

Hard-won Corridors — the Power of People on the Move

2015 in Botovo – Spielfeld – Šid

The following stories from the Balkan Route in autumn and winter 2015 are part of a more comprehensive ‘collective memories’ project, in which the author tries to retell experiences mainly from struggles for freedom of movement. The names of the mentioned persons are fictitious, but the stories with their places, dates, and encounters were experienced exactly as they were told. As fragments of the summer of migration, these stories may help us to understand this extraordinary period better. During this period, the freedom of movement posed a greater challenge to the EU border regime than at any other time in the last few decades.

They asked for a room overlooking the train station. There was one available, so they paid in cash in advance. It was at the one-star Hotel Cubura. It was located in the small Serbian town of Šid, a few kilometres from the Croatian border. It was a cold day just before Christmas, and it was already dark outside. Milena and Max kept their jackets and woolly hats on when they opened the window. They wanted to see and hear what was going on at the train station. More than ten buses had just arrived. The car park was too small for such a large crowd. However, it took less than an hour for all the passengers to disembark, pass through a checkpoint, and board the waiting train. The same thing happened twice more in the next two hours. Then the train left. First, it would go to Slavonski Brod in Croatia, and then, via Slovenia, on to the Austrian border. The next stage of the journey north was still largely open in December 2015. This was possible for

people who could prove that they came from Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan, or who could convincingly claim to do so.

As the departing train pulled away, Max was reminded of the incredible scenes he had witnessed in autumn. At a station in a Croatian village. It was 26 September 2015, and shortly after 10 pm. in Botovo, close to the Hungarian border. Max would never forget it. After the train rolled in, a surreal nighttime scene unfolded. Women, children, men, and people of all ages poured out of every door. They were helping each other. There were even two people in wheelchairs. Most families had only a minimal amount of luggage. Some were wrapped in blankets. Around 1,600 people left the wagons. They moved quickly and decisively, following the groups ahead of them rather than the barely understandable announcements over the loudspeakers.

The local police, fire brigade, and Red Cross were on site, still somewhat surprised by what was happening. At the same time, however, they already seemed somewhat experienced. As a friendly firefighter explained to Max, "This is already the eleventh train. It started three days ago." The Botovo transit would continue for several weeks. It was an extension of the hard-won corridor. Over 80 more trains would follow. Around 180,000 people, accompanied by Croatian police, first walked one kilometre to the green border with Hungary. They would then board trains provided by the Hungarian government, which would take them to Austria. From there, they would travel on to Germany and Scandinavia.

Help with mass flight across a green border. Organised between countries. In the age of Frontex. The movement of hundreds of thousands of people was unstoppable at this stage. Where they were blocked, immediate mass protests ensued, and new routes were found. The authorities and border police were overwhelmed and helpless, focusing only on channelling the flow of people somehow. The aim was to avoid losing control completely. Max has always seen himself as a possibilities thinker. Almost anything is possible. But even he could not have imagined Botovo in his wildest dreams...

'Amazing' was the word on everyone's lips. Max had ended up in a convoy of cars with a mixed group of supporters at the Croatian-Hungarian border. They were mainly activists from Slovenia, Italy, and Germany who had responded to the call from Ljubljana for an 'Open Border Caravan'. In the evening, they lined up dozens of boxes of food, drinks, and clothes on the side of the road next to the train station. These were donations that they had purchased in supermarkets or collected at the Rog social centre in the Slovenian capital. A plenary meeting took place there at midday. All available information about current flight routes was gathered and discussed, along with ways in which support could be provided. Many were willing to help people, even across closed borders. But that was no longer necessary, as they witnessed firsthand late that evening in Botovo.

“The power of refugee movements—how governments are forced to act as smugglers”—was the headline that Max would use the next day to circulate a short report on the transnational mailing lists.

Three months had passed since then, but Max still had vivid memories of what had happened. It was the craziest episode of a long summer of migration, which was still ongoing even at the end of December. They could see Šid and follow the middle section of the Balkan route. Milena and he had spent the last few days in Belgrade. They wanted to get a firsthand impression of the embattled borders at the end of the year. While there, they met Marko, a friend of theirs who had been living in Budapest for several years and who, in mid-September, had started the ‘Moving Europe’ project with them and other activists. “Getting in direct contact with the communities, and passing on information about support along the route”—this is something that Milena and Max have been doing for the past few years. They had been learning by doing ever since they helped set up the ‘Welcome to Europe’ (w2eu) network in 2009 after the ‘No Border Camp’ in Lesbos. ‘Counselling in transit—advice on the route’ was Milena’s particular strength. She found it easy to strike up conversations with people, in English and French. She could quickly gain their trust, or at least their interest. They handed out lots of green business cards advertising w2eu.info. The website provided information and contacts for almost every European country of transit and destination in four languages. For several months, a special ‘live feed’ was set up to provide regular updates about changes to the corridor online. At the same time, a minibus carrying the ‘Moving Europe’ team was travelling along the route. Experienced friends had decided without hesitation to take time off from October onwards to spend the following weeks travelling along the route. Milena and Max replaced them for the days between Christmas and New Year.

In Belgrade, a central park served as a meeting place for refugees, who, for the first time during these months, appeared as ‘normal travellers’. They were no longer hidden away on secret paths, constantly fearing police checks and possible internment. Instead, they moved openly, searching for the fastest route and cheapest ticket to the north. There was still money to be made from refugees. However, the market for professional smugglers—who had all too often been used as an excuse to criminalise and seal off the European border regime—had collapsed in the face of de facto open borders. Once again, it became clear that without border controls, there would be no illegal routes. In other words, without Frontex, there would be no smugglers. And there would be no deaths by land, at least. In August, 71 people suffocated in a truck. They were on their way to Germany, but this incident occurred in Austria. They were hidden and abandoned in an airtight refrigerated container. This horror was over for the time being. For a few months, the deadly violence at the border in the Balkans lost some of its terror.

Milena and Max had found posters with a map showing the route from Greece to Scandinavia on walls near Belgrade Park. The posters also featured a business card with the website address of 'w2eu'. The 'guide' was spreading well. But there were hardly any refugees moving through the area these days. Most transit travellers were now using buses that ran directly from Preševo, on the southern border with Macedonia, to Šid, on the northern border with Croatia. They were leaving Belgrade to the east, so to speak. The Serbian authorities wanted to avoid their capital being used as a permanent stopover. They therefore set up a collection point for buses near the town of Adaševci, at a motorway car park around 10 kilometres from the Croatian border.

Milena and Max spent several hours at this rest area. It was clear that a remarkable infrastructure had been set up here in a very short time. Both authorities and volunteers ran it. Soup and tea were served, and a medical station had been set up. There was also an internet point with mobile phone charging stations and a clothing distribution point, especially for families and children. Large tents equipped with fan heaters, camp beds, and blankets were set up to enable people to spend the night. There was a calm and friendly atmosphere at this transit point, which was created spontaneously. The buses arrived one by one to take a break here. Some rested for only an hour, while others stayed for a whole day or night. Then, when a convoy of at least ten buses was ready to depart, they set off northwards, escorted by a police car. They were heading for the train station in Šid.

Milena and Max first encountered Syrian and Afghan families in Adaševci. The people were exhausted, but not desperate. They had crossed the Aegean Sea by boat and had been travelling almost non-stop since then. Sometimes by bus, sometimes by train, and rarely on foot. They were all in contact with relatives and friends who had either travelled the route before them or walked endless distances. These people encouraged them to persevere. They gave them hope, assuring them that they would arrive in a few days. As soon as people found out that Milena and Max were from Germany, their interest grew noticeably. They asked about the cities with the best prospects. Milena replied as always: 'Go where you have good friends and relatives. The most important thing is to have a good team with whom you can assert your right to stay.' She handed them the w2eu-business card with the contact and support addresses of many cities across Europe.

Milena and Max finally met a group of young men. Judging by their appearance and English, Milena guessed that they were Somali. And that was precisely their problem. From mid-November onwards, open transit to the 'SIA' countries was restricted, most likely at the instigation of the Slovenian government but with Austrian spin doctors pulling the strings in the background: Syria, Iraq,

and Afghanistan. Over 90% of people travelling on the route were affected. However, refugees and migrants from other countries were now being denied passage. They were turned away at the newly set-up checkpoints and detained. They were forced to apply for asylum in local camps.

The group of people who were supposedly Somali eventually discussed their chances of getting through the checkpoints as black Syrians with Milena and Max openly. They couldn't tell them how strict the controls in Šid were, but they did encourage them to try. And with a bit of luck, they might even get through without being checked. There were still many security gaps, and the guards at the checkpoints did not always conduct thorough checks. The media was still predominantly pro-refugee, and the authorities did not dare attack the refugee movements head-on for good reason. Instead, the usual 'divide and rule' tactic was employed. They created the 'SIA' construct to exclude smaller communities initially. Then, step by step, they tried to close the door on the larger groups.

When Milena and Max arrived in Šid in the late afternoon, they went straight to the checkpoint at the station entrance. They wanted to see how strictly the new rule was being enforced. They asked the security guards why and whether people were being singled out. They argued that it was absurd to turn away the few black refugees, considering the civil war in Somalia and the dictatorship in Eritrea. They pointed out that these people weren't planning to settle there; they wanted to move on to Germany or Scandinavia, where they would be welcomed. Milena and Max introduced themselves as refugee advisers from Germany. It sounded almost official. However, it was difficult to determine whether this had made an impression and possibly contributed to unsettling the security guards. It was worth a try. It was more likely, however, that pressure from above was increasing, and that the checkpoints had to demonstrate that they had filtered out at least a certain number of transit travellers every day.

Milena and Max continued to watch the arriving buses from the window of their hotel in Šid. The small-town railway station, usually completely deserted, had been transformed into a lively transit station on a hard-won corridor. This would have been completely unthinkable at the beginning of the year. Milena and Max pondered the autonomy of migration. They shared their memories and assessments of the turbulent last few months. They agreed that the struggles had developed new dynamics over the course of the year. They acknowledged that refugees and migrants had asserted their right to freedom of movement in a new way.

Did it all start in January 2015? At the same time as Syriza's election victory in Greece? The practice of pushbacks at the militarised land border with Turkey continued unabated under the new government. However, illegal refoulements

at sea, off the Aegean islands, were gradually phased out. Milena and Max experienced this first-hand through their work with Alarm Phone. When the project began in October 2014, there were no feasible options for the hotline to intervene in the Aegean Sea. Forwarding of an emergency call would have played into the hands of the Greek coastguard, who would have used force to push the boat away. This changed in February 2015, and by the second half of the year, Alarm Phone had established a genuine working relationship with the rescue coordination centre in Piraeus. From late summer onwards, there was hardly a night without an emergency call, and during this period, the Greek coastguard finally did its job. It rescued people. The GPS positions passed on by Alarm Phone were generally taken seriously and acted upon accordingly.

Further changes in the region led to a steady increase in refugee movements. On the Greek side, the brutal detention regime was eased. However, the decisive push factor came from the other side of the coast, where several million Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon were experiencing permanent undersupply and an increasing deprivation of rights. Their hopes of an end to the war and a return to Syria had been dashed once and for all. Even families who had initially tried to build a new life in the diaspora nearby had given up, seeking a better life for themselves and, above all, for their children's future by continuing their journey to north-western Europe.

From spring 2015 onwards, the first large groups of refugees started gathering at the border with Macedonia. They intended to cross the border together and make their way north along the railway line. On foot. They marched for days and nights on end. In April, a serious accident occurred when a group was hit by a train. Fourteen people lost their lives. Against this backdrop of tragedy, and following skilful lobbying by local NGOs, the Macedonian parliament passed a law in June 2015 introducing a transit visa. This document was valid for 72 hours, allowing people to travel through the country on public transport during this period.

An increased number of people began using this route until the Macedonian government declared a state of emergency in August. The government sealed off the border with military forces and used tear gas and flashbang grenades against families with children. However, faced with the growing number of arrivals and the refugees' determination, the soldiers were forced to surrender just a few days later. They either could not or would not shoot at the refugees, and there was no fence yet. More people were making their way through Serbia to the Hungarian border, reaching Budapest via the contested route. At the beginning of September, the struggle on the Balkan route reached a critical point.

At the end of August, Marko, a friend from Budapest, reported daily on the situation at Keleti station. Hundreds of people were sleeping there, while thou-

sands more were gathering to continue their journey by train. “There will either be brutal mass arrests or an uprising here soon,” he wrote shortly before the ‘March of Hope’, which was called for by mainly Syrian refugees, began on 3 September. They marched on foot along roads and motorways towards Austria and Germany. Thousands took part, demonstrating great determination. There was a great deal of media interest, and the reporting was largely favourable towards the protesters, whose actions forced the governments of Hungary, Austria and Germany to act. On 4 September, a historic success was achieved when the Hungarian government sent buses to take people to the Austrian border. With the approval of the German government, a decisive breakthrough had been achieved, and the EU border regime was on the back foot.

Max was in Tunisia at the beginning of September. He was on one of Alarm Phone's contact and networking trips, visiting the families of people who had disappeared at sea, as well as young activists organising on the other side of the Mediterranean. From Tunis, he followed the latest news from the Balkan route with disbelief. No one had expected such a turn of events in the struggle for freedom of movement. Not even the positive mood in the cities in Germany, where people arrived by bus and train. The first train reached Munich on 5 September, followed by arrivals in an increasing number of cities. On 17 September, Milena, Max, and some friends from Hanau (near Frankfurt) welcomed the first refugees at the station. Over the next few days, they met people who had travelled from Izmir to Hanau in just seven days. Unbelievable.

When Max heard about the call for an ‘Open Border Caravan’ in Slovenia at the end of September. He spontaneously decided to go there. ‘Moving Europe’ was still in the preparatory stages, and unfortunately, no one from Max's Hanau group was available at such short notice. So, he went alone, but he had known the Slovenian group for many years through transnational networking. The last time they had met was at a Blockupy mobilisation in Frankfurt. He had also arranged to meet friends from Italy at Rog, a social centre in Ljubljana. Together, they had an impressive experience in Botovo. This inspired Max to plan another long weekend in the Balkans for the end of October.

This time, Miro, a young friend of his, joined him. Their first stop was their friends' place in Rog, Ljubljana. They received the latest information on the situation at the Slovenian-Croatian border here. Following the complete closure of Hungary, this area had become a newly contested zone. Max and Miro travelled through Rigonce, Brežice and Dobova. These small towns, situated on the border between Croatia and Slovenia, served as flashpoints in the corridor for only a few days or weeks. Heavily armed military personnel and border police guarded the improvised emergency shelters, where, at first glance, hundreds of people appeared to be interned. Locked behind fences and subject to strict access con-

trols. However, the authorities understood that holding transit travellers in one place for too long would immediately spark protests. Barriers were overrun, and on one occasion, even tents were set on fire. Journalists and activists were everywhere, documenting the violent police attacks and spreading the news through the media. That's why everything was constantly in motion. First came the long marches, then the convoys of buses and finally the trains. At Dobova train station, Max and Miro successfully accessed the supposedly cordoned-off tracks. They handed out 'Welcome to Europe' business cards to departing wagons, and the photos they took reflected the travellers' relief and pride at having made it through another stage of their journey.

Max and Miro gathered a wide range of impressions and information, but it wasn't easy to get an overview. Miro spent a day helping in the Noborder kitchen, which had been set up on a farm along the route. They then distributed warm soup in huge pots. Max tried to find out more by talking to journalists. But what exactly? Because there was obviously no concept or plan. The authorities improvised and reacted. They kept people together in large groups to prevent complete loss of control. However, they couldn't stop them.

Max and Miro experienced this first-hand on their return journey from Šenilj to Spielfeld, the border crossing between Slovenia and Austria. This is where buses and trains travelling from Brežice and Dobova stopped. The Austrian military attempted to block people with makeshift fences, gates, and police cordons, or at least to detain them for hours while carrying out individual checks. From a hill, Max and Miro were able to observe and record on video how this led to life-threatening situations. Families, and children in particular, were at risk of being crushed against the fences by the crowd pushing forward. On several occasions, the force of the crowd moved aside gates and literally overran police cordons. Despite the use of loudspeakers and Arabic translators, the announcements made by the authorities were unsuccessful. These were scenes of a contested border that the refugees had literally broken through.

At the end of the year, Max took his third and southernmost tour of the Balkan borders, this time to Serbia. However, Milena and he were due to travel several times between Idomeni and Thessaloniki in northern Greece in the coming months. All the corridors were closed again in March 2016. This was after the border regime regained control through the construction of high fences and the use of massive violence, which led to further divisions. Right-wingers and racists emerged from their hiding places, expressing their pent-up anger. However, the foreseeable backlash would not be able to turn back history. In a short time, hundreds of thousands had crossed the borders. They would settle in the communities of their destinations and bolster them. Thus, however long it might take, they would prepare the next breakthroughs.

Even without this probabilistic assessment, however, no one could take away the impressions that Milena and Max had of their journey between Belgrade and Šid. They felt that these events marked the end of a historic year in the fight against the EU border regime. At least for their short lives. Max thought back to 1997 and the foundation of the No One Is Illegal network, which they had joined to support migrant autonomy at a time when it was under threat. Over the past few years, Milena and he had contributed to setting up and expanding adequate infrastructure for freedom of movement, particularly within the transnational networks Welcome to Europe and Alarm Phone. They were both aware of the limitations of their daily efforts. However, after 2015, they were more determined than ever to continue fighting against borders.



Idomeni, 2016. Photo: Nidžara Ahmetašević