

Face to face

Interview by Tamara Gausi

Martin Leidenfrost is an Austrian journalist and the author of *Intimate Brussels*.

What is 'Intimate Brussels' and why did you decide to write it?

Intimate Brussels was an experiment, a rather cruel experiment, on myself. I had never been to Brussels before, although I had explored remote regions of Eastern Europe, and it was clear that I did not belong in Brussels. I was a fish out of water.

In your introduction you say you wanted to write a "Brussels version of 'Sex and the City', only less sex and more Europe", but Brussels has a bit of an image problem; it isn't considered to be very sexy. After a year of living in the city, do you think this is a fair assessment?

Yes, it is. Just spend some time in the cafeteria of the European Commission at the Berlaymont building and you will find the most unsexy place in Europe. There is nothing ugly about the Eurocrats themselves. They take long showers in the morning and they dress properly. But they don't flaunt any kind of distinct masculinity or any exposed femininity. They are well-tempered in every respect.

How easy did you find it to penetrate Brussels?

Brussels is an easy place to explore. I came from living and working in Eastern Europe (Slovakia), where, in general, people don't respond to emails, but where a writer can find sharp contrasts between existential beauty and brutality. The hierarchies in Brussels are flat; you can get in contact with almost everybody. Though, at some level, there are differences between the different nationalities. The Scandinavians, for example, are the most efficient communicators; the Eastern Europeans who have made it to Brussels are unpredictable; and the Spaniards and Italians tend to segregate.

Out of all the communities you discovered in Brussels which one did you feel most a part of and why?

I never wanted to be part of any milieu in Brussels. This was not my aim. As a traveller-writer, it is the basic premise of my work to be a stranger. I need some distance to observe.

What did you most like and dislike about Brussels, and why?

We must always distinguish between the European bubble and Brussels, which is a normal city with normal people. I don't like the popular residential areas for Eurocrats such as Woluwe-Saint Lambert, where the streets are as quiet as a graveyard, and if I ran into someone, it was Monsieur Jean-Marie, a petty bourgeois Belgian with his small neurotic dog. I also dislike the Arab neighbourhoods of Anderlecht, for the simple reason that I was attacked by a group of youngsters there. I have always been indifferent



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about downtown Brussels, you can find dozens of city centres like that all over Europe. Strangely enough, considering the fact that this was meant to be a project on Europe, emotionally the most striking result was that I discovered my love for Africans in Brussels.

Did your time in Brussels change the way you view Europe in any way?

Yes, the reality of the European bubble changed my view towards the European project. Within a few days, I became a Eurosceptic. It took me some time before I was able to enjoy it. Occasionally, I still return to Brussels from time to time in order to spend one or two days in the European

Parliament where you can take part in all the big debates of our time. This I love.

Belgium is approaching 365 days without a government and there is a chance the country may split. You live and work on the Slovak border with Austria – do you think a Czech-Slovak-style split is the way forward for Belgium?

The splitting of Czechoslovakia is considered a success story for the simple reason that there had been no hatred and no conflict between the Czechs and Slovaks. Relations between the Flemish and the Walloons are much more precarious than they were between Czechs and Slovaks. Czechs and Slovaks speak different languages, but they can be easily understood. Also, in Czechoslovakia there was no territorial conflict, no ethnically mixed area, which is not the case in Belgium. Thus, for practical reasons, the eventual splitting of Belgium cannot be modelled on Czechoslovakia. I can only tell you that 18 years after the division, Czechs and Slovaks love each other more than ever. They even share a popular reality programme *Cesko-Slovensko hlada superstar* (similar to *American Idol* or *X Factor*)

What are you working on now and do you have any plans to return to Brussels?

I have been working on a number of film projects, including a documentary on the gas business which we were partly shooting in Brussels. I go to Brussels at least two or three times a year and I wouldn't like to quit this habit.