

# One morning at Damascus' main railway station

I heard the true sound of tears. A chorus of tears. The huddled choir, spontaneously and with one voice, wept copiously.

The train was leaving for Beirut, just 134 kilometres down the line.

"Each time one of this group leaves Beirut does everyone else weep on the platform?" I asked.

"Oh, they must be emigrants," came the reply.

The man in question carried a crate of oranges. When he finished the oranges the crate would serve as a suitcase.

For the moment he had no need. Without the wherewithal to invest in a second shirt, he wore the only one he had on his back.

"Why don't you try Brazil instead, it's better there," his wife cried in a broken voice.

He went where he could. Destiny would take him first to Marseille.

They come to Marseille from all corners. The great caravanseraï of modern times is to be found here in rue Fauchier. It's the Hôtel des émigrants. There's no more home-sick building in Europe. The crossroads of the world.

Take a look at them. They're not like anyone else. Their determination sets them apart. One inhales, up and down these corridors, the smell of gaming rooms. Emigrants roll their very lives on the carpet yelling "Banco". And yet they're not gamblers.

So the countries they flee are at war?

Yes. The war against hunger.

Some quit overcrowded nations, others unfriendly regimes.

They take to the open waves of the high seas begging for a new homeland.

Their own has proved incapable of supporting them.

They will become Argentinians, or Brazilians. Just now they remain themselves. Each stays in his own little corner, even to peel potatoes.

There are slices of Polish or Spanish sausage, slices of all sorts. Soon they'll make up the same stew, but not yet. The common tongue they'll learn will one day be close to all the ingredients. For the moment if you want to taste it you have to digest it bit by bit. The sauce is missing.

Over there, Christians from Mesopotamia. They fled as a family for fear of having their throats cut. Who threatened them? "The others." Their preferred destination is New York. They have just been informed that their papers are not in order.

"We'll send you to Argentina," they said.

"That's fine," they replied.

On the first floor, a men's dormitory: twelve beds, twelve men. Clean and respectable, they group around three beds, sitting hands on knees. They are Serbs discussing the harvest back home. They're awaiting a boat for Australia. There's no sparkle in their eyes, their gestures are frozen. They have been here 18 days, as patient and reasonable as they are now. They go down to eat like clockwork. They take the air in the rue de la République but always return before 9pm. They're gold-diggers.

Emigrants are not bohemians. On the contrary, an emigrant calculates coldly. Those who work things out best return millionaires. But each person makes his own move. Economics drives everything. You don't become an emigrant at the shake of a stick. It's a decision taken long before. You need to save up the cash to travel. What a strange business. The poorest guest in this hotel of unbelievably poor people has at least two thousand francs under his belt.

Take that young Levantine sitting in the courtyard. I bet you a hundred sous that, clearer than a clairvoyant, I know exactly what he's up to.

First, he's from Smyrna, Aleppo or an Aegean island.

"No, I'm from Homs..."

OK, he's from Homs. It's the same thing, it's in Syria.

So how old is he? Twenty-three?

"Twenty-two!"

He saved up the cost of his passage piastre by piastre. He was...?

"...a trainee lamb butcher."

An honourable trade. But what slaughter. How many little bleating beasts did he decapitate to earn enough to become an emigrant? It doesn't bear thinking about.

He's on his way to Brazil, I'm sure. From his part of the Levant they always go to Brazil. His only luggage is a basket. As an old Mediterranean hand I know his story very well.

"Isn't that right, you've got a basket?"

"Yes, *the* basket."

*The* basket! He puts it best. He's got *the* basket with him! As if you could have two baskets... When he disembarks from the *Valdivia* at Rio, his hotel bill and his boat passage paid, he'll have notes to the value of a hundred francs in his pocket – and *the* basket.

It's then that the cycle of an emigrant from the Levant starts in earnest for him. He'll buy twenty francs' worth of non-perishable goods. With the goods safely stowed in his basket, the basket on his arm, he'll set off into an unknown world and make forty francs from his twenty. He will take care to remain sober. That way he's sure of succeeding. His basket will become a stall. This, in turn, will be transformed into a real shop with his name inscribed over the door. At about that time a relative back home will receive a cheque from Rio. It's to buy land with. A year later the same relative gets another cheque. It's to cover building the ground floor. Three years later he'll send enough for the first storey. After another three years the second storey will be built. One fine day, preferably a Maundy Thursday – all roads leading to Rome – he'll send enough to finish the roof.

"So, distinguished one, you'll return home?"

"Yes, of course" says the trainee lamb butcher, already smiling at his good luck.

Here's another group arriving. Which neck of the woods do they come from? How can people so young look so exhausted? They enter as one from rue Fourchier, heads bowed under the weight of the fortune they have in a bag. Their children follow, breathless. It's as though they had made the journey from their home village on foot. They're from Georgia.

Their guide pushes the hotel door open. They enter without looking up to see where they are. Ever since they left Batoum they have known that they will pass through this faraway foreign door. They don't even notice it. In the group is a beautiful young woman. She has to fight the others for her turn to use the tin cup at the drinking-fountain. Her beauty exacts no privileges.

"Twenty-seven Georgians", the hotel-keeper says looking down his list.

He counts them.

She was number eighteen.

"The eighteenth. Not bad, is she?" I say to him, "but she won't be here long."

What a hotel!

Some emigrants chant dirges which put your soul on ice. They believe they're still on the Volga propelling their barges. They're Russians. In the corridor, Olé, Olé. An accordion played by natives of Castille and Léon. From the bottom of the courtyard loud, sad cries. What's going on? They are Jews, book in hand and rocking from side to side, using the zinc counter as the Wailing Wall. They think they're in Jerusalem. They utter long, liturgical groans. God damn me if I lie. Here come some regular clients.

You'll see what a funny routine these regulars follow. They're Roumanian. That's not funny in itself. The thing is they've just finished harvesting in Roumania. They're off to do the same in South America. They'll return to scythe wheat by the Danube then, six months later, they'll be back to stack it in Uruguay. I'm talking of the very same people. The hotel-keeper knows them well. They've been on the move like this for four years.

"Does that pay well?"

"No."

"So, my friends", I ask them, "why do you go so far afield to cut wheat?"

"We were about to tell you", they say. "It's the custom in our province."

A departure. "Travellers for Rio, Santos, Montevideo and Buenos Aires in the bus, please!"

On the covered first floor balcony a group rises to its feet.

They're bound for Haiti. They've been waiting 27 days. Every time a departure is announced, they stand up and start forward.

"No, not you," their agent cries out once again.

They sit back down like dogs ordered to their baskets.

One by one the lucky ones file past the bureau. In this heap of humanity, who will be the future millionaires? They're leaving for the New World. One man has two enamel plates under his arm; one woman a black eye. The rest have nothing...

This evening a real somebody came to the hotel. He was followed by a young woman. He looked around at the walls, the cement floor, the stairwell.

"Do you remember this, Anna?"

He was very well dressed.

You could tell that he was not looking for shelter.

"Memories?" I asked him.

In effect, yes. He had left from here. At that time he could neither read nor write. He had 227 francs to his name and a little seven-year-old girl.

"Do you remember, Anna?"

He was French.

Today he is Argentinian. He has 15,000 head of sheep and 1,000 head of cattle out there.

He also has more than a million pesos.

He went to the counter and offered 2,000 francs to the hotel cashier.

"For your most needy guests."

"Would you like to leave me your name?" asked the hotel-keeper.

"Auguste Bardec", he replied. "You can write it on the wall if you like as an example and an encouragement." They left.

Anna was now 17 and he had his car waiting outside.

Night fell.

Abdallah appeared.

Abdallah's art is to channel the flow of emigrants. He comes to wait for them at the hotel door. He knows how to keep them happy. This evening he has organised a film screening in their honour. It's warm, but the screening is open air. Twenty centimes a head. They pay in advance.

Led by Abdallah the enthusiasts file down the rue de la République. They turn into rue Colbert. Then cours Belsunce. They've arrived.

A Marseille advertising company has set up a screen on the right-hand pavement. Abdallah sits his group down on the left.

Quietly content, the emigrants follow the action on the screen. They watch images of chemists' jars, beautiful Côte d'Azur landscapes, safety tyres, where to find the best chiropodist.

"Move along now," orders a policeman, worried at such a large group.

"But," reply the unfortunates, "we've paid."

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