

Same Space, Different Worlds: Or, Rubbish Bins

In my travels through Europe, the cityscape of Belgrade stood out. It was like something out of a strange dream – not a nightmare, just odd. The streets are lined by a hodgepodge of old Austrian-style buildings and brutally square communist architecture – sort of like LEGO. The city is new to me. The people passing by are all neatly dressed, and there is hardly any rubbish on the streets – it’s clean, but the main streets lack the Western brand shops like those that line Ginza. The graffiti is different to what I saw in Berlin. There are no anarchy symbols or antifa stickers, but lots of Celtic crosses and swastikas of the neo-Nazis. It’s all anti-EU and pro-Russia. I found it a bit uncomfortable.

What made me more uncomfortable was witnessing the Roma people, and their position in society. Of course, I knew that the Roma people were a minority in many nations across greater Europe and the world, and I knew that there was discrimination against them. But I never imagined how two different peoples could occupy the same space, but live in such different worlds. The majority of Serbians, mostly white people, the same neatly dressed people walking the streets, seem never to interact with the Roma – but there is one place where their lives intersect – the rubbish bins.

Belgrade is as clean as Tokyo, even cleaner in some places. One part of this is the rubbish bins all around the city – there is a bin every few meters. None overflow like the recycling bins next to vending machines in Tokyo. Clearly, someone is emptying them regularly.

It had been the same in Sofia, Bulgaria. The main streets were clean, and all lined with rubbish bins. I was sitting with my friends, Petar and Honoka, whom I hadn’t seen for many years – in fact, not since we’d graduated *Gaidai* together. We’d all just bought ice-creams – actually, this is funny, the clerk who sold me the ice-cream spoke fluent English, and was the first person in Europe to comment on my appearance. I surely looked odd, a bearded, Asian man with a mohawk. “Looking slick!” He told me – I guess he was used to tourists, and this showed in the price of the ice-cream, too.

Anyway, Petar, Honoka, and I were sitting on a bench, eating our ice-creams, and I was sharing my impressions of the city, especially how clean it was, and how convenient the rubbish bins were. It was during that discussion that a Roma man, wearing a fluorescent orange waistcoat and with a black plastic bag in his hand, began going through the rubbish bins. He was gathering the contents of the bins one after another. A young boy, who looked around ten years old – probably his son – was helping him. They were both quick in their work, and the boy seemed to be used to his job. I didn’t stop to think before I said out loud to them, “Good work on making the town clean, but shouldn’t your kid be in school?”

The Roma man ignored me. I thought, perhaps, he didn’t hear, so I said loudly to Petar and Honoka – loud enough that the man and his son would certainly hear – “shouldn’t he be in school?” Petar gave a small nod, but he looked really uncomfortable. I looked around. The neatly dressed people passing by didn’t seem to even notice the Roma man and his child. They didn’t antagonize them, or bully them. In a way it was worse. They just ignored them.

During my travels, I couldn’t stay quiet about how uncomfortable this made me. I’d asked friends in Bulgaria and Serbia, and in Austria and Berlin, but the answer was always the same; “Yes, there is a problem with discrimination against Roma,” everyone would say that. “There are good Roma,” most people would say that, too. But almost everyone would add, “But there are dangerous ones, too. Shingo, be careful with Roma.” I don’t think these people are racist, not at all – in fact, almost all of the people I met in my travels have been wonderful, and have lots of compassion and concern for the world. But also, they all lived in the first world – that world that the neatly dressed people walking the main streets live in. I wonder how many of them have imagined the other world, shared in the same space but connected only by rubbish bins. I wonder how many have thought about ‘how the other half live.’ Perhaps it was easier for me to see, because I was looking on these ‘two worlds’ from outside – I don’t live there.

Travelling with friends is fun, especially when they are good friends of ten years or more. But sometimes their views of things can hinder my understanding – if you live in a place too long, or

belong too strongly to one group, your biases can begin to cloud your vision.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. Where do you think the narrator is originally from?

Answer: Japan.

Hints/Clues: The most prominent clue comes in the middle of the passage, when the narrator talks about meeting his friends ‘Petar and Honoka,’ whom he hadn’t met since ‘graduated *Gaidai* (=外大, so likely a foreign studies university somewhere in Japan) together.’ Other smaller clues include a reference to Ginza (near the beginning), and to recycling bins beside vending machines in Tokyo, suggesting a familiarity with the city. (Also, the answer to the next question, a Japanese name, is also a clue).

2. What is the narrator’s name?

Answer: Shingo.

Hints/Clues: This is explicitly stated in the narrator’s conversations about Roma near the end – ‘But there are dangerous ones, too. Shingo, be careful with Roma.’’

3. What country do you think the narrator’s friend, Petar, is originally from?

Answer: Bulgaria.

Hints/Clues: Clues for this question are somewhat limited, but it is important to note that the narrator, Shingo, met with Petar and Honoka in Sofia, Bulgaria. Honoka appears to be at least of Japanese descent, while Petar has a more Bulgarian name. Another clue is that, after Shingo questions the Roma man and his son, he turns to Petar; and after asking whether the young boy should be in school, ‘Petar gave a small nod, but he looked really uncomfortable.’ This reaction suggests a familiarity with Roma, and also an unwillingness to engage, likely a result of extended experience and/or knowledge of Roma people in Bulgaria.

4. Why do you think ‘communist architecture’ was a defining feature of Belgrade?

Answer: The country was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union during the 20th century.

Hints/Clues: Although an independent state, Bulgaria was a socialist state with close ties to the Soviet Union. The English Wikipedia page for the People’s Republic of Bulgaria describes it as “one of the most loyal satellite states of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, sometimes being called the 16th Soviet Republic rather than an independent country.”

5. Why do you think the ice-cream clerk’s ‘being used to tourists’ was reflected in the ‘price of the ice-cream?’

Answer: The ice-cream was probably more expensive than it would have been if sold to locals.

Hints/Clues: There are no direct hints in the passage, but it is generally well known in many countries that tourist-centric areas are generally overpriced. Further, in some countries, vendors will take advantage of tourist’s lack of knowledge of local prices to charge more – this also happened to the narrator in Listening Passage 2.9 ‘Ripped Off, But Satisfied,’ in which she was overcharged for her taxi ride from the airport.

6. Why do you think the Roma man didn’t reply to the narrator?

Answer: Answers will vary.

Hints/Clues: No specific hints are given, although points should be given for well-reasoned answers. However, the consistent theme throughout the passage is the almost entire lack of interaction between the Roma people and the local majority – this is evidenced again by Petar’s

lack of willingness to engage, and the several discussions about the Roma people at the end of the passage. It is also entirely likely that the Roma man did not want to engage with a potentially very forward question, particularly from someone who was clearly not a local, and therefore might be assumed to lack any knowledge of the societal situation.