

WELCOME TO SLOVAKIA

While I was driving through my neighborhood recently, in an area that could kindly be described as working class, an old lady ran out from her house into the middle of the street and frantically waved me down. “Oh please, oh my Jesus, oh good god please!” she cried, tears bursting from every pore of her face. “My husband is in the hospital and they’ve phoned to tell me he’s had another heart attack. My car won’t start so I phoned for a cab, but I just realized that I’m out of cash. Oh please, sir, would you help me? The cab will be here any minute. You can wait and see if you like. Please, please, anything will do!” She took off her glasses, fogged thick with perspiration and salt water, and looked me in the eye with a mixture of despair and pleading. Her grief was real. I quickly took out my wallet and gave her a ten. “Oh thank you, thank you so much, and God bless you!” she said. And with that, she ran to the sidewalk to wait for the cab. I glanced in the rear view as I left the scene, took one last look at her quivering figure, and quietly wished her good luck.

Three weeks later, while driving down the same street, I watched as the same woman ran out to flag down a car about fifty yards in front of me. She was shouting and gesticulating with the same enormous passion, exhorting the driver to find it within the confines of his heart to help her out. I pulled over to take in the proceedings. The driver was apparently more reluctant than I was, forcing the old woman to extend her monologue and produce an additional rush of tears. She practically fainted at one point, using the hood of his car to steady herself. That seemed to do the trick. The driver reached into his wallet and gave her some money. She gratefully thanked him and took her place at the curb until he was gone. When he turned the corner, she counted the money, shaking her head as if to comment on the declining state of public philanthropy. I started to applaud. If anything, I thought, she’s underpaid.

The old lady’s performance reminded me of an experience I had while traveling in Eastern Europe a few years ago. Having just completed a fact-finding mission about why theatre artists in State supported countries do not have to produce plays like *Mama Mia!* or *Puppetry of the Penis* to make a living, I was traveling by train from Budapest to Warsaw to catch a plane back to the States. The majority of the trip was spent winding our way through Slovakia, a nation whose history primarily consists of having been raped and pillaged by every major Empire from the Romans to the Ottomans to the Nazis. Even today, every country within a thousand miles thinks that Slovakia is rightfully theirs, which has made the people who actually live in Slovakia pre-disposed to rape and pillage all strangers who look suspicious in the slightest degree.

We pulled out of Budapest just before midnight. The trip covered just over 300 miles but was ungodly long as we were scheduled to stop in every other village along the way. It was the very dead of winter, on the darkest of nights. I had booked a sleeper compartment, my curiosity about Slovakia being trumped by my middle-aged need for any amount of beauty sleep my poor body could muster. As I looked out from the ice-covered window of my tiny couchette, I could see nothing but my own freezing breath. Every so often I caught the dim silhouette of a few ancient trees, interrupted periodically

by the distant outline of some belching smokestacks. “So much for Slovakia”, I thought as I crammed my body into the tiny cubicle masquerading as a bed. “I’ll see you in my dreams”. And with that, I dozed off, my testicles and toes rattling from the cold despite my wearing three pairs of socks, a sweater, jeans, sweatpants, my winter overcoat, a hat, another hat, and some make shift mittens made from yet another pair of socks.

I was in the middle of an absurdly amusing dream that I was getting sunburned in Seattle when a gentle but insistent knocking awoke me. The door opened and the lights went on. Evidently I had not locked the door. In front me stood the conductor from every train movie ever made. Short, balding, with a mildly cherubic face and a pronounced cherubic girth, his physical appearance was so undistinguished that it gave him the gift of invisibility. His age was indiscriminate: he looked like he was born at age 48 and would die, 85 years later, at age 48. I imagined him toiling every night in Chekovian obscurity, bringing his modest but honest wages home to his wife and mother, (both roles perhaps performed by the same woman), and having regrets about never seeing his children enough. Or maybe he was gay, but because of his fate of having been born in the rough hewn outback of lower Slovakia, he was permanently closeted, even to himself, never understanding the powerful feelings pulsating from his loins when passing by the packs of good looking young soldiers who roamed the train stations. These are the kinds of thoughts one has when taking the night train from Budapest to Warsaw. In any event, the real man was standing before me now, his perpetual weariness offset by the kindest of smiles, which he now applied to our meeting.

“Passporte!” he declaimed as if announcing one of the single most important events of the 21st century. I squinted through the dirty white light and fumbled through my bags. The conductor studied my passport as if it contained state secrets. He was a meticulous man, a good man. No terrorists or criminals would slip through the Solvakian cracks on his watch. He looked at my picture, which unfortunately gave the impression that I was a drunken gunrunner from Tanzania, but he showed no visible sign of dismay. Everything was in order. He placed the passport in his jacket pocket and stood there smiling. I smiled back. He waited, apparently with unfinished business. I tried smiling harder. Something was wrong.

I shrugged in deferential ignorance and made signs indicating that I was at a loss. He shook his head with the beneficence of a wise man speaking to a stupid man. “Tarifa, tarifa...” He was speaking slowly so I could understand. “Tarifa” he repeated until the light finally went off in my head. I did not know of any tariff, but as it is common when crossing any border to pay some kind of governmental tax, I was not terribly surprised. I rubbed my fingers together and asked how much. He looked at me quizzically, glanced at his watch, suddenly realized he was late for something, indicated with his hands that he would be back, and left the compartment. “What a funny man,” I thought as I folded myself back into the tiny box of a bed. He was off, no doubt, to insure that his train was precisely on schedule, that all passengers were comfortable, and that the world as he knew it was in working order. Twenty minutes passed, then thirty. I started to doze off again.

I was dreaming that I was performing a stand-up comedy routine for a group of tax auditors when a violent pounding on the door jolted me completely awake. Two muscle bound soldiers wearing flaming red berets and full camouflage regalia appeared in front of me. They were led by a pair of German shepherds that pushed their way into the room as if I was in their way. The soldiers barked at me for my passport. The dogs did not have to bark. Any friendly tongue wagging or tail waving had been bred out of them several generations ago. I thought I saw one of the dogs smirk at me. The other one looked hungry. “Let the soldiers do the barking”, I could see them thinking, “if this guy is trouble we’ll just eat him”. I retreated to the bed, there being not enough floor space to accommodate all five of us, and assumed a cowering position.

“Passporte!” a deep voice repeated. It took me a while to unfix my gaze from the dog who was smirking before I went fumbling through my bags to retrieve my passport. After several minutes of searching through my belongings, exposing everything including a pair of tie-dye underpants that the soldiers did not even pretend not to laugh at, I realized that my passport was missing. Of course, I did not have my passport. The conductor had my passport. Trying to act nonchalant, I let out a little laugh of realization and slapped my forehead. “Oh, silly me,” I was trying to say with my laugh, “how could I have forgotten? I gave my passport to the conductor.” I pointed outside the car to wherever it was the conductor was doing his undoubtedly good work. The soldiers immediately started shouting and pointing back at me. They mistakenly thought I had cavalierly told them to get out of my compartment. Their aggressive Slovakian parlance seemed intended to convey the idea that they would like to roast my little wise ass. The smirking dog broke into a full smile. The other dog pulled out a napkin and a salt shaker.

Just when the conversation was on the brink of turning into an ugly interrogation, the conductor came to my rescue. Entering with the cheery serenity of a great international diplomat, he spoke in rapid undertones expertly designed to diffuse the situation. He was obviously used to dealing with dangerous men and the perennial anger of soldiers forced to work the night shift in the wintry wasteland of Eastern Europe. Perhaps, as a dutiful husband or an oppressed gay man, he could empathize with those caught in the grand web of an ignominious fate, who were furious about their given circumstances but lacked the conductor’s skill in the life-long art of negotiation and compromise. In either case, he was a wise man, and within a short time he had control over the situation. The soldiers began talking normally, and soon the three of them were joking about something or other. The smiling dog went back to smirking, the other put away his napkin. They finally turned and exited, the men nodding at me as if to say they were almost sorry. The dogs were disappointed. “Next time,” I could hear them thinking, “next time you will never see Poland.”

I turned to the conductor with enormous relief. His round face broke into a gracious smile. We chuckled as I acted out what had happened. “All because of my passport”, I exclaimed, “that you still have”. “Passporte!” he nodded, like we were two old Shriners sharing one of our favorite stories. I smiled until it seemed no longer appropriate to smile. The room went quiet and he still stood there stoically. He made no move to

return my passport. Maybe, I thought, Slovakia is like one of those hotels where the receptionist holds onto your passport until your stay is over. Or, I suddenly remembered, maybe I simply needed to pay the tariff to get it back. “The tarifa, how much?” I smartly said. A quizzical look returned to his face. I felt like I was in a high priced restaurant where inquiring about the price of the food is grounds for being kicked out. At last he bowed his head ever so slightly and gestured back to me with his hand as if to say “You tell me.”

My mind started racing. My estimation of the good character of the good conductor had had obviously been too high. He was now playing that ancient game called Guess My Price. The tariff could be real or fictitious. Maybe he was getting a cut, or maybe he was pocketing the whole thing. Maybe his thirteen children were all suffering from the cholera, or maybe he needed money for illicit gay sex he was having at every station we pulled into, or maybe he was part of a small-time crime syndicate targeting all tourists passing through Slovakia. The question was, how much should I pay? I removed my socks from my hands, took out my wallet and brought forth a ten-dollar bill. Ten dollars in Slovakia would buy him enough medicine or prophylactics to last a year, I figured. The conductor looked at the money and then looked back at me, crestfallen. I took out ten more. He was disappointed. I took out my last ten. To my astonishment, in bent but not broken English, he said “No good, no good. Next stopping, you off train getting. So sorry, so.” My jaw dropped to its most open position. “The law is being the law,” he said with a heavy heart. “To do what I can is nothing”. He looked sincerely sorry. Did I hear him correctly? He was going to kick me off the train? As he left I considered weeping.

How did this happen? Without my noticing, the man had gone over to the dark side. I looked out the window. We had not moved. The train was idling, the conductor probably making his criminal rounds, telling every other impoverished tourist on board to gather their belongings in preparation of being hurled into the unforgiving darkness. I looked outside again. The dim lights on the platform looked as if they might explode from the cold. I imagined myself out there in the middle of the Slovakian night, hopelessly lost in the middle of Slovakian nowhere. I would try to walk into town, but there would be no town. My lips would blow up from frostbite, preventing me from asking for help. Seeing a light from a distant farmhouse, I would attempt to walk there, but the real distance would be far greater than anticipated and one of my frozen feet would break off before reaching the property. I would, at last, make my way to an abandoned barn, and save myself from death by sleeping buried up to my neck in a pile of hot manure. Just before dawn, however, the disgruntled landowner, a former Nazi calling himself Dr. Lenz, would find me sleeping in the manure mound. Bitterly resentful over the outcome of World War II, he would decide to satisfy his need for revenge by having me shot by his two thuggish sons, Drago and Stanko. Tied up, blindfolded, still wet with manure, one leg gone, my lips blown up, I would stand there shivering in the freezing rain as Lenz whispered into my ears the last words I would ever hear on this earth: “Welcome, my friend, to Slovakia.”

The pulling of the train away from the station joggled me back to reality. I tried to shake off my bout of despair by thinking about my options with the wily conductor. Perhaps I could throw a fit of anger, demanding to speak to someone from the American Consulate. No, I thought, no one ever is ever home at the American Consulate. Perhaps I could plead with the conductor for mercy, kissing his hands repeatedly before throwing myself at his feet. No, I thought, that would arouse his suspicions or simply arouse him, neither of which was a good idea. The only viable choice was to play my own version of Guess My Price: show no fear, stare him down, call his bluff. Let's see what this guy is made of, I thought. If I am going to die in Slovakia, let me die like a man.

I waited in the dark for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, there was a gentle knock on the door. I let in the conductor, who looked at me now with a studied expression of utmost sympathy. Refusing to be drawn into the warmth of his eyes, I launched into a speech about justice and honesty. Listing my rights as a citizen in good standing of the world's largest if not greatest democracy, I made it clear that I would not tolerate being cheated or bribed. Was there a tarifa or wasn't there a tarifa? I demanded. My righteous indignation burst from within, and my rhetoric increased in its vitriolic intensity. I cited the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as proof of my guaranteed freedoms. I shouted about oppression and liberation, even managing to include the Geneva Convention and Warsaw Pact in my remarks, events of major historical importance however irrelevant they were to my particular situation. "We are all responsible to history," I concluded with a great flourish, "you Slovaks, you of all people, you should know that. Shame on you, sir. Shame on you." By the end of my outburst I felt faint with exhaustion.

The conductor nodded with great deference, placed his hand on my shoulder, and soothingly patted my back. Ever so gently, he pulled me down on the edge of the bed, where the two of us sat huddled quite close to each other. I instinctively recoiled, but there was a gentleness in his manner that reassured me. His eyes were moist, his round face inviting, his demeanor graceful. I became still, and then, as his loving gaze took hold of me, I felt myself become surprisingly calm. In hushed undertones that implied he was now sharing things that no one had ever heard before, the conductor began to speak.

At first, I thought something was wrong. He made no attempt to speak in English, so I had no clue as to the specific content of what he was saying. But his focus was unlike anything I had ever seen. Every syllable that came out of his mouth made me want to listen to him. Unlike my baroque and high-minded delivery, he was not overly melodramatic, nor was he pushing to get me to understand him. He was simply in touch with some private part of himself, some internal treasure trove of uncensored truths that he was now revealing for my benefit. His voice was beautiful, full of dulcet tones and melodious rhythms, and he moved through his tale with effortless ease. Every so often he would pause to make sure I was with him. He knew I could not understand a word of what he was saying, but he knew that if I just listened to sound of his voice and kept a watchful eye on his animated expressions, I would "grok" what he was saying. Maybe he was telling me about his ailing wife, or maybe he was telling me about his ailing cow. Maybe he was telling me about the Slovakian mob, or maybe he was talking about the boils on his feet. It did not matter. I was in the hands of a master. Like some ancient witch

doctor, he cast a spell, a spell that transported me to another land. At the apex of his performance, one perfect tear rolled down his right cheek. Meryl Streep would have been proud.

He finished his speech, took out a handkerchief, and pressed it to his face. I took out my wallet and removed thirty dollars. Then I went to my luggage and took out an old sock where I kept the rest of my money. After the performance I had just witnessed, I concluded that he was underpaid. I gave him another thirty dollars, enthusiastically. The conductor smiled, took the money, and handed me my passport. As a parting gesture he doffed his hat, gave me a courteous little bow, and stood upright. "Welcome, my friend, to Slovakia," he said. And with that he turned and disappeared into the body of the train to conduct the rest of the night's unfinished business.

Back in my neighborhood, I was thinking of the conductor as I watched the old lady counting her money. I had to hand it to her. She had given a wonderful, disarming, dramatic performance filled with all kinds of falsified emotional truths. Best of all, she was old. Exploiting her age was nothing short of an act of genius, smashing conventional stereotypes about the inability of old people to have the proper degree of chutzpa to pull off such a hustle. Her age gave extraordinary panache to her routine. I had to admit, the old lady had some brass balls.

But, to my mind, the conductor was in a different class. His genius lay in his ability to create sympathy not only for himself, but for his victims. Yes, he was robbing me. And yes, there was a hint of extortion and pay offs and illegal shenanigans that informed the proceedings. But he made me feel good about it, made me feel that we were in it together. His entire strategy was based on offering mutual kindness and understanding. "You have suffered" his eyes were saying, "as have I. All of humanity has suffered so much. I am honored to help you in your suffering. I gratefully will now take your sixty dollars so that the both of us can continue to make our way through life. Thank you for being such a good audience. Good night."

I never met a petty crook more capable of expressing his humanity. Nor did I regret giving him that sixty dollars. Not to do so would have simply been criminal.