

YOUROPEANS!

This is
EUROPE

**(ACCORDING TO ITS DOCTORS,
HAIRDRESSERS, POLICE OFFICERS,
SEX WORKERS AND OTHER EXPERTS)**

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INTRODUCTION

8 'Do you play golf?' Gedas asked.

'Only rarely, and very badly,' I replied.

He said it was a shame, since the centre of Europe was located next to a beautiful golf course.

'The centre of Europe?'

Yes, it was only about a 30-minute bus ride from the city, and he thought I should see it.

So the following day found me strolling through a small recreational park built in 2004 when Lithuania became a member of the European Union (EU). A column with yellow stars at the top, located at the edge of a compass laid out the on the ground, marked the spot. I reached it by walking up a path flanked by 28 flag masts; the Dutch flag dangled limply somewhere in the middle. Birds sang, a rabbit hopped off into the grass, and from behind a clump of trees came the intermittent sound of a golf club hitting a ball. According to the national tourist board, the geographic centre of Europe is an official tourist attraction, although the wooden information kiosk/souvenir shop was closed.

I missed the first bus back to Vilnius: I should have signalled

more clearly that I wanted a ride, explained the driver of the next bus an hour later.

In Hungary, in Tállya, there is also a monument claiming to mark the geographical centre of Europe. And if you include Iceland, the Azores, and the European islands, the geographical centre is located in the Estonian town Mõnnuste. They are planning to erect a tourist centre there. Belorussian scientists have calculated that the geographical centre is located somewhere within their borders. The geographical centre may also be located in Slovakia, Ukraine or Poland.

The geographical centre of EU has also been calculated, and in 1987 it was somewhere in the middle of France. Since 2013 it has moved to northwest Bayern. The shift is easily explained: the size of the EU changes with the admission of every new member. This is where the 28 flagpoles should be located, not in Vilnius. And there should be 44 of them, which is the number of countries on the European continent. Or 51 if you include Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkey, only part of which lie in Europe, and Armenia and Cyprus, which are geographically Asian, but culturally and historically European. It is neither the first nor the last example of a tendency to confuse Europe with the European Union.

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Approximately 600 million people can call themselves Europeans; as of the end of 2014, the EU united 507 million of them. Including the 232 *Youropeans* that I interviewed between June 2013 and February 2015, eight in every EU capital: a doctor, a hairdresser, an entrepreneur, an artist, an immigrant, a sex worker, a local celebrity and a police agent. I was looking for striking differences and surprising similarities between them, with a view to creating a website and this book.

Why? For several reasons, the first being that it is necessary. Those 507 million people are all members of the same club: members of a union which has become increasingly important in recent years, and which plays an ever greater role in their daily life,

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whether they like it or not. Once you're in the club, you can work wherever you like, travel freely, and if you're a student, study for a time at a foreign university. The result is that members are visiting each other's countries much more frequently. I have seen this in my own city, Amsterdam, in recent years: more and more tourists, in all shapes and sizes. Tourists from China and the US, immigrants from Africa, as well as French expats, temporary labourers from Poland and Slovakia, Bulgarian sex workers, Spanish students, pickpockets and au-pairs from Romania, city trippers from Austria and Estonia. They live on my street, if only for a weekend, sit next to me in the underground, and stand in front of me in the queue for the supermarket. New neighbours.

10 On 1 January 2014 nearly 2 million people of non-Western origin and 1.6 million Western immigrants lived in the Netherlands. Most of them live in the cities, where they also make up a relatively large share of the population: since 2011 first and second-generation immigrants have accounted for over half of Amsterdam's population. These figures only include people who are registered, i.e. students and trainees; temporary employees, sex workers and pickpockets are not included. Nor are tourists.

I soon got to know most of my new neighbours, but I did not like all of them. The man at number 16 who pricked a hole in the football my friends from school and I accidentally kicked into his garden (every half hour). Or my downstairs neighbour in Amsterdam who had apparently left months before, leaving behind a marijuana plantation. But we usually got along. I feel more at home in a place where I know my neighbours and the neighbourhood, where I can find a restaurant where the waitress recognises me, and where I can go running along a fixed route. If I know my neighbours, I am willing to be tolerant, and if they occasionally party until the early hours, instead of getting angry, I'm glad to see they're enjoying themselves. You see what I mean.

You can measure social cohesion on the basis of how well people know their neighbours. Not an attractive term, but it is how the willingness of the members of society to cooperate with one

another is usually described. Ten years ago, it was one of the focal points of my own company, Robin Good, which conceptualised and organised projects and events designed to help companies make their social involvement more tangible, and move from words to deeds. Sometimes by getting the neighbourhood involved, often by bringing people together who would not otherwise have much contact with one another. Examples include *Amsterdammers Ontmoeten Elkaar*, a project in which handicapped and non-handicapped joined forces to help other residents of Amsterdam. Or the organisation of the Amsterdam World Cup, an annual big two-day football tournament, but also an event where Amsterdammers with international roots have a chance to meet one another.

The Dutch have a saying: unknown is unloved. But the opposite is also true: getting to know people can foster understanding and greater social cohesion, which in turn makes people happier. There is nothing 'airy fairy' about this; business thrives when people know trust each other. I wanted to try to put into practice as a journalist what I had been doing for years as an entrepreneur: getting better acquainted with my neighbours. I hoped that writing about it would also help others to get to know their neighbours, and strengthen the ties within the European club. Or least make a modest contribution towards strengthening those increasingly important ties.

That was my initial excuse for starting the Youropeans. And I was casting around for a new project – I had arrived at the decision to write a novel, and before that to start a business, in the same way. This has become something of a speciality for me:¹ the same recipe, the same ingredients. The project always has to be creative, positive, have some commercial potential, and be socially relevant. The new element in this mix was travel. I had done so only reluctantly in recent years, having developed a fear of travel, and I wanted to confront that fear. And confront it I did, even though there were moments – alone in a hotel room in Sofia, or lost in Budapest – when it wasn't always easy.

1

**PROJECT YOUROPEANS:
28 CITIES, 8 CATEGORIES
AND 232 INTERVIEWEES**

14 What do Europeans think of their work? Their country? Europe? The Eurobarometer – the European Commission’s opinion poll – has been putting this question to 1,000 European in every member state since 1973. These interviews are conducted in person, but also online, and they produce interesting data, which also has scientific value: because $N = 1000 \times 28$.

The result of my interviews was $N = 8 \times 28$, because I interviewed 8 people in 28 countries, in the timespan of just one year. Completely useless as scientific data, but my results were different: a wealth of opinions, experiences and anecdotes from real people, who had their own story to tell about Europe: *the people’s Europe*.

The eight professions were chosen at random. I tried to cover society as a whole: from high to low, from left to right.

- The **doctor**. Doctors have a university education, and social standing; they are usually part of the country’s elite. Most of the doctors I spoke to worked in a hospital although I also met general practitioners, a psychiatrist and a dentist.

- The **entrepreneur**. Good people by definition, but I confess to being prejudiced. For me, as a former entrepreneur, I see them as optimistic, commercial and hard working. I spoke to a wide range of them, young and old, rich and struggling, and so their place in society also varied. In general, however, they tended towards the right of centre. My only criterion was that the entrepreneur in question should have at least eight employees. A one-person company without personnel is not an entrepreneur.
- The **artist**. Generally left of centre. This category included painters, musicians (two hard rock guitar players), actors. Of all my interviews, these were often the most entertaining, but they were also long because 1) artists are apparently very loquacious, and 2) they have a lot of time. And I had to produce a transcript from every two-hour long recording.
- The **policeman**. Of police woman (men outnumber women 18 to 10). Preferably a street cop instead of a spokesperson. They are key figures in society, the representatives of Authority. Not my favourite category to start with, but in the end I liked them more than I thought I would.
- The **hairstresser**. I had no affinity with them, not because I disliked them, but because it's been ten years since I last visited one: once a week I use clippers to shave off the sparse hairs on my skull. Beforehand I would have placed them near the bottom of the social ladder, but the hairstressers surprised me. Many of them were well-informed about world events, had an interesting take on those events, and were also entrepreneurial, managing their own chair or business.
- The **sex worker**. I started out calling them prostitutes, which did not go over well in the business, and also had an unfavourable effect on their willingness to cooperate. Sections of my novel *The Parvenu* were set in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, which I lived close to at the time, and I have met enough sex workers over the years to be amazed by the caricatures of their profession: dumb, common women who practise a profession that is so disgusting that they must be doing it

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against their will. Involving them was a kind of project within a project, which I hoped would counter the prevailing view. I also hoped that talking to 28 workers about their job would give the knowledge I needed to draw some conclusions about sexual morality in Europe. Nor did I have any objection to including such a mediagenic category. 27 women and 1 man (she-male Melissa), from escorts to strippers.

- The **immigrant**. The outsider can provide a refreshing view of his or her new country, and in the case of immigrants from other parts of the world, also an interesting perspective on Europe. I gradually realised that the differences between different immigrants were too big to include them in one category, and I began to divide them into expats and immigrants. More about that later.
- The **local celebrity**. The joker category. It ranged from politicians such as Herman van Rompuy and Felix Rottenberg, (a Dutch former politician and now a political commentator) and athletes such as the Slovenian Olympic ski champion Tina Maze to the London-based stand-up comedian Omid Djalili. The only criterion was that they had to be familiar with their city. It was a good excuse to interview playmate Cathy in Vienna, but celebrities are by definition mediagenic, and I hoped that their inclusion would attract more media coverage and increase the project's impact. That was after all the purpose of the whole undertaking.

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I interviewed a total of 232 Youropeans: 127 men and 105 women.* The average age was 39.6. The youngest were hairdressers Joni and Angelique (in Helsinki and Berlin) and sex worker Nicola (in Bratislava): 21. The oldest was the priest Anton, who is a *local celeb* in Bratislava: 85 (after our interview he drove me back to the city centre in the pouring rain. Without glasses and without incident.)

* 232 and not 224 Youropeans, because in some cities I interviewed more than one entrepreneur or local celebrity.

Each interview lasted approximately fifty minutes, and there was no set list of questions (although the police in particular expected that, and some agents, like the uncooperative Irishman Dennis, wanted to work through the questions I had emailed him in advance as quickly as possible. In that short space of time I tried find out how the interviewees felt about work, various social issues and their country, whether they felt like Europeans and how they viewed the EU. Their responses were of course varied: in the Baltic States, they talked about the long arm of Russia, in Athens about the economic crisis.

I wanted to use the interviews in two ways. The first was to produce an edited version, shortened to roughly 1,000 words in English (sometimes translated if the conversation had been held in German, Dutch, Spanish or French) that could be posted on the website www.youropeans with a photograph of the interviewee.* There they would be grouped city-by-city in a way that was eye-catching and attractive enough to encourage visitors of this site to get to know their fellow Europeans: the main goal of my project.

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The second involved using the interviews as raw material for this book, in which I want to connect the dots and highlight noticeable differences and similarities. Ideally, the book would be a good read and would be available in all of the European Union's 23 languages. So that we can all become one big happy family.

HOW DO YOU FIND A YOUROPEAN?

I started my *tour d'Europe* in Lisbon in June of 2013. You have to start somewhere, so why not in the city that was at the top of my personal list of the most pleasant, beautiful capital cities (and it still is). Moreover, it was a city where I knew people, which would make it easier to find interviewees. One of my acquaintances, Marta, put me in touch with her own hairdresser Mauro, and

*The photographs are also displayed in this book, in the middle pages. A selection was exhibited in Brussels, Amsterdam and in various villages in Northern Italy.

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on 3 June 2013, in the Rua Serpa Pinto in Lisbon, he became the very first Youropean.

‘I only recently became a hairdresser; I studied mathematics and worked in IT for a long time,’ Mauro said. It was quite a change, his friends agreed, was he gay now? He wasn’t he said, speaking in Portuguese with Marta translating, because Mauro didn’t think his English was good enough. I heard that a lot but usually their English was pretty good – better than my Portuguese/Romanian/Lithuanian in any case. The three of us were sitting on trendy, i.e. uncomfortable, chairs next to a client who was waiting her turn. Mauro’s colleagues continued cutting and colouring, but I could see in the mirror that they were keeping an eagle eye on us: people come to hairdressers for a haircut, not an interview. Especially not an interview about Europe. I asked him what he thought of Europe, but a swelling chorus of hairdryers made him difficult to understand, even for Marta. After twenty minutes or so Mauro was ready to get back to work; he posed impatiently for a few photos.

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Mauro was followed by 231 Youropeans. I found them in different ways, sometimes by accident, like the entrepreneur Karoli, whom I met on the bus from Riga to Vilnius. We were sitting in the two comfortable leather seats that formed the last row of the business class section. There is no train connection between the Latvian and the Lithuanian capitals, but this coach was just as good, and it only cost 20 euros, including a bottle of water, an apple and WIFI. At least you can make good use of your time this way, but before we both got to work (earphones in, bashing away at our laptops) I had a brief conversation with my neighbour. As the bus slowly manoeuvred its way out of Riga, I found out that Karoli was from Estonia, and although she was only 31, she was a serial entrepreneur who started her first company when she was sixteen, and had twice been named Europe’s Young Entrepreneur of the Year. I don’t think I could have found a better candidate for the entrepreneur category of Youropeans in Estonia, and I interviewed her in Tallinn a few months later.

Or take the Viennese Youropeans Coco, Cathy and Martin, respectively an artist, a local celeb and a doctor, whom I met thanks to Mario, the owner of a modelling agency, and Vienna's first drag queen. With real breasts, at least a C-cup, which he showed me on a Facebook photo. Thankfully he did not unbutton his shirt to show me the real thing. According to him, it is a medical miracle, which occurs in 1 out of a 100,000 men, but pills may have given nature a helping hand. I met him through other people, and was invited to visit his office, which was staffed by him, a charming assistant, and his right-hand man Marcus, who was as fashionable as he was eccentric: he was tall and thin with a Dali-like moustache.

'Are you sure you're not gay?' Mario asked as he fired up another Marlboro. *Circus Mario*. 'Right, so who do you plan to interview? Her? Pleeease... she looks terrible. I'll give you her,' he said pointing to a gorgeous model whose portfolio was displayed on the wall behind him. She was the Playmate Cathy, a local celebrity, but Marco also put me in touch with Coco and the doctor Martin. As a bonus he got me a place in a casting call for an Austrian beer brand that same afternoon, not far from his office. 'It's right up your street,' he said, looking me over from top to bottom like I was steer in a cattle market. The casting call went well, but I will not be the new face of Schloß Eggenberg Hopfenkönig.

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Usually, however, the process was not as effortless, and finding Youropeans was hard work. There were three ways of doing so: 1) simply walking into their place of work, 2) connections, or 3) through official channels, such as with police agents. I usually found hairdressers along the first street I encountered, and after a few refusals, the fourth or fifth agreed to an interview right away, or said they would be happy to talk to me the next day. No, hairdressers were not a problem. Just look around and see how many salons there are in your own city.

Artists were also relatively easy to find, in the same way that I found doctors, expats/immigrants and entrepreneurs: though connections. Facebook was also helpful. Placing a notice that I was on

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my way to Vilnius/Prague/Luxembourg and looking for interviewees always resulted in a few good responses and some local contacts. Embassies – especially the smaller ones – were sometimes helpful; those in London, Paris and Rome made it abundantly clear that they had other things on their mind. But the Dutch embassies in Valetta, Riga, Prague and Madrid did what they could, as did the EU representative in Bratislava and Tallinn. The local journalists I contacted so that they could interview me for their newspaper or TV station also provided assistance: every now and then a local celebrity popped up in their well-filled rolodexes.

20 And it was a good thing too, because local celebrities are often difficult to approach. And who qualifies as a celebrity? I had already specified *local*, not wanting to reach too high and force myself to score the one real celebrity in Vilnius. London, on the other hand, is full of celebrities, but a local London celeb is usually so famous that they can't spare 30 minutes for anything less than *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue* or *The New York Times*. I tried. I was told that the children of David Beckham, Elle Macpherson and Claudia Schiffer all attended school right around the corner from where I was staying in upmarket Bayswater. I hung around near the school for two mornings and saw a lot of Porsche Cayennes, and yummy mummies with children in school uniforms, but it was apparently not David, Elle or Claudia's turn to do the school run. This category did provide an excuse to approach a few of my own personal heroes, but Goran Ivanišević was not in Zagreb when I was there, Agnetha Fältskog refused politely and Johann Cruyff, Amsterdam's most famous citizen could not be persuaded (I was, however, not unhappy with Felix Rottenberg and Pierre Bokma).

Hard work, as I said, but sometimes I got lucky and someone took over for me, as in Bucharest: a Romanian living in the Netherlands heard about Youropeans and appreciated the fact that I was helping to dispel prejudices about her country. She took care of literally everything, from interviews to address instructions. In Cyprus I stayed with a friend from college, who is now the director of a telecom company and packs considerable weight on the

island. When his charming secretary put in a call to someone, they answered, and an interview was easily arranged.

I had to locate the sex workers myself, as no one admits to having one on their list of contacts. As Eva, a sex worker in Amsterdam, said: 'None of my friends knows one.' Their work anonymously. When I explained the project and listed the categories, they frequently joked 'Oh, so I'm the prostitute'. Prostitution exists everywhere, but it isn't always legal. Often it is the sex worker who is punishable, although in some countries, like Sweden, it is client. I could usually find online sites offering sex work, varying from escort services to independent operators, but that was only the start; as soon as I telephoned and mentioned that I was a journalist, most of them hung up. I conducted a number of interviews under false pretences, showing up as a client and not revealing my real intentions until a little later, when I had gained their trust.

And finally, the police. It is not easy to get an appointment; you have to work at it. Submit an official request, for example, which was a lot more complicated in some in some countries than in others. The Netherlands was a piece of cake: the communications officer understood the project, and arranged an interview within a day. She happened to have read my novel, which helped my case.

Unfortunately, no one in Bulgaria, Slovakia or Lithuania had read it. In most of the Eastern European countries the procedure was as follows: after searching an outdated website written in a language I do not speak (and in Bulgaria in an alphabet I cannot read) I would find a telephone number. Often no one answered the phone, but sometimes I got a receptionist who spoke no English/French/German and therefore hung up after a few minutes of further confusion. Further inquiries sometimes produced an email address, but no one ever replied to my emails.

On at least ten occasions, I was unable to finalize my appointment with the police until the next-to-last day of my visit, and had to travel directly from the police station to the airport. It was the bureaucracy, explained one of my interviewees. Every decision

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requires the approval of a supervisor, who in turn needs to consult his or her boss, and so on and so forth.

My Youropean was often a good agent who spoke openly about the profession – perhaps my interviewees had been carefully chosen with that purpose in mind. They usually spoke a language I understood, and if I was unlucky, used an interpreter, who was often a communications officer who made sure that the officer was not too open. That happened in Bratislava, Prague and Bucharest.

Most of them enjoyed being interviewed, with the exception of the Irishman Dennis. He clearly viewed it as a chore, and he explored every possible escape route. His first excuse was that he didn't want the conversation to be recorded. The second was that he did not want to be photographed. But his superior officer had agreed, and so after his initial refusal, and a ten-minute phone call with a boss, he returned to the interrogation room (!), looking like a criminal who had just been forced to surrender to a SWAT team. 'Ok,' he said, 'you've got 15 minutes.' And with a stopwatch in his hand he made sure that the interview did not last a second longer.

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In time, things went more smoothly, and my requests were granted more easily: the police could consult the growing number of interviews on my website and conclude that my intentions were honourable (although Dennis may not have been all that happy when he saw his interview online a few weeks later). At least I wasn't arrested.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR, AUGUST 2016

The interviews in *This is Europe* were conducted between June 2013 and January 2015, and I finished writing the book in November of that same year. At the time, Europe was not yet the target of frequent terrorist attacks, and the prospect of a Brexit still seemed fairly unlikely. Times have certainly changed, but the subject of my book has not: Europe is Europe.

2

**AND THAT IS WHY THE EU
DOESN'T WORK**

24 Dutch journalist Rob Wijnberg once said² that the word Europe in the title of a newspaper article is like the forecast of a rainy day for the owner of a beach club – it’s a miracle that you are reading this book at all. Very little is written about Europe and the EU, although that has changed since the influx of refugees ceased to be an Italian (or Maltese) problem, and became a European issue, sometime around the spring of 2015. Even then, most of what we read is about other European countries and how they are responding to the problem, not about the EU.*

Claes de Vreese, professor of political communication at the University of Amsterdam, has been studying the way European elections are reported in 27 countries since 1999. According to him, in the early years the Netherlands provided the least coverage of all 27 countries, although that figure has crept up to about the average. I noticed this during the *Your Europeans* project, which got

* When this book is published, in March 2016, the Netherlands will be halfway through its year as EU chair, which will probably result in a (temporary) Dutch peak in interest in the EU.

little publicity at home in the Netherlands before the publication of the book, while my visit made the front page of national newspapers in Hungary and Romania, and Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Croatia all devoted solid articles to the project. As a result of the lack of coverage, the Dutch have little interest in the EU, although there are editors-in-chief who argue that the opposite is true, i.e. they do not provide much coverage because readers and viewers are not interested. (I have noticed they tend to assign themselves a passive role, whilst I am more inclined to think it is the newspaper, and not the reader, who decides what is news.)

Another consequence of this hit-and-miss reporting is that people in the Netherlands have very little knowledge of European affairs. When the political activists from the Dutch *Geen Peil* movement called for an advisory referendum in March 2016 on the EU association agreement with Ukraine, they did so with the help of posters featuring outrageous quotes from equally outrageously Europhile politicians. Jean-Claude Juncker, chairman of the European Commission was quoted as saying 'Most Europeans don't understand the decisions being made anyway.' Dutch politician Alexander Pechtold opined that 'Europe is too complex to stuff into a referendum.' Unfortunately, both statements are true.

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The complexity, but above all the level of knowledge, has consequences for the way in which the media cover European issues, which they tend to avoid until, for example, impending European elections force them to examine the issues. 'If an issue isn't really on the agenda, you can't suddenly have a serious debate about it,' De Vreese said.³ 'Because there is little or no continuity in Dutch reporting on Europe, the media cannot assume even a basic level of knowledge on the part of general public.' And so the media prefers simple frames, such as in the last elections when it all boiled down to 'do we want more or less Europe?'

De Vreese concluded that in countries where former prime ministers and other government ministers stand for European offices, there is more coverage. A familiar face helps. So does a good conflict: countries where there is a lot of conflict about Europe pro-

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vide more coverage. Herman van Rompuy, former chairman of the European Council, was acutely aware of the difficulty of addressing all Europeans at once. 'He believed that national government leaders should actually be on the frontline, explaining European policies, because together, they are those policies,' said his former assistant Luuk van Middelaar, who is now a political columnist. But national leaders do not do this, and it is highly questionable whether they would have allowed Van Rompuy to go over their heads and speak to all of Europe.

Moreover, what podium could he have used to do that? The newspapers are less likely to write that 'Juncker believes' or 'Tusk thinks' than they are to report that 'Merkel wants' and 'Cameron demands'. There are no truly European media. In my hotel rooms I sometimes zapped to Euronews, which devotes a portion of its programming to the EU, from which it receives an annual subsidy of 15 million euros. There is no European newspaper.* Back in the

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HERMAN, YOUROPEAN #196, LOCAL CELEB IN BRUSSELS

No, he does not have Obama's swagger, or Putin's raw charisma, I think as I follow Herman van Rompuy up the stairs to his room in the offices of his party in the EU, the *Europese Volkspartij* (EVP) His former party, because two months earlier, on 1 December 2014, his period as chairman of the European Council ended. He now has more time on his hands: my 10.30 appointment is his first of the day. A man of slight build wearing a long, sensible grey

* *Neweurope* is a weekly publication, and in April 2015 the US-based *Politico* started publishing a weekly European edition, but their target readers are primarily Brussels insiders.

coat, but carrying an elegant calfskin briefcase. He unlocks the door, switches on the light and we sit down, he on a couch next to a lowered European flag.

'Go ahead,' he says, and I take my first misstep: 'The EU was originally an economic union.' Van Rompuy interrupts me, his eyes piercing behind small, round lenses. 'That's so typically Dutch, and it is incorrect. The underlying idea was no more war, the peace ideal. And the economy was an instrument, not an objective. I see that in debates in the Netherlands, but certainly also in Great Britain, the economic motive is always at the forefront: "what's in it for us?" People are for or against Europe only insofar as calculating citizens believe that it directly benefits them. The founding fathers of the European Union sought an end to centuries of war, and wanted to find the most pragmatic way of doing so.' I have a feeling that Van Rompuy has told this story at least ten thousand times, but the tireless teacher in him is willing to tell it again. 'So they did it via coal and steel, the basis of the weapon industry. By transferring national control to a supranational body. That was the EGCS, later the EEC, which eliminated internal customs controls and introduced a common export tariff. When that had been completed, there was a move towards creating even closer ties within the common market, and finally towards the introduction of a common currency. That was a giant step towards integration, and a major hand over of sovereignty on the part of the nation states. But during that time, the economy was always a tool.'

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'You are still young, of course, but you saw the birth of the EU. How did you experience that?'

'I was brought up in the European mindset. At the Jesuit College here in Brussels. Where I was a student from '59 to '65, the teachers were enthusiastic about the European ideology. Every year there was a kind of mini-Erasmus project, and a group of ten or so interested students took a fourteen-day trip through Europe with other boys – yes, at the time it was only boys, unfortunately – from Nijmegen, Berlin, Genoa and Evreux. It made Europeans of us. No longer focussed only on our own little group. It has

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sometimes been said that this was the noblest period in European history, and that it was it felt like to us. In the first rush of idealism there was even talk of the demise of the nation state. I have managed to hold on to that drive, even during my five years in the European Council.'

He takes his time, and does not mince his words. When I leave I give him a copy of my first novel, *The Parvenu*. His nickname is 'Haiku Herman' and so I sign the book:

*So very diverse
Yet so very much alike
The Youropeans*

My first haiku, composed on the underground just before the interview.

'Ah, that's how you spell Youropeans. Interesting.'

28 No, Herman van Rompuy does not have a lot of swagger. But I do not find it hard to imagine that he had what it takes to be the chairman Europe needed: intellectual, committed and accessible. A bridge builder. A decent man. And how many of those do you see in politics these days?

3

**THE POLICE IN MADRID HAVE
650,00 FOLLOWERS**

30 The police have, to put it mildly, a problem with professional deformation. ‘During holidays I take pictures of my foreign colleagues. I pay special attention to their techniques, uniforms, and badges,’ said Christian from Bratislava. He is not the only police officer who enjoys a busman’s holiday: many of them simply walk into a foreign police station, introduce themselves, and are given a tour. Would bakers do the same? Some of them, like Igor from Slovenia, even stay with their foreign colleagues. He wanted go to London, and the IPA, the International Police Association, put him in touch with a retired Scotland Yard officer who had a spare room for him. ‘It was wonderful,’ said Igor, a jolly man in his forties. ‘We shared a cup of tea every day, and discussed police matters.’ Sometimes they contact one another online, for example via Policelink, a US-based community where the police upload films, mostly from their dash cams. ‘It’s fascinating to see how Americans deal with situations,’ John said. He was a gentle giant working in the canine unit in Copenhagen. ‘You know, we may do things differently, but we are all cut from the same cloth.’ And it gets worse. Halfway through my tour I discovered that police officers also trade badges,

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like little boys do with football cards. ‘I ask foreign colleagues for them when I’m travelling, but I always carry a few in my pocket when I’m working here in Tallinn, so that I also have something to trade,’ Lea said. The most coveted badge – the equivalent of that one impossible-to-find football card – is that of the British police. Bobbies are not allowed to give away their badge, which is the property of Her Majesty the Queen.

It says a lot about the officers’ level of involvement: many of them also have a brother, uncle or father in the police force as well. Most of them have wanted to join up since they were young, and they remain with the police their whole working life, although many retire at a relatively young age. Serge in Luxembourg was so anxious to wear a uniform that he joined the army six days after his seventeenth birthday, the youngest ever according to a newspaper article. Four years later he became a gendarme, and now, at the age of 45, he is a presenter on Luxembourg Police TV. And looking forward to retiring in a few years – at 50.

31

‘What will you do?’

‘Play golf all day.’ And he already has a handicap of five.

Stefano from Rome, a 50-year-old *carabinieri*, only played with soldiers when he was a child, and Igor caught the bug from reading *Sherlock Holmes* as a boy. (‘But are you a detective now?’ ‘No, I’m with the border police’). When she was 4 years old, Verona, the chief of one of Amsterdam’s neighbourhood police stations, watched the police pump the water out of a village pond in order to retrieve a pistol, and knew exactly what she wanted: more excitement and sensation. But she also wanted to be able to help, because she knows how to handle herself, whether in a shoot-out or giving CPR. She is small, just 1m65, but fierce: ‘Whereas others walk away from tension, I step forward,’ she said.

It was a fraught decision for Kestutis, Lithuania’s highest-ranking police officer. ‘In 1991, when we finally gained our independence, everyone did what they could to help the country recover. We were very patriotic. I had just finished law school, and

This is Europe

my way of helping was to join the police force.'

It was a less obvious choice for some of the others. László, for example, was rebellious, and angry with everyone, especially after he was refused admission to the university. He had wanted to become a teacher. Now, thirty years later, he leads the Hungarian police force's information programme for schools, and so it all worked out in the end.

Paulo was a professional football player in Portugal, earning a decent salary, when he got injured. And so he ended up in the police force. 'Because it is a stable job, with the chance of a promotion.' Theognossia from Cyprus said more or less the same. She wanted to be an actress but ended up doing a commercial marketing course before finally deciding to join the police force. 'At least I'm sure of having a job and reasonable working hours. Nothing else is certain in this country.'

32 *To serve and protect*, the motto of almost every police force, is a deep-rooted belief, and they all take it very seriously, regardless of their role or rank: border police, head of the transport department, Frontex, Interpol, traffic police, chief inspector, team leader, sergeant, lieutenant, canine unit or commissioner. And most of them were incredibly dismissive of rank, arguing that the number of stars and bars on their jacket was not important. Except for Martins from Riga, who although only 25 already had four gold stripes on his coat. According to him, 'A soldier who doesn't want to become a general isn't worth his salt.'

The police. Most of my interviewees couldn't wait to join up, but I had always been wary of them, especially after I launched my own career of petty crime around the age of fourteen, stealing Marlboros from the supermarket, Heineken flags from the snack bar and advertising posters from bus shelters. The cops caught me every now and then, and made me report to the station; as a student I also spent a few hours in the cell. Around the same time I developed a strong aversion to authority, something which plagues me even today, in the extremely post-puberty stage of my life. To

The police in Madrid have 650,00 followers

be honest, I found it thrilling to being entering the lion's den of my own accord rather than being sent there by my parents following a call from the police, casually strolling past rooms where weapons were kept and seeing gun holsters draped over chairs. Rooms where people were having lunch: I saw a can of Seven-Up on a desk, family photographs, and glass display cases (every police station has a display case full of prizes related to the national sport: football cups in Southern Europe, ice hockey cups in the north). They had hobbies, some of the police women were very attractive, and some policemen were witty. Just like real people.

LONG, CREEPY CORRIDORS IN BRATISLAVA, OPEN CURTAINS IN AMSTERDAM

The most remarkable interview I had was with Christian, in Bratislava. I was surprised to find that we would not be alone: we met in the office of one of his superiors, where I was seated next to him on a narrow couch. Leonora, an interpreter, sat on one side of the room, next to an information officer, while the police chief – an imposing woman in her fifties – was seated directly across from me on an equally imposing chair.

33

When I walked into the station ten minutes before I had noticed two statues on either side of the big front door. A man with a machine gun and a uniformed woman on the left, and three workers wielding radar equipment on the right side. I asked Christian if he could tell me anything about them. The interpreter rattled away, the press officer scribbled along with her, and Madame Police Chief watched. 'No,' he said. End of it. His thin hands lay in his lap, his fingers fidgeted with his hat. Out on the street he was respected, but here, at the head officer, the pistol on his belt might just as well have been a cap gun.

'Have the police changed since 1991, when the country was still communist?' I asked. He didn't really need an interpreter to answer my question, but he waited a long time before he said: 'I don't know, I didn't work here then.'