DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS

Marc Hatzfeld

Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est are twin stations on the right bank of Paris. Gare du Nord serves not only London and Brussels but also Charles de Gaulle Airport. Gare de l'Est serves Eastern France as well as Eastern Europe up to Berlin, Frankfurt, Moscow and further. They are not real twins for they don't look alike, but being so close to one another, they deeply mark the urban landscape. In their vicinity you'll find the famous Terminus Nord and Flo, two of the brightest brasseries in Paris; huge places offering excellent food and wine served up by those Parisian garçons dressed in bow ties and black aprons that hang down to their shoes. Many chic hotels await the visitors, as it's an easy stroll down to Montmartre, the canal Saint Martin or the Palais Royal.

Walking southward from one of those stations, you would pass thorough Faubourg Saint Martin or perhaps Faubourg Saint Denis – two of the most picturesque Parisian neighbourhoods. If you cast an eye down the side streets though, you might be amazed to find that not only fancy hotels await the visitor, but also cheap ones - and even very cheap ones. The kind of hotels you would rather expect in the hotel districts of third world countries. You'll also notice a number of employment agencies offering low paid jobs and ethnic, fast-food cafes where middle-aged men eat huge meals standing upright before high tables. Resting there a moment, you'll begin to hear the familiar buzz and click of industrial sewing machines in workshops hidden from view in those very typical pedestrian passages running street to street between the buildings. Also, instead of the Molièrean French you learned in school, you might be surprised to hear Turkish, Arabic, Polish or Telugu.

Cast a closer look then. Those faces are not exactly what you would expect as French, are they? So many Africans now - or do they come from the West Indies? And this Chinese lady there, what is she doing on the sidewalk of the Boulevard de Strasbourg, a plastic handbag dangling on her arm? Would she be a prostitute? If you dare ask, you will discover that her price is 20 euros for 10 minutes of her time and that she hardly speaks a word of French although she's already been here over five years.

So there we are - the stations! Of course, because you're a clever observer, it's no mystery to you that torrents of immigrants spilling down from those twin stations have, in the course of the past century and-a-half, flooded the neighbourhoods with different cultures linked to world dramas: the Jews, the Poles, the Algerians, the Blacks, the Turks, the Serbians - now the Chinese and the Chechens. They all remind you of tragedies read in newspapers or history books.

But the latest don't need any writing about because you can see them yourself. Midway between the Gare du Nord and the Porte Saint Denis, built by Louis XIV, is a charming square called Place Alban Satragne. A sign informs the visitor that this tiny patch of greenery has been carved from the

fields of the Saint Lazare farm which was once part of a huge convent of the same name - le Couvent Saint Lazare - in the 17th century. During the day, swings, seesaws and sandbackets attract kids and their moms for a bit of recreation. But why don't you come at night? No kids, no young ladies, only men - plenty of them. Young men with dark complexion and dirty clothes. Why don't you ask them what they are doing here at dusk? The answer is that they live here, that this is their home and their own private Paris. You can talk with them - most of them speak a clumsy English. They'll be delighted to have someone interested in their presence.

Most of those men come from Chechnya, Iraq or the former Yugoslavia. Why they chose this place is unknown - probably word-of-mouth. At times there have been sixty to seventy slumbering behind the bushes in sleeping bags offered by the homeless associations. Now there are only a couple of dozen. They are in their twenties to forties - proud men, not beggars, not wanderers. What they escaped needs no explanation. Why they came to France is more of a surprise. In their countries, in the middle class families that most of them came from, they were raised on stories of France being the country of Freedom and Human Rights. When they heard France, they thought of the Enlightenment, of Jean-Paul Sartre, of the founding fathers of Europe, of the great French Revolution, of surrealism and so on. They have saved and tucked away money, helped along by family and friends, crossed many risky borders, walked long distances across high, wintry mountains, been ripped off and sometimes beaten. They have been frightened to death, but they have also met, all along their journey, wonderful and hospitable people - everywhere. Everywhere except here in Paris. Why?

They keep wondering – these refugees - why people treat them the way they do here in the homeland of Liberty. No one talks with them. Actually they are baffled by their encounter with the French. Living in a public garden needs some form of organisation. At the beginning of their adventure, in 2005 and 2006, the first wave of those freedom-seekers managed to keep the place tidy, shitting in newspapers and cleaning up after themselves, disappearing during the day, keeping themselves straight. But it didn't last long. The neighbours reacted quickly. Actually there were two sorts of reactions from the nearby residents. The self-righteous reaction was a demand for ejection addressed to the city. A majority of the young urban middle class wanted those people swiftly kicked out. 'With the taxes that we pay, they should find a decent place for those people, shouldn't they?' A solid minority leaned towards compassion: 'Poor people! What can we do? Let's feed them.'

What those young men asked for wasn't charity - not pity, but a job, a way of making a dignified living and more than anything else, an encounter with the local people, with the Parisians. Some of those men were eventually lucky enough to find a quick escape, to zip away from the street with the help of a friend, so the Place Alban Satragne was only a provisional harbour for them. Some tried their luck going to England. But some men remained sleeping rough.

None of them found any of their dreams of France. As a citizen of Paris and former inhabitant of the community where these young men ended up, I attended a debate of the neighbourhood council under the chairmanship of a deputy mayor about the problem raised by this incongruous presence. Wasn't it an opportunity to appraise the real feeling of hospitality of our great people?

To my astonishment, on the appointed day, the room was filled with neighbourhood residents. The proof of strong concern, I thought. First, the two main political parties debated a perfectly sterile

search for responsibility. Then a very elegant diplomat from Iraqi Kurdistan made a long speech about his people, his struggle and his government's policy. Then a famous Catholic association argued with a Communist organisation about the root causes of this situation. All through those speeches, a woman kept screaming – 'Go and talk with those people, not about them!'

Finally, the discussion was left to the audience. Most of them wanted the state or the city to 'take care of those poor men' without they, themselves, having to bother. Some thought the police were the solution. A group of do-gooders decided to organise regular meals in the square, during which neighbours and the homeless residents of the park could speak with each other. Then, a few minutes before the meeting ended, a clumsy man stood up and, scratching his grey hair, said in a low voice: 'I know the right thing to do is to offer one of those men the hospitality of my place. This is probably what they would do if the situation were reversed. But I must confess that I live in 15 square meters and I don't dare to do it. That is all I can say.'

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