

THE PIECE OF WOOD

Not all land, even in Europe, belongs to someone. Usually this becomes true because of a dispute, between families or states, but it can become true that a certain piece of land reverts to what we might call a more 'natural', or owner-less condition.

This happened to a tract of land close to the Slovenian – Croatian border in the eighteen-nineties as the Ottoman Empire was already falling apart.

Lazar Hrstic was an orphan from lands closer to the Hungarian border but left that area when he was about twelve.

He had been in no trouble, and everyone in the several villages was kind to him but Lazar had wanderlust. He arrived in the forest I've just written about the same year that the new century came in, and a squirrel in a tree dropped a pinecone on his head.

Lazar laughed and looked up at the squirrel. "Kösvönöm", he said, and picked up the pinecone. There were two small nuts in it. He cracked one and ate it. Then he dug a small hole and planted the other one. "For your winter supply", he said to the squirrel.

As he walked on through the forest he came to a small clean stream with a natural clearing, and he decided to make camp there. The weather was warm so he felt no need for shelter, although he made a fire for comfort. He had bread and cheese, some spicy sausage and some dried apricots. Water from the stream.

But during the next weeks he built himself a quite comfortable cabin, which gave him then the courage to go to the village a few kilometres away and look for work. Lazar was a strong and cheerful youth, so soon found several jobs.

People in the village were interested in his talk of other places.

They gave him a respect unusual for a person so young.

His cabin grew in complexity and household goods; blankets, pots and pans, even an iron stove he had got in trade for gently killing an old horse. (He prepared and ate the horseflesh, unbeknownst to the villagers). His garden in the clearing flourished.

Years passed pleasantly. The First World War came. Lazar Hrstic went as a soldier, the same as all the other young men. As the war was continued to the death of so many for so long, the tract of land I wrote about earlier became known as 'Lazar's Woods'.

Not many young men returned from the war. Lazar did not; not until three years after the end. He had been travelling and had found a wife, whom he brought back to the cabin. It was of course in disrepair but had not been touched by war.

Years passed, not so pleasantly. The war had started great changes which made for continual upheaval.

But the woods seemed safe. Lazar and Ksu (his wife's name; her father was Berber from Africa and her mother was from Nice...either French or Italian.) had five children. One died from childhood disease and one died from injuries sustained from a fall from a tree. No one knew that it was the same tree that Lazar had planted when he first came into the area. It was, though, and there's not much to be made of that: these kind of coincidences happen daily, completely uselessly.

It was a little boy who fell from the tree, directly onto his butt. The fall knocked the wind out of him, and for a long time he could not get his breath. The pain was immense. He was five years old and did not know that there could be such pain. It frightened him so much, and he could not move. After a time, however, he began to take small breaths, and wanted to cry from the pain of it, but he could not. He was finally able to move, after many minutes, by slowly lying over onto his side and then onto his knees. He stood up and walked slowly home, feeling a great sadness from his injury. He died a few hours later without anyone knowing why.

Both Lazar and Ksu lived long lives. The second war came and took the only son they had left and soon after some ex-soldiers stupidly murdered one of the daughters.

Lazar Hrstic died in nineteen-sixty-seven and Ksu moved with her daughter to Zagreb and lived another ten years in the city. It's OK to write the daughter's name now; she is safely out of danger and is still alive, although really quite old. Aysha married a Bosnian man named Amiel, whose family were Spanish Jews driven from Spain to Sarajevo during the inquisition.

It was Amiel who had so many of the pine trees cut down, to sell for timber in an arrangement with the government. The tract of land was always known as Lazar's Woods.

As you know now, the squirrel did not find the pine nut Lazar had planted. In fact Lazar never saw the squirrel again. It was eaten by a hawk, which Lazar had watched with delight as it taught its young to fly. The pine tree which Lazar had planted and which killed his son was sawn into building timber along with many other trees from Lazar's Woods. For a while the timber was stored in a Yugoslavian government yard close to Trieste.

Then a new tourist hotel complex was planned on the island of Krk so it was taken there by boat.

What a lucky break in life not to be needed! To not 'fit in'! "You are not needed," the authorities might say, and then you are free to continue on your way.

The workers were careful, and sawed to exact measurements. What wood was wasted happened only because of the fact of the standard lengths cut at the sawmill.

We know the name of the man who operated the saw at the sawmill, and something of his history (he had wanted to be a singer and had recorded a few songs in the fifties) and even about the family that made the saw blades and other tools. Because of knowledge gaps caused by previous wars

and invasions, that family does not realize that it had been in the blacksmith trade since the beginning of the Iron age. But no matter.

With the leftover scraps of wood the workers would make little fires to cook their lunch; sometimes sausages, sometimes sardines.

As you see, luckily, not everything happens according to plan, On the island of Krk a worker called Vasco missed one scrap of wood when he was preparing the daily lunch fire.

Much later a lazy hotel worker was given the job of cleaning up the grounds. He swept up all the trash (we know his name and history also, but why give him any credit?) and threw it into the sea. It is at this point when our scrap of wood becomes itself instead of simply an unwanted part of something else. Lucky piece of wood! Floating along, it was able to visit all around Krk and several other islands. At sea it constantly visited the sea, and became sensitized to its currents and temperatures. Other pieces of wood passed by, and sometimes our scrap of wood joined others in large conglomerations, only to drift apart again under the moon and its pull.

The Family History of the piece of Wood

It is from a pine tree. Pine trees might be the oldest trees; if we consider that they most likely come from plants in the family called 'Horsetail' or equisetum arvense, they can certainly be older than the Palm tree family.

Even though it comes from a Pine tree fairly close to the Adriatic, the tree was not the kind called 'Mediterranean' or 'Umbrella' pine. Lazar's Woods was a small mixed forest of Oak, Beech, Elm, and Ash, with a few smaller species such as Elder scattered within; as well as Mediterranean Pine in clear areas and the Yellow Pine from which the piece of wood comes.

Perhaps I should here say more about Amiel: he did not cut down the Woods, American style, but only thinned an over-grown area and marketed the timber for his family. His granddaughter, Ksu, is now a doctor working with Médecins sans Frontières. I hope you didn't think he was being destructive.

Pine trees are coniferous, which means they bear seeds in cones. These species have an oily sap which resists freezing. They thereby are usually evergreen. Pinesap makes turpentine and resin for violin bowstrings. It often works also to repel predators, and that may be why the piece of wood has no sea-worm holes or barnacles attached. (also, the Adriatic and all the Mediterranean become more and more lifeless every year.

Incredibly, the piece of wood entered the water on April 23, 1992 and did not leave until June 6, 2005.

Both Italians and tourists are perversely messy and destructive of the environment, and beaches seem to especially bring out this perversity; with everyone bringing things to discard on the beach.

For this reason Lido Beach in Venice is cleaned every day. If I had arrived, as originally planned, on June 7, the piece of wood would have been swept into some new cycle of travel and I would not have encountered it.

I do not think that I have either captured it nor rescued it. True, it now has a job, whereas before it was useless and free, but that can happen to anyone, as well as can the opposite.

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Berlin 2005