

The Transversal
A Travelogue

Jakob J. Kenda

Translated by Michael Biggins

Mountain, Mountain in the Night

You and your two kids have been on the trail for several weeks now and once again you've put at least twelve hours of hiking behind you. Even so, today you manage to tack a good half hour's extension off of the main trail onto that without anybody complaining. For at the end of that side-trek you know a modest clearing awaits you, its surfaces aglow in the golden light of the summer evening's setting sun. On the edge of the clearing there's a perfect spot for two tents, with a fire pit neatly edged in small stones nearby. On all sides of the clearing there are jagged cliffs looming up that lend even the least bit distinct sound an uncanny echo. And nestled at the foot of those craggy peaks are the barely accessible slopes of a primeval forest, which, it's believed, no human hand has touched since the last ice age, at least.

And so it's no wonder that your kids quietly attend to all of their immediate business so they can join you at the campfire as soon as possible. Not just so they can press close to you, as longer and longer shadows press in, as the darkness finally engulfs even you, until at last all that's left of the whole wide world is your intimate circle of light and steady warmth, but because you've set up a small stove in that circle with a pot on top of it that bubbles reassuringly, sending out all kinds of delectable aromas and scents. And then there are the bags of snacks and treats, the heaviest bags of all, which have to be emptied. Especially if you're a growing girl or boy. That's when your life depends on snacks and treats. Even if you have polished off a double portion of supper, you're driven to stuff those things into your mouth as if there will be no tomorrow.

But of course, the most delectable treats of all aren't contained in any bags. They're sitting next to you, literally clinging to you, and you can't help nibbling and sniffing at them, at least just a bit. Or, amid that onrush of happiness, thinking how you might treat them even more.

"How about a story?" you ask.

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"They first arrived in these parts sometime around the sixth century," you say and fall silent.

Your kids look at you expectantly, then start to fidget. Then they realize that they're supposed to react somehow.

"In the sixth century? In these parts?" your daughter repeats, and then when you nod, "Oh! You mean the Slavs, who came here from the north and the east, from beyond the... beyond the... what were they called?"

"From beyond the Carpathian Mountains," you smile. "That's where they'd been living alongside vast rivers that flow through those vast plains. Along the Pripyat, for instance. You've heard of it, haven't you? That's the same river that some other Slavs built the Chernobyl nuclear power plant beside some fourteen centuries later."

"Oh."

"That's right. And a lot like the way Chernobyl sent radioactivity into the atmosphere in the twentieth century, what happened way back in those ancient times caused a chain reaction, too."

"No!"

"Oh yes, it did. The plains all around those vast rivers to the east were like the reactor of a nuclear power plant when it blows up. What caused the chain reaction is anyone's guess. Maybe climate change was at fault, or maybe there had suddenly come to be too many people. It's also possible they were fleeing nomadic tribes from much farther east that had begun making incursions into their territory. Maybe all of these were causes, along with some other factors, as well. At any rate, that reactor exploded and sent a whole bunch of tribes flying out of it, especially toward the west, into the domains of the Roman Empire, which was then in a centuries-long process of disintegrating, and in the course of those chain reactions some of those tribes merged and still others perished. The inexorable force of that migration of peoples brought about the demise of the nomadic Avars, the long-bearded Langobards, the Vandals, the Gepids and the Kugrigurs among many others, even if they were among the most powerful tribes of their time and had decided the fates of many less powerful ethnic groups.

And among the smallest of these last were the Slavs, who arrived in the lands of the Eastern Alps after an arduous migration from the north. Of course, the tiny patch of earth that they settled hadn't just been empty. In spite of the hordes that had already traversed these lands, here and there you could still find some declining city of the formerly powerful Roman Empire with the descendants of its original local inhabitants and colonizers. But there weren't that many of them. So the newcomers gradually began to merge with the remnants of those earlier populations that were still here. They acquired a lot from each other, just as in the course of the many centuries to come they would acquire new bits of identity from the foreign warlords and merchants

and soldiers and refugees and so many others who would wander into their sphere.

The shared identity of the people who lived in these breathtaking eastern Alpine valleys continued to evolve over time. All sorts of constituent parts of what they called “us” continued to mix and remix until, many centuries later, those of us living on this patch of earth began to refer to ourselves as Slovenes. And it’s downright incredible when you think about how through all this mixing and remixing the imprint of the Slavs who settled here in the sixth century CE remained essential to our identity.

The language that had been the most obvious link among the people in these parts was at the core of that imprint, its most intimate connecting tissue. Even though from the very beginning we had never been numerous and even today we scarcely number two million, the oldest preserved document in Old Slovenian was from the end of the tenth century CE, and it doubles as the oldest preserved Slavic document written in the Latin alphabet. Some six centuries later we demonstrated yet again how central our shared language was to us. In 1584 Slovenian became one of the first languages into which the complete Bible was translated. And to this day, language has retained its exceptional significance for our sense of identity. The conviction continues to dominate that we really only know how to swear using phrases that we’ve borrowed from other languages, because we lack any real swear words of our own. Or at most just one or two broadly ridiculous ones, such as “Three hundred hairy bears!”

Of course, this is an opportunity that neither kid can pass up.

“Or ‘So kick me chicken!’” your daughter bursts out in uncontrollable laughter.

“And ‘May your sprouts rot!’” your younger son gets his chance to contribute.

“You’ve got it exactly,” you tell them. “We’re supposed to save our language for finer things. Which isn’t exactly true, though it comes close. Ultimately we can use it to show what hopeless romantics we are. And the fact that Slovene has a dual number, in addition to a singular and plural, must be definitive proof of that fact.

But in addition to language there were other things that the Slavic newcomers contributed to the imprint they left on our shared identity. Their journey had been long and hard. When they arrived in these valleys, they must have had the feeling that they deserved them outright. At the same time, more than once they must have felt as though they were intended for them, that the valleys had been waiting precisely for them to show up. For you see, this was no untouched backwoods. There were fields and roads and quarries and who knows how many other things in these beautiful valleys, which were

otherwise almost devoid of human habitation. Is it any wonder that the Slavs immediately took to this place? Especially considering all the wondrous new things they discovered here, such as grape vines, which were tremendously appealing, too much so for some of them.

They also grew attached to the vast, deep, nearly impassable forests. Partly because they were so rich in resources they could use, but also because they were so wild, mysterious and for the most part untouched. They could also escape into them from the valleys whenever some hostile horde or other came barreling through. It was thanks to the forests that their imprint wasn't simply obliterated in the course of incursions by various conquerors.

But even more than the valleys and forests, there was yet something else they fell in love with. They were simple folk who had lived for countless generations alongside the slow-moving waterways that wended their way through the vast plains far to the east, and they had never before seen mountains such as these. And so these mountains became the superficial image of this land for them and a sign of their tribal cohesion. But the mountains also became something far more complex. Their trek here had been long and arduous at a time when the world was descending into the Middle Ages, and the mountains proved to be an even more dependable retreat than the forests. They were like deities protecting the scree that dwelled at their base from the tempests of history, despite the fact that life in their shadow was hard and the deities themselves cold and ruthless. But above all they were beautiful, endlessly beautiful.

How could those simple people not have been moved by the sight of them? So on that distant evening when they arrived at the foot of these mountains, their migration came to an end. Looking up at them in awe, they collectively formed a tightly knit mass, with something like the words from poet Gregor Strniša's poem "The Barbarian's Prayer" pouring forth from them in a single voice: *Mountain, mountain in the night!*

You call out this last line straight toward those echoing cliffs that loom over your camp site, provoking a strange echo that sounds like a dense crowd of people repeating in unison, *Mountain, mountain in the night!*

When you turn back toward your kids, you see them staring at you with wide-open eyes. You give them a smile.

And then you add very quietly, "Source of frigid, pristine waters! Home of dark renewal! Rise up in our hearts and let us be like you! Mountain, mountain in the night, oh, great mountain in the night!"

Fortune, Unity and Grace

We have so many different names for these trails. The Americans refer to them as *long trails*, the French as *grandes randonnées*, big treks.

Characteristic of the formidable German tradition of wordsmithery is their *Fernwanderwege*, which appears to have been the inspiration for the pan-European designation of *long-distance trails*. In Slovenia we call them transversals.

Every transversal is something completely unique. One might be a traditional pilgrims' trail, another an ancient trade route, and yet a third might map to a series of mountain ridges and passes. The most popular of them provide endless opportunities for social interaction, while you can hike the most obscure ones for days without running into a living soul. Some of them are well marked from beginning to end. On others there are segments where you have to blaze your own trail, at least for a stretch. But for all their variety these long trails have a number of fundamental features in common. The most obvious, of course, is the fact that they're truly long. Anyone who has ever traversed the full length of one of them can attest that therein lies their meaning. Every genuine transversal requires at least a month's worth of hiking, and preferably two. This is the only way it can provide the hiker with what he's seeking more than anything else—for instance, by revealing the true face of the land it wends its way through, concealed behind all the common clichés about it, or perhaps by helping him back on his feet after enduring one of life's heavier hardships. Or it can acculturate him to the simplicity of life on the trail, so he can enjoy it to the fullest. All these and a number of other great things are the potential rewards of hiking any genuine transversal.

Among the less obvious qualities that transversals share, one of the most important is their propensity for bringing people together. For the most part in the same way, by enabling the hiker to merge into the lands and populations the trail leads through. Yet each of them facilitates this merging in its own way. The more than two thousand mile long Appalachian Trail connects the American North and South, which haven't reconciled some of their fundamental differences to this day. The Via Francigena, which leads from Canterbury to Rome, connects opposite shores, across which two churches have faced each other for centuries. And vice versa. It's unfortunate that it's proven impossible to extend some of these "long-distance trails" across a certain number of countries of Europe, and it's unfortunate that there are whole segments of established trails that have fallen into disrepair to the point of becoming impassable—a sign that in some places in Europe bonds between neighboring countries haven't really been established at all and that they've grown weaker in others.

Within the comparatively small European continent there's an even smaller patch of earth known as Slovenia, where we're fortunately quite bullish about this type of interconnectedness. In contrast with many other countries of Europe, of which even the largest barely accounts for one percent of the world's population, we're far more acutely aware of our country's

diminutive size. This is also a big reason why we tend to get our hackles up whenever one of the other European patches of land starts making noises about how it wants to make itself great again. A small patch, so our thinking goes, can only make itself great again at the expense of the patches around it, the way some of them have been great at our expense in the past. As far as we're concerned, those days are long over.

And anyway, because we come from such a geographically dynamic part of the world, we've always been enthusiastic about all kinds of dynamism. So enthusiastic that in spite of our insignificant numbers, we've succeeded again and again in placing ourselves among the world's top performers in various athletic pursuits. Of course, we're inordinately proud of that record and we're not shy about using those accomplishments to create some name recognition for ourselves in the world. But for all our joy in competitive dynamic activities, by far the most significant, rewarding and beloved of those pursuits that we engage in right here at home entails competing with no one, except perhaps with yourself.

So it should be no surprise that we enthusiastically seize onto every international initiative that comes along to establish a new long-range trail. Even decades before we officially became a member of the European Union, we participated in the creation of various trans-European long-range trails. After we achieved independence in 1991 and were no longer subject to a government staunchly opposed to every kind of faith-related pilgrimage, we began to restore our local versions of the Camino de Santiago, which in centuries past had functioned as part of a European-wide network connecting to that many-branched walking route. More recently we've joined in some international efforts primarily focused on mountaineering trails, such as the Via Alpina, whose longest itinerary clocks in at some 1,500 miles charting an arc through the Alps from Monaco to Trieste. We've also participated in some mountain trail initiatives that have stubbornly refused to take shape, such as the Via Dinarica, whose main route aspired to link the most important ridges and peaks of the Dinaric range stretching from Slovenia to Albania.

As far as efforts to connect internationally are concerned, the only thing you can say of us is that we're really first-rate and in the forefront. After all, for the lyrics of our national anthem we chose precisely the stanza from our great national poet France Prešeren's poem "A Toast" that celebrates peace among nations, "Long live every nation / that longs to see the day / when where the sun holds sway / strife is banished from creation..." But we're a lot less first-rate and at the forefront with respect to something else that's articulated in the same poem just a few lines further on, "May fortune, unity and grace / return to rule our ranks at last." At least two centuries have passed since those ideals forsook this country. Prešeren was already missing them in the early nineteenth century. And they remain in scarce supply to this day.

Admittedly, we're capable of uniting every now and then, sometimes even to an astonishing extent. Take as an example our plebiscite in 1990, when nearly ninety percent of us voted in favor of uncoupling ourselves from the increasingly fratricidal republics of Yugoslavia to the south in favor of adopting democracy and joining Europe. But we're incapable of unity in the long run, not to mention our complexes involving social reconciliation (grace) and the pursuit of happiness (fortune). Regarding the latter, surveys have shown that we rarely rate ourselves more than a tepid seven out of ten, and if in an odd year the number ticks up by a fraction or two, the media begin to trumpet an upsurge in happiness. This is also borne out in international surveys, where out of 150 countries we typically rank somewhere between fortieth and sixtieth, in amongst such company as Uzbekistan and Kosovo, Nicaragua and Thailand, Belarus and Libya. Because those countries have far greater challenges to deal with than we do, that outcome suggests that we ourselves must be responsible for driving much of our happiness away by undervaluing our actual circumstances. Much the same holds true for reconciling the polar ideologies that dominate our society. This strife of ours is so old now that it really ought to have been long since buried and forgotten. Some have speculated that it's hardwired onto devices embedded at some exceptionally unpleasant depth in our collective psyche. But no matter whether this age-old division has survived naturally or if we're keeping it artificially alive, there's no question that it does us no good.

As a consequence some people think that a full-fledged, entirely domestic long-range trail could do us a great deal of good, the sort of trail that in the course of two months' worth of first-person, physical contact would connect the hiker with his own country and its people. Experience has shown that it almost can't help but imbue the hiker with a sense of happiness that endures long after trail's end. Not least of all, without any doubt it erases any possible need the individual might feel for needless bickering.

So it should be no surprise that there was a proposal to build precisely this kind of trail across our native terrain as early as 1951. The plans for its routes, though otherwise rather sketchy, still show clearly that the average person would have needed just about two months to complete it. The proposed Slovenian transversal would have led primarily across uplands and mountains, thus building on what was probably the finest tradition of hiking in this part of the world. It would also have been something unique, because up until then there had never been any extended trail describing a circuit. As such, its very shape would have been unifying.

What's more, it would have been a trail without a beginning or end, a fact that has downright metaphysical implications incorporating a number of no less promising practical implications, such as, for instance, that you could begin a grand tour at any point and in any direction and ultimately

arrive back at your point of departure; or that you could even set out on it from home and then, from the very outset, be heading back home even as you moved on.

In that early post-war period this magnificent proposal was seized on enthusiastically and so, for a time, things looked very promising for the creation of our Transversal. In just two years—by 1953—it was already wending its way through the Pohorje Range (our Appalachians), the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, the Karawanks and the Julian Alps. But once it proceeded southward from there, it ran into roadblocks. Completion of the segment from Porezen to Nanos dragged on into the 1960s, but even then it wasn't completed to anyone's satisfaction. From Nanos on, at scarcely a third of the entire way, the momentum faltered.

When the idea of a proper, unifying transversal circuit first drew my interest a number of years ago, I of course began wondering why it had never been fully realized in that first effort. The whole concept was so brilliant, even fundamentally important, that it should have been a top priority from the start. Had some flaws in its execution brought it to a halt? If I could determine what those were, would it be possible to avoid them? Or had it been confronted back then, in the 1950s, with some insurmountable obstacles? Perhaps now it would be possible to bypass them—if they even still existed.

When, as a student, I began to look into what had prevented the completion of a transversal circuit, I met one of the people who had been involved in the creation of its first half, a certain Mr. X. In his opinion, at least, the principal problem was the government that we had from the end of the Second World War all the way up to our independence in 1991. Those people, he said, would never allow a trail to be built from Nanos across the Gottschee Region. For any number of reasons, but above all because Gottschee had become a symbol of *those* mine shafts where *those* bones were concealed. And that, he said, was why the authorities hinted to the planners of the transversal that it would be far better for them if they continued the trail from Nanos west to the Adriatic coast and had it end there. That way the Slovenian grand tour would celebrate the fact that the last and most problematic part of our border with Italy was just then being settled. And that's why the final segment of the upland trail was drawn, against all logic, along that part of our western border that was finalized in 1954, through a decidedly lowland terrain that ends at the coast.

With time it turned out that there had been a whole sequence of interrelated factors that had brought the project to a halt and that it was very important to be aware of them. Not just in order to avoid the same errors and obstacles this time, but because one or another very interesting trait of this country and its people was mirrored in them. And amidst all the circumstances that prevented the Transversal from becoming a transversal,

toward the very end of my preparations I realized how critical it was finally to turn it into a reality as soon as possible. The less than half of the original transversal that we now have isn't doing too well. The most beloved transversals, whether intended for pilgrimages, mountaineering, or general purposes, have seen a doubling of their foot traffic every decade from the 1960s on. As far as our Slovenian Transversal is concerned, that trend obtained until the 1970s only. In the 1960s some nine hundred mountaineers traversed its full length, while the number increased to 1,600 in the 1970s. But in the 1980s and 1990s that important indicator of the vitality of our trails stopped rising, and in the first decade of the new century the number even began to drop. In the second decade that drop became dramatic. Over the past decade, interest in our grand tour has dropped below the level of the 1970s. So it would be wise to act, and as soon as possible. Yesterday.

And there really is no insurmountable obstacle to doing that. It's been more than twenty years, for instance, since we opened the formerly closed regions of Gottschee (which we call Kočevje in Slovene) and elsewhere to the general public and marked trails have begun to proliferate even there.

Preparations

It takes quite a while for them get on their feet and start walking. And then it takes a good deal more time after that for them to really learn how to walk, because walking only superficially strikes us as something simple. It's a good thing they're made in such a way that you can't help but help them. Those wide-open eyes, the tiny hand timidly reaching out for yours and taking hold of it. And once you've helped them take their first steps, you're hooked. You've made those wide-open eyes so happy that now they look at you with unalloyed love.

But the lessons that walking entails are demanding, so sometimes those eyes need powerful encouragement—for instance, the kind of encouragement that our boy got on our first joint, multi-day hike through the gentle terrain of the trail that leads through the uplands of one of our least challenging mountain ranges, Pohorje. If your seven-year-old can find enough energy on a trek like that to begin throwing a tantrum about not being able to go on, you need to look him straight in the eye and tell him with an absolutely serious face:

“I understand. If you can't go on, you can't go on. Lučka and I are going to go ahead to that hikers' lodge where they make those incredibly scrumptious Pohorje omelettes. You just find a tree stump here to sit on and wait for the bears to come. You'll get to see how big they are, so big they can down little ones like you in one or two gulps. It almost doesn't hurt at all.”

Of course, in practically no time all three of you have made your way to the aforementioned lodge, with each of you sitting in front of your own plate of scrumptious delight. But more delightful yet is the whole parallel ursine universe that comes into being as a result.

Those furry bruins begin to trail after you wherever you go, whatever challenges you face. As they did one day on the transversal when nothing seemed to be going right for Lučka. She'd been tripping over things practically all day, her legs lagging a good kilometer behind her, and to top it all off some bird decided to poop on her head. When we stopped for our snack, all she could do was cry big, fat tears of despair onto her processed cheese.

"Hey, dad," Aljaž said then, "did you hear about the bear that went bounding through the forest?"

"No," I said, looking up, my interest piqued. "Why was he bounding?"

"He was so excited! He absolutely had to tell somebody. And then he ran into the fox."

"Hey there, fox! Fox! Have you seen her?" the bear roared, completely beside himself.

"Seen who? Oh, you mean *her*?" the fox said.

"That's right! Have you seen her?"

"No, I haven't! That Lučka's really a fast one, isn't she?"

There followed a moment or two of silence and then I couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing as she rushed over to hug him. And for the rest of the day she was sure-footed and quick.

And then there was the time several years ago when the bears made an appearance as the kids took to complaining about having to eat fish for dinner all the time. Salmon today, mackerel tomorrow, and then mom packs tuna sandwiches in bags for the trail. All I could do was sigh.

"All right," I announced. "I've been feeding you fish, especially salmon and tuna on purpose. I imagine you know how expensive all that fancy foreign fish is, so you can bet I haven't been buying it just to make the two of you happy. I've had a special reason for doing it."

For a moment or two they look at me suspiciously, as if to say wouldn't you know, dad's always got something up his sleeve.

"So," I continued, "let's say one night a bear makes his way into our camp and comes up to my tent and roars, "HUNGRY!!!" What am I supposed to tell him? Now I can say, 'I'm just a gristly old jade.' And then

I'll point to your tent and say, 'Wouldn't you rather have some nice, tender sushi?'"

But even more gratifying than the parallel ursine universe is when you see what those wide-open eyes grow up to be. When it began to look like things were coming together for me to hike the entire Transversal in 2019, I seized the opportunity. We intensified our preparations and, in the process, tried out various segments and spurs to map out the best possible master route for ourselves. In the course of these dry-runs I arranged a number of times for sunset to catch up with us while we were still on the trail. It really helps when you've already put, say, forty kilometers behind you to cover the final twenty or so in the dark without any problem. And it teaches you so much, that darkness. As it did, for instance, on the Kočevski Rog loop trail when we deliberately set out at eleven one morning to cover its 63-kilometer length and 1,700 meters of altitude gain. There, toward the end of the trail, when we'd almost made our way out of the forest where very real bears are often seen to be padding about, along with other scary and marvelous beasts, there, toward the end of the Kočevski Rog trail at eleven at night, amid the pitch black darkness, two hours before we arrived back at our point of entry onto the loop trail, something came over me that caused me to stop and turn around to face the oncoming glow from their two hiker's headlamps.

"Hey, aren't you two scared at all?"

"Why should we be?" Aljaž wondered when he caught up to me and stopped.

"Of course not," Lučka said after him. "Not when we're with you, daddy."

Clearly, from that point to the end of the Rog trail I floated more than walked. Despite that, I was even more elated to think of all the trails the two of them could manage now without any problem and what all our hiking had taught them. Such as how to stand up for themselves.

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Bent over a table covered with maps that have various electronic devices loaded with hiking applications and programs humming on them, we've almost achieved our goal: we've charted a working route that takes in the entire Transversal circuit. Of course, a number of practical and technical problems will need to be worked out along the way, and even a few particularly stubborn parts of the trail have yet to be included. But all in all it's done and now we can use some complex calculations to determine fairly precisely how long the entire trail is going to be. Nearly 1,200 kilometers, Aljaž calculates and adds look at this, it has a total elevation gain of seventy kilometers! No doubt, Aljaž's numbers further inform us, our Transversal is

one of the bounciest in existence. Some of the more famous upland trails, like the Pacific Crest Trail, have barely half as much elevation gain over a comparable distance. And the most famous branch of the Camino de Santiago, leading from the town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France to Cape Finisterre at the far western end of Spain's province of Galicia, has barely a third of the elevation gain per kilometer that our long trail does.

"To cite just two of the better-known examples," Aljaž sums up, but he has one more calculation to share. "Can you guess how many ascents of Everest it would take to achieve the same elevation gain as on the Transversal? Eight! You'd have to climb Everest eight times, and not from the base camp, but from sea level all the way to the top.

Both kids, of course, are excited about these grandiose numbers. At the same time, they grow a shade more skeptical at the thought of their sheer magnitude. Lučka gives me a very searching look.

"Can you calculate one other thing," she says to Aljaž while her eyes remain fixed on me. "How much time will the Transversal take?"

"At what sort of pace?"

"With distances like those? With twenty-five pounds on your back, thirty for dad? At whatever the pace is for disabled people!"

"So you mean standard German hiking speed. . .," he nods seriously.

"Hey!" I frown at hearing that, "are you suggesting that German hikers are disabled?" But Aljaž has already moved on to his calculations and doesn't hear what I've said. The numbers are already dancing in front of his eyes, apparently performing quite the quadrille.

"German hiking speed is the least demanding," he nods at last. "And based on it the trail should take 670 hours to hike, which if divided by twelve hours per day . . . comes to almost two months. And with the usual one day off from hiking per week, it easily comes to two months and closer to a week or so more."

Both kids look at me for a while.

"But, dad," Lučka finally speaks up, "what did you have in mind? That Aljaž and I were going to spend our whole summer vacation just hiking, or what?"

"Oh, my!" I pretend that something has begun to worry me at hearing that question. "We'd have to be moving awfully fast to do that. I think the two of you are in good enough condition to maintain that pace, but I don't know about me. There'll already be enough for us to do along the way just checking out and charting the alternate forks, not to mention the places where we're going to have to explore multiple forks to figure out which one

works best and that sort of thing. I probably couldn't complete a route like that in much less than three months."

Of course, the kids couldn't care less what I could or couldn't do. The bit about two months was already beyond the pale for them, and now this business with three is downright insane.

"I see," Lučka says at last in a voice that suggests just how far out into view the claws have extended. "And how are the two of us supposed to find the time to go hiking the mountains with you for three months?"

"Oh, you know," I shrug innocently. "There's the two months of summer vacation, then you could maybe skip school for a month or so."

This statement strikes my children as so absurd that the electric charge in the air is instantly neutralized. Sure, that's like telling Harry that he can just forget about Hogwarts. No, it's even crazier: it's like saying that to Hermione!

"You know how much we love hiking with you," Lučka assures me after she's finished laughing and wiping her eyes. "We'd hike two tours of the Transversal with you, even three! But we can't really afford even one at the cost of a whole summer vacation. It only lasts two months and we've got so many *obligations* over the summer."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We do. We've made plans to go with our cousins to Rogla for a week, then with one grandma to Lož Valley for a week and then to spend *at least* one week visiting the other. And we've promised mom that we'd take walks with her into the Ljubljana wetlands to soak our feet in the ditches. And I know that's hard for you to understand, because you spend every day from morning to night in front of the computer. But some of us actually have a social life and we have to tend to it or else before you know it, it's gone. That's why I absolutely have to go with my girlfriends to downtown Ljubljana two times at least every summer, and to the stores to shop..."

"That's right, I have a social life, too, and I absolutely have to go out to the movies with my buddies. With my buddies and popcorn!" Aljaž lends his support to the petition.

Of course, the list of absolutely essential obligations goes on. And naturally, that suits me just fine. There's no question that both my kids are wonderful company, but at the same time they pose additional concerns, particularly in an environment that poses far more challenges than does our planned community on the southern, wetland extremity of Ljubljana. And although they're wonderful company, the fact is that each of us has a need for a certain amount of solitude. To spend a solid two months in the mountains, which are practically made for solitary contemplation, and not have a single

day to yourself would be the height of folly. Anyway, I tell myself, the Transversal is the kind of project where it would be good, at least for a while, to have people hiking with me who are complete strangers to this patch of earth. Because, as the tried-and-true comparative method tells us, you can only ever really come to understand what's yours by comparing it with what's not.

Needless to say, you don't try to explain all that to your twelve- and fifteen-year-old, no matter how terrific and great they are. Partly so that they can learn on their own how to stand up for themselves. Finally, we reached an agreement that was ideal for everyone: that our joint hike would be planned to last four weeks. We did some calculations to reach that estimate, because that's what we like to do. In those four weeks, taking all eventualities into account, along with the possible practical and technical problems as Aljaž tallied them up, we would probably be able to make it across all of the Adriatic Littoral, Inner Carniola and Lower Carniola as far as the town of Krško.

It wasn't until this agreement was reached that Mateja joined in the discussion. I found it positively entertaining to watch how, all the way up until then, she had managed to suddenly merge with the woodwork at any point when the conversation turned to the Transversal, so that none of us would be tempted to count on her participation in all that nasty climbing up rock faces, let alone with a load on her back in high summer temperatures. And in spite of that, every time in the course of our preparations when the kids and I needed to set out somewhere, by some miracle a special treat would show up in their knapsacks, some bandages, now and then even a five- or ten-euro bill. In these and many other ways she let us know that she saw the physical exercise and engagement of hiking as being of existential importance for the kids and deserving of every possible support. Which she, true to character, offered even now.

"You're going to have the best trail mom any kids have ever had, so good in fact you couldn't wish for better," she promised. "Do you know what a trail mom is?"

Of course, they knew and Aljaž was quickest to show how well.

"A trail mom comes out to the trail to visit you now and then and brings you things you can't get in a lot of smaller towns. She always knows where you are and she can come to your aid if something goes wrong. Or at least she can tell the authorities where they can find your remains."

Mateja gave him a big smile, then turned to me.

"So you're going to hike the remainder all by yourself?"

“Some part of it, at least,” I replied. “As for the rest ... well, you remember when I promised our American friends last year that I’d show them around our mountains?”

Setting Out

Before every substantial segment of the trail the kids and I would discuss its succession of terrains one last time, along with dozens of its other particulars. But when, after long preparations, we finally set out from home, we found it impossible to talk any more about the approach that we’d planned from Ljubljana to the Transversal or about the old half of the route south of the Julian Alps that was in urgent need of repair. We were going to leave all that for later, we decided. Now we needed to focus on whether the introduction to the trail that we’d proposed was really the grand dramatic progression it needed to be. Was it really such a great idea to start from our own front door and then, at the end of the Ljubljana access trail, just beneath the summit of Tošč near Polhov Gradec, turn left onto the Transversal circuit, onto the loop that then proceeds toward Žiri and Idrija and subsequently farther south?

Certainly the beginning struck us as quite grand. Perhaps because we were so flawlessly equipped and much of the kids’ gear was completely new. Or was it our backpacks that leant the beginning such weight? Maybe it was grand because we were able to bid farewell to the city we love in such a unique way, on foot? From the paths that the kids used to take, first to go to preschool, then to school and music lessons. From the streets where their friends lived, at that moment still asleep. From the Botanical Garden that had recently opened a second entrance on its other side, so that now we had a much nicer and shorter walk through it and over the Prule Bridge to the center of town. From the Ljubljana Old Town, which is like a museum, but one that wakes up early every morning to yet another lively day of the summer tourist season. And it felt as if we were headed to some special ceremony, which was undoubtedly a result of the fact that we were first headed past the monument to Prešeren. For the Ljubljana access trail’s formal beginning is at the foot of that statue, Prešeren standing, as he does, at the beginning of so very much that defines this patch of earth and its people.

At the same time this preliminary part of the trail, if you begin it from Ljubljana and then turn left beneath Tošč onto the Transversal loop, gently rocks you between the urban and natural worlds. Our capital city is not big and has tongues of the countryside, even mountainous ones, extending far into it from every direction. From the east the Lower Carniolan range culminating in Golovec Ridge and Castle Hill extends all the way up to the original old city core and the monument to Prešeren. Barely two short blocks west of that and you’re already in Tivoli Park where you can climb up into the gently rolling uplands of Rožnik. That’s followed in turn by a bit of city around Dravlje, but that’s a very wooded neighborhood that even has a

fishpond and certainly a lot of foot trails. Its least pleasant part, congested with roads, is the suburb of Podutik, but even here you only need to log a few paces and, before you know it, you're in the Polhov Gradec foothills.

The trail rocks you on from here. These are hills where you occasionally get the feeling you're in a nature preserve, which the Polhov Gradec region is actually supposed to be. But then you hit patches that have lost the fight to defend themselves from development and you feel as though you've wandered back in amongst city villas, except that many of the ones here are even more ostentatious than the ones in Ljubljana. Along the way you also run into regular settlements of vacation houses and can hear the strains of turbofolk tunes pouring out of a number of them even at this early hour, along with the forced jollity of powerful voices toasting each other. But as you proceed, pastures and grasslands and forests begin to predominate. Little villages huddle at intervals along the exposed ridges of hills, with individual farmhouses clinging still farther up from them to the steepest and uppermost slopes. Here we encounter the first real peaks of the upland world, such as Tošč, some of which are so beloved amongst the locals that they have their own clubs of admirers devoted to them.

As we proceed through the Polhov Gradec region, the last remnants of the city continue to peter out until we reach the Žiri region, where we can say at last that we're really in the countryside and where the uppermost stretches and steepest slopes have been preserved in a breathtakingly pristine state. Of course, in the town of Žiri proper the path tends more toward the urban, much as all across the highlands before we reach Idrija there's a proliferation of houses that ought to have been built down in the valley where their owners actually work. But then after Idrija solitude predominates once again and even rural traces of human habitation become sparse. A few relics of the region's industrial past, followed by the rare, isolated farmstead or hamlet, then after Mrzla Rupa barely a living soul for nearly a day's hike in any direction ahead: this is the Trnovo Forest, the first real forest along the way, which is so deep that many of its remoter reaches have never been touched by the hand of man, full of crevices and ravines and sinkholes, desolate peaks and cliffs so remote that golden eagles nest there.

Thus the route along the Ljubljana access trail, then counterclockwise along the Transversal gently rocks you out of your urban habitat into a virtually untouched wilderness. It's a magnificent introduction, and it's all the more interesting for being strewn from the very outset with all sorts of natural and cultural gems, many of the latter sacral in nature. Just before the trail down from Tošč levels out, as you come out of the forest into that quintessentially Slovenian meadow, you catch sight of the Church of St. Gertrude (sv. Jedrt in Slovene). All bristly and perched on its slope, it reminds you instantly of the character Gertrude from Svetlana Makarovič's children's book *The Mišmaš Bakery*. Among the countless little natural treasures here,

many are unprepossessing and hospitable to the wayfarer, much the way the people of this region are, such as the lone rustic bench that's been put in place in the midst of a grassy ridge, sheltered by a birch growing above it. A bench with a view onto the hills around Škofja Loka that changes so much with variations of the light and the weather but is continually so arresting that it compels you to stay sitting there, watching it. And all the historical sites, among them Pasja Ravan (Dog's Flat), which at 1,029 meters was once the highest point in the entire Polhov Gradec uplands, but has since ceded first place to neighboring Tošč (1,021 meters). The Yugoslav People's Army quite simply flattened the top of Dog's Flat, reducing its elevation by nine meters so that a missile launch site could be built there. The times have since changed for the better and the mountain's bare, leveled peak is now home to a peaceful weather radar station. The Žiri region has similarly interesting historical remnants of the Rupnik Line, where you can have your trailside snack alongside one of the deliberately preserved bunkers that were once part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's defense system before World War II, designed along the same principles as the Maginot Line in France. Despite the huge investments in both lines, they turned out to be useless as obstacles to the invading armies, which is how at least parts of the Rupnik Line have survived.

This introductory segment leading from city to wilderness, scattered with so many little historical, cultural and natural treasures, takes a few days. Our first day on the trail was particularly dramatic, because the weather forecast, which had predicted an especially spectacular collision of two storm cells and thus the probability of downpours and high winds, was turning out to have been accurate.

"Wonderful," I said, looking up at the sky as we reached the Prešeren monument and rubbing my hands at the sight of dark clouds roiling over the poet's head. "Right at the outset we're going to have a chance to prove that we have the qualities of every good long distance hiker—as sweet as we may be, we're not made out of sugar."

Indeed, that very morning we had the chance to prove we weren't made of sugar. Though we kept dry all the way across Rožnik, by Dravlje it was beginning to drizzle and soon after that it was raining full force, with a bit of lightning to boot. But none of that deterred us in the slightest and the long ascent from Ljubljana to the first Polhov Gradec ridges did nothing to diminish our steam, so early that afternoon I proposed that we celebrate our display of virtue by having lunch at an inn.

"That's still possible here, but farther on we'll be in some pretty remote territory," I said to justify my suggestion, though there was really no need. Both of the kids immediately said yes.

The inn that we chose was typically Slovene in a number of ways, not least of which was the size of the portions, which were nothing short of overwhelming. But they were just right for us, so after the meal I quoted Nietzsche, as I'm inclined to do when life confronts me with such Herculean labors.

“There is much that is difficult for the spirit, the strong reverent spirit that would bear much,” I philosophize with a straight face, patting my stomach. *“But the difficult and the most difficult are what its strength demands.”*¹

For the kids this first stop of ours was a triumph pure and simple, but sweetened by something else yet again, for we'd called mom to see if she'd be inclined to come join us, and because the severe weather conditions had her worried for us, she drove out straight away. At the inn she let the kids persuade her that that the entire hike that day had been a breeze, in spite of the rain. No, they weren't cold at all, as they sat soaking wet at the table. Mom, this is merino wool. It keeps you warm even when it gets wet. And it dries best while you wear it, because essentially you're an oven set to 98.6 degrees. Yes, of course we're going to keep hiking with dad! And once she was convinced, she said she couldn't believe how brave the two of them were and how proud she was of them. And this she said in a voice so loud and distinct that everyone at the tables around us could hear and began looking in our direction with expressions of admiration. The kids made as if they were embarrassed, but in fact they were smiling from ear to ear.

To top it all off, the weather obliged with an excellent end to the day. Toward evening it died down for just long enough that we were able to make camp in peace precisely at the place where we'd enjoyed the first of the day's magical views, as the mists gathered over the subdued colors of the steep slopes and clouds swirled threateningly over the peaks. Barely had we squared everything away for the night when it really let loose. Of course, in your tent you have the exciting feeling that there's nothing separating you from all those Wagnerian drum rolls and the howls of the wind. Against its taut nylon the patter of the rain seems all the more forceful and each flash of lightning more vivid. Yet despite all this you're dry and even wrapped up in the goose down warmth of your bedroll. This coaxes a satisfied smile onto your face and in spite of the elements raging around you, sooner or later you drift off into a restful oblivion.

¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1966).

The Žiri Region and Idrija

One of the commendable features of the old half of the Transversal is that, in contrast to the most orthodox wilderness trails, it doesn't deliberately avoid the smaller towns and villages along its way. The complete Transversal circuit retains that feature, of course, so when it needs to cross a valley to get from one peak to the next, it doesn't hesitate to go straight through one or more of the intervening settlements. In this way it mirrors a pleasant trait of the people in these parts, who have a way of rolling their eyes at fanatical principles when they begin to verge on the inhuman. But more importantly, it's precisely the detours from the upland world that reinforce two things. These villages provide a contrast which makes the trail all the more admirable for its upland qualities and at the same time they reinforce the insight that every hiker on a long trail gains into his country and its people.

Because transversal hikers rarely stay over in any one place for long, this insight takes shape gradually out of many tiny impressions. A case in point would be the impression we got that first day in Žiri, which reminded us that all sorts of assumptions many of us have about this patch of earth we inhabit could do with some further scrutiny. Such as one that we've already mentioned: that the Slovene language as our national communion chalice is incapable of producing salty swear words. Because when we visited a cozily packed café in Žiri where some of the customers had extremely tempting dishes of ice cream on the table in front of them, one of these tipped over into the lap of somebody sitting at a nearby table. This triggered a barrage of powerful, inventively interlinked obscenities that lasted so long it seemed like a veritable cursing chromosome. On the other hand, Žiri is a splendid example of how certain other stereotypes about Slovenes sometimes hold true to the last jot, because there's no doubt that these parts are home to some remarkably enterprising and diligent folks.

As a textbook example of diligence let me cite the gray-haired couple we encountered on a hillside above Žiri. She was raking and he was pushing an old manual lawnmower up an incredibly steep slope. The work was strenuous and even a bit dangerous, but most of all it was Sunday and the sun was already getting close to the horizon. In the course of a short conversation it turned out that "the weather had been screwing us over for the longest time," but that the forecast for the following day, a holiday, was for clear skies all day at last. This meant that whatever they managed to mow today would have time to dry, and that's why they were mowing so late today in anticipation of making the most of a full day's raking and gathering tomorrow—on a holiday, like plenty of other people in the area, where in spite of the rainy start to the summer everything had been scrupulously worked over or mown like an English lawn down to the very last nook and cranny.

The best authorities to ask about how enterprising they are, are the people of Žiri themselves, who take inordinate pride in telling you about all

the locally based companies that have been successful. Just from the trail alone you can tally up quite a few that are clearly doing quite well, at least three of which it's impossible to miss, since the route goes right past them. As important as the length of the list is the fact that this pride is not directed at any of the region's better known old warhorses. Ask the locals about any of these and they'll just make a sour face. They'll tell you that those old warhorses did not do well in the transition from the times when "everything belonged to all of us." That they're still majority owned by the government because the politicians can't bring themselves to let go of them. That the politicians' personal financial interest is the reason some of those horses have been slowly dying. If there's any grain of truth to this mudslinging at venerable politicians and no less praiseworthy old state-held enterprises, then what Žiri has accomplished appears in an even better light. Not just because it made good use of opportunities it was given to advance in the decades since World War II, but also because it didn't rest on those laurels after Slovenia gained independence. Clearly, much was learned from the mistakes made in raising those old warhorses and with the same sort of effort the region has raised a fine little new herd in the meantime. May it thrive and suffer from as few new-fangled design flaws as possible!

Idrija put us in as good a mood as Žiri. We were equipped for the trail down to the last buckle, all our new items of equipment had been tried out and we ourselves were in first-rate condition. We were taking our time during our first days on the trail, so as not to overdo it at first and get ourselves into trouble, as had happened to me on a previous occasion or two. But apparently our crew can't do without some unplanned fun at the outset, so even though Aljaž had tried to break his new hiking boots in beforehand, they insisted on giving him blisters now and his heels needed a rest. I had stupidly tripped and fallen, doing nasty damage to something in my knee, so nasty that I was unable to continue without a brace, which I had to keep on all the way to Kočevje.

We were treated to some friendly therapy in the drugstore we hobbled into as soon as we reached the bottom of the hill leading down into Idrija. In spite of our ripe state after two days on the trail, the attendant, a lady of Mediterranean kindness, took all the time we needed, especially to help out "such a good, brave and handsome boy!" By the time she was finished, Aljaž was as red as a boiled crayfish, though of course grateful for the maternal attention. A couple of meters farther on from there, when we were served with our first course of žlikrofi, Idrija's most special therapy of all for broken-down hikers, both of the kids were as good as new. Seriously, at the end of our trek, anytime I asked them what was most memorable from our time on the trail, a fog of bliss would veil their eyes and in tones worthy of Garfield they'd simultaneously purr, "The žlikrofi!" Before we left Idrija, we absolutely had to visit that restaurant again and by all reports the žlikrofi were even better the second time. My Idrijan trout, which I commanded be

brought before me on that second visit, was indeed so criminally delicious that it deserved every last bit of the oil used to pan fry it.

As in the restaurant, there were crowds of both Slovene and foreign visitors present on the tour of the mine shafts. Apparently the word was out that those were the two biggest highlights of a trip to Idrija. And the mines really are worth the visit. On the guided tour of that monument to our industrial history you're treated to an expertly curated array of information spanning diverse fields, ranging from mining technology and folklore to the history of medicine and geopolitics. Everything else in Idrija tends to be a shade bit lonely or even falling apart. Which is a pity, because it's an interesting place. Fine, the museum's collections could be made a bit more exciting and the town could do with some cultural and night life—not to mention less car traffic. But the castle that houses the museum has undergone a first-rate restoration. The oldest secondary school in Slovenia, the old Miners' Warehouse that now houses the municipal library, and of course the Miners' House are all impressive places to visit. And there's much more, including the hostel overlooking the town center, where things weren't running at full steam when we were there, but precisely for that reason made us feel like lords of the manor. In spite of the holiday, besides us there was just some student playing the part of receptionist, and even she was only there for a few hours each afternoon, leaving us entirely on our own until early evening. Who wouldn't want to have such a magnificent concrete colossus all to themselves, so typical of the monumental construction dotting these parts that dates to the period between the two World Wars, when Fascist Italy ruled over the westernmost quarter of Slovene territory from the Adriatic Littoral all the way east to Idrija and Postojna.