

Andraž Rožman: This Cannot Be Erased

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Instead of an introduction:

Why did we not do anything?

On 26 February 1992, the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia (DEMOS) coalition government, on a whim, illegally and under a veil of secrecy deleted 25,671 people from the state register of permanent residents. Because an individual's many other rights are linked to residency, those erased lost their right to employment, social security, health insurance, housing rights... In a legal sense, they no longer existed. According to unofficial estimates (the exact number is not known), about half of those erased left Slovenia, others were forced into years of homelessness, hiding from the police, working illegally, depending on family and friends... Some were deported from the country forcibly by the police, even to war zones and, in at least one officially confirmed case, deportation resulted in imprisonment in a detention camp, torture and death.

The vast majority of those erased were of other nationalities from the former Yugoslavia, but they also included individuals who were ethnically Slovene.

It did not affect residents of Slovenia of other nationalities, Germans, Italians, British, Americans, and all other nationalities not connected to the former Yugoslavia. Essentially this was a case of discrimination on the basis of nationality.

In its systemic decisions between 1999 and 2003 the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia ruled that the State's action was illegal. Later, in 2012 and in 2014, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg also ruled in favour of those erased. On the basis of these rulings, it became definitively clear that the erasure was a mass violation of human rights, essentially a bureaucratic ethnic cleansing. The court in Strasbourg also ordered Slovenia to pay compensation to those erased, but the State set up a scheme under which only a small proportion of those erased who met certain conditions could within a timeframe of three years claim 50 euros for each month they were erased. For larger amounts they would need to go to court.

A media blockade was in place for several years and information about the erasure only began trickling through to the public at the beginning of the new millennium when, on the initiative of Aco Todorović, the erased began to organise themselves politically and legally. Over the next few years the erased and their supporters uncovered layer after layer of the issue and only then did the extent and severity of the illegal act by the State become entirely clear.

My own deeper interest in the erasure was spurred when I met Mirjana Učakar and Irfan Beširević, both erased citizens and activists who formed an inseparable trio with Aco Todorović. Through my friendship with them I came to realise that the erasure was not a closed book as it might seem to most of the public. There are people in Slovenia who thirty-two years later, still have no legal status, no identity document, right to employment, social benefits, health insurance, and live in extremely poor conditions as a direct result of this erasure. Apart from them, a large number of those who were forced to leave Slovenia never had their status restored.

Initially through Mirjana and Irfan, then also through other channels, I got to know many other people who had been erased. It became clear to me that there are still many consequences the public is not aware of and that over the years these have widened from the legal, social and economic extent to other aspects, some of which are also seen in this book. It also soon became clear that, unlike what I might have once mistakenly thought, not everything has been written about the erasure.

What I also realised was just how important the struggle of the oppressed for their own rights is; which, as one of the women interviewed put it, quoting Aco Todorović and Paulo Freire, rehumanises those who had previously been dehumanised. But how could I even begin writing? I set myself two goals: firstly, writing about collective human rights violations, I need to connect the isolated voices of the erased, and secondly, their voices need to be truly theirs with as little of my interference as possible. I am aware that it is impossible to entirely meet both criteria, but I need to at least get as close as possible.

Confirmation that it is important to take this approach when writing came from Svetlana Alexievich. I remembered her words about telling history through emotions, doing so decades after all the heroic stories, about the Second World War, for example, had already been written. I do not wish to offer the floor to the so-called left-wing or right-wing independentists, but the victims of their actions. I began recording the interviews that could go on for hours (in some cases, between 2020 and 2024, I conducted more than one

interview with those affected and also followed up how they were getting on). I would then type up the transcripts and connect them into sometimes more complete, at other times more fragmented stories, that I then, where necessary, to a greater or lesser degree put into literary form, maintaining, however, the authenticity of the story. I then connected them into several lines of narrative in order to outline the arc of the erasure and the struggle of the erased before showing the text to the protagonists. Every author wished their work to stay the way they envisaged it, uncensored, so I was afraid of this last step. I needn't have been.

Like the oppressed I spoke of in my first two books, the erased also gave me a freedom in writing far greater than I had ever had as a newspaper journalist, and, with the exception of a few minor, mostly technical corrections, the text was left intact.

Reading the book *The Erased; Organised Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion* by Vlasta Jalušič, Jasminka Dedić and Jelka Zorn, I found out this was not enough. I told myself that I needed to write something more, show the other side of the coin. But how? Talking to officials who holepunched and invalidated identity cards? I began conducting interviews but soon realised that I would not find much content in this way. The work, however, was not in vain, since it gave me a clear insight into the practicalities of the theory of organised innocence described by Jalušič. Then I asked myself what I myself had been doing since the time of the erasure, 1992, until now. When officials were holepunching ID cards, I was still a child. When Aco Todorović and his like-minded friends founded the Association of Erased Residents of Slovenia, I was barely adult. But by the time the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of the erased, I was 29, 31 by the time of the second ruling. What I recall is that I sympathised with the plight of the erased (it is possible that my memory is also idealizing this aspect), but that I did nothing to support them. I did not delve enough into the issue to understand the magnitude of what was going on. I was ignorant. To paraphrase one of the people from this story: Why, with the exception of a handful of activists, did we not do anything when we should have done something? Of course, I don't have a clear answer, but with the help of the abovementioned theoretical concept, my own imagination and observations, I have also devoted parts of this book to this question. Intermittently I have included sections in a different narrative voice, printed in italics, attempting to convey some of these thoughts through other people, the ordinary man or woman in the street, the neighbour, the official, the police officer, the lawyer, and others. Unlike the voices of the erased, all the names and events in these sections are fictional.

Commented [G1]: Tole sem malo prepisal in razložil tako da bo bralcu vzorčnega prevoda malo bolj jasna struktura knjige...

Now, at the end of the process, I am writing this introduction to *This Cannot Be Erased*, I am once again thinking about the (un)reliability of memory and the imagination. I recall how in my first book, *Three Memories, Between Haifa, Aleppo and Ljubljana*, I noted that memory today is different to the same memory yesterday. Tomorrow it will be different to today. But for the narrator it is always true. I thought along the same lines in my second book, *Tito's Son*, for I was interested in the personal truth, the experience of the person. Regardless of how reliable society sees that individual, their words need to be taken seriously., And when you begin trusting the other person's inner truth, you quickly realise that people tend not to lie about their personal experiences, and also that they possess great knowledge about general matters, facts. I set about conducting these conversations about the erased and their experiences, consequences of an undoubtedly illegal act by the State of Slovenia with the same guidelines. In doing so, I once again remembered the words of Svetlana Alexievich that human memory is not static, people remember things differently over the years, different details. As if wanting to take a snapshot, I wanted to catch this moment, the moment of memory here and now, realising that the moment before now or the one after will be different. This moment is the truth.

Let me fist introduce myself, dear audience, so you know who and what you are dealing with.

I do not belong to your kind, yet I am in each one of you. I do not belong to any gender, neither female, nor male, but I can proclaim myself either one. I do not even belong to any nationality, ethnicity or country, but without me no state would have been created or existed.

I have no heart or head, you cannot touch me, see me, but I live at all geographical latitudes and longitudes and it is unlikely anyone will ever succeed in destroying all my offshoots. You can't find out what my name is because no one knows, not even those most keen to accept me. Like my image, my essence is also elusive. While I walk over human bodies, I change shape slightly, replace some small part or feature, all in order to readapt to my host.

My task is to present the voice of those who would otherwise not have an opportunity to speak. They are ordinary citizens. They are, dear reader, your kind or less kind neighbours, colleagues, friends, strangers in the street, at the town hall, in the National Assembly, the government palace and the police car. I know their thoughts and stories, but I cannot write all of them. I am only sharing with you an anthology of those closest to my

heart and those that drew me most for some other reason. In their minds I am a journalist and anthropologist in one, I transform myself into what is needed to help you understand an act that decades ago paved this country's way to success.

One of those most compassionate during the time of our intensive interaction was a young communication expert, future creative director of an advertising agency; for the purpose of this record and in line with the laws on personal data protection, let us call him Jaša. As I settle into him, I instantly feel a warm heart. So I ask him whether he liked people. At first he gives me a bright look, straightens a lock of hair falling over his eyes, and gives me a broad smile. 'Of course! It seems ridiculous to separate people into anything, especially political affiliation. If I am left-wing and you are right-wing, that does not mean you are a bad person. Far from it. I know many good people, left and right, and many who aren't either. I do not understand why some people get so worked up about politics. Let us instead join hands and the world will instantly become a better place.'

As his internal dialogue partner, I nod calculatingly as he talks about how he sees the world. He tells me often we are all just people. Making mistakes is human, you have to forgive. Because people are good in their essence, nobody is deliberately evil, society is also fundamentally good and Jaša sees no need to tear down its foundations. Of course, he understands that sometimes people have different opinions and that conflicts occur, but he is convinced that everything can be resolved with tolerance and dialogue. He does not hate anyone but has a hard time dealing with violence. When he hears some boor shouting in the centre of town or sees the streets of Paris ablaze with protests on TV, he flinches and shakes his head. But this does not shake his idea about people being good, exceptions prove the rule, he says.

Once (he was still very young at the time), when he happened to be, like me, walking through Prešeren Square, he came across a similar situation.

He turns down one of the three bridges leading towards the town hall. He notices the long queue winding past the building on the narrow street to his left. He does not understand why so many people are standing in the queue, the days of shortages of basic goods in the Socialist State are over, we are at the threshold of capitalism, about to become the land of milk and honey. These people can't be queueing up to buy bananas at the nearby market. He approaches the queue, follows it to see where it begins, and he arrives at some administrative office. Sitting at the window in the glass partition was a man with a moustache, glasses, and only one arm, who had just punched a hole into some document,

frowning indifferently, telling the person outside the window that they can from now on go about sorting out their status according to the provisions of the Foreigners Act. The poor guy outside becomes agitated. He waves about with his hands, swears at the official, shouts about how unfair this is, that he has been wronged. Then he storms out of the building, slams the door so the walls shake. Jaša can hear him fulminating until his voice fades away in the distance.

Jaša trusts the rule of law, so he does not doubt that the one-armed official is acting in good faith and has done nothing wrong. Rules need to be followed. If the man said the Foreigners Act applies to the person at his window, then that must be so. Surely matters can be sorted out if they are written in law, that is what laws are for.

I listen to Jaša's monologue and, wisely, I don't say anything. For a while he continues to deliberate about how there is no point in protesting so roughly against justice which is always – just. But, thoughtful as he always is, he also does not forget the emotions of the poor man who stormed out of the office. Although he does not approve of the man's behaviour, he feels sorry for him, knowing that the man must be suffering within. Who knows what kind of baggage the poor sod is carrying with him, making a mountain out of a molehill, thinking that his world is collapsing right before his eyes. Sooner or later he will discover that there is a way out. If not earlier, later, when he will look carefully at the provisions of the Foreigners Act that regulate and most certainly also protect his interests.

Jaša thus rested assured without needing my support. In his own good-hearted spirit he went on with his life, later completing his studies, finding a job, getting married, having children, becoming the creative director of an advertising company, always showing empathy for his fellow men. Just as his path was on the up, however, he saw a bearded man with a colourful scarf, a hat and a yellow anorak hissing on TV a number of times. He reminded him of that unfortunate stranger at the office near the market. He too talked about documents being invalidated by a holepunch, calling for the perpetrators of the huge crime to be prosecuted. He used words like erasure, mass violations of human rights, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, racism and also mentioned the Foreigners Act. Upon these mentions, Jaša was disturbed, remembering the event a decade earlier. He began to wonder whether back then it really was the rude man's fault that he became a foreigner without the right to reside and, even more, what became of him. Did he too end up in the street, was perhaps deported or even died, as the bearded man with the scarf said had happened to many sharing his fate?

Jaša was confused, in danger of losing his faith in the rule of law. That would truly shake the ground under his feet, so this time, he needed my help. He wondered, in truth asking me, whether it was possible that a young democracy actually systemically deprived thousands of people of all their rights, leaving them without jobs, without a place to live, and without the offerings of a welfare state... The pestering bearded man seemed convincing, even though he looked a little strange...

The situation became serious. I explain to him that the State has done nobody any harm but that there are among us also individuals that are not as good as he perceives everyone to be. Some people didn't bother ensuring their rights and the bureaucratic apparatus is not omnipotent to know what request form each individual submitted and what not. In any case, you cannot always expect the State to work only for you, sometimes you also need to do something for the State. Many people didn't act according to this principle but primarily thought about what was best for them.

But Jaša does not give up easily. He is not indifferent to these poor people, keeps asking me about them, and I reassure him that nothing terrible has happened to them, also using the strongest argument – they all had the chance to request citizenship. Just as I begin to worry that a spark might have ignited within him, something changes. As if he has been given approval to feel what is most primal within him, he surrenders to my argument. It is easier for him to believe that his native land has nothing to do with the misfortune of these miserable people, as if his perception of the nature of the world had been shattered but he can carry on with his peaceful life. Especially having an alibi in the indisputable facts I am offering him.

Such arguments became very deep rooted in many of my hosts. What is true, though, is that at the time they were not entirely aware of the stories from the other side.

A never-created memory

I am sitting on the sofa with my mother, now a retired lady. I catch the moment... She sits as she always sat in moments of serenity and contentment. An elegant pose, tucking her legs gracefully under the chair.

...

The scent of stewed apples and plums rushes into my nostrils. I smelled that scent, the scent of mum and dad, every time I walked into the living room and they both lay there giggling on the sofa in front of the TV. Young, beautiful, attracted to each other. An inseparable pair... I snuggle up to them and switch the TV to cartoons. It is the scent of peace, beauty, the universe...

Dad is a striking man. He can have anyone he wants for breakfast... He has everything sorted out and clear. He fights for us, he is my super-hero. He comes from work on his bicycle every day, shouting through the window, 'Biljanaaa, Biljanaaa, put the coffee on!' I serve him his coffee – I have been making him coffee since I was eight. He lights a ciggie, Marlboro, I eat his packed lunch he brings back from work, and we are best friends. We talk about what we will do in the afternoon. Will we use his tools to make things or change the tiles in the bathroom?

Dad is a welder at the Rog bicycle factory, Mum is a seamstress at the Pletenina textile factory. They work alternate shifts, so there is always someone at home to look after me and my sister. Dad cooks, takes us out, on Saturdays we all go to the grocery store together... When Mum gets paid, she takes me to the Nama department store to buy a dress and to the coffee shop in town for a slice of cake and coke... She bakes biscuits and cakes for us, Dad makes sure we have enough stores for the winter. One of their pay packets goes towards paying off the bank loan for the flat we live in, the other covers our everyday expenses.

Is there anything nicer than that?

...

There is, there is. Playing with friends in the neighbourhood all day.

We have a punctured ball we all chase after. Twenty, thirty kids. Each one bringing a little brother or sister along, so there was a wide age range. And we have a single bicycle, but we can all ride it. We are not aware that we need money to get a new one. We are not even aware that we could have more bicycles. Bicycles are things you can buy... All we were interested in is persuading our parents to let us play cops and robbers in the neighbourhood after ten o'clock in the evening. We were allowed to roam around the entire area, much of it now built up with shopping centres; at the time it was empty spaces. We do not look at what each one of us is wearing. We don't care. All we want is company. The older kids look after the younger kids and we are all like brothers and sisters.

I like going to school. I am dutiful and interested in everything. I am never absent. Even when I break my arm, I go to school the following day.

...

It was like that until I was in sixth grade at school when I was eleven years old. And then...

I fall asleep and wake up in a different home, in a different neighbourhood, I have different parents, go to a different school...

Mum no longer takes me for cakes to the coffee shop in town, instead she dips bread into fried onions, claiming she isn't hungry. And she only does so after my sister and I have had our lunch. When things are really bad, all I eat is mustard spread on bread.

Mum is distant and tired, Dad can no longer eat anyone he wants for breakfast, he is lucky if he has breakfast. He becomes paranoid, constantly on the run, wandering around trying to find answers that nobody ever gives him. A shell of his former self. Every day I hear words I do not understand the meaning of – deportation, expulsion, permanent residency, visa... I do not understand why there is no longer harmony between them.

I stand in the playground outside our block of flats, watching people holding suitcases. I haven't got a clue that some of them are erased, others are combatants. All I understood was that my friends were leaving. Ever since I was four years old, these friends were my world... Suddenly they are no more... How is this possible? Everything around me falls silent...

Seventh grade... Previously we all played together – Samira, Petra, Asmir, Dino, Biljana... Now we no longer do. I am no longer Biljana but an -ić. I don't understand what being an -ić means. I am no longer dutiful, I become aggressive. I think everyone is out to get me. I sit at my desk, look at the teacher but I do not hear her. My ears feel as if under pressure. When the teacher calls me to the blackboard, I react. Who do you think you are, expecting me to answer your questions? She is about to write an F into the register but I grab it from her hands and through it out of the window. I fail the class and have to repeat the year.

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Why were things like this?

...

Dad and Mum keep telling me not to go outside alone in the evening. If the police were to get me, I could be deported. I don't give a shit. I walk around town whenever I feel like it. I

come home at three, four in the morning. My parents tremble, not knowing whether it will be the police, the coroner, or me.

When I am not roaming around town, I wait in queues outside government offices. Every year I need to bring confirmation that I live in Slovenia. They make me write an address in Bosnia on the forms even though I was born in Slovenia and have never lived in Bosnia. If I want to go to secondary school, I need to get some certificate from Bosnia. I stand outside the Embassy. I wait there from nine in the morning till seven in the evening. When my turn finally comes, the official tells me they are closing for the day. 'Come tomorrow.' And I come again the following day, wait and wait until I get the piece of paper that allows me to enrol into secondary school.

My sister is four years older than me. She wants to be a doctor but has dropped out of school so she can work. She needs the money to pay for legal advice, pay the fees for work permits... At least one of the parents also needs to be employed for us to be able to stay in Slovenia based on their work permit. At times one of them is in work, at other times the other, sometimes neither of them. When you work on a visa, they can do what they want with you... Mum works 13, 14 hours a day and gets less and less pay.

She comes home and tells Dad that her boss is refusing to pay her.

'What? I'll kill 'im!'

'Oh dear, you can't kill him. If you kill him, we'll all get thrown out of the country.'

We have no cash, no food. If only we had a grandma with a garden...

Should we call family in Bosnia for help? They are at war, we have been erased. They have been left without everything and we don't even have any money to send them, or the documents to be able to go and physically help them. They think we are lying. It is only thirty years later that they comprehend we were not.

...

I don't go to the school sports day because we don't have two sandwiches for a packed lunch. Mum writes an absence note, saying I had tummy ache, though I never have tummy ache. In eighth grade I don't go on the end-of-year trip because the class goes across the border. Before this I went on all school trips. I have photos from them, tons of photos. I was such a model... swimming in Zambratija. About to get my first kiss. And then the photographs stop. I am forgetting and memories fade.

I am fourteen. I begin working as a waitress. Off the books, of course. I think this is normal. I worked for a month and a half in the first bar, 300 hours, but the boss doesn't pay me. He later gives me the money in instalments, telling me to come to collect the money at half past eleven every evening when he closes the register. In today's money I should have got around 2700 euros. I get 730 and even these I have to keep asking for. Such a swindler. But I work non-stop. And I have enough money for books, packed lunches, monthly bus passes, clothes... I pay for everything myself and my sister finances my parents.

I do not understand why I have to work instead of being out in the playground with friends. I do not understand why some guy in the bar gropes me. Do you understand that?

The fear as my sister and I approach adulthood.... Then you can no longer be registered as a child on your parents' work permit. And our parents don't earn enough to prove they can support four people. Only with great trouble does my sister manage to get a regular job, so I am allowed to stay in Slovenia via her.

The local administrative offices, the embassy, the town hall... All these places and the people working there... They keep me going round in circles. Like a hamster on a wheel. You come to the counter, present 15 different documents, and the official there tells you that you also need to bring some other piece of paper. They do not tell you where to get it. The next time they suggest I go to get the certificate from Sarajevo. How? Aged fourteen and without a passport? For eight years I listened to how some official document was missing, some document that didn't even exist, that they cannot provide me with such and such a certificate, that I should wait because they are on their coffee break... How can I compete with them? I feel embarrassed, speak quietly, barely dare to utter my surname...

When I now still, over and over again, have to explain to officials since when I have been working, I am no longer silent...

'How can you have 23 years of service when it says here you have eleven?'

'Well, you tell me!'

I go to social services and say I need money to pay the bills and the official there says, 'Why did you have a child?' She deserved a slap. I was sorry later I hadn't beaten her up on the spot. As soon as they see you as having a weakness, they devour you.

I have no problem building relationships. What I do have a problem with is being underestimated.

I go for a job interview. The boss tells me I would get 6.5 euros an hour.

‘What do you think, that I’ve come here to be exploited, or what?’

‘How dare you be so rude? This interview is over.’

‘How dare *you* be so rude, woman? What are you playing at? People like you, always underestimating me; of course I know what I’m worth.’

Or when they tell me, ‘Go back to Bosnia.’ Officials, or people in the parking lot. I have had people say that to me countless times. When they have nothing else to say, they try to drive me away. I used to not say anything, now I lose my temper. This kind of altercation ends with the arrival of the police. Yeeees, the police... I have been in situations where I was the target of violence but how can I ask the police for support? They came to our door, asking me, aged eleven, where my permanent residence was. They wanted to deport me from the country and now I should ask them for help? No, I have nothing to say to the police!

...

Today I am no longer afraid. If you survive hunger, you gain a special kind of knowledge. When you have a sandwich and know that you can only eat half because you will be even hungrier later on... You also live by the same principles later, when you have enough. But now many things are different. With the help of my former partner, I opened old wounds. I cried my way through them, paid attention to my trauma and overcame it.

...

Ten years ago I could not publicly speak about the erasure. I had to go through this process. Revealing your own story is one of the final steps in cleansing. I waited for this day and I knew it would come. So use my name, and my picture, if you want.

On the other hand, I am now still at the beginning. I have come out of the cellar and reached point zero. I have a feeling I can create anything but that I have a twenty-year delay. I would like to be the mother who would give her daughters a place to live and few extras, living a fine life. Well, because of those twenty years, I am unable to do so... Every year we spent at least four thousand deutschmarks just for renewing our work permits. Just so we could stay in Slovenia... Others took advantage of the Jazbinšek Law (1991 Housing Act) to buy themselves a flat for five thousand marks.

...

The consequences for my parents... They are clear when we sit down at the table together. You can see it on their faces, in their eyes, in the way they communicate, their posture, the tone of voice... Mum still thinks she will have no money. So, despite having retired, she still

works. I am now aware of her maternal greatness, strength and fighting spirit, the meaning of the rare words she uttered. Dad is still only a shell of his former self, but his mightiness has not faded, people still admire him...

It is 1991. They have only a few years left to pay off the housing loan. They planned to then sell the flat and buy a house in Zalog. Back then Dad took me there to see it. And we still go to see it now. As we drive past, he says, 'This is where you and your sister should be living.' But fuck it, it didn't happen...

Now someone else lives there and for us the house in Zalog remains a never-created memory.

Biljana Pilipović

No food or roof over our head

I am telling my story to students in the classroom. They listen to me intently. I get the feeling that it is the first time they have heard about the erasure. I notice the shock on their faces. They pleasantly surprise me with questions and compassionate comments. When I finish, a boy approaches me and gives me a packet of biscuits. I thank him and he says, 'I hope you will never be hungry again.' My eyes water.

...

I talked to them about how I hid in cellars, abandoned cars and remote parts of town. I went without food for days on end. I would get water in some of the bars but not food. I did not tell people about the situation I had found myself in, fearing deportation. It was worst when I walked past restaurants. Everyone was eating and having fun, I watched them with my stomach glued to my back...

I used to work in restaurants just like these. I was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a white shirt, always behaving respectfully towards guests. I stuck to the rule that every guest is equal, whether they order water with a slice of lemon or the most expensive whisky. I learned about psychology working in catering. A waiter needs to have a feeling for people, with some you can joke, with others you need to be serious. You need to pay attention to guests, observe them in order to understand their nature. I also served those who erased me. Before Slovenia's independence I worked in the Hotel Palace in Portorož. It was a place often visited by politicians, they used the auditorium for their election campaign speeches.

Janez Drnovšek, Milan Kučan, Janez Janša, Zmago Jelinčič... We opened champagne bottles together... Long before that I was on a Youth Work Brigade with Janša. We sat together, drinking, just like we are sitting now, shouting, 'Tito, the Party, Youth, Action!' Just think about where his path took him after that and where mine took me.

...

Under the staircase in a block of flats on the Štepanjsko Naselje estate. I have been hiding all week. In the middle of winter. I have no food, I cannot wash, the only access to water I have is a tap in the cleaner's cupboard, I go outside to use the toilet, but only at night so the residents won't see me. Wounds on my feet keep opening up, my skin is cracking, I have a fever... Thrombosis.

Two years before the erasure I had a serious traffic accident. I was in a coma for two weeks. After the erasure I could not go to the doctor, I had no health insurance and there were no bono health centres yet. So I did not treat the consequences of the accident and to this day I still have four screws and a metal plate in my leg. My wounds still open up. I feel cold, everything hurts, I could die but I never think about death. When you find yourself in the most difficult situations, the only question is whether you will give in... After a few days under the staircase, the situation begins to improve. Somehow I manage to get through to the rugby pitch. I remember a colleague I used to train rugby with and go to rowing competitions, I was the coxswain in an eight... I drag myself to him and don't beat about the bush. 'Look, Planta, I'm hungry, I don't have anything.' He makes me soup and a vegetable stew. Then a coffee. We talk for two hours and as I leave he gives me some money. So I continue hiding and somehow manage to soothe my thrombosis.

Today I can still go without food for a long time. I can survive on pasta with oil if needed. What can you do, if there ain't anything, there ain't anything. I won't say no to meat. I can eat as many čevapčiči, fried chicken and roast pork as I am given. Things were a little easier in the summer and autumn. I could nick apples, pears, carrots from people's gardens... I was good at that when I was a kid. In Trnovo we would go scrumping from our neighbour. For a while he didn't do anything about it, then he had had enough. He came to visit my father to tell him we shouldn't waste fruit. If we wanted some, we could have some, but we should not be feckless about it.

Scrumping was not the only experience from childhood I brought to the erasure. My father was a squatter. He had squatted in a space on Opekarska Street number 18 and turned it into a flat. The trading company Kurivo owned the building and wanted to evict us. But my

old man was resourceful. He wrote directly to Marshal Tito's government. A reply came from Belgrade that nobody had the right to evict us. If only I had kept that letter...

In our neighbourhood nationalism didn't exist. They were the good times... Father was a builder, Mother worked in a biscuit and cake factory. She would bring various treats home from work every day. The employees were allowed to take home things that were left over. If only it would still be so today... Living next to us were the Sever and Radić families, behind us was the Peršin farm. In the evenings, the adults would sit together in the common yard, drink, smoke, talk loudly and laugh. We children would play. Most families were Slovene, two were southerners. But at the time that didn't matter. Nobody asked you what ethnicity you were. We were all the same. All until Tito's death. Then it began...

All of a sudden, I was a *čefur*. No documents, no rights. Although I went to the town hall on time to hand in my citizenship application. Sitting at the counter was an official called Marko. I can still recall him: glasses, moustache, and he had only one arm. I tell him I want to hand in my application, but he refuses to accept it. A number of the erased told me the same story later. How I'd like to know where this Marko is now...

Well, all this nationalism brought me to the point where I had to deal with my thrombosis on my own without treatment. When my condition improved, it was a little easier. I was still in hiding and looking for food, but the world was slowly opening up. The first constitutional decision in our favour was ever closer and I had a few friends who helped me.

Don't think that all coppers were bad people. No, not at all! I even spent a lot of time with one policeman. I won't tell you his name... What I can tell you is that he knew I was one of the erased but didn't report on me. Not only that, he helped me. He welcomed me in his home, allowed me to shower, rest, have something to eat. When I was with him, I knew I was safe from deportation. I knew he would not betray me.

I slowly recovered enough so I could start working. Illegally, of course. But it was thanks to another friend, Kojić he was called. I worked at his bar for two years and I could use a room there as well. Every time the police came to the bar I trembled. But I had worked it all out. I knew where I had to stand behind the bar so I would notice them from the window and hide in the back room. They were not looking for me because of the erasure. But at that time, the police would go round bars and pubs checking that waiters had all the necessary documentation.

Vice also worked in catering. He gave me work at his place, took me into his home. I roasted piglets on spits, hundreds of piglets. I looked after his mother, took his kids to kindergarten, cleaned the place... As if I were a family member. When Vice's wife bought him clothes, she also bought me clothes. All was nice and well, until 22 May 2002.

I was drinking coffee at the restaurant. The police enter. A routine check. They want identification. What now? I tell them I have forgotten my ID in my room. They tell me to go and fetch it. I bring them the ID with a hole punched through it... I still have it. It is a little faded, but you can still see my moustache in the photo. They take me to the Centre for Deportation of Foreigners in Šiška. They submit a proposal for expulsion from the country. Expulsion? For ten years I had successfully managed to hide and now, just as the constitutional court has confirmed that the erasure was illegal, they are going to deport me? Fortunately, the judge was sympathetic to me. She finds there are no reasons for expulsion but the police still take me back to the Foreigners Centre and tell me that I would be deported in a couple of days' time. I feel frustrated... I only find out from the social worker that there is a possible solution... I call Vice who signs a statement that he will be my guarantor. I get a temporary stay permit with the condition that I stay in the Bežigrad area. I am detained for another day without justification before I am released from the Foreigners Centre.

Soon after that, the Constitutional Court once again rules in our favour. And I can submit a citizenship application. But if I want to get citizenship I also need to take a Slovene language exam where I have to answer dumb questions. I listen to a recorded passage and repeat what I hear in order for them to see whether I understand. They ask me about how many Olympic medals the gymnast Miro Cerar won and how many children the singer Tomaž Domicelj has. And whether I run after a bus, and ridiculous questions like that. As if I had not lived in Slovenia since I was one... But if I survived my thrombosis, then I will also survive this humiliation. On 13 October 2003, I forget all about it, put it all behind me. On that day, after eleven years and almost eight months of erasure, I was given Slovene citizenship. But the joint struggle for justice had only just begun.

Irfan Beširević