

A Gap called Central Europe

A review of *Lapidarium III* by Ryszard Kapuscinski written by Slowomir Majman, published in *Warsaw Voice*, June 29, 1997, has an excellent review of identity in this part of Europe. Here is most of it with a small addition in [text].

It is a diary of a traveller, political scientist, thinker and poet. This latest book includes a top-notch piece in which, in one page, he attempts to define Central and Eastern Europe, to name a few of the region's common characteristics.

First is the variety and wealth of cultures, nationalities, religions and languages. For years when I tried to explain to more obtuse Westerners where the country I came from was, I added: in Central Europe. The trouble is that I'm not entirely sure if there is any Central Europe, and if there is whether Poland belongs to it, as for an average Pole, Poland means separateness. I don't know if one can be a Pole and also feel any sense of community with Czechs, Hungarians or Croats.

I don't know whether it's right to speak of a region if the nations that live there don't want to have anything to do with each other. Exactly as before World War I, when the English traveller Robert Seston-Watson crossed Central Europe and gained a deserved reputation as the best expert of the region. Even he couldn't hold back his astonishment: "When I first arrived in this region more than 50 years ago, I was simply amazed at how much the educated classes in each of these countries looked only to the developed countries of the West, while ignoring, and even being proud of ignoring their neighbours."

I don't know if it's worth mentioning a single Central European region when old aversions still run amok like evil elves between its nations: between Hungarians and Romanians, Poles and Ukrainians, Serbs and Bulgarians, Poles and Czechs, Croats and Hungarians, Romanians and Bulgarians. The list goes on and on of these pairs joined by common enmity, between which there has always been some bone of contention, growing to apocalyptic proportion, blotting out the rest of the world.

Even so, despite this dispassionate and quarrelsome variety, there is something in the idea of Central Europe that has pleasant associations for me, and this pleasant sensation is confirmed over and over again.

For instance, at the commotion of an international fair I met a relaxed, strolling gentleman. When I asked him whether he's not worried over how his business affairs are going, he answered with a smile. "My mother was a Hungarian, my father an Austrian, one grandmother a Czech, the other a Jew. My son is a Serb and my daughter a Pole. What else do I have to worry about?"

Second, according to Kapuscinski, the history of this region is sand in a desert. Everything is constantly changing. States rise and fall. Borders, flags, systems, interests, relations between states, alliances constantly fluctuate. Central Europe has always been more of a political or a cultural, rather than a geographical concept.

According to the great Czech writer Milan Kundera, Central Europe is not its individual states, but a "culture or fate, and its borders are fictitious and have to be set out anew in each historical situation".

Since a powerful Russia arose before the eyes of the Europeans from the mists of the East, Germany, once considered the centre of the continent, has moved to the West, and a gap appeared and a gap

appeared between the East and the West. This gap began to be filled by Central Europe in the course of the 19th century.

“In Central Europe everything is flat, even, destined to mediocrity. The people avoid extremes. There is no tremendous poverty or great wealth, extreme right or radical left, violent passion or sober reason.” This is the way a Czech author, hidden behind the very Central Europe and still undeciphered pseudonym of Josef K., wrote in his most famous pamphlet about Central Europe at the end of the 1970s.

Kapuscinski’s voice resonates with that anonymous Czech writer’s. He considers provincialism to be the region’s third characteristic. Local every day matters absorb all interest. Thoughts don’t cross the nearest border. There is an aversion to finding out what lies behind the line of hills that surrounds one’s hometown.

“A small town feel is typical of Central Europe”, Josef K continues. “Small human figures, small stories, a banal monotony shattered into little pieces, all this forms the specific local structures. Epic works are not successful in Central Europe. It’s rather small forms, like grotesques, farces, parodies.”

Fourth is its location between large powerful states and cultures. After 1945, with the introduction of the Manichaeic division into East and West, Central Europe suddenly disappeared, and many nations that considered themselves Western from time immemorial woke up to find themselves in the East. For many years Central Europe became a part of Europe that was geographically in the centre, culturally in the West and politically in the East.

Incessant outside pressure and interventions obviously had their effects on people’s characters. It’s no wonder that limited mentalities, disorder, sloppiness and thick headedness were often the result.

According to Kapuscinski, this Sovietism and the laziness and mess associated with it suited this society of Central Europe peasants, whose life consisted of long period of inactivity, of weeks and months when they sat in their hut looking through a window at the road.

[Watching and waiting for the next invading army who will steal their food, burn their villages and crops, brutalise the people regardless of age or gender, to be followed by administrators who confiscate land and houses as a reward for strangers and collaborators, conscript the young and tax the rest, and lastly followed by teachers and intellectuals who instruct them about who they are and what they must believe.

In the inter-war period, Polish censuses among the White-Ruthenians in the Poleshuk region asked for their nationality. The majority wrote ‘local’ rather than Polish, White-Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, etc. This was interpreted as the people having a vague and undefined sense of nationality. However it could also be argued that they were taking no chances in defining themselves for fear of potential consequences given the vagaries of conquest and colonisation over the previous centuries.]

When the causes for its disappearance fell away, Central Europe re-emerged, as enticing and indefinable as before. Like the dragon in Antole France’s *Penguin Island* – no one who had claimed to have seen the dragon could describe its appearance. It’s a fusion of cultures and politician’s notions, a mixture of the smells of pork, cabbage, beer and cheap cigarettes.

The concept of Central Europe wouldn’t have arisen without Austria. Austria-Hungary was ruled by an old man, bigoted but liberal because that’s what historical necessity dictated. He was the personification of bureaucratic and bourgeois virtues, fretting indiscriminately from four in the morning till late at night over all the problems of his decaying monarchy.

Even so, this was the country in whose disorder and mediocrity part of the Polish nation, as well as the Czechs, Croats, Slovaks, Hungarians, Jews, Romanians and Slovenians, had the longest period of stability and peace in their history. Austria was proof that the cohabitation of race, cultures, religions and languages was possible, reminding Poles of the former Polish Commonwealth's traditions, still active in their subconscious.

Jews need this more than Poles, Kundera wrote, "No part of the world besides Central Europe was so deeply marked by the action of Jewish genius." No wonder then that it was the Jews that mourned the fall of the Central European commonwealth the most, and most ardently built a false but beautiful myth out of the Hapsburgs.

Nothing remains of this. Vienna without Slavs, without Jews, turned spiritually provincial. It's a shame, but the Poles got rid of memories of their multinational state and have lost the ability to communicate with their neighbours for good. The Central European commonwealth was cut up by borders, old grudges and revived nationalism, by increasing ignorance and indifference.

There is no use pretending. There is no Central European community. This won't be fixed by any political voodoo with the Visegrad Group. Central Europe lives only in intellectuals' nostalgic dreams and occasional speeches by presidents.

Poles are of the opinion that they lose the least by this. They never identified too strongly with the rest of the local community, having the feeling that they are a powerful nation thrown into a Central European backwater by an unfavourable turn of events.

Does Central Europe exist then? Politically it doesn't. But it's enough to step into one of the countless inns in one of the countless little towns of which the region really consists, and listen to the long slow conversations over beer or wine to recognise where we are.

In a gap called Central Europe.