Three Memories – Proposal for a book in translation

Original Title: Trije spomini. Med Hajfo, Alepom in Ljubljano

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Title in Translation: Three Memories

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About the Book:

Three Memories tells the story of the Syrian poet Mohamad Al Munem and his Palestinian family, its fortunes, misfortunes and almost unbelievable dramatic twists of fate.

At a time when barbed wire fences were being erected along Slovenia's southern borders, the Syrian publisher and poet Mohamad Al Munem sets out on the dangerous Mediterranean route and reaches Slovenia where he also unexpectedly stays. The poet from Aleppo was born a refugee, his story, documented in *Three Memories*, is not just a story of lively intellectual life in Aleppo but reaches into the period before his birth when his father and mother were forced to leave Palestine. It is the story of his refugee family, its fates and fortunes, but also a book about his friendship with the journalist Andraž Rožman who got to know Mohamad through numerous conversations, learned from him, and eventually became the book's author. It is a book of memories of three towns, Haifa, Aleppo and Ljubljana, a biography of a teacher and a novel about a listener who is becoming a writer.

About the Author:

Andraž Rožman was born in 1983 in Novo mesto and spent most of his life in Mengeš, Slovenia. He has been linked to journalism for almost 15 years and he has always been very attracted to reportages and interviews, and most of all to stories of people whose voice has not yet been heard. Since 2005, he has been working at Dnevnik newspaper. He holds a degree in Journalism from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. In the last few years he has also been working on literary journalism, paying special attention to the literary aspect. The arrival of refugees to Slovenia had a great impact on him and his work. *Three Memories* is his literary debut.

About the Translator:

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Sample Translation

1.
Three Bridges[1]

Mohamad, Karim and I sat on the white leather sofas. The noise from the bar splashed into our world constructing itself from stories. As Mohamad was explaining how the *mukhabarat*, the secret police, worked in Syria, his face darkened. Before this his words had flowed with ease, then he stopped and became more cautious. Glancing across his right shoulder, he gave Karim and me a quizzical, suspicious look. Sitting behind him was a man with a goatee wearing a suit and tie.

We interrupted our discussion and went outside for a cigarette.

"Mohamad, why are you so upset?" I first turned to Karim to continue translating.

"If a stranger is eavesdropping on you, they can report on what they see and hear."

"But you had your back turned towards this man. You don't have eyes on the back of your head so you could see his face."

"I turned round briefly. I can sense when someone is watching me, even if they are behind my back. We're starting on a difficult subject here," Mohamad paused as if thinking whether to continue or to stop talking. He decided to speak, as he usually did in such situations.

"Whenever I sat down in a public pace in Syria, the first thing I did was look round to see whether anyone was watching. I have this paranoia in my blood. It's much reduced now, but the fear has not gone away. I have not quite comprehended yet that I needn't worry about this here. I rely on intuition. Just as I felt about you that you were of no danger to me, I felt the opposite about the stranger in there. I remember the day we met. I could feel your warmth, I could read it from your face."

[1] Beyond the symbolic reference in the title of the opening chapter of this book, the group of three bridges known as Tromostovje (often called the Triple Bridge in English) is one of the most recognisable landmarks in the centre of Ljubljana. Prešeren's Monument, also mentioned in the text, stands in the eponymous square at the northern end of the bridge.

A small part of me wanted to warn Mohamad of the hidden reefs someone revealing their story can run onto. Another part of me fervently hoped that possible dangers would not deter him from the adventure we had already set out on. “I could betray your trust. After all, you are telling me about the secret layers of your life,” I said.

“That could happen. But your face does not show any such thing. As soon as I first saw you, your face appeared *karim*, generous. The *mukhabarat* cannot put on such an expression.”

His last sentence made all three of us laugh.

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Mohamad and I first met in April 2016. I had arranged to meet some students at the Prešeren Monument in order to interview them for a newspaper article I was writing. Mohamad happened to walk past with his roommate Ahmad, also from Syria. They lingered for a while. In the fading afternoon light Mohamad leaned on the balustrade, gazing across the river towards the market, deep in thought. I wished to hear his story. A few minutes later we were already drinking coffee by the river.

There was something about Mohamad that drew me to him, even though we did not talk much as his English was still only very basic at the time. Just the fact that he was a writer attracted my attention. His face too, and his smile. To me, only just starting to meet new friends from war-torn parts of the world, his face seemed to display a certain amount of inexplicable optimism. His deep, raspy, cigarette laugh just added to this impression. I asked myself why I found this so surprising. Should a refugee never be happy? The answer was clear; I was approaching this friendship with prejudice just as we enter into any relationship with prejudice, however much we hate stereotypes and try to convince ourselves about how cosmopolitan we are.

Later, after we had spent hours and days together, I discovered that this cheerfulness was merely a skin, hinting at what lies beneath but I could never have dreamt of its depths. It was joined by a variety of nuances and other characteristics. But it never entirely faded away, regardless of what kind of story he was telling. I did not know whether this was the result of my idealization and fantasies or reality. Even less could I have known that he would allow me to immerse myself in his life.

I was writing stories for the national daily *Dnevnik* about people who had come to Slovenia via the Balkan route[2]. So I asked Mohamad for an interview. He agreed without hesitation. Our conversation did not go into much detail but was enough for a newspaper article entitled *Without Reading There Wouldn't Be Man*[3]. With the help of translators he gave me fragments of stories. Their contents and the enthusiasm in his narrative made me see that this stranger might have something I had long been looking for. I was drawn to his enthusiasm for books and reading. And the sound of the voice that I did not know at the time was not really his. He recited his poem *Conversing With a Rock*. He had written it on the Aegean island of Chios that he reached from the Turkish coast in an overcrowded dinghy.

I asked the rock by the sea,
What are you doing here?
I forge memories to passers-by,
it replied.
What about the sea?
I insisted.
Sometimes I am its nose
and sometimes its eyes that protect those in love,
it said.[4]

He wrote out for me on a piece of paper the names of some of the writers from Aleppo that he was friends with. He explained that he had owned a publishing house in Aleppo and that his favourite poems were those of Mahmoud Darwish… Even then he had told me that he had been imprisoned for printing the wrong book, but asked me not to include that in the article. The new political reality into which he was stepping was unknown to him. He could not rid himself of the idea that the *mukhabarat* were hard on his heels.

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[2] Between September 2015 and March 2016 hundreds of thousands of refugees travelled along the hmanitarian corridor through the Western Balkans towards Northern and Western Europe. Individual countries later began closing their borders for so-called irregular migrants.

[3] *Brez branja ne bi bilo človeka*, article published in the daily newspaper *Dnevnik* 13 April 2016

[4] Translated into English from Mohsen Alhady and Margit P. Alhady's Slovene version of the Arabic original, first read at the literary-musical festival Living Literature (Živa književnost) organised by Škuc (2016).

The thick layer of fear of informants was almost as old as Mohamad himself. He explained about the control Bashar and his father Hafez al-Asad[5] had in Syria. And the institutional discrimination against Sunnis. Syrian society, this historic crossroads of diversity, has always been multicultural. Mohamad claims that in principle there were no troubles between the people of different religions and ethnic groups living together in Aleppo. That divisions were merely political, deliberately initiated by Hafez, and sustained by Bashar al-Asad, bringing restlessness and mistrust to all levels of society.

Thus the ethnic origin of the individual became of consequence in every day life. A naïve question struck me, "How, for example, can an official at some office know whether you are Sunni or Alawite?"[6]

Mohamad laughed briefly, "Control is so widespread that they know for everyone where they are from. I even suspect that they printed some kind of sign on ID cards that showed whether one was Sunni or Alawite."

"What about when you meet a Syrian in Slovenia, do you also know whether he is Sunni or Alawite?"

This time the smile was faint, "I know without even talking to him."

"How is that possible?"

"With all that has happened in Syria, one knows where a person belongs without them opening their mouth. Once they start talking there is no doubt at all. It can be their dialect, a single word they use, the way they think…"

"What do you feel when you meet an Alawite in Slovenia?!"

"I'll only tell you because you are my friend."

He took a shallow breath that sounded like a short sigh, and after pausing for a second or two he began talking, "When I meet an Alawite in Slovenia I do not hate him but I don't feel at ease. Many Alawites that were very close to Sunnis before the war turned against us and always found an excuse for why they were killing us. There is a minority of Alawites that respect us and condemns the killing of innocent people. There have been slaughterers among the Sunnis as well. But they were not in power. What Alawites did to Sunnis was a planned project."

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[5] Hafez al-Asad became president of Syria with a coup d'état in 1970. He was succeeded in 2000 by his son Bashar al-Asad.

[6] Sunnis are numerically the Muslim majority, both in Syria and on a world-wide scale. The Alawites are part of the minority Shia branch. The Asad family are Alawites and this was allegedly one of the reasons Sunnis were discriminated against in Syria.

It was as if I had already heard the echo of the story somewhere along the Balkan route between Greece and Slovenia that Mohamad travelled in the winter of 2016. Just that the words Sunni and Alawite in the other story from our recent past were changed to Serbs, Croats, Bosnians.

"Would it have been different if Sunnis were in power and Alawites the underdog?"

"No. Perhaps it would have been even worse."

For the first time Mohamad reminded me of Botros from the novel *Origins*.[7] At the time I did not know that in reading Amin Maalouf's masterpiece I would often see Mohamad in the character of the Lebanese-French writer's grandfather. I did wonder why I had come across *Origins* at a book fair just at the time I was getting to know him. Mohamad and Amin Maalouf helped me find the answer – encounters. Encounters, not only with people but also with books that determine our path. They both know this. Well, in fact all three of them knew it - Mohamad, Amin and Botros. With them I learned of the extent of the power and metaphysics of encounters.

The teacher Botros who lived in the Lebanese mountains at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from a Catholic branch of the family, the other branch being Christian Orthodox. In the Russo-Japanese War between 1904 and 1905, according to their allegiances, the Orthodox part of the family supported the Russians and the Catholic side the Japanese. But Botros maintained that the Russians were in the right.

Amin Maalouf writes about his grandfather, '*His message to his cousins was that events had to be judged in the light of universal principles and not personal affiliation.*[8] I saw the same principle in Mohamad's explanation of the relationship between Sunnis and Alawites.

With Karim's help, still sitting at the same table in the same bar, we continued our conversation. "You say that you are apprehensive of Alawites, but you do not hate them."

"I always feel threatened because I have the feeling that any Alawite I meet holds power. I can never know for certain who was in fact linked to the System.[9] In Slovenia I can go out for a coffee with an Alawite, tell him all about myself, then he goes and calls the System in Syria and tells them to kill my wife and children. This is what I am afraid of. I don't hate anyone. I am just afraid, that is why I am cautious."

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[7] The novel *Origins* by the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf was published in Slovenia in 2011, translated by Suzana Koncut, whom Mohamad met in Ljubljana and dedicated one of his poems to.

[8] Amin Maalouf, *Origins*, translated from the French by Catherine Temerson, Picador paperback ed., 2009, pg.85

[9] Mohamad calls the Asad regime the System.

One of his experiences that was a result of his Sunni origin was from the early years of the war when he went by bus to Al-Qadmus in the Tartus province to visit his wife Aber's family.

"We were stopped at a checkpoint. The soldier looked at my ID card and knew I was Sunni. He kept asking me what I was doing there. I told him I was on a visit. The soldier replied, 'So people like you come to visit us here, do they?' I told him that my wife was from that village, Aber was afraid they would arrest me. She said, 'He's my husband and I am from here. These are our children.' He took my ID card and only returned it fifteen minutes later, telling me, 'Today I've taken pity on you because she's from round here.' And I asked the soldier, 'Why pity? I'm hardly a murderer?' He threw the ID card in my face, 'Bad enough that you're Sunni.''

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As a Sunni he was born into opposition and remained there all his life. Hiding information from the *mukhabarat* was part of his daily routine, especially considering that he used to print books, often books that the System would not permit.

After he had had it all and lost everything he found himself on Kotnik Street in Ljubljana where for a long time nothing happened. Like most of the other residents at the branch of the asylum centre, he waited, waited and waited for a decision on his asylum application. Much longer than the maximum six months mandatory by law. Months went by, months that were as long as years, a year felt like a decade. As if waiting for rain in the desert, he thought he would never rid himself of the burden of living in the tiny room opposite the old power station. This was a new war he had fallen into without realizing it. The aggressor was bureaucracy.

Occasionally the odd thing happened that broke the monotony, though sometimes it worried Mohamad. A social worker kept telling him that he would not have his asylum approved were he to visit the Rog Factory[10]. Mohamad took the threat seriously, remembering the terror that control stirs in a person. This was early on, soon after he arrived on Kotnik Street, when the fear of conspiracy and informants was still obstinate. So for months he did not dare visit Rog where people could go any time and choose, in the spirit of solidarity, how to organise

[10] A squat in Ljubljana where a number of collectives operate, among them also a community centre for migrants and refugees.

their activities. Months later the fear had faded and Mohamad became a regular visitor to the former tannery and bicycle factory.

It all, however, began far away from Kotnik Street and the Rog Factory.

(…)

18.

An End Without Conclusion

An approaching end often awakens a certain anxiety, regardless of whether what is ending is bitter or sweet. Especially if the pattern that is disappearing had previously been solid. But after an end comes a beginning.

Before the end there was Carol's anguish. And evenings when I would meet up with Mohamad so his story could come to light. And the end of Ahmad's suffering was on the horizon a number of times but something always became complicated. The legal battle in which the Ministry of the Interior would not relent was long and fierce. In the end Slovenia was unable to send him back to Croatia because it had missed all the deadlines. This was Ahmad's victory. I did think it was somewhat pyrrhic, for they made him wait a long time without even beginning to process his asylum request and he was becoming weaker and weaker. He had been in Slovenia just a few months short of three years[11].

He still came to the Rog Embassy every morning, to open up the place. Then he made a coffee, lit a cigarette and set up his barber's stand. Whenever it was warm enough, he would bring the table out into the yard, place his scissors and shaver on it and set up a stand for the mirror next to it. Then he sat on the chair and waited for customers. Only rarely did anyone come to him for a trim. The enthusiasm over his barber's stand had waned as if the long waiting had also tired his supporters. But he was still there every day, from eight in the morning till six in the evening.

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[11] As I was putting the final punctuation marks in this book, Slovenia finally began to process his request but Ahmed still did not know how long the process would take. He could anticipate more waiting and could still not be certain that he would eventually be granted refugee status.

It was early January in 2018. Carol was on tenterhooks. She was told that she would find out in a few days whether she, Hani and Adel were to be allowed to stay in Croatia. “I am certain it will be negative,” she kept telling Hani. With its numerous rejections, Slovenia had not only driven her out but also taught her what to expect. That one rejection is always followed by others. What else could she expect from Croatia.

“It was a Thursday. I was so afraid. The translator began talking. I cannot describe all that was happening inside me. He told us we had been granted refugee status. I did not know what to feel,” she explained when I visited Carol, Adel and Hani with Allay, Petra and their Aleksander, two weeks later in Zagreb.

“The battle is over and I am exhausted. But I have won.”

The good news had to be celebrated. Hani bought us all pizza. Us grown-ups chatted all afternoon at a café in the centre of Zagreb, while Adel and Aleksander had fun of their own. Aleksander gave Adel a kiss. Then they both slept, each in their pushchair parked next to each other, amusing the visitors to the café with their childish indifference. Adel stretched his fingers towards an empty ashtray, curiously watching Petra change his friend’s nappy. Where are you from?, I asked the two-year old Adel in English. “Ljubljana.” What’s your name? “Adel”. How are you? “Good.” He was absorbing English, Arabic, Croatian and Slovene like a sponge. His face was quite different from when I had last seen him. His black eyes were happy, locks of his dark hair sticking up. He no longer cried inconsolably and no longer hysterically begged his mother for milk. One thing had not changed. He was still a child without citizenship.

Carol was different. And Adel with her. “I see life in colours once again,” she said. She still could not quite believe that the worst period of her life was over. “After we were granted refugee status I could not sleep for three days. I kept asking Hani in the middle of the night whether it was true. Hani would say, ‘Yes, now go to sleep.’ But I could not sleep, I had too many thoughts. I am still in shock.” The anxiety of how they would survive did not disappear, for life with refugee status is hard, but at least the nightmares went away.

I asked her whether she still felt regret.

“Perhaps a little. Hmmm… No. No. I don’t regret having persisted until the end in Slovenia, but I spent my best years in the worst situation.” I reminded her of Mohamad’s words when he told her how she was still young and how, at under thirty, she has her entire life in front of her. She began nodding slowly.

Indeed, life for Carol and her family had only just begun. A few days after our visit they received their refugee passports. Exactly a year and a day after Slovenia had deported them to Croatia, they came on a visit to Ljubljana. We prepared a tea party at the Rog Embassy.

Our living room was filled with the clamour of excited children, warm embraces of old friends, endless chatting between people who had not seen each other for a long time. Only Mohamad with his family were absent. But Carol, Hani and Adel will come to Ljubljana again, perhaps they will even move back to the town of Adel's birth.

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The joy embracing the young family coincided with the end of the two-years in which I had first wished to merely hear Mohamad's story and then became part of it.

When we began talking about his life he had said that his family would have to join him first. We agreed that only then would the book be fit for publication. The arrival of Aber, Majdal, Rand, Vasima and Jad should have completed the circle and concluded the story. March of 2018 was approaching its end, almost five months had passed since Mohamad had sprinted like an Olympic athlete at Ljubljana Airport, holding twenty-two roses in his arms, and still we had not reached the finish line. We would continue to meet up with Karim and Mohamad, and occasionally just me and Mohamad, in the new family home. In their kitchen, with the clock on the wall chicken-shaped like the map of Slovenia, and their living room, clad in wood, it felt no different to home. Neither of us wanted these evenings to end. But there comes a time when you need to place a full stop. During our last evening of discussions for the purpose of our book, I felt we were both afraid of that moment.

Mohamad's words reminded me of myself at the age of six. Of the schoolboy-to-be on the last evening in August as I anxiously awaited the following morning, thinking that the first day of school would never come if I stayed awake all night.

"I don't want to end this. I hope that we can talk till morning," he said as Karim nodded, saying what a pleasure it was to translate for us.

We all wanted to talk on, so we talked. Not quite until morning, well past midnight.

We continued with Amin Maalouf. It is not only I who like him but Mohamad also, usually more touched by poetry than prose, primarily Darwish and then other poets. In this we differ. But Maalouf's books are on a list of prose that has impressed him. Botros once again sneaked into our story. I did not beat around the bush. I asked him whether he too thought of himself being like the teacher from the mountains of Lebanon, the way I saw him.

"Yes. I'd like to be like Botros," he said level-headedly. He seemed to be thinking and then continued, "Botros was a bridge between West and East. But I know many such people.

His story is important for the East because it makes the West see that there are such Botroses in the East. But in truth there are thousands upon thousands of Botroses there."

I wanted to contradict him slightly, to correct him. I was not sure that the metaphor of the bridge was the most appropriate. The French writer Mathias Énard claims that it is not possible to define the East and West as two different worlds and points out that boundaries keep moving[12]. Where then should we build the bridge? But with the following words Mohamad made me realize how it is not that simple,

"With his story about Botros, Maalouf transcends the divisions between East and West. I like him because he does this with a number of his characters in various books. I want to do something along those lines. Through culture we can reach more humanity. So that we no longer have the myths of East and West, but simply human beings."

There is, of course, no chasm between East and West. I don't sense it, neither does Mohamad. But many people do, and that is why divisions exist. And they believe in the myth. So is it still true that the chasm does not exist?

It is merely perceived. Dug over decades and centuries by numerous world leaders, colonialists, corrupt governments, arms corporations, geopolitical superpowers and multinationals, big players in the natural resources market, consumer ideology that kills off thinking and leads to the banalization of evil; systems reflected in the rigid formality of the Ministry of the Interior… Over and over. They have dug it for so long that the chasm now appears real to many people. This delusion can only be wiped out by a people that stand united and resist the diggers. And only if the thinking of teachers and writers, of Botros, Mohamad and Darwish, prevails.

"Historically East and West have always engaged in politics and war, occasionally also with trade. And too little with culture. But it is precisely culture that makes us human. If we create a cultured person we shall reduce the importance of economic benefit. That's my dream," Mohamad says.

"A book makes a person. And the book is the teacher."

"A book is more than a teacher. It is an eternal soul that the writer bestows to others. Without the book, the body is worthless."

Mohamad bestowed his soul to others when he published his *Twenty One Women from Ljubljana*[13]. Botros also wrote poems but his poetic talent would have remained sealed in a

[12] in an interview with Mimi Podkrižnik published in the *Delo* supplement *Sobotna Priloga*, March 2017.
[13] *Enaindvajset žensk iz Ljubljane*, poems published in three languages, Slovene, Arabic and English by Moderna galerija Ljubljana, 2018

dusty chest had it not been set free by his grandson Amin Maalouf in his novel, years after the teacher's death. One of the worst anguishes one can suffer are undeveloped (cultural) potentials. If only those digging would have known how to develop them… Then there would have been no imaginary chasms. Mohamad's verses remained locked in a dark cellar for a long time. But they managed to come out in the open. And his potential is developing. He will continue to publish.

"When you take in the culture, you take in the soul of a place. You give in to the scent of books. It is as if you are smelling a baby that has only just been born," he said, as if reciting a poem.

"The writer dies and the book lives on," I began poking at our self-importance.

"If it is important. If it is not, the book dies along with them."

"But it can become important only decades later, centuries. This means that *Twenty One Women from Ljubljana* will be your footprint in eternity. If nothing else, you can at least hope for that."

"True. I put my genes into this book. My genes are now in Ljubljana that has given me so much and through my poems I want to give something in return. I will die, like everyone will die, but *Twenty One Women from Ljubljana* will not sink into oblivion."

It could well be that our debating was a case of self-importance, perhaps an illusion, perhaps a need for uniqueness or something else. Who would know.

We slapped the palm of each other's hand.

"Now we have reached the end. You have been the ink, I the hand of this book that we hope will not remain forgotten in some dark warehouse."

"I will say something that is a little like verse."

I will miss this intonation and expectation of what words Mohamad will place before me.

"Before a book is printed it is like a child in a mother's womb. You can see it on the ultra-sound, that's the computer. You see it in the face of the writer. In the effort, the exhaustion and the joy in the face. When the book is born, with it comes a different effort and a different joy. This is a new life. The feelings about this book are as if a child belonging to both of us is being born. We don't know what it will be like. But I know myself, and I also know Karim who is a beautiful person. And the one who carries this book is also a beautiful person. Best wishes for a beautiful birth, my friend. In my mind I am preparing the delivery room. Then you will become a father. You will not be free because lots of questions will arise. You will have a

great responsibility. Your period of being single is coming to an end. All this forbids you many things and also gives you a great deal. I am very happy that your genes will spread all over."

Shukran, habibi.

During our conversations Mohamad's cheeks had often been dampened by tears, now it is mine that are wet. To hell with restraint. Crying is a sign of strength. Even Saladin knew that when he persecuted the crusaders. As I write this imagination begins to work. I imagine Mohamad and me walking into the offices of some unknown publishers. Lots of books on the desk. The publisher whose name we do not know greets us and nods towards the books with his head. We approach. I pick up a copy, run my fingers over the sleeve, my eyes fixing on Samira's cover. I open the first page and bring it closer to my face. I take a deep breath to enjoy this wonderful scent. Mohamad is smiling, watching me bury myself in the freshly printed letters. Then I pass it over to him. He too gently strokes it. He takes off his glasses and presses the book against his chest. His eyes are red, my own pupils so dilated there is hardly any white sclera visible. We grab each other's hands and hug as we have done thousand of times before. But this time it is different.

I had not intended to speak of the following, at least not for the purpose of this book and not as directly, but I have already sent restraint to hell, so I ask Mohamad whether he knows what a strong influence he has been on me. Whether he knows that he has set me on a path and helped me overcome the dictator within me.

"I know. But I would prefer to say I don't, because I am embarrassed."

I am too. But we can dispel embarrassment, this sensation that has caused so much misery, by looking it straight in the eye. And writing about it. Even if with a heavy hand.

"You helped me return to memories that give me strength for the future. I wanted to forget. I thought I needed to forget because I need to survive. This experience has filled me with respect and that is why I am stronger than before," Mohamad continued.

"For years I have admired and sought out stories, in fact I have always lived for them and wanted to write something similar to what we have now written together, with your ink and my hand. But never before had I managed to find anything like this or anyone like you."

"That's encounters for you. Encounters, encounters, encounters… As described by Maalouf. Paths draw out people's lives so that kindred spirits can meet. When I was in Aleppo I was convinced I would meet Karima, Nada, Melita, Andraž… I knew not who they were or where and how I would meet them. But I knew they existed."

The three of us held hands. Then we talked about something we have no control over – the future.

“Yesterday I was telling Karim how beautiful life will be in five years’ time. We will buy ourselves a plane ticket and go on a trip to Syria, to also build the other half of the bridge. The hope in the question of the future is immense. This hope allows me to believe that I will see you in five years’ time with a family and children. And a great writer. This hope allows me to imagine me showing my *habibti*, my love – Aleppo. Come, meet my friends. And if they will allow me, we can also visit Palestine.”

“You know what… If your wish of seeing me in five years’ with a family and children comes true, it will be thanks to you. Will you not ask me why?”

“Why?”

“Because if it weren’t for you and Nada, I would never have met Urša.”

“It my parents hadn’t fled to Syria during the Nakba, if I hadn’t left Aleppo and if I hadn’t managed to cross from Greece into Macedonia at Idomeni, if the police woman on the border between Slovenia and Austria had not turned me back, if Ahmad had not suggested that we went to the centre of town for a fag, if you had not at that moment been conducting that interview with students at the Prešeren Monument… then I would never have met you.”

Encounters, encounters, encounters… Who do we have to thank for encounters?

The last day of March, the rain is abating. Through the window I see the branches of the ash tree, behind them an ever-clearer sky, changing colour. Grey is turning pale blue.

May the child be healthy and live long after we are both gone.

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh