

(selected essay from the book "Fleeing from the Dark Side of the Moon" by Simon Chang)

## Preface / **A Life of Resilience Exerted to Extremes**



*"The heart is a house with two bedrooms, one in which the pain lives, and the other people can't laugh too loudly when living in joy. Otherwise the laughter will wake up the pain in the next room."*

— Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*

It was scenes of flight I witnessed not too long ago, and I would rather if a story like this had never unfolded on the face of this Earth.

In the early morning hours of October 17, 2015, word about the closing of borders by the Hungarian government began to spread. Syrian, Iranian, Afghani, Iraqi, and Kurdish refugees deviated from their original path and made their way into Slovenia. On October 22, I was photographing in Rigonce—a quiet border town in southeastern Slovenia with a population of less than 200. At the end of a narrow country road thousands of refugees were held up in the unassuming wooded area behind the recently harvested corn field. After assessing the geographic layout and positioning of law enforcement, I decided to circumvent the police barricade and make my way into the desperate crowd.

No more than a few meters wide, the Sotla River demarcates the border between Slovenia and Croatia after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Before the refugees flooded in, this area was a seldomly-visited green border. Subtle territorial markers erected on both riverbanks, there was no border inspection; residents could freely pass through, like the majority of border crossings within the European Union. Since mid-October 2015, an endless deluge of refugees and migrants has crossed that small bridge near Rigonce, over the Sotla into Slovenia and into the Schengen area, with the ambitious intention to continue onwards to western Europe. What was normally a vast cornfield and a few scattered farmhouses, suddenly became a spotlight of the refugee crisis to Europe and the rest

of the world. The number of refugees that fled to Slovenia started from zero on October 16, rocketed to 3,000 on October 17, to 7,766 on October 19, and reached a record high of 12,616 on October 21, 2015.

Rigonce is only a one-hour car ride from the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana. The country scenery was at the height of their autumnal beauty. News channels competed to report the latest updates of the migrant crisis, and drivers in the oncoming traffic lane shared identical countenances of apprehension, almost as if it was prearranged. Not one person was in the mood to enjoy the interweaving red and yellow landscapes; piles of fallen foliage by the side of the road seemed to hint at the departure of warmth from the earth. And playing out, among the trees at the end of the road, lining the border fields, was a story that would rewrite our history.

The only gravel street in the border village was packed with news vans. Elderly ladies stood slack-jawed in the middle of their vegetable gardens like lost time-traveling visitors; the perturbing mood and the crowd's unsettled gazes were not familiar sights for the residents of this quiet town. The little road leading to the Sotla was littered with items discarded by those who had left in a hurry: a rumpled blanket emblazoned with the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) logo caked with mud; winter clothing stuffed into a children's backpack, all missing their zippers; a leather shoe marred by holes; moldy, dried-out bread wrapped in a plastic bag; toothbrushes; two halves of a broken mirror... I followed the little street to the end of the village. Farmhouses, with tightly shut windows and doorways, opened up to sweeping backyards. If it weren't for the intermittent police sirens that shattered the cool autumn twilight, the distinct layering of farmhouses, the grassy plains, the woods, and the riverbank would surely paint the most idyllic of image. Up ahead, the prohibitive barricade tape segregated the farmhouses from the increasing wailing of infants in the field by the border, so indifferently, into two very separate realities. 800 meters behind the barricade was a football pitch-sized field, a piece of wilderness by the shared boundary with Croatia. A small nation with less than 7,000 strong in its police force, Slovenia had to hastily transfer hundreds of armed law enforcement officers from around the country to maintain peace here at the border. On a cool night, just a few days prior, Croatian authorities stealthily transported thousands of refugees across the border without informing their Slovenian counterparts. Mounted police and police dogs patrolled the border, a line of defense fortified with armored vehicles and fencing. All of this was an attempt to stymie the rush of refugees from their neighbors to the south; an attempt to corral them inside the fence, not unlike herding livestock, to maintain control of the situation before contemplating their next step. In comparison with the small sleepy village, the refugee waiting area bustled with cooking smoke, clusters of shadowy figures circled around and around within the wooded area, despondent families paced the border with their footsteps—all resembling apparitions from a parallel world. The masses grew restless as they gathered. An Arabic interpreter, fetched by the police, tried to calm the refugees through a megaphone. The mad howl of the police cars and ambulances sped near and departed even more hurriedly. This tiny village on the border was boiling. A row of refugees barreled against the fence and yelled furiously, "open the border!", punctuating the unmoving situation with their wrath. Hoarse, frustrated voices of the crowd echoed within the woods along the border, the wailing of infants continued. The graveyard shift riot police officers peered through their helmets and face coverings with bloodshot eyes. No matter how forceful the refugees yelled, no orders came through, and not a single one was allowed forward.

Slovenian army and Croatian police helicopters hovered above the restricted area, like two vultures vying to yield their prey to the other. In an instant, the refugees'

outcries were torn asunder by the aircrafts' deafening rotor blades and drowned within the melancholy forest. The sky above seemed further away than ever, a few solitary birds flew shakily by overhead. More and more ghost-like shadows of the refugees and migrants continued to come forward, like piles of ashes rolling along in the dust, endlessly brought over from afar by vicious gales, treading the well-worn path up to the edge of the fence where they settled into heaps and began their wait. In the midst of the chaos, I retreated to the back of the swarm of media. Slowly making my way through the fields to my right, I tried to find a way around the barricade tape and into the refugee waiting area. Peppered throughout the trees in the distance were an infinite number of small black dots slowly making their way into the Slovenian borders. Like the mass exodus of an ant army before a downpour, crowds continued to spill into the police's field of view. I deliberately slowed my steps and held my breath, even tried to press my chin down, learning how to reduce myself to just a miniscule dot in the wilderness within the police's line of sight. As the mounted police herded a young boy back into the restricted area, under the cloak of my Asian features and a stature equivalent to that of a refugee shouldering a large backpack, I hotfooted towards the center of the field and quickly blended into the landscape of the simmering masses.

A mother wearing a hijab walked arm in arm with her young daughter as they searched for leftover corn in the field. In front of us laid the farmland and river landscapes common to the European countryside. Like ironic art installations, evenly placed armored vehicles and submachine gun-carrying border police surrounded the frantically bewildered thousands, most of whom were women and children. Misshapen rucksacks bulged with all their possessions and an unknown finite amount of luck. Arabic flowed around me, Pashto and Kurdish as well, voices of agitation cried out the names of loved ones. The weary masses wrapped themselves tightly in wool blankets, like fragile pieces of unclaimed luggage scattered about field. It was apparent the cold, foreign earth they slept on presented more peace of mind than the two-meter swells of the Aegean Sea. With their deep, bold singing voices and expressive dancing, a Kurdish family from northern Iran shared the sights and sounds of their journey; men from a Syrian family gathered branches and corn husks for a fire to ward off the bitter cold. Late October temperatures vary wildly on the European continent—one may only require a short-sleeved shirt during the day, but nighttime brings the temperature close to zero. Branches within the waiting area had long been burned to cinders by earlier refugees, presenting a stark contrast to the wooded greenery outside the restricted area. What remained by the riverbank was an entire row of tree trunks, their branches forcibly snapped off before they could mount a protest. People made do by tossing their scarves into the fire, or space blankets distributed to them by volunteers along the way, or even random objects they foraged to aid the embers. The waiting area was shrouded in clouds of smoke. Children sat in front of the flames, dark eyebrows framing their puffy eyes, red from the smoke and tears clouding their vision. In that moment, Europe was an immensely blistering experience in their eyes. A mother holding a baby asked me where she could find warm water; next to her, her husband gestured powerlessly at a pacifier that looked like it hadn't been cleaned for a long while, perhaps ever since they fled home. And still all around us were police officers armed with guns, with no Red Cross volunteers in sight ...

A family from Aleppo told me, a dozen of them arrived in the early morning hours after being put on a train at the northern Serbia and southern Croatia border. There was still no news after a day of waiting. Their Serbian sim cards had no signal in Slovenia and they wondered if their elderly grandmother, separated from them by the crowd, might have remained behind in the asylum center in Serbia. Even more

people came forward to ask, "Where are we exactly? Are there stores or restaurants nearby? When will the police release us? How far away is Germany and Sweden? How do we get there...?" It was a slew of despondent curiosity. Naturally, I didn't have answers for them, I could only listen and reply with the sole Arabic phrase I knew: "Inshallah," which meant "If Allah wills it." I encouraged them to have a little more patience, perhaps the police would release them shortly and let them move towards the temporary refugee shelter five kilometers away, where at least they would be able to await news and rest indoors. There, hot food and further instructions on when they could move towards western Europe to Austria should be provided by volunteers. What I decided to withhold from them was the scenes of utter chaos I saw when passing by the temporary shelter earlier—the mob had extended all the way to the road... Dumbstruck in the middle of these scenes of displacement, the mother with the infant cradled in one arm and a baby bottle clutched in the other hand was still begging the police for hot water. Although the dancing dust and swirling smoke obscured my vision, that precious connection between human beings seem to fracture before my very eyes. After 13 years in Europe, I never would have thought I would witness such a scene on this continent.

If only this were a dream, and that I could awake from my tumultuous slumber to find reality still a friendly existence. I chose to come to Europe because I instinctively believed it to be a land that valued fundamental human rights and reflected heavily on life. In the most severe of refugee crises since World War II, the influx of more than one million refugees in 2015 was indeed jarring for the ever so dignified Europeans. Life vests piled high along the shores of small Greek islands in the Mediterranean Sea, the endless clamoring to open up the borders of the Europeans homeland, the infants newly born behind barbed wire fences still nestled in their mothers' arms as their families fled for their lives... Europeans were shocked to realize their own self-isolation, having been safely ensconced in their comfort zone at the top of the ivory tower for some time now. Through glimpses from the tower window, one could enjoy the distant view without taking in the suffering. Even though the cruelties of conflicts and terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen were not news, images of war appearing on the television screen after a few clicks of the remote seem to be a fanciful or extension of a virtual world. The increasing number of terrorist attacks in Europe has brought upon the same threats and fearful uncertainty that plagued the refugees in their home, impinging on the Europeans in their neighborhood cafes and at parties with friends at weekend concerts. The Balkan Route had closed as early as March 2016—conservative estimates show that at least 60,000 refugees are still at temporary shelters in Greece, unable to continue towards western Europe. 2.7 million Syrian refugees remain in Turkey and more than 1.2 million Syrians had fled to Lebanon, a neighboring country with less than four million in population... One war had instigated the displacement of close to five million innocent civilians, one-third of whom were women and young children. In comparison, the influx of refugees I saw at the Slovenian border was an insignificant teardrop in this treacherous ocean. News of the refugees is no longer a hotly discussed issue—when I returned to the Rigonce border where I had witnessed the refugee crowds in 2015, the small village had resumed its usual order and tranquility. Rigid stalks of corn had replaced the refugees' panicked figures. Yet this time, there were two 2-meter tall barbed wire fences along the border. This so-called 180-kilometer long "temporary obstacle" was gradually erected by the Slovenian authorities in the winter of 2015 at the country's southern border. The plan was to construct a barbed wire fence along all 670 kilometers of the border with Croatia to prevent the next influx from entering. Standing before the spiked wire fence, the dense blanket of razors appeared extraordinarily menacing. The blue sky and cream clouds overhead seemed ill-fitting, like a gaggle of people harvesting the absurdity from this piece of land as they snicker from a distance. Outsiders were no longer

allowed to enter; even local residents had to circle around the area in order to visit family and neighbors on the opposite riverbank. Only Linden trees with broken limbs remained, awkwardly cornered in the entangled wired depths at the border. The scene harkened back to Albert Camus's *La Peste* in which the French author wrote of the mayor of Oran's decision to seal the city located on the shores of Algeria.

Intimate observations of flight are a repressed memory, these bitter scenes were happenings from a mere few months prior. As I pen these thoughts, Europeans are enjoying their summer holidays. Tourists balked at visiting France, Belgium and other western European states besieged by terrorist attacks, so Ljubljana, located in the north of the Balkan Peninsula, naturally became a more popular choice. As I pass through the city, I couldn't help but gaze around and wonder: that infinite ocean of refugees gathered at the border of the Union, where were they at this very moment? Europeans revel in merry coffee shop conversations, but when they glance up at the starry night sky, do they even lament those unable to find safe respite? If I don't put down these words, that mad border spectacle would remain but a secret, a secret that will eventually be forgotten. "Leaving home" is such a simple term, but each individual story I heard from the refugees is its own heartbreaking motion picture, a complete spectrum of emotions experienced when one is running for their lives. I cannot fathom what exorbitant price must be paid, sometimes even with one's existence, just to keep breathing. Through this up close and personal vignette, I hope to share with readers from home the stories of resilience and the lives of these individuals during the most severe of ordeals, and the hopes buried deeply beneath the muddy footprints in the cornfield by the border, and that shared humanity, unimpeded by even the sharpest barbed wire fences.