

Hidden among the woods of the Republic of Srpska and overlooked by geographical maps, Stivor is a two-kilometre stretch of road where a community of Trentino nationals has survived for the past 125 years. Two world

Bosnia, the ethnic group you don't expect

BALKANS

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wars, Tito's regime and the fierce ethnic war waged in recent times have not changed their identity. A bilingual sign welcomes the visitor. A bar, a food shop and about a hundred small houses line a ribbon of asphalt...

The Croatian border is behind you; the buildings of Banja Luka, the capital, loom on the horizon and there's a cement-grey sky above. Along the trunk road that skirts one bank of the unpronounceably named Vrbas river, the possibility of running into a police patrol is the only thing that keeps you from nodding off at the wheel. The first real distraction is near Laktasi, where there is a sharp curve in the road and a two span bridge leading into the hills. But the road signs are about as useful as glasses to a blind man for anyone without at least a rudimentary grasp of the Cyrillic alphabet. A car with Italian plates makes an unhesitating turn: a providential sign that shows you the way. The road starts climbing gently. A few kilometres on, the desolate landscape changes into a kind of Bosniashire: forests of sessile oak and false acacia, wheat fields, irrigation canals and a few houses made of exposed brick. This is deep into northern Bosnia-Herzegovina, the part of the country that was given to Bosnian Serbs in 1995 following the Dayton Agreement and took on the name Republika Srpska: the remaining 51% of the territory belongs to the Croat and Muslim Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is no sign here of the tourists who have started flocking once more



to Sarajevo and Mostar. It takes another half an hour of driving along winding roads through this unexpectedly luxuriant countryside to reach your destination. A bilingual sign welcomes visitors to Stivor, which it might be excessive to call a village: a bar, a food shop and about a hundred small houses lining a two-kilometre ribbon of asphalt.

A Catholic outpost in Ottoman territory

Almost all the inhabitants of Stivor are Italian, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of a small group – about five hundred in all – of Trentino natives who left the Valsugana valley, then a part of Austria, in 1882 after it had been devastated by a flood on the Brenta river and poverty. Drawn by a massive manpower recruitment campaign, they should have all ended up in Brazil; instead, they entrusted their money and hopes to a middleman who abandoned them at the port of Trieste with neither tickets nor

prospects – just after Austria-Hungary had signed the Treaty of Berlin allowing it to administer a still-Turkish Bosnia and started “selecting” settlers to create a Catholic outpost on the ridge between the Austro-Hungarian empire and Ottoman territory. The only formality involved was a request on stamped paper. It was time to leave for the Balkans: a month and a half’s walk pulling creaking carts piled high with equipment and seeds along rutted mule tracks until they came to a stop in a sea of green nothingness. They cut down trees, tilled the land and built shacks. Thus Stivor came into existence. There were other peasants – Polish, Czech, Ukrainian – not far away, their story also one of forced emigration. The Trentino natives have never moved since; however, instead of being absorbed by the trend towards standardisation of usages and customs, they have maintained their ties with their country of origin. As recently as World War II, Stivor was a sealed-off community; weddings and baptisms were private affairs



and not even subsequent intermarriages with Bosnian Serbs in the area have managed to affect their identity, so much so that nearly all the inhabitants are now partially related to each other. There are a handful of surnames, always the same ones: Agostini, Andreata, Moreti, Montibeler, Postaj, Dalsaso, Bokker, Paternoster. Some have dropped the double letters from their names or incorporated hitherto unknown consonants to adapt to the local phonetic structure: a visit to the small cemetery makes it possible to date the stages of this concession to integration. The first immigrant tomb, however, is located just outside the village with no surrounding wall; it lies in the shade of three century-old linden trees, crystallized in an almost unreal silence, wrapped in eternal peace since 1883.

Close ties with Italy

Giuseppe Moreti, a cordial 50-year-old man with a cool gaze, is the community's spokesman and the president of the local branch of the *Trentini nel mondo* association of Trentino nationals abroad. "There are two hundred of us", he specifies immediately. "In 1998 the Italian government recognised our right to also have Italian citizenship and our passports were sent to us, but Italian has always been the mother tongue here anyway, even at school. Unfortunately there are few young people today, because when the war broke out in 1992, many of our youngsters ran away to Italy to look for work. The village remained without electricity or telephones for two years. Those who stayed on had to make the best of it". As he speaks, he glances at the fields that start outside his window. There is not a single cottage, house or shed in Stivor without at least one hectare of cultivated land: vegetable gardens, vineyards and orchards. Each family also has a cistern to collect rainwater for household use and draws drinking water from wells. The Autonomous Province of Trento in Italy has dipped into regional funds to solve Stivor's water supply problem. In collaboration with local administrations, it has already built two huge tanks and three big wells and invested 500,000 euros in the construction of an aqueduct which is expected to be functional in five years' time. "Some have come back", Giuseppe continues as a boy on the road waves heartily to him in greeting. "Others commute to and from Valsugana, where they are employed as

specialised workers in large construction companies. A worker earns 400 convertible marks a month here, or about 200 euros, so it is understandable that many of them prefer to remain in Trentino. So some people come to visit their families every weekend while others only come here for the holidays". All year round, mainly in summer, cars keep coming and going between northern Bosnia and places like Strigno, Borgo and Roncegno in Trentino. Whole wedding processions often leave from Trentino, complete with traditional bands bringing up the parade, to come and get married in the little village church and celebrate with a wedding lunch of *polenta* and *luganega* sausages in the club hall. It's not just a question of roots: a reception for two hundred people, i.e. the entire village, only costs about 2,000 euros.

Those who have left and those who wish to return

Financial considerations aside, the call of the



land and relatives is undying even for those who have crossed over to another world. Stefano Montibeler, a sturdy 67-year-old, greets everyone he meets with the good cheer and enthusiasm of the village's most unexpected guest. This is the eighth time in the past forty years that he is back visiting his native land. The embroidered kangaroo logo on his polo shirt and his caricatural accent reveal his story of a political refugee outside the bounds of Europe. Having fled Tito's regime in 1965, just married and with "nary a dinar in my pockets", he stopped off in Trieste and on the outskirts of Latina, where he and his wife

decided to get on the first ship to Australia, an alternative to America for fortune seekers of the time. A month's journey at sea, passing through the Suez Canal; the difficult process of adaptation, the apprenticeships at thousands of different jobs: a story shared by millions of Italian emigrants between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and today's Third World emigrants, who have simply reversed the direction of the migratory flow. Montibeler now lives in Canberra, where he is a building contractor: a successful one, not least because "the Australians have never really been all that keen on back-breaking work". He has only heard about the war in other people's stories, unlike Ivan Osti, 36, who has a passion for Belgrade's Red Star football club and exhibits a rare courteousness. Osti experienced the war from up close. He tells of the foolhardiness and determination of his frequent trips from Bosnia to Italy in the three-year period from 1992 to 1995: "Stivor was spared, because they knew we were Italian, but in Derventa, a village only

Giuseppe Moreti is the president of the branch of the Trentino nationals abroad in Stivor. There are 200 Trentino nationals in Stivor and since 1998 the Italian government has recognised their Italian citizenship. Italian has always been the native language in this corner of Bosnia, although there are few youngsters left today, because when the war broke out in 1992, many of them ran away to Italy to look for work



fifteen kilometres away as the crow flies, the bombers razed everything to the ground. They would pass close overhead, flying so low that our caps would fly off our heads". He had to pay the municipality a tax of 150 German marks a month to be able to leave Stivor, money that was meant to finance war logistics but "ended up making a couple of people richer". Every trip was an odyssey. In the beginning he would travel via Slovenia and Croatia but the gun battles and army roadblocks became increasingly frequent and dangerous, as he risked being killed because of a misunderstanding. The alternative was to skirt the Balkans via Austria and Hungary, entering Bosnia through Serbia. Today, Ivan hopes that someone will finally decide to invest in this land and that young Stivorians can come back, drawn by new jobs. Some have even started thinking of hunting-related tourism, advertising empty houses on the Internet and renting them to Italian hunters in search of virgin and, above all – a rarity for Bosnia – mine-free woodland.

A minority that goes against the tide

While waiting for Stivorians to rebuild the future, it is up to the elderly to maintain the link with their ancestors and carry the religion



forward in harmony with their Orthodox and Muslim neighbours. Their homes are shrines to piety and tradition, with religious icons, faded photographs, embroidered lace and the inevitable bottle of *slivovitza*, homemade plum brandy. Listening to Giuseppe's loquacious 80-year-old mother Elena, 83-year-old Antonia or 91-year-old Arcangelo takes you on a journey into time, for their throats emit a dialect that has remained unchanged since the 19th century, a small treasure for ethnolinguists.





_Above: the small Bosnian cemetery marks the stages of the Trentino nationals' integration. The first immigrant tomb, however, is located just outside the village, in the shade of three century-old linden trees. In the jigsaw puzzle of ethnic groups in Bosnia today, the Italians are the smallest of the minorities and it is up to the elderly (below, 83-years-old Antonia Montibeler) to maintain the link with their ancestors and carry the religion forward in harmony with their Orthodox and Muslim neighbours. Young people who witnessed the war from up close, such as Ivan Osti (facing page), hope that someone will decide to invest in this land

In the jigsaw puzzle of ethnic groups in Bosnia today, the Italians are the smallest of the minorities and it is hard to even find a trace of them on the official maps. They are certainly not represented in the last census, which dates back to 1991: 44% Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak), 31% Serb, 17% Croat, 6% Yugoslav (people nostalgic for the Federal Socialist Republic and mixed marriages). Since then there have only been estimates. The ethnic cleansing and the war refugees have shuffled the cards. Going by the figures in the 2006 CIA World Factbook, there does not seem to have been a radical change: 48% Bosnian Muslim, 37.1% Serb, 14.3% Croat and a tiny but heterogeneous 0.6% "Other" which also includes the Stivor Italians. Reviewing the data from a geographical standpoint, however, the country has changed its description: BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network), the regional journalistic organisation, estimates that in the Republic of Srpska, where the majority of the population was formerly Bosnian Muslim, over 90% of the current population comprises people of Serb origin. It is here, far from political games and racial hatred, that the tale of Stivor's Trentino natives continues to be told. ■

