

Guardians of stones

Crimea is an in-between world, a peninsula still tied by a thread to Ukraine yet apparently tempted to drift away. In its attempt to sail off southwards it pushes out into the Black Sea, its cliffs finally plunging into the waves opposite the distant shores of Turkey. In sociological terms Crimea could well be an island. A part of Ukraine by bequest, its heart is nevertheless Russian, and its soul Tatar. Historically it has served as an arena for bitter disputes. Its earliest known inhabitants, the Crimean Tatars were widely respected and feared as great warriors and slave traders, holding sway over the Slav population until the mid-18th century. Greater Russia subsequently worked hard to remove all trace of Tatar identity, colonizing the peninsula and driving the indigenous population out, towards the Ottoman empire. After the Crimean War (1853-56) Russia was forced to give up the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, and its plans for further expansion into the Mediterranean, but it nevertheless turned Crimea into a seaside holiday resort where aristocrats, and later party *nomenklatura*, could go for a while to forget the harsh climate of the great northern cities.

The Tatar population became a negligible minority, hardly mentioned until 18 May 1944 when Joseph Stalin decided to punish the remaining representatives of this down-trodden community, and various other ethnic groups, for allegedly cooperating with the Nazi foe. In one night 200,000 Tatars were deported to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, giving up their homes, land and schools to Russian families resettled here at the end of the second world war. Although the Tatars regained a degree of recognition and legitimacy under Nikita Khrushchev (1953-64), the majority of them were only able to return to Crimea after the break-up of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

The road that runs from Simferopol, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, to Sevastopol, a port with a glorious past, cuts straight across the fields, only allowing itself a few bends as it approaches the hills along the south coast. Crossing this landscape the visitor's eye is drawn to long lines of small detached houses, on either side of the road, separated by an apparently standard gap. Much as the pieces on a checkboard, they stand there with no apparent function other than to occupy the land. Deliberately abandoned, these small structures, which only have room for a single bed, can have no real use as housing. They nevertheless have a door and a window, and in most cases a roof. But no one lives there, nor are they likely to do so. The Russians refer to them as 'toilets', their size being roughly equivalent to that of our traditional garden loos. However their real role is more lofty, despite their harmless, almost comic appearance: they are there as testimony, guard-dogs built to lay claim to land which officially belongs to the state. Wandering among these huts conjures up the impression of being in the middle of a vast game of Go, each one akin to a pebble on the board. Yet this particular game concerns a whole people and they play it so slowly because they know their most effective weapon is patience.

A village to be recovered

At Nikita, a village on the coast near Yalta, the entire Tatar population was deported in 1944. The place is now the scene of a Go contest on a grand scale. Property developers are building luxury blocks of flats beside the sea to attract holiday-makers and investors. Large roadside billboards proclaim the beauty of the spot and the luxury of the blocks. The Tatar community which originally lived here has settled, illegally, round the historic centre, now the scene of frantic change. Confiscated and disfigured, the Nikita which once belonged to them has been handed over to investors and free-market forces. On the land they have recovered on the outskirts, there are about 30 pretend houses, only four of which are actually occupied. A little further along, set back from the road, three women and an old man occupy a building little bigger than the others, watching over a stony field. The Tatars seem convinced that to regain possession of their land they must proceed in silence, obstinately defying the law in a show of constant self-denial backed by official procedures and calls for international support. This commitment is particularly apparent among those I call the 'guardians', fore-runners who returned to recolonize their territory, assisted by a determined, well organized community abroad. The land to which they lay claim has sometimes been recovered and a curtain of silence conceals the source of any help they receive, witness their well orchestrated communication. On the square facing the station in Simferopol an automated billboard displays, between two adverts for supermarkets, a massive poster showing a cart carrying deportees, a reminder of the events of 1944. The quality of execution suggests a professional designer and that particular spot must be among the most expensive in the city.

At the heart of the community

As passing strangers visiting an illegal settlement we receive a warm welcome. Sticky sweet coffee is quickly heated up on the wood stove which serves for warmth and cooking. This simple gesture underlines the visibly sparse living conditions. Against one wall a flat-screen television is running on a car battery. But they are proud of such destitution, imposed upon them but also sought out. They never miss a chance to point out what they lack and how well they do without. In the course of our conversation it soon emerges that they refuse to steal electricity from the state. The power lines run close to their home and it would be easy to divert part of the current, a common practice in shanty towns all over the world. On the contrary, they do not want any trouble with the police, emphasising in the same breath that they would rather not owe anything to the 'occupants', the Russians now living in the houses the Tatars abandoned when they were deported. Their determination is on a par with their privation. By avoiding any problems with the Ukrainian police, the Tatars also assert their independence. However, on the surface, peaceful co-existence seems to prevail, on both sides, with neither party indulging in direct criticism. All the Russians and Ukrainians we talked to claimed to be on good, albeit distant terms with the Tatars. They acknowledged the other's qualities in an effort to show how open-minded they were, and to leave room for a little back-biting. As for the Tatars, they claimed not to encounter any particular difficulties with the local population. So the various communities seem to be locked in a sort of mute stand-off, with no space for open criticism.

Jiliara, a young woman of about 30 belonging to the small Nikita community, told us about her son Elias who goes to the state school every day. He is the only Tatar in his class and, she claims, he has no particular problems with his classmates. Elvira, 70 and clearly possessed of a strong character, shows us the photographs she keeps in a cardboard box. Here are her children, two boys, one now working in Moscow, the other living in Kazakhstan. She also tells us her own story and what happened during the Deportation, when she was still a child. One day in May 1944 the soldiers arrived before dawn and herded everyone into the local school. At 3am they received orders to gather their belongings for a journey that would last 18 days, with no one knowing where they were going. She recalls her aunt telling her mother there was no point making any preparations, because in any case they would be executed. Her aunt turned out to be mistaken on one essential point: execution was not on the agenda. But those who did pack their bags never found them again when they left the train in Uzbekistan, or anywhere else for that matter. The deportees were packed into cattle trucks, a means of transport much used by both the Soviet and Nazi authorities to displace unwanted minorities. The only item some families managed to keep was a copy of the Quran, well hidden on their person. They still have the same volume today, carefully preserved, wrapped in a piece of cloth and placed in a handbag hanging on the wall. It is the most valuable object in the home, an enduring testimony to their faith. Generally printed in Arabic it is quite inaccessible to most Tatars, who only open the holy book very rarely, respectfully turning the pages, unable to understand the words before them.

Deportations were commonplace at the end of the second world war and the Tatars, much as many other peoples in the Soviet Union, bore the brunt of Stalin's policies. Their religion, stifled during the Soviet era, has emerged again as a powerful emblem of identity, and after being muzzled for years the Muslim peoples now have a powerful link which defies political borders and seems much stronger than fragile, battered national identity.

The guardian of the mosque

Although religions have been stifled for a long time, their resurgence is now well under way. Nor is it confined to the Muslim world. In response to the Islamic concord that is taking hold, Russians and Ukrainians, though not in perfect agreement themselves, are responding to the return of the Tatars in their own way, with what unites them. On hilltops taken over by a huddle of ramshackle buildings, it is increasingly commonplace to see a Christian cross apparently raised in defiance of the silent encroachment. Rarely seen elsewhere, crosses are evidently placed there in reaction to the presence of Tatar buildings left in a state of studied abandon. It could be that ethnic tensions will find their expression in the two religions practised in the land of their respective followers. Numerous mosques destroyed during the Soviet era are now being restored or rescued from oblivion, while others are being built or waiting to be built. A typical instance is the new mosque at Simferopol, currently no more than a tent facing Mecca. It has a few mats on which the faithful can kneel and, against the side of the tent, an elevation drawing of the projected mosque. Adim, the official caretaker, lives in a caravan beside the main road. He was originally hired to work on the building site,

but administrative hassles prevented construction work. Adim stayed on, earning a small wage for watching over the stones which may one day become the pride of his community. Like so many other Tatars, he too is a warden, the guardian of stones where the next generations will attempt to put down roots.

Banks

We are living in an era dominated by banks and bankers. There are banks for everything – or almost everything – gene banks, sperm banks, seed banks – such as the one in Svalbard in Norway which will ultimately store more than 4 million different seed samples. This huge vault is protected by armour-plated doors and reinforced concrete walls. The structure proved its solidity in February 2008, withstanding the strongest earthquake ever recorded in Norway. We also have banks for data and census records, the largest of which is undoubtedly in Salt Lake City, where a vault has been carved out of the solid granite of the Wasatch mountains to act as a repository for as many names as possible. Names of the living and the dead, the purpose being to baptise all of these people. Your names and mine, perhaps, can be found on one of the millions of microfilms stored in the vault.

We have never created as many banks as we are creating at present. We have become obsessed with the idea of preserving, storing, protecting. In the wild, a great many animals prepare for hard times by building up stocks. The squirrel stores up acorns for the winter and the camel drinks large amounts of water before crossing the desert. What kind of desert are we preparing to cross, one is prompted to ask. What is this harsh winter which compels us to accumulate and store things? Do we perhaps feel instinctively that we are heading for a period of scarcity, or a long winter, or worse? Or is our society simply witnessing the disappearance of values that for so many years it believed were eternal? We look on, powerless, as our certainties fade. The world which used to be western, atheo-Christian and full of promise, is becoming global, religious and worrisome.

Among all of these banks, one in particular stands out: the image bank. The best known, owned by Bill Gates, includes no less than 100 million digitized images while other lesser known and more profitable image libraries contain over 3 thousand million. These entrepreneurs have clearly understood that one of the main ingredients of contemporary business is the image in all its forms. We know that the image has never been as important as it is today and it will certainly remain so for a long time to come. Whether in terms of broadcasting, reproduction, or creation, never have so many tools been made available to so many people.

Fortunately, it is impossible to conserve, classify and retrieve everything. The method made available to find the object we are looking for very quickly limits the almost limitless stock of photos. A natural levelling therefore occurs, due to the complexity of the world and the impossibility of finding a definitive representation of any particular object.

Look at the annual report of any business in the world, and you will always find the same representations of efficiency and work, portrayed in all kinds of different ways with varying degrees of talent. Smiling employees, dynamism, dependability, determination and faces gazing into the distance.

We can classify photos in as many categories as we choose, but we will soon be reduced to illustrating an idea merely by the same images, by variations on a theme. Take for example the key word 'pollution'. If you do a search with the search engine of a well-known image bank, you will discover that 40% of the illustrations are of factory chimneys, 20% of cars, 16% of oil slicks, 13% of rubbish, 10% of people wearing masks. We all know that pollution is considerably more complex than a simple division into five categories, but we are happy to take this short cut because it means we can stay within the realm of what we know, of what we can easily identify. Furthermore, it is infinitely easier and less costly to obtain photos and illustrations from the internet, with the additional certainty that everyone will understand, than to try to make photography speak for itself.

The problem is that if we persist in endlessly showing the same pictures, people get weary and end up believing that when all is said and done pollution is just another chimney spewing out smoke. All concepts are reduced to their simplest form, to what is good, bad, beautiful or ugly.

By taking the courageous step of sending a photographer to the region when preparing its report on Ukraine and the Crimea, the NGO Zoï adopted a different approach. It acknowledged that pollution is indeed caused by industry, but hidden behind this industry we find workers, and behind them, families, and ultimately a community, region and country.

Pollution is no longer portrayed as an evil detached from everything else, an isolated, detestable aberration, but as a consequence of a vital activity of a society in a particular socio-political context. We can no longer simply talk about nasty, disrespectful factories, because there are workers who depend on them for their livelihoods. We can no longer simply talk about blind exploitation of resources, because there is also a need for survival and for pride in a job well done. By daring to show the problem in its complexity, Zoï is emphasizing the importance of looking at issues from various angles instead of churning out the reassuring, tired clichés which all too often we are expected to accept.