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From soldier to beggar

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He holds out his hand, in it, a small plate; he politely asks for some change, and always ends his request with a blessing. Every day, he is there, in the same place, where there are plenty of people coming and going. He is a beggar, one of the many, too many, who live like this, surrounded by the contrasting feelings of pity and of disdain, of solidarity and of rejection.
Everyone knows Sem, or so he says. “Even the Police and the Carabinieri, and the video cameras up there.” He nods in the direction of the silent device watching the entrance to a council office that we won’t name. “I’m here, I don’t drink, I don’t take drugs, I don’t do anything wrong.”
Sem is a foreigner, and you can tell. His face is not from these parts. “I come from Macedonia, Skopje,” he says. But his face doesn’t look Macedonian; he looks more from India than from the Balkans.
“Are you Romany?”
“Yes, but at home, we only speak Macedonian (which is very similar to Bulgarian, *ed.*). I left two children in Macedonia, years ago. I’ve been here, in Busto, for four years. I beg, and every now and again, when I have the chance, I work a bit as a gardener. I’m here in the mornings, I come on a STIE bus. In the afternoon, I go to Legnano, and buy something to eat in a supermarket. At night, I sleep at the hospital in Legnano – the old one, not the new one. Fortunately, Italians are generous, and they help me; every now and again, someone finds me something to do.” While we were there, someone brought a plastic bag with some T-shirts. He even changes money; we saw people handing him €5 notes; he would then hand back €4 in coins so they could pay for the nearby car park. Sitting cross-legged, he doesn’t move from his spot, and tells his story, which might sound fictional, one of the many invented to satisfy curious bystanders, but there is some truth to it.
Sem is not his real name. In his native country, they are waiting to give him a warm welcome home, at least, that’s what he says. Sem, 35 (he looks older), took part, in 2000-2001, in the brief, conclusive Macedonian chapter of the terrible Ten Years’ War, which swept through the former Yugoslavia, breaking it into pieces and spreading the populations to the four winds. “How many Yugoslavs were there in Italy before the war? Very few, none,” he says in his amusing, but at the same time, reasonably correct and comprehensible Italian. “But later, they all left.” Sem was in the regular Macedonian army; he shows us his documents, photos of him with other men in greenish khaki uniforms, old-style, saucepan-shaped helmets on their heads, with assault rifles of the late Yugoslav Federal Army. “I don’t know how you say the rank in

Italian, I was a *Mla?i vodnik* (sergeant, *ed.*), I had three stars on my shoulders (three stripes, the stars are for generals … *ed.*), I commanded men. I fought the war against the Albanians." This conflict was mercifully short and unsuccessful, but it threatened the very existence of the complex, multiethnic Macedonian State. Very close to the capital, there were the areas on which the UCK, which had a free hand in Kosovo after the Serbian surrender to the NATO air bombardments, sought to extend its control. Defending them was a question of life or death for the young State.

"We were in different places, we often changed position. Was it a brief war? With few deaths? Not few, lots. Yes, it was much worse in Bosnia; maybe you also know about Vukivar and Dubrovnik. But I'll tell you, where we fought, there were no houses left intact, as you can see here. Everywhere, there are the signs of bullets and bombs." He talks briefly about the deaths, so many deaths, civilians and soldiers, of villages that all but disappeared in a few hours of ferocious battle, with automatic weapons and mortars.

"I also lost friends. They tell me it's quieter now, but there isn't much freedom. I hope peace comes back, because when the country's at war, it's the civilians that pay the price, and they've got nothing to do with it. You see them, they're there, the elderly, women, children, and yet, they shoot at you; there are those that shoot at you, you can't see where from. And you reply." And they are in the middle of it.

In 2001, when the worst of the conflict had just come to an end, sensing the hostility of the Albanians, Sem decided he needed a change of air. "At that time, there were people among them that went into the houses with their weapons levelled," (here, we interpret his gestures, *ed.*), "and gave two options: you could either let one of your sons enrol, or you had to give money for the cause. Otherwise, they shot you. Then, as America commands here in Italy, it also commanded there, in Macedonia. The UCK weapons we found were all American, all new. And they were much better trained than us regular soldiers were."

Sem left Skopje in 2001, and went to Greece. "There, I took a chance, and took a boat to Ancona. In Italy, life's been hard, but the people are good, they're generous. I'm here. I haven't heard from my family for a month; the telephone cards are expensive, food's expensive, it's not easy even to save €10. You promise not to mention my real name, don't you?" Sem is still afraid of the Albanians, ten years on. From what he says, in his country, the Romany people and Albanians can't stand each other. But the Romany people can get on with the Serbs, and there is a certain nostalgia for the times of Tito, who only the people of a certain age still remember.

All around, the solidarity of some is matched by the cold loathing of others. "How convenient, without work," says one woman, turning up her nose. "I wouldn't mind sitting there all day. I bet he makes even more than I do by working." These days, it would appear that even begging is something to be envied.

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