

Jana BEŇOVÁ

Enter

Migration. Emigration. Tourism. Crowds of people, especially in summer, people from different countries, nomads wander through the popular places, the cities, towns, hills and lakes. They bring nothing, contribute nothing, but they all want to take something home, at least an experience. Hanibal ante portas! From my point of view, what differentiates tourism from migration is time. Tourists jump from their homes to airports, then from airports to hotels--from one known place to another like frantic squirrels. Sometimes I see them in the evening, exhausted from sightseeing in the streets of my town, hopeless, blind like bats. The town moves them from one place to another like chess pieces. And like those pieces, the tourists don't set the rules.

After the Russian invasion of 1968, my country regressed back to old fashioned communist rules and closed our borders. Citizens were not permitted to leave. A rabbit trap? A kheda? A pit fall? Maybe a blind set, a hidden trap on a familiar path, would be the best comparison. Migration, which I see as a semi-permanent move, a move you can return from, was no longer possible. Only emigration--to leave and never return. To step through the iron curtain meant never coming home again--at least to a home that was not prison. The president of socialist Czechoslovakia said: Enough is enough, our borders are not a promenade! This sentence stayed on people's minds for generations.

In Bratislava, capitol of Slovakia, only 60 kilometres from Vienna, capitol of Austria, people would stand on the bridge crossing the Danube and look at the hills and castle in Hainburg, the town closest to the Slovak-Austrian border, and 15 kilometres from Bratislava. Elderly people told stories to the youth about the tram which in the past connected those two cities. Romantic stories that to those youth must have had a hint of science fiction to them, they were so unbelievable.

Now, when I ride my bike from Bratislava to Hainburg, simply following the river, I often think about the president of Czechoslovakia and his efforts to control the borders, and while passing the place where the border had been, without any interruption or stop, I stick my tongue out at him: yes, borders are a promenade, made to walk, ride, fly, or swim through.

I have heard stories about people from Bratislava who left the country and ended up, for example, in Canada. But when homesickness struck, they would travel to Hainburg, climb Braunsberg hill and look from there at Bratislava Castle. It was as far as they could go. Still, the best feature, maybe the only good feature, of the iron curtain was its transparency. People who had left could still return home with their eyes.

I am fond of this song, which seems to me to encapsulate that feeling. About migration, travelling and seeing landscapes, towns and countries on someone's behalf.

The title is *Air Mail*.

I have got your letter with its joyful message.

in the envelope blue-marked AIR MAIL.

"I climbed the highest mountain of the country," - you have written.

*I thank you. 5 days of climbing in sun, snow
and sharp blue air*

*you were standing up there on my behalf
looking into the dizzying lively sparkling depths*

- the way AIR MAIL - you were looking there a long time on my behalf.

Now, when Hainburg has become the destination of my trips, my walks and bike rides, who am I there? A tourist? A migrant? An emigrant? I am simply me. The country is what changes, the border migrating into my own land.

My first migration, though, took me to the United States. I visited my uncle and his family, and lived with them for 3 months. It was my first time so far away for any length of time, alone without my parents or my friends. I read Dostojevski *Crime and Punishment* and took care of my 3-year-old cousin.

He and I learned English together! I was a bit lonesome, but it made me focus on myself. When I look back now, I think it was a time of great change for me, sixteen years old in a completely foreign country. And I believe it is having that time and circumstance for personal change and development that also differentiates tourism from migration. Time to travel and discover. Do some sightseeing on the inside, explore the inner life.

Inside. Insight. To find rivers and notice the backwaters. To see the nice views, but also awkward and pretentious places. To walk *in* not just *around*. Enter.