

Party in the Afghan Squat

Bojan Mucko

At the end of December 2020, after three months of volunteering, Dana's last weekend in Bihać was approaching. That Friday evening was the last chance for us five volunteers to go to a party at a nearby squat. With the Afghans. The good ones, someone added, not the ones with knives. The guys invite us all the time, every time they leave their cell phones for charging – all of us as the *Habibi* team (cf. **distro**) – but maybe Dana most of all. As agreed, we bought two chickens, made a salad, and I (as usual) cooked some improvised rice with ingredients found in our fridge. We also took some plates and put them all in two blue Ikea bags, used for carrying packages prepared for distro to the van. After a few minutes of driving, we turned onto a gravel road. After driving through an overgrown field on a muddy road for about two kilometers, we parked in complete darkness in front of a dilapidated industrial or maybe a former warehouse building. It consisted of a huge hall with only the concrete foundation and the bare blue structural frame remaining. We turned on our lamps and grabbed the blue bags from the van. Sergej and Dana knew the way. Everything was overgrown with tall vegetation, except for the white surfaces of the foundation, with sporadic plants emerging from them. We walked along that concrete clearing through a tall, blue, hollow frame which looked surreal against the backdrop of the night sky, like an unfinished computer 3D render. We were greeted by cheerful, friendly voices coming from the other side of the frame. After exiting the hall, a ruin of a small, one-story brick house where our hosts lived could be seen to the right, probably a former office that was attached to the hall.

The guys met us at the door and came out to greet us. We all hugged each other in turn, the five of us and ten of them. First a warm, gentle hug with the right hand, then a handshake. A welcoming laughter and the quiet, joyful festivity of meeting in the middle of a dark field. Their temporary home was protected by gravel hills overgrown with weeds. The diffuse, bluish lights of the city broke through the fog, and the orange light of the fire flickered and beckoned from within. There was a feeling of security, as if the whole scene was protected by some transparent, impenetrable shield. The home we entered through the wide open door was reduced to its bare walls. There was a hole in the wall in the place of a former window, immediately to the left of the entrance to the first of two small rooms. Sleeping bags and personal belongings were neatly arranged along the edges of the room, and clean, soft, gray patterned blankets covered the floor. Following the example set by our hosts, we took off our shoes and sat together on the floor, in a large circle around the fire lit in a dilapidated, improvised metal stove in the middle of the room. Nisar spoke English the best, and he also seemed to be the oldest. In any case, he was in charge in a way. He assumed the role of master of ceremonies and, with a charming smile, asked us to introduce ourselves by name and origin. Sergej from Germany sat furthest from him, then, from right to left, Dana from the USA, Louise from France, Fabian from Belgium, and me from Croatia. All of us in that circle, at the moment of introduction, became national representatives. At the mention of Croatia, everyone paused for a moment, and I used my prepared line with a bad apology for my nationality in stand-up comedy style. The line was met, just like in previous similar situations, with a slight smile, but Nisar, who was sitting right next to me, addressed me pensively: "I don't mean to judge you or anything, but do you maybe know why they beat us like that?"

He posed the question without any emotion, looking me directly in the eyes, as if he simply needed help in solving a puzzle he had been thinking about for a long time. The fire illuminated only the right side of his face, just enough so that the scars on his eyebrows and temples became forever seared in my memory. The blue-eyed boy sitting a little bit behind me carried the same ones, and so did the others. The similar positions and appearances of the lines created a scary impression of a signature. Lines three or four centimeters in length cut diagonally across the eyebrows. An encounter with the Croatian police recorded on the body. But that was not the main topic of conversation, only an incidental detail that was not fussed about, it was simply presented as a fact. As if the warm, friendly atmosphere of the small festivity, which they decided to organize for us that evening, was more important to them than the brutality of their everyday life.

11/4/2022