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LEROS, A SMALL ISLAND IN THE DODECANESE, CLOSE TO THE TURKISH COAST. *

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I first entered ward B1 in the eleventh Pavilion of Leros Psychiatric Hospital in August 1993. Four huge rooms, each contain 20 beds. No sheets or pillows, just filthy rubber mattresses and an old cover - all year round, winter and summer. A large refectory, with tables and chairs set out only at stated hours. A wardrobe for everyday clothes of 56 people. Two showers - one of them unusable. A kitchen where nothing is actually cooked, but where meals for inmates brought from the central kitchens are distributed.

For all - for 20 years, for 30 years - the hours and years have been marked only by eating, by the distribution of cigarettes, by the weekly shower.

Eating: a dish of food in the middle of the table for four or five people, one or two plastic cups, also for four or five people, to save washing up. Meals last five minutes by the clock. Food is meagre and poor.

The ablutions - ten people a day, five in the morning and five in the afternoon - each waiting their turn naked in the corridor, in front of the ward entrance. Even those who could wash themselves are washed. The whole process lasts at most 20 minutes per group.

Cigarettes, after meals, these can be from two or three, or none, depending on the whim of the distributor.

For some there is work. One inmate organises the distribution of food, and with meticulous care cleans the showers and lavatories for twelve hours a day. In return he has the authority to give or withhold a piece of bread, and to claim a section of the only wardrobe for his work clothes. Other patients clean the refectory, make up what little there is of the beds, take out the rubbish or deliver the dirty clothes to the central laundry.

For those wanting to get outside even for a short time, if they have the energy, there are two hours each morning in the parade ground in front of the building.

The parade ground marked the centre of the naval base that for 50 years, from the start of the century, housed more than 3000 Italian soldiers; barracks for soldiers, arsenals, store rooms for seaplanes, submarines and cannons, villas for the officers and office space. That is how it was; now it is the Psychiatric Hospital of Leros.

The parade ground, that enormous expanse of red earth, beaten by the winter winds and the torrid summer sun, has for years been the theatre of solitude for hundred of inmates.

Bedraggled men, poorly clothed or naked, prone or crouching on the ground or walking up and down silently. Furtive glances. Sudden bursts of movement without apparent cause. One cries and another shouts.

For a few hours of the day nobody tells you what to do. Paradoxically this freedom just goes to confirm for these men that, however much they do, for them there is nothing to do.

The nurses in the hospital - 400 for 400 inmates: not one is a nurse. They are *filakes*, guards. Farm labourers or fisherman who have found through working for the State an answer to the impoverishment of the island. They have never been told or shown that a hospital can/should be a place of care, of rehabilitation.

The guards, I watch and talk to them. I see ancient faces, hands that have tilled the soil, people who know the meaning of hard work. They express strong feelings, take pleasure in sharing the beauty of their land but are afraid of loosing the livelihood the hospital provides.

They too are abandoned in the same pavilions, resisting and then succumbing to the situation, abiding by the law of the strongest and concealing their compassion for the patients. Sadism, exploitation were the rule. Compassion, protection, the exception.

Towards the end of my first visit a man approached me and cautiously handed me a strange object. It was a knotted bundle of plaited pieces of old material.

I remember in that corridor a barrel of drinking water with one beaker for 56 people, the television - overhead, noises of aluminium saucepans, voices.

I remember the look, the silver hair, and the agile angular body of an old man.

I remember my embarrassment, but also the relief and sense of gratitude for this human form that without asking for anything just affirmed his existence in that desolation.

November 1993

When, months later, it was at last possible to start an initiative in the ward, the practical program was very "simple", take the patients out.

And so every day, from that ward, six or seven people were taken on outings.

To go out meant breaking the normal routine of the ward. It meant needing clothes and money. A hot shower outside specified times.

Each outing meant a new way of getting to know each patient and, significant for him and for us, measuring the reality of each person, of things, of nature, of what is outside, of what they and we are able to compare.

Eleven o'clock of a splendid day in January 1994

Vassili (the man who had given me the present some months back), Sofia a young worker from the rehabilitation program, Maria a cleaner in the ward and I went out together.

Vassili: a jacket, a tie, all a bit creased and a few sizes too small for him.

Nevertheless, Vassili's evident pride in his appearance, despite years of living amongst hunger, cold and fear almost put us to shame.

Where should we go? To the restaurant by the sea.

We all sit down and a variety of different dishes are ordered. Meanwhile Vassili, clearly indifferent to the unusual abundance, with his hands to his mouth is mumbling away rather like one of those story tellers.

"Leros, Lipsi, Athina, Volos, Kalkida, Kimi"

"LEROS, LIPSI, ATHINA, VOLOS, KALKIDA, KIMI"

and then:

"OMONIA.....",

and a number of other words I didn't understand.

The table is slowly filled with plates of squid, *tzaziki*, omelette, tuna, nibbles..... Vassili at last asked for a fresh orange juice.

What was this list of names? Were they places?

They represent the stopping places of a journey begun, who knows how many years ago, in his village on the island of Eubea, near Kimi.

Vassili mumbles something about being a labourer in Volos and Athens..... and then:

"I want to go back to my village. "

Clearly, unmistakably, full of meaning.

Sofia, Maria and I pay attention, we chat away with Vassili, but there is a sense that this chanting, which till today had been considered a kind of raving, not only had a past reality, but - also more important - a possible future.

"OMONIA" and other words sung out, words I couldn't understand but had a steady rhythm.

OMONIA which is round, which is in the centre of Athens.

How many years ago? More than 20, perhaps 30 years ago.

Then a list of bars, shops all round Omonia Square.

Omonia, the heart of Athens thirty years ago!

He talks, or rather sings, of market traders, shopkeepers, prostitutes, sailors, pimps, musicians, people from the East and the West, people from all over the world, just as though he was there amongst them.

"I want to go to my village"

"I want to go to Athens"

"Yes Vassili"

Then Vassili stood up and began to shout loudly. The restaurant was almost empty. I didn't understand a word of what he was saying. Nor did I understand what Dimitri, the restaurant owner, said to him. But it was obviously something directed at Vassili as a real person. A conversation consisting of a few retorts from each of them, ending with both parties clearly satisfied.

That morning Vassili had been listened to, understood, spoken to, and treated as a person. With a history, a personality, perhaps a future.

We returned to the hospital and at the daily staff meeting we reported what had happened that morning. It was proposed that we should indeed organise a journey into the past with Vassili. We talked about him in some detail with reminders of past incidents, of concerns. Was such a trip practical? What were the risks? What could be the outcome?

Some questioned whether returning to a family who had abandoned him thirty years ago would risk Vassili returning to Leros depressed.

Common sense prevailed. It was agreed to find out whether the staff as a whole, and specifically three or four of them, were prepared to organise and take responsibility for the trip, or rather be prepared to participate and share in Vassili's experience outside those walls.....

I don't believe I shall ever forget that meeting. Those present fell into two camps: on one side there were the *filakes* with 15, 20, 30 years of work experience and on the other side were youngsters working as part of the programme funded by the European Union. The older people couldn't help being suspicious - what was the point of changing a life which it had been a struggle to adjust to in the first place, although it was evident that several of them had adjusted rather too well to the status quo.

These older people would have been responsible on each shift for up to 100 inmates: one hundred strangers whose deportation to Leros had stripped them of identity or history.

The fight for survival in these conditions was not just the lot of inmates but also of those who worked there, I realised that for one and all the only thing that mattered was survival.

During that meeting a deal was struck between the two groups; nobody was telling *the filakes* that what they were doing was wrong, but simply that more could be done. A return to one's home, perhaps finding a gravestone, the wails of a childhood home, or even seeing a school companion, might be a help in this fight for survival. The *filakes* had not yet lost their love for their homes, their graves, and their ruins and childhood friends.

To conclude, it was decided that the funds were there. All that was needed were some volunteers.

February 1994

Today is the twenty second, of the second, nineteen hundred and ninety four: twenty two plus two, twenty four, plus one is twenty five, plus nine is thirty four, plus nine is forty three, plus four is forty seven and minus one is forty six. Divided by two is twenty three. Tomorrow is the twenty third. Are we going out?"

Blessed (wretched?) Vassili, playing with numbers as he has done for the last 23 years, possibly the salvation, while everybody assumed that his bits of material, his songs and number games were just delirious raving.

A meeting was held with the discussion focusing on Vassili's clinical records: parents dead, a brother and a sister in his native village, two other brothers' whereabouts unknown, no contact in the 23 years since his internment in Leros, neither with family nor anyone else. Two different dates of birth - seven years between them - a first hospitalisation in Athens in 1965 ... but, most important, a discussion followed with everyone there: impressions, memories. And then a problem raised by several people that Vassili was to be among half a dozen inmates who would be the first to leave the ward and move into an apartment to live semi-independently. Vassili however showed no response, neither a yes or no, to this prospect, but kept up a firm reminder of his wish to travel to his village.

Vassili found himself, or rather I feel he made himself, the centre of attention. There was no acting on his part: he had already become a strong personality on his ward, someone who commanded a degree of respect. It was also due to his indomitable refusal to be tamed: for example in 20 years it had been impossible to stop Vassili from cutting up the sheets which he then made into his lively little objects. But also belts and bits which elegantly replaced the shirt buttons that were so often missing.

Vassili however knew how to benefit from the new climate, which in a paradoxical way was emerging in the ward and focusing on him. In fact he seemed not to expect it to be otherwise.

When changing, his clothes in anticipation of an outing he took steps to ensure that he was not observed, yet at the same time let it be known that he was aware of being watched. He emptied his pockets of countless personal possessions - put on an old blue striped suit with restrained haste - and then..... off out.

Since his first outing a visit to the barber had become a must. He liked being looked after by someone else - a couple of sentences exchanged - perhaps a sense of being clean - then to the "piazza".

The main square in the village, at the cafe.

He observed, watched life go by around him, perhaps trying to recognise what had changed and what would never change.

At the bar he would never ask for anything and would only accept a coffee or an orange drink after some persuasion. The way he did this made us think that his minimalist attitude was deliberate, consciously reducing his needs to zero, never asking for anything, and never expecting anything. So it wasn't a process of adapting to institutionalisation (after 23 years), a situation of having no rights, but rather a conscious decision of never asking for anything, thus saying to the Institution and those in charge:

"you have the power, but I would never ask you for anything because your giving or not giving is totally arbitrary, it is all just part of your wish to show who's boss."

Occasionally he would explode with anger. And just as quickly as it started it would stop. Inevitably: the impression of a strong desire to make his presence felt. Raising his voice in a manner which I feel was accepted by those around as part of a Mediterranean temperament where feelings are often expressed publicly, almost theatrically.

And then- alone- in the neighbourhood.

Short walks, excursions from which he never returned empty handed: a packet of nuts, some fruit or a box of matches. A result of his incredible capacity for meeting people. Excursions from B 1 were becoming more and more frequent with the entire life and system of the hospital under discussion. Resistance was always strong, seeing that the entire economy of the island had been founded and run using the mental hospital as a source of money and privilege. To me this resistance on the part of the hospital staff did not seem to be totally unjustified; seeming to say:

"It's not as though you are talking about great things, after all the only thing that can actually change is the person in charge which will change nothing"

In other words the game was becoming very interesting.

Then Vassili's "volunteers" for his trip appeared. Lianna, Psychologist in charge of organising the apartment in which Vassili was to go and live, and Iannis, the nurse who would work in the same apartment.

Permission granted, preparations completed, the necessary funds, documents, pieces to stay arrangedit was Vassili who challenged the idea at the last minute:

"If I go back to the village, I'll never come back to Leros !"

The argument with Vassili was charged - as can be imagined - sometimes sharp and at other times patronising. In the end Vassili was convinced, convinced after speaking to Iannis who said that was not one of the options.

The discussion or rather the discussions, were held - for the first time in the ward's history - in the nurses' room; Vassili sat in one of the chairs normally reserved for staff, and everyone could see this through the glass door.

Thank you Vassili; for killing off one of the small taboos.

Athens, Saturday 2nd March (for Vassili 23 years later)

We disembarked from the ship which brought us to Piraeus from Leros at 8 am. Vassili, Lianna, Iannis and his wife - and me.

We had reserved two rooms at the hotel "EI Greco", a couple of steps from Omonia and we were there. Diving into the big market which at that time of day was just coming to life, especially in Athinas Odos, the street where our hotel was located.

Black people speaking Greek like natives, selling designer scarves and hi-fi equipment, former Soviet citizens with a Zeiss camera, a spanner, a Lenin badge set out on a cloth, women dressed in black, children and cigarettes, watches, sun glasses, leather jackets ...

walking through all this we watched and were watched. We watched Vassili, who moved as if he had always been there. He looks, and then for a few seconds he stops in front of a shop window, brushes his hand against a passer-by: a man, an old woman, a boy and a woman. Several of them notice and turn around enquiringly. But the touch had been so delicate, light, and non-intrusive..... that nobody protested. Contact. I had never seen Vassili do anything like this before and I never saw him do anything like it again.

Increasingly we become engulfed by both the crowds and traffic. Lianna is from Athens and is accustomed to this, whereas for Iannis and his wife it is their first trip away from their life on Leros. We walk once, twice around the main square. Perambulating almost aimlessly with our hands behind our backs. Vassili looks, stops, and observes intently. Life goes on around us at a frenetic pace but for us it is as though time has left us behind. The only thing that matters is Vassili and this: his reintroduction into this world which has changed so very much. Where everything is very different but at the same times perhaps not so very different in terms of the daily goings on, sounds, the mixture of races, history and looks. Vassili appears totally at ease, unperturbed about his surroundings. Not even a gesture, a single word betrayed a sense of discomfort, fear or distance.

And then one of us made a suggestion, almost in response to our collective unspoken anxiety as to what should be done next:

" Vassili what about finding a barber shop where you could get a shave?"

" My brother's a barber here in Athens"

" ????.Do you remember where?"

" Of course!"

" What about how to get there.. Can you remember?"

" Yes of course. Come on let's go."

We are surprised. Very surprised. We set off guided entirely by Vassili.

Excited and on tenterhooks we cross Athens. Vassili leads the way in a very decisive manner. He tells us of a square right next to his brother's shop. Lianna recognises the street but leaves it to Vassili to lead the way. Vassili in front, and the four of us following behind.

Then we are lost. Lianna stops to ask directions, we lose her ... but find the square.

We retrace our steps a little and find Lianna, then it is Vassili again who takes the lead. Iannis smiles unbelievably. A small alley way and Vassili stops outside an ironmonger's. Then up and down the alley we go but no sign of the barber's shop, . At that point Vassili and Lianna go into the ironmonger's to ask. Yes, it had been a barber shop until four years ago when the owner had retired. Do you know where we could find the barber? This is his brother and they haven't seen each other for many years. We really would like to find him. No, sorry, but try asking at the café just down there. We go there and arrive just as a young handicapped boy is closing up. No, his father isn't in and, no, he knows nothing about any barber and anyway the cafe is now closed,

And so there we were back in the middle of the road and in limbo.

Suddenly we are called from both sides of the road: from one way by the ironmonger and from the other the father of the boy. The ironmonger is at first a little anxious, but says he has thought about it again and gives us Vassili's brother's telephone number. Simultaneously the bar owner starts to volunteer the same address!

We try to phone from the first shop but there is no answer. To reduce the emotional stress we decide and have lunch and talk about what to do in the restaurant.

Emotions? Iannis can't believe his eyes, how can Vassili remember after thirty years? This place that Iannis sees only as chaos and full of mystery.

Lianna calls from the restaurant: "Yes, I've found the brother!" We've made an appointment to meet him at the hotel at 4.30 p.m.

He was surprised, incredulous and possibly rather threatened and that is why he suggested coming to the hotel rather than meeting Vassili at home...

The reunion was planned in the nicest of the rooms, two armchairs a small table and a coffee. Only Lianna would be there from our group.

The brother arrived dead on time and less than ten minutes later Lianna emerges to say that all three of them are going to go back to the brother's home.

They came back three hours later. Lianna was shattered but Vassili was totally unperturbed, clean-shaven and sporting a new hair cut.

If you heard it told it almost sounds like a film script; apparently Vassili and his brother talked as if no had happened, Vassili's brother had cut his hair and given him a shave. It had also been decided that on Monday, the day after tomorrow, "the new found brother" would go back to his native village too.

We get ready to go out. After all it is Saturday night and we are in Athens! Vassili is wearing his purple flannel jacket tucked into his trousers. Instead of a belt he is wearing a purple strip of cloth. He is also wearing a matching tie. His jacket looks like a bolero the way he has put it on. Vassili dressed like this could be described as rather extravagant or eccentric, but certainly elegant and he knew he looked good. His way of dressing took on new meaning, it was a sense of identity, a sense of expressing who he was. And so out we went ... there is little that could shock anyone in Athens. We spent the evening in an *Ouzo* bar (a local alcoholic drink derived from aniseed),

We each enjoyed our evening in our own way, I ate and drank. Vassili, tiring of things, spent the evening almost with his back to us, listening intently to the conversation of a couple at the next table. He openly scrutinised two young women engrossed in conversation who in turn neither spoke to him nor ignored him.

Trieste, May 1998

Vassili has been back to his village twice. He has revisited people and buildings. He surprised everybody remembering names and events from all those years ago. He was not able, or didn't want, to get close to his brother and sister who lived in the village in the old family house. Or rather in the one room which they had split into two by building a simple partition. The brother, who had been paralysed from birth depended on the help of local villagers, while she, after thirty years in Athens spent either on the street or in local psychiatric hospitals, had finally escaped to her village and lives there marginalised from the rest of society.

It hasn't been possible to guarantee the support needed from the mental health services to help with Vassili's reintegration into society. Nor to organise a pension for him to live off: the village mayor, a contemporary of Vassili's at school, has tried with no success.

Between his first and second trip to the village, Vassili:

- Bought his friend Helias in ward B1 a pair of new shoes from Athens. Helias seems the exact opposite of Vassili - he appears to be so vulnerable and dependent. The shoes were a precious gift - both in themselves and symbolically. The Vassili who returned from his trip, and who wished to go back immediately to take his place with his 'pedia' ("the boys") has improved the quality of the relationship between all the inmates to a degree that is different from any I have ever known. I think it has the characteristics of relationships between prisoners. These men have had to embrace violence and love, and learn how to make them meet.
- He told everybody the story of his journey, sitting in the large refectory, for once the scene of emotions that had found expression. Some said "what about me?", while others just thought it. People's pasts and personal stories began to emerge, each with its own validity.

- He started to tell anecdotes. For example how as a sixteen year old boy he used to take food to the partisans in the mountains. Then he was called up into the regular army and tells of how, when driving a jeep, a bomb laid by one of the partisans was set off. He doesn't go into details and no one presses to know more.
- He asked to meet and speak to the President of the Hospital's Administrative Council and had a talk with him - on his own.
- He has moved into a house in the countryside, with five other inmates. The party held when they moved in, organised by the neighbours -local farmers - was conducted in true Greek spirit.
- After a bitter verbal confrontation with one of his old 'guards' from the hospital, he was put on a course of drug treatment which seriously upsets him. "Den borume" ("it's impossible, we cannot, we will never reach our goal")he said to me. At the end of his tether. But the respect and friendships he has developed throughout the island, even though he cannot get the drug reduced, carry him through this troubled time.
- He moves around the island freely on his own, with his own landmarks - houses always open to him - hiding places for his possessions.
- He returns now and then to visit ward B and the look of compassion in his eyes tells us how much more we still have to do.

After the second visit to his village

Vassili has decided to stay on Leros.

We are all given only one past, and Vassili and many others on Leros have only the past of Leros.

I have been back to Leros a couple of times in the past few years. And I know that, like me, other staff have returned and will continue to return, under the spell of its sweet and fierce character - subtle and overpowering, like the wind that sweeps through it from the East.

I imagine - or rather I know - that others feel as I do the depths of feeling Vassili and many others allowed us to touch. For once a rare perception of our own humanity.

- *At the end of the '80 the European Commission asked the Greek Government to implement a radical transformation of the Greek psychiatric system. An Italian expert's staff worked for the change also in the Leros Psychiatric Hospital. This staff was co-ordinated by the Mental Health Studies and Research Centre of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region (Italian WHO collaborating Centre) . The author has been responsible of the Italian team in Leros in 1993/94.*