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Welcome To Your Worst Nightmare

I went to Morocco for fourteen days when I was a twentysomething and fell in love with the country. I read *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles and learnt that Port Moresby (here the hero, otherwise the place my parents lived in for three years in Papua New Guinea) defines himself as a traveler, not a tourist. "The desert was too powerful an entity not to lend itself to personification." I planned to go back for years.

I was delighted to hear that the International Writing Program was hosting a gathering of writers and artists in Morocco in the form of a Souk Ukaz, a regional tradition of intellectual exchange. I worked as a tour guide for two seasons on the river Danube; the job and the experience became central topics of the novel I am currently writing. I loved being guided this time, especially by the official Moroccan local guides, who are very far from politically correct and see a lot of things through rose-colored glasses. According to Momo, who accompanied us most of the time on the trips, there is no poverty in Morocco (even when some guys asked me a couple of times for my sneakers so that they'd finally have one pair of shoes); women love to do all the housework; nobody ever wants to escape from the country (over the second half of the 20th century, Morocco has evolved into both one of the world's leading emigration countries and a transit and immigration hub for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.)

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One of our hosts was a shy and friendly millionaire in Fez. After a delicious lunch in his huge hotel, he ran his finger along the patterns of dazzling mosaics. Then he served us traditional Moroccan mint tea and his friend Faouzi Skali, a writer and scholar, talked about Sufi culture and the unique Fez Sufi Festival. The intimate lodge was a temple of marble, carved cedar wood, chiseled plaster, calligraphic inscriptions – and some Kartell chairs.

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My hotel room had no glass at the windows and was open to the terrace on one side. The breeze rushed into the bedroom every morning, sending the curtains into an unchoreographed dance. I stumbled through them and stepped barefoot onto the icy marble in my bathroom. The whole house seemed unnecessarily vast. The unraveling inside and the chant of the muezzin filled the cloudless sky above the city. I did not forget my earplugs.

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Eliot Weinberger from New York City, writer, editor and translator (Jorge L. Borges, Octavio Paz, Bei Dao) wearing a fez, the cap of scholars. His Jewish father from Bosnia used to have a similar one before he left for the USA in 1912. Eliot is very smart, but also down to earth, which is not always the case among people of his reputation. We had a nice conversation about Vítězslav Nezval, the Czech modernist. Eliot loves, as do I, *Abeceda*, Nezval's collection of poems illustrated by Karel Teige.

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Most internet cafés in Morocco only have Arabic keyboards. The cure for all Facebook addicts.

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I was the only one in the group who ate outside a lot, not in the restaurants, but at street vendors', listening to people. The men's laughter gained volume after each punch line, and the girls' smiles, flashed at them sporadically from across the table, fired their momentum. The yellow striped tablecloth a canvas for the kebabs that would arrive from the kitchen along with too many cats. On the trays, I thought, lie this country's aspirations as well as its demise, its desire for cosmopolitanism and its refusal to see itself for what it has become. The price of the dishes was different every day, depending perhaps on what I was wearing.

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Storks build their nests on the remaining Romans columns of Volubilis. A couple of weeks later they depart for middle Europe for the summer. Two thousand years ago this was the most remote outpost of the Roman Empire. On the other side of the world it reached Trenčín in my home country, Slovakia. Archaeological excavations continue.

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The town of Sefrou had for centuries a vibrant Jewish community. In the 1970s nearly all of its Jewish population emigrated to the USA, Israel and beyond. Only a lone cemetery and a synagogue endure.

"Please, can you tell us some details on why they all left?" I asked Momo, our dear local guide.

"You know – the idea of the promised land..." he said and quickly changed the topic. The abandoned school next to the synagogue is one of the saddest places on Earth. "Take a good look. This is the future of books," Mr. Weinberger said.

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Moulay Idriss, a small town near Meknes, is named after Moulay Idriss el Akhbar, a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad. For centuries it has been a site of pilgrimage for the poor and sick, just as Mecca is for those generally rich and healthy. Five times Moulay Idriss equals one Mecca. Entry to the tomb is forbidden to non-Muslims, of course – a rule devised by the French, we were told... Momo could go in, I had to stay outside.

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“The city aboundeth in all manner of provision fit for man or beast,” wrote the Scottish traveller William Lithgow in the early 1600s about Fez.

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In my essay, I decided to write about a city most guests of the Souk Ukaz have probably never heard of. Or maybe they know its other names. Bratislava... anyone?

Many ancient European cities have disappeared over time, usually due to natural factors: earthquakes, economic upheaval or the drying-up of water supplies. Although these phenomena were significant, the underlying reason for their decline was often moral or spiritual.

But modern towns and cities have also disappeared, like Pripjat in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. With the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, nearly forty times more fallout was released than had been by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It resulted in the evacuation and resettlement of over 335,000 people. It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of deaths caused by the events at Chernobyl, as the Soviet-era cover-up made it difficult to track down victims.

There are lots of websites dedicated to capturing the beauty and character of abandoned modern cities, dark ghost towns, zones of alienation, empty high-rises, silent and deserted amusement parks and decaying Ferris wheels. It comes as no surprise that many of these websites are in Russian.

Bratislava also disappeared, but more metaphorically than physically. The city vanished for forty years after the Second World War, together with the term ‘Central Europe’. Nobody spoke of Bratislava in the present tense. And the very word Mitteleuropa survived only as a ghostly Mitropa in the dining cars of German Railways.

The idea of Central Europe continued to be cherished by writers such as Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Péter Esterházy, Joseph Brodsky and Czeslaw Milosz, but it vanished completely from the public sphere in the West. Post-Yalta Europe accepted the dichotomy and all parts of historic Central, East Central, and South-Eastern Europe fell under the label “Eastern Europe”, which basically meant “under Soviet domination”. For Bratislava this was almost a means to an end.

I'm delighted to be here in Eastern, I mean Central Europe," said Henry Kissinger in the summer of 1990 in Warsaw. And for the rest of his talk he kept saying, "Eastern, I mean Central Europe." At that moment Central Europe was finally back and I knew Bratislava could triumphantly return to the map of Europe as well.

One hundred years ago Bratislava had so many names that not even the natives could remember the right one. For the Slovak minority it was Prešporok, for the German and Hungarian minorities Pressburg or Pozsony. But none of these is my favourite name. I love to call my hometown the Wilson City, the name it kept just for few months in the end of 1918. This was to commemorate American President Woodrow Wilson's support for the creation of the state of Czechoslovakia. Like Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the future president of the new country, Wilson was fighting for a Central Europe of small states liberated from German, Austrian, and Russian imperial domination.

The very idea of Wilson City, acknowledged as an open and free multinational city, is fascinating and very much alive for contemporary Europe, hopelessly searching for a common identity or constitution. The inhabitants of Wilson City did not want to become part of Czechoslovakia based on the idea of just one nation. Many different nationalities and cultures were making their home in my city, including Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Czechs, and Croats. Wilson City was a good chance with bad timing. Before the war, the city enjoyed a sharp growth in industrial production, spurred primarily by the arrival of modern transportation. It also experienced a population boom and had a great connection to the very essence of the city – the river Danube. The proposal to keep Wilson City alive was rejected by the negotiating powers and the isolated island suffered from a chronic lack of supplies and inflationary prices. There was a short war in the city and the invasion of the army. We lost...

The Austro-Hungarian Empire had been dissolved only half a year before, and on March 27, 1919, my city was officially renamed Bratislava and made the capital of the Province of Slovakia. The new name Bratislava was artificially created by new city officials to sound Slavic; it was adapted from the surnames Bracislav, Brecislav or Břetislav. This sounded similar to the truly historical source Brecisburg, from the medieval German chronicle written almost a thousand years ago (1042). All it needed was a grammatically feminine form marked by the final 'a' – Bratislava. Just as was the case with its past names, the city too suffered, first after the collapse of the Eastern, Tartar-Turkish hegemony, later in the collapse of the Austro-German hegemony from the West, and once again when it returned into the Eastern hegemony, this time of the Slavic, and later the Soviet/ Russian kind.

Karl Kraus once said that the Orient begins at Südbahnhof, the train station in Vienna from where south- and east-bound trains depart. It took a long time to explain to foreign newspaper readers and international TV audiences where Bratislava really is.

"The only thing I know about Slovakia is what I learned first-hand from your secretary of foreign affairs," George Bush told a proud Slovak journalist – shortly after meeting the prime minister of Slovenia.

For forty years, western Europeans hardly noticed the difference between Prague, Budapest, Kiev or Vladivostok. For them, Siberia literally started at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin.

The most unusual detail about Bratislava is its geography. The city lies directly on the east-west seam that has held the calm and the turbulent Europe together for centuries. Only one hour away from Vienna, two from Budapest and three from Prague – so how is it possible that Bratislava almost disappeared?

Tens of thousands of Jews were forced to leave between 1941 and 1944. Most of them died in Nazi Concentration Camps. The few survivors left the country after the Communist Putsch in February 1948. The Pressburg Germans had to leave in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In the late 1970s, the Czechoslovak historian Ján Mlynárik, writing under the pseudonym Danubius, began a fascinating and controversial discussion in Prague when he argued that the expulsion of the Germans by the non-communist Czechoslovak government was itself an inhuman and totalitarian act, a path breaker for the Stalinist dictatorship to come. By the beginning of the Cold War, Bratislava had suddenly developed an almost completely new population, mostly from the rural countryside. Just as a teenager, during the struggle against his parents, adopts their most distinctive traits, Bratislavians became villagers during their struggle against their roots in the former village life – in the new city environment.

Bratislava's compact city centre was cut open by utopian socialist plans in the 1950s and 60s, destroying a part of its Jewish and German heritage, and replacing them by the symbols of the industrial modernist capitalism. The city policy had been deformed by the global competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, capitalism and communism, East and West. Vienna, just a decade ago connected by the S-Bahn C, was after 1950 lost behind the Iron Curtain for what seemed like forever to my parents. To a child Austria remained only the dream of hallucinatory, glamorous TV shows and noisy radio rock & pop stations, their signals constantly interfered with by communist censors.

The centres of Vienna and Bratislava are roughly sixty-five kilometres apart, the city borders about thirty-five kilometres apart. Depending on the perspective of the observer, they are two foreign planets or else an agglomeration connected by a river landscape.

Today, twenty years after the peaceful Velvet Revolution of November 1989, what else do we know? Above all, we know more about the consequences. We can now say that these events had results that place 1989 beside 1789 as a significant date in world history. For my city, it brought about a much hoped for, a fundamental change.

In 1993, Bratislava suddenly became the capital of the new Slovak republic, and ten years later it was a boomtown. Bratislava joined the European Union and Schengen Treaty as the vibrant capital of one of the most progressive countries in central Europe.

This unexpected status shift took Bratislava by surprise. Suddenly everybody was talking about a futuristic vision of the Twin City, a union with the foreign

neighbour Vienna. There's really never been a better time to visit my city. But the closer one gets to the Twin City, the greater the sense of distance. A lot of Viennese have never even been to Bratislava. In the south and west, the city border is also the national border and increasing numbers of capital city dwellers are moving abroad when they move into the green outskirts, to Hungary's Rajka, or Austria's Kittsee or Wolfsthal. They don't have far to go from there and real estate is surprisingly cheaper.

After the fall of the communism, investment companies, project developers and speculators streamed in and the city government didn't know how to deal with them. The city's master plan did not specify maximum building heights. With the help of a bribe, project developers could easily get a building permit allowing them to build wherever they wanted, as long as they remained out of the historical centre.

Meanwhile, the international skyscraper fan group discovered Bratislava, or Little Big City, as the new city headline describes it. A new wave of neighbourhoods such as River Park, Three Towers, Vienna Gate, South City, The Port and Central Europe Valley are casting for a total of more than 80,000 residents. Yet Bratislava's population is only 425,000; it hasn't grown since the change of political systems.

The vertical yearnings are noticeable. By around 2012, there will be about forty high rises in Bratislava and the tallest ones will be east of the historical centre, shooting up in the industrial wastelands. This is the rise of a Central European Dubai, a Manhattan on the Danube.

Bratislava's construction boom in modernist industrial fields has given rise to a spectrum of fast-track solutions for erecting a number of corporate buildings. High-rises show how effectively and permanently contemporary architecture can enter such post-industrial urban situations.

The Slovakian Tourist Board hymns "the explosive development of the city and the opening of five major shopping centres within the past few years". Thanks to cheap flights and alcohol, and its picturesque streets granted über-cool status by the Tarantino-backed movie *Hostel*, Bratislava is the most happening weekend hotspot and the new party capital of Europe. More and more tourists trip up and down its cobbled streets in various stages of drunkenness between bars and strip clubs. I love the tagline of *Hostel*: Welcome To Your Worst Nightmare. Director Eli Roth had to apologise to the city for depicting its men as killer maniacs and its women as the most promiscuous on the planet Earth.

Bratislava makes itself easy for modern visitors: it has fitted itself out with an up-to-date wardrobe. The reconstruction of the historical heart of the city is almost complete and preparations for the next phase have begun: refurbishing post-war expansions around the center.

Unbridled capitalism and an obsession with consumerism are visible everywhere. Most of the high buildings are covered with advertisements measuring hundreds of square meters: billboards, wall paintings, banners; they cover walls, but just as often they are stretched across windows. Hotel Kyjev takes the cake with an advertising banner of at least two thousand square meters. When you sleep in your

hotel room, all you see of the city is a small detail of the mobile phone or the knee of the supermodel in the picture.

Bratislava is now famed not just for its crystal, porcelain and wooden toys, but most of all for its beautiful twentysomethings with award-winning long legs and high cheekbones, and its ultra-alcoholic drinks like Slivovica, Demänovka or Borovička.

Sometimes I ask my friends in Partyslava if they can name a single bar for me that is more than fifteen years old. Most of them can't think of one.

What is Bratislava's relationship with the countryside? Suburbanisation? How to deal with the relics of socialism – keep them standing, or demolish them? Is there a way to stop the endless commercialism? What is the identity of the city as the youngest capital of European countries? How will the city deal with the first truly globalised crisis of capitalism? Will the year 2009 be to capitalism what 1989 was to communism? Hey man, who cares? You are in the new hedonistic boomtown of paintballing and kart racing, and nights of pub crawls, mud wrestling and roaming the sundry fleshpots!

You are in the car city, with shopping malls open 24/7, and newly found dynamic cafés filled with international pop music! I've never heard so much talk about real estate as in this turbulent place.

My favourite building in Bratislava is, typically very, very new. It is called The House Attack and was created by the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm. It looks as though it crashed down from a heavenly muse: a carefully selected art piece shaped like a common family house with sloped roof, tacky details, and a chimney on top, well, actually, on the bottom. Because the House Attack, a parasite, actually turns the building upside down. And that, it seems to me, is now true of the whole city of Bratislava.

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Paradise is said to have eight doors in the Q'uran.

Thanks to all who made this possible. Shukran. Ďakujem.