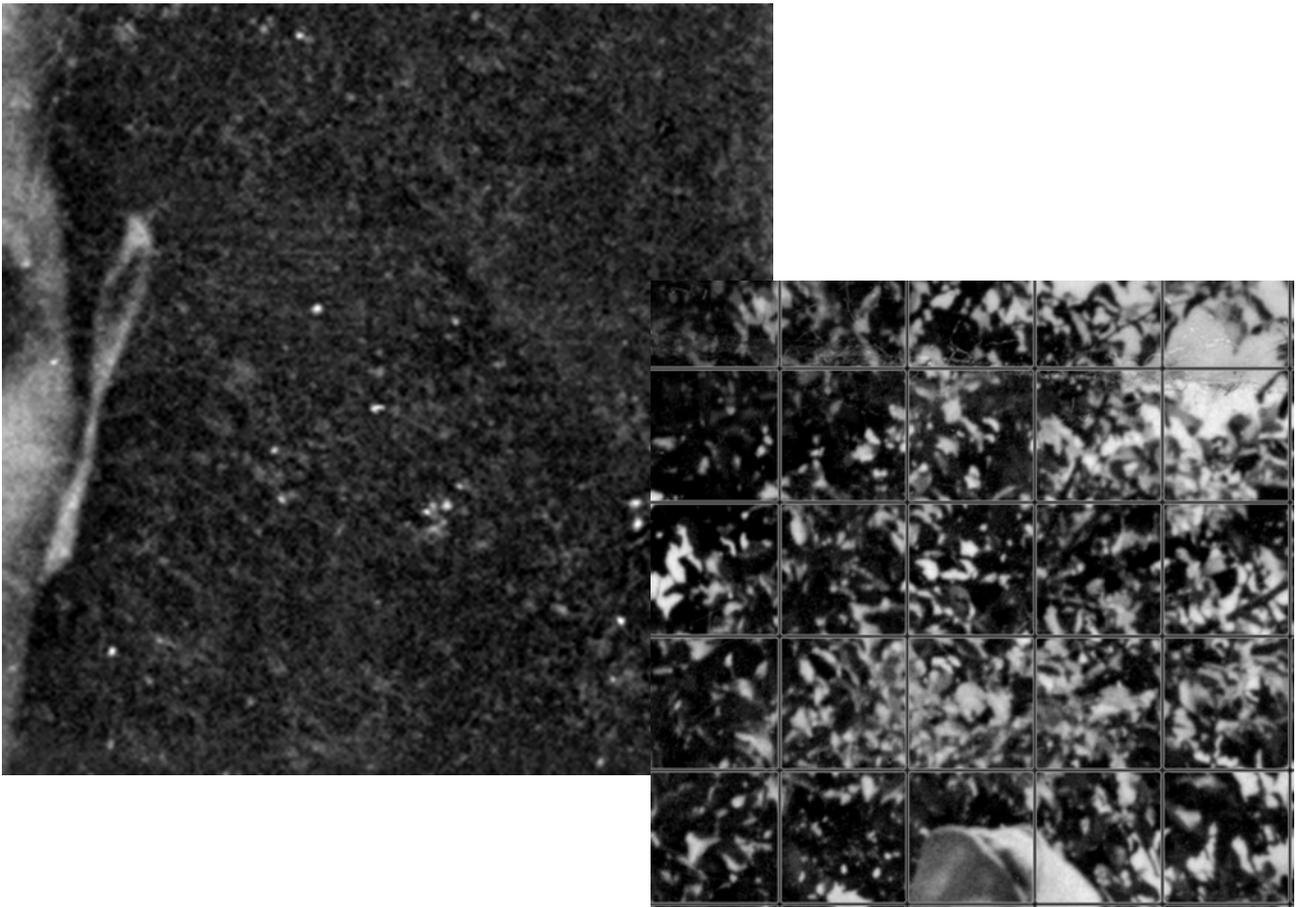
I observe mom's brother digging in his documents, searching for the traces of N.N. In the cupboard shelf slightly above his head there are piles horizontally stacked on top of each other. He pulls out folders, then pushes them back. A piece of chicken is on my plate. I lean sidewise and whisper to the woman next to me.

My mom is now sitting next to her brother. We are six persons at the table. With a smile, I send the piece of the chicken to rejoin other not eaten wings and drumsticks in the middle of the table. The pumpkin dish was superb – I compliment our host sitting opposite, the wife of mom's brother. The other two people have arrived from Slovenia to see me after my absence of five years. They are mom's younger sister and her husband, the unofficial family photographer.



On the walls, there are three paintings made by Nikolina, the oldest granddaughter of mom's brother. These are two studies of architectural space and one portrait of a young woman. We lunch in a flat with a panoramic view of Banja Luka. The flat is built in the 1980s on the first step of a hill entering the city.

Sometimes I remember my father carry me as a child under this hill. While writing this, I notice that angle from which I view this memory is slightly above our heads. We are in the parking lot under the flat. It is midnight illuminated by yellow street lights. As he holds me, he stumbles and falls on his knee. There was one last step before the car. This accident did not wake me up. His knee never recovered.



Not far from Banja Luka is a cottage around which mom's brother grows an orchard with pear trees.

Before lunch, I am sitting on the couch under the paintings. My father used to sit there while getting drunk on pear-brandy. I would often fall asleep in another room after playing with my cousin. Father would carry me downstairs, from the fourth floor to our family car parked under the flat. Behind the flat and its hill is an unknown world. I requested him once to drive me over there, to see what is behind the hill. Then I learned him to whisper. He was sick and soon after died. Ten years or ten days of agony.

After my third pear-brandy, I inquire about the missing close-up of two horses. One in front of another, the horses used to gaze at the guests from the wall. I thought it was a black and white photograph. Mom's brother instantly recalls his Italian friend who made this drawing of horses. After a short personality sketch, I picture him as a Renaissance master. During the last civil war, among many others, he was designated to be systematically abused until he left the city's territory.



The hill in front of Banja Luka is named after a family of landowners. At its footnote, I have reopened the issue of N.N.'s times in Berlin. A man without territorial claims, or just a homeless person. Mom's sister, out of nothing, declares that the current 'Tsar of the Northeast' is taking good care of his people. The seconds of disorientating silence follows. I add: His daughter is okay in the Netherlands, that's for sure. The husband of mom's sister cements the leftover awkwardness: Ah, she is the one that does acrobatic rock&roll.

Our unofficial family photographer and archivist has recently sent me the pictures I might not have seen. And so I encountered N.N.'s face for the first time – uncanny and familiar. Included was the selection of the last two decades of family gatherings that I missed. It is a disquieting sequence, a very different series from the pictures I previously collected. Everyone was abruptly older, digitally deformed, or in other ways unfamiliar.

The last time at the hill step, slightly above Banja Luka, no one was taking pictures.

T#2



August 20

Tiergarten @ the small table

Looking at the photo projection: his eyes, one brighter than the other. What else? Dark hair - I recall his daughter remembering it as too rough to caress. Wide nostrils, I would say like in a horse. Did he have time to walk in the Tiergarten (with half-closed eyelids sniffing certain scents, a mixture of herbs, water, stones, bark,...)?

Meanwhile, the only creature that looked at me while walking at the Tiergarten was a hunting horse. I met this sculpture at the avenue in between Spanish embassy (build in 1938) and Siegestsäule (relocated in 1939). Most of the Tiergarten's monuments are still marked by the 'time of svastika'. Except for trees – the ones planted before 1945 do not exist.

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It seems that the reproduction of the conditions of life requires a permanent effort. [The] failure to maintain harmonious existence reveals the fragility of the cosmos. [The forces of chaos] invasions, wars, revolutions, epidemics... [and] fear of entropy makes us [distressed] ... Of course, the people at the top present ['chaos'] and ['barbarism'] as the ultimate and undesirable alternative to the status quo.

[This] is truly a strange story. In fact,... it [assumes] that some animals are really inclined... to observe a law. Were it not for wise police measures, the world would cease to be intelligible and... the night would fall; sweet, human-like animals would be displaced by maddened, barbaric [monkeys]. Human-horses would transform into ape-horses. They would cease to care about keeping order, and,... still less would they 'kneel before the king'.

However, the initially 'good' [- law sensitive -] horse... goes mad and becomes an absurd [& suicidal] animal. There is no place for him in this glorious police world... He is doomed to become an outcast, since he has come to know something that he should not have known, according to his rank. Perhaps it would have been better for him to put his trust in the human,... in his stableman, but he was doomed all the same.

From the book 'The History of Animals: A Philosophy', by Oxana Timofeeva (2018)