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## THE BORDER AND NO MAN'S LAND\*

In my memories, the state border always represented some kind of frustration, kind of foreboding barrier. I still treasure vivid memories from my childhood: we lived at the very outskirts of the Szenttamas village, near Novi Sad (Serbian name Srbobran, Hungarian pronunciation Sentomash). The window of our living room was on the north side. The border with Hungary was right there, my father repeated pertinently. At those times, at the beginning of 1950's, he repeated that sentence while the trenches were being dug along the northern border; everything that alluded to what lays across the border was somehow suspicious. The trenches were still standing in the fields even when there was no imminent danger of military conflict.

The border dwelled there, effective and suspicious even when it opened. Contact zone widened, the suspicion became finer and wider as well. It turned out that the widening of border line forms contact zones over a period of time in which fear, distrust and insecurity are incorporating into the culture. When culture antagonizes reality, however, even then we know that we have to overpower the enemy, that we have to befriend the enemy and unite with solidarity. In 1961 I traveled to Hungary with the delegation of young writers, officially, so to say. Although municipal, Szenttamas law enforcement authorities only new that I intend to travel to Hungary they took me in for interrogation. After lengthy explanation and at the edge of being physically abused I managed to avoid being beaten. The word "delegation" worked its magic. They checked out by phone my statements and let me leave the police station. I was in my freshman year at the university then and I fig-

\* Translated by Vera Johnson

ured out that everything can be controlled in the contact zone. The weirdest, however, was that my neighbors, and my parents even, thought that my desire to cross the border was some kind of malfeasance. Why did I accept the offer, my worried mother wanted to know. She was sure that I will become suspicious. Crossing of the border was considered to be dangerous venture, with the number of acute reasons as the notion of danger, vengeance, reprisal and excommunication was associated to the idea of the border.

Everybody knew that various secrets are hidden at the other side of the border, secrets that one may not have an insight into, as well as the secrets on this side of the border that may not be transmitted, in other words, that we live with the fact that we, who live here know, but must keep secret. That secret often cannot be named; as a matter of fact it is about the fiction, about the creation of the border. The Yalta state culture based on Versailles culture lived in this form in people's minds, in my parents' minds, in the minds of my neighbors and in my own mind. State border that originally belonged to the vocabulary of soldiers, war lords and diplomats became totalitarian concept that overrules any border concept. In the contact zone, at the border area, awareness of the above was embedded in people's minds.

State border displaces all other borders in that area and the state border becomes the border of all other borders. Those relegated borders, contorted under the state cloak, engaged into the every pore of life, even in those gestures with which one draws the lines to its apartment, house, village, town, culture, religion, and tradition, within which one determines self. Even those lines, however, were determined by the state border that became fundamental part of the modern culture. Versailles brought to Eastern Europe the neurosis of twisted modernity, in other words, every border must become state border; it is impossible to live without borders,

and it is not only necessary to fight for them, we must live with them as well. Versailles defined substantiality of state borders as essential need for unique tradition, and vice versa. The idea of state border in the XX century was sanctity and a taboo. This idea kept on living even when borders were more open, when one could travel with the passport only and without harassment. It was a family event when somebody traveled across the border. If somebody went to work abroad he would say his good byes as if he was going to the road of no return. We knew, however, that the man will be checked at the border. On arrival to the border line, one was aware that not only the luggage will be checked out but his very soul as well. The border became the scene and symbol of radical self-censorship, one had to prepare for that for, in another life, it was necessary to censor one's culture, identity, customs, behavior, in one word, its entire culture. It is not surprising that this attracted, first of all, adventurers or wanderlust, or those sensitive people who could not find there home any place, those who could not deal with reality and those who dreamed of cosmopolitan homeland. When the world is foreign, it is limitless, I used to encourage myself. Large numbers of people who live the destiny of the minority or are under any other repression hear this voice. "Our homeland is Europe," stated many of the homeless, thinking that they should hurry towards the border, regardless of its meanness, as if they are heading to the purgatory. Per their opinion every crossing of the border is bringing purification, every crossing of the border guarantees final redemption.

State borders would only be self explanatory external rules of life and violent cannons, if they did not move into people's souls, into their inner worlds. Huge drama, not to say tragedy, started when one realized that the border rules are not only out there, but also here, inside us. Namely, it became apparent that multiple personalities exist in a human being. In his mind, Faust's only perception of the border was the border between heaven and hell as an inner,

personal destiny and venture. In the XX century, however, we became aware of the fact that borders acquired internal quality and that they enslaved us. Borders acquired the quality of the legitimate stamp; without them we would be nameless, exiles, even if we bitterly fight against them. We are detainees and hostages of the borders and our entire culture consists of fragmented borders. The history of the border is actually history of internal and external conflicts.

For the first time I noticed this conflict through language, and language tends to gradually terrorize every other border: cultural, confessional, cognitive, economic, etc. Larger the area of the experience the language occupies and determines, larger its power is. The power of the language depends on the size of the area of experience it occupies and determines. In multilingual community, the name and significance are in constant asynchrony, and the connection between the world and objects becomes relative and insecure. Because of that, multilingualism represents constant tension, the kind of tension that generates cultural energy and big invention, but at the same time is wasting them. Multilingualism is dissipation and radical relativism, chaos and anarchy; gallowing, roaming in the agitation of clues.

My mother tongue is Hungarian, and having in mind that I am the member of the minority nation, the language means more to me than to somebody from the mother country, as it is carrying greater burden. My mother tongue has a larger role and experiences more oppression that is not merely of the political nature. This oppression is generated by understanding that things have more names than one, that more characters live in different systems and that all of them are leading somewhere. The one that belongs to the majority nation can experience many oppressions: social, political, aesthetical and moral, but never will that person experience language oppression. His language is built on the pure

cannons. In the majority nation, the oppressor and the oppressed speak the same language and this forms special consortium between them. The one who belongs to the lingual minority, however, is oppressed in every field, even if he/she is the member of the ruling class as that person always lives in the language that is surrounded by the ring of threat. That person is oppressed even when he/she does not feel so because of the lack of desire to feel so.

My language, hence was the border of my world. As Sandor Marai (Hungarian writer who lived in the Diaspora for fifty years) wrote, my mother tongue is my homeland. At the same time, there is another homeland, the region where I was born, multinational Vojvodina that is the part of Serbia, the region to which I am attached thanks to my life experiences. Those are two kinds of homeland whose borders do not concur, borders between which hidden conflict exists. This conflict is present even when it is not happening, when it is dormant, just like volcano heart.

The inhabitants of the border areas live in the constant danger of volcano eruption; anarchists and spendthrifts. If the volcano erupts just once the feeling of danger will move into the culture of the border area. I do not wish to idealize the border region, pluralism of the border area, because I deeply respect its courage, I live its life and I can see that, after many centuries of the state terror of the national state, the renaissance of the border area happened at the postmodern horizon. The tolerance was also oppressive; pluralistic simultanism, parallelism was rarely practiced.

I am one of those who believes in the future of the border area, into its utopia in the interest of which I should have confronted my own times. With a lot of effort, with a lot of internal antagonisms, I had to realize that ethnic cleansing and hidden mass graves that go with it are behind the utopia of the border area. Those mass graves were not the result of feudal ideas, but of the liberal national ideas of my century. Although national idea of the XIX century

was impressive because of the quantity of liberal promisees, XX century, as Agnes Heller wrote, rebutted the XIX century's idea. It seems, Heller continues, that the XX century canceled XIX century - as did Adrian Leverkühn, composer and hero of Thomas Mann, his 9<sup>th</sup> symphony - as if XX century accomplished XIX century ideals. That was the meaning of the idea of national state and that is how the idea of national state became reality. This is not only theoretical, historical or philosophical question in the border area, but the question of family history as well.

Mass graves and cemeteries are guardians of this history. Western Europe expanded its ideals in the totalitarian form in 1919 in Versailles. As the room for conquest diminished, new national states attacked their border areas, submitting them to colonial discourse. Border areas of new national states became their own colonies. This is how it was in every state where strong centralism ruled; the center of power moved all trash, all harm along the border line, into the border area.

The fate of Serbian Vojvodina in XX century is an excellent example of such a standpoint. In 1910 or in 1920, the standard of living in this region was as high as in Slovenia; the difference enlarged, decade by decade, to the advantage of Slovenia certainly, so that Vojvodina and Slovenia cannot be compared any longer. The same happened as related to the ethnic structure. The colonization on the large scale that occurred in XVIII century, after the Turkish rule, created a multicultural situation: it brought about balance between Serbs, Germans and Hungarians. This multiethnic community took Vojvodina forward, rendering it an economic miracle almost. Contrary to the commonly renowned deformities, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was pondering along the lines of the national state; this sensibility animated, with the huge artistic force, the opus of Musil, Dodere and Joseph Roth. Family archives, however, also maintain recollection of this culture: if somebody wanted to

sell horses, the government tendered contract in three or four languages. Ten languages in the Empire had the status of the official language and the multilingualism functioned in Vojvodina so well that the valid tradition was established and was later preserved, in the framework of national states, for a long period of time.

Because of the above, ethnic proportion established at the beginning of the XVIII century, was barely undermined during the two centuries. After the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, first migration wave, emigration of Hungarians, occurred. This trend grew more and more until it climaxed with the expulsion of approximately 400,000 Germans in 1945. There is no exact data how many Germans lost their lives in labor camps or how many ended up in mass graves, but their number is estimated at more than 50,000. Same applies to Hungarians. The wave of refugees was induced and, at the same time, as a retaliation for atrocities committed by Hungarians in January, 1942, approximately 20,000 Hungarians were executed without any court proceedings and thrown into mass graves, during the socialist "Long Knives" night. Hungarian war crime, known under the name "Cold Days," is unanimously qualified as atrocity in Hungarian history. The acknowledgment of this atrocity belongs into the elementary historical understanding; Hungarian art and literature affronted the past with works of soul-stirring, cathartic character. Serbian history also imputes distinctive importance to the year 1942, in other words, to the "Cold Days." The state, by directives of the political character, is building monuments, organizing ceremonies, books ensure special place of this event in collective memory, memorials are held about it. All this attains targeted and actualized annotation in the 1990's. In a symbolic political space, at the time of breakup of Yugoslavia, that era of national martyrdom obtained contemporary interpretation. Per that interpretation, the state discourse renders diversity as nefarious matter.

Post-Milošević government's rhetoric depicts history in the same manner. At the same time the bloodshed and expatriation of 1945 are taboo until today. Post-Milošević government does not have sincere volition to outright unmask this crime; in the latest high school history textbook published in 1992, not a word is dedicated to this matter, while crimes committed against Serbs are painted in vivid colors. Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian students must study from the same text book. The majority community demonstrates rigid resistance towards exposing of the past, as well as the opposition to any intention of marking of mass graves. Let's imagine what kind of moral brakes would be launched if the Serbian nation affronted the fact of the authenticity of mass graves of Germans and Hungarians from Backa and Banat. This, however, did not happen; particular historical events occurred without any barriers. Milošević, namely, (Milošević who wanted to extend Vojvodina strategy to - from the point of view of the national state - rugged Yugoslavia) only finalized this bloody, internalized history that started in 1945. In the beginning, there were only territorial seizures; the borders remained as an external compulsion. In the era of national states, however, the states did not aim at conquering territory only, but human soul as well. The state border, hence, became the frame of cultural and existential totalitarianism, governed by the set of rules established beforehand, in which victors, who should demonstrate symbolic power, are determined in advance, as well as those who are defeated, who must comply. Possible tolerance in this game is only a technique that assures voluntary compliance instead of pluralism.

To discriminate, in the end, means choosing the side that approves mass graves. The history of the period following Vojvodina retorsion of 1945 is the witness of the totalitarian role the state allocates to its borders. Only at the beginning of 1990's, after almost four decades, my mother started to talk about mass graves

where bodies of some of our relatives are buried. Those mass graves are already inaccessible. The chapel was built over one of them, the soccer field over another, and the residential block over the third. There is no space where the mark could be placed. It was, hence, intended to radically erase any external evidence. Not only external, but internal evidence also was to be erased. I asked my mother why she did not tell me about all this before, why she did not reveal to me the apocryphal family history when I was young; my life might have gone in a different direction. That different direction might have been harder, but would have been clearer. My mother responded that she wanted to spare me the agony of remembering; she did not want to deprive me of hope. I asked then if she spoke about this with my late father, with other family members. She responded that she did not say a word to anybody about this; it was not ever mentioned in our family home. My mother divulged this family history to me when there was no hope left. She managed to completely blot out her memory. It turned out later that my whole generation shares this experience. All generations were rendered as traumatized partners. The state succeeded in the attempt to falsify family histories. My own distinctiveness, hence, is built on mutilation, which is not the nature of diversity, because I do not recognize its borders in my own boundaries, but among the boundaries it is forced to accept. At the time of NATO air raids, I finally realized with astonishment that I am afraid of the state in which I was born and whose citizen I am, that I am as afraid as those Hungarian peasants from Backa who were taken out into the fields to dig trenches to prevent tank movements during NATO air raids. Those trenches were of the exactly same width as mass graves dug in 1945.

In the novel *Fateless*, for which he won Nobel Prize, Imre Kertesz discusses the culture of holocaust as the determinant of our present; after Auschwitz one should write about Auschwitz. European

culture acknowledged this crime and although there are radicals who deny this crime, the fact of the holocaust became an organic part of our culture. This, however, did not happen with the tragedies that happened in European border areas, especially not with crimes committed in East European multiethnic regions, in regards of which we should discuss that the culture of mass graves is determinant of our present. Europe must clearly acknowledge this in the same manner as holocaust. Europe was an accomplice in those events; this is not only the private affair of victims, but an imperative consequence of the idea of state. This acknowledgment never came as this crime was not of such brutally gigantic scope, as well as because it assimilated dispersing character, and especially, because it was not always possible to clearly distinguish between butcher and the victim; victims existed, but butchers could not be considered defeated. The butchers could rather be considered as victors.

Can we, after all, possibly talk about Sisyphean luck of the inhabitant of the border area? Are we closer to the utopia of the border area mentioned in many important literary works? Confrontation did not occur, but changes, however, where significant. The process of modernization accelerated the growth of the Diaspora in Western Europe. The contact zone is widening more and more, and is influencing the center with unstoppable force. The layout of European capitals is not homogeneous any longer; it is more colorful and diverse than border area. Different identities are blending with a greater pace. To be the foreigner, to immigrate as a foreigner to a metropolis does not have the meaning of being cast off; instead, more and more people are discovering the stranger in themselves. The collapse of the politics of identity in everyday life, at first appalled liberals and their global rhetoric. They feared of new collapse, they talked about new fragmentation, as new post modernist processes aroused suspicion of global system of val-

ues inherited from erudite philosophy. It became obvious, however, that global system of values was oppressive; instead of the image of the citizen of the world, hybrid citizen of eclectic identity and complex amalgamation appeared. Identity, however, per Stuart Hall, an expert in this matter, "is formed at an unstable point, where 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet narration of history and culture." Whoever looks for security and evidence in identity, finds insecurity and ambiguousness only. Instead of traditional idea of the citizen of the world on one hand and instead of the idea of local patriotism on the other hand, the citizen of no man's land emerges, who positions not between two poles, but above them. I would like to illustrate this with the notion of Simone Weil: that hybrid citizen became capable of growing roots in extermination. No man's land is expanding with surprising speed and deprives the border of its myth and might. This spiritual vine, nursed by the border area, was animated again in this new European space; it was considered to be exotic until now, but became an asset.

This area started acquiring its shape in Western Europe. The traditional, multicultural micro cosmoses, cities and provinces started to flourish and to serve as paradigm in that world. European megalopolises begun to acquire the shape of border areas. In Eastern Europe, on the contrary, ethnic cleansing is still taking place. Small, traumatized Mid-European countries and Balkans nationalism are still hysterically carrying on ethnic cleansing in search of ethnically homogeneous state. This will be the case until Sofia, Warsaw, and Budapest, Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana become polyphonic, large cities, etched with internal borders, as Berlin, London or Paris is. When these cities acquire similarity to their border areas, border areas will be free. The border will exist, but it will be on no man's land. To be a foreigner, however, on no man's land is not only natural - it is beautiful.