ESSAY

kontrollat e pasaportave/ passport control

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"The Road" by Ann Privateer

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The smell of armpit sweat and unbrushed teeth are so dominant in the car, I can't stand them anymore. My legs are asleep but I can't stretch them: The cool box with the not-so-cool drinks and lunch boxes in it, pillows, and my sleeping brother are in the way. I hate him for being able to sleep normally without knowing anything about this ordeal that we're in for about nine hours. My father has both hands on the steering wheel, looking left and right, trying to find a little gap between the cars so he can get further in line. We are in line with EU citizens. Only three of ten counters are open. People from different countries on their way to get "home," crossing one border after the other and getting more tired after each crossing. Someone from a non-EU country reacted a second faster than my father and pushed in front of him. With his nerves at his wits' end, my father honks and gets upset about the chaos and the passive watching of the border police. My mother looks at him and asks him in an annoyed tone not to get upset, it wouldn't help at all. He looks back annoyingly at her, tells her with a tense voice, "Please, not at the border, we are almost there!"

Everything stands still. The border policemen sit on the white plastic chairs, light up a cigarette and pick up a coffee in a plastic cup, looking calmingly at all those cars while sweat is dripping down their cheeks. They are in no hurry. It seems that they enjoy it, making people wait. Suddenly the masses of the cars are making a concert: a honking concert. They protest. The masses of the cars become one, aiming for the same wish: crossing the border and being just a little bit closer to home. Cars with license plates from Germany, Sweden, UK, and Belgium at a border crossing at a lost place somewhere deep in the Balkans with people in it whose origins are in Kosovo, Bulgaria, Turkey, North Macedonia. My father participates with the honking and we become one with the masses. My brother still sleeps. And this exact moment at the border makes me feel like home. Those unique situations at the border controls are experiences that only a few people know and that makes borders a huge part of my identity with a Kosovar-Albanian heritage. Those borders mean a lot to me. Funny thing is that those borders do not exist for many people.

When people asked me where my origins are, I always said, "From Kosovo, it's in the Balkans, near Albania." I got used to those puzzled faces, never having heard of it, assuming it is located somewhere in the Middle East or Africa. Or they assume I'm from Albania. When I say, "No, Kosovo," they look puzzled. When they asked where they could find it on the map, I'd shown them the dashed line on Google Maps. I'd shown them where the border is, where we wait every summer to pass it to get *home*.

The border lines of present day Kosovo were drawn around 1912. In 1945 Kosovo became a part of Yugoslavia. In 1989 Yugoslavia began to crumble and fell apart, followed by bloody wars that my family was also a part of and that ended in Kosovo in 1999. Kosovo eventually

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declared independence on 17th February 2008. Over 100 states accept the state of Kosovo, 90 don’t. For the latter those borders do not exist.

Until today the border on Google Maps is not a clean line, it is a dashed one. To me those borders exist, they have always existed. And that's why I put *kosovë* in my bio on social media. And just because of that I get hate and insults by strangers on the internet. One time I even got death threats via voice messages.

I remember one time when my father drew two little lines in the school book where Kosovo was. And I kept on doing that until today. The first thing I do when I see a map is looking if I can spot the border of Kosovo, this little place that no emotion of mine seems suitable to describe what I feel for it. Dua Lipa, whose origins are in Kosovo as well, described it once properly: “I just want to see my country on a map!”

And it hurts me that I've experienced many encounters with people who did not seem to hear or care for what happened from 1990 until 1999 in the Balkans. It was not *something somewhere far away*. Former Yugoslavia and its wars were behind the Austrian border. It hurts that the suffering of millions of people is not known to a lot of people. It is at least what I experienced my whole life: many people don’t care. Those specific borders were the center of attention of a bloody conflict where many countries were involved. However people do not seem to care that those borders are also a part of *their* country’s history.

I have had many encounters with people who never experienced closed borders or problems with their visa, yet they act as if they know exactly what they are talking about when I tell them that I have a different background.

It started at school. Teachers at school told me often, “You don’t know what borders are, staying in line, waiting and not knowing if you can make it to the other side.” I just looked at them, feeling numb of my inability to find words for my experience — something that is still within me — and not knowing how to respond to it. I was sick of being told that this little piece of land “doesn't exist,” having the feeling that I'm the odd one out by not having a country. Those borders have also shown me how I differed from the other pupils at school in Germany.

I specifically experienced it recently when I was talking with an elderly colleague, almost a pensionist, about the wars in Europe. She grew up her whole life in peace and prosperity, works for a big German company, and was able to afford a house in the 1980s where she still lives. Still, she told me, “I’m a child of the Cold War, you don’t know anything about the constant danger of a war.” I responded by saying “last autumn (October 2023) I was in Kosovo when the tanks and hard weapons were at the border of Kosovo. My family

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experienced the war in the 1990s." Her shocked face was kind of a satisfaction. However my response does not seem satisfactional to me. I wish I'd added, "Don't tell me anything about not knowing anything." I feel that I do not have much endurance left in myself for being for my whole life understanding or sympathetical for the ignorance many people have.

I don't know the feeling of "free borders." The reason for it was having the Yugoslavian passport I was born with, something that everyone from the countries of former Yugoslavia had. We had a pink sticker with a stamp in it that told us how long our *Duldung* was valid. Duldung means endurement: *We endure your stay for a specific amount of time*. And this stamp determined our radius of movement: the surrounding of the city I was born, Braunschweig, later even other states of Germany. And this stamp made me hate the circle of chairs after each holiday when all the children talked about those places they visited: France, Spain, Italy, or the USA. They just got into the plane with their strong passports. I had spent my summer holidays with my cousins, going to the outdoor pool and eating pommes every day. And to me it was enough. Until today I fear the passport controls even when I'm not travelling to Kosovo.

The feeling of being at the border is something that I share with people who know the feeling of "somewhere in between." Taking care of the passport as if it was the Holy Grail, hiding it somewhere in a bag for "important documents". I had to ask my mother more than once for my passport, it was even not accessible for myself. Years later I have made my own "special place" in my own apartment where I keep my passport, taking it every time I travel even though only an ID is required. The constant fear of not being able to cross a border and thus feeling stuck accompanies me everywhere I go. And when friends tell me that they don't own a passport, I feel discomfort. I ask myself "how is it possible to sleep properly without a passport?"

Much later during lockdown many people could not stand the feeling of being "trapped". As someone who is able to show a lot of sympathy suddenly I was not able to show any sympathy. I have felt the pain as a child to be laughed at for only visiting Kosovo, not Asia or Mallorca. And I have seen the frustration of the people of Kosovo until 1st January 2024, the day of the visa liberalization, a day that many people of Kosovo had patiently awaited.

As I write those lines I feel that borders divide but at the same time connect people. Crossing a border is required in order. And at the borders someone is always waiting: The son at an airport in Germany waiting for his 78-years-old mother who traveled by plane for the first time in her life. The grandmother waiting on the other side of the border control somewhere in the Balkans, waiting for her grandchildren she sees only once a year. And it means waiting for another year in order to meet loved ones.

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Borders crossing determine the feeling. Due to the circumstances in the late 1980s and especially the tension in the 1990s my parents are afraid of *uniforms*: police and military. Back in their day *uniforms* meant danger. The reason: simply being Albanian. After the demonstrations in 1989 (where my parents participated) and when the rest of Yugoslavia began to crumble, Albanians in Kosovë were expelled from the Yugoslavian authorities from the public life even though the majority of Kosovë are Albanian: They were not allowed to enter public places such as schools, universities, or hospitals and there were curfews. Instead their lives took place at private homes. Furthermore, almost everyone lost their jobs in the 90s.

Because of that my mother reasons how her generation is afraid of uniforms. And other family members tell me how they were beaten up arbitrarily by the police just for crossing a street.

Those stories today made me understand why my parents get uneasy and anxious at every border crossing in the Balkans where the *uniforms* inspect us. I understand that their past is speaking out of them when they start arguing in the car in front of the border.

But after crossing the line the attitude completely changes, the mood is much better.

And seeing the face of the parents who seem truly happy with no frown and a smile on their faces, a facial expression that is mostly rare in the life in the Diaspora, far away from their *home* they left for survival reasons and not because they wanted to.

I have finished this text during my flight to the Balkans. Due to the current possibilities of tensions at the borders I avoid traveling there by bus or car. One thing that doesn't change and that I inherited from my parents is constantly looking after my passport, keeping it safe and feeling naked and vulnerable without it.

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