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An Algerian who made it in Prague - Algerian trading skills and Czech corruption

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Abstract:

Migrants from Algeria do not enjoy the best reputation among Czech people. For many, the word *Algerian* is associated with negative stereotypes. How do Algerians settled in the Czech Republic make their living and what made them come to this country? And what type of migrant does Czech society invite up the economic ladder?

I am sitting in a bistro called *Chez Amis* in Spálená Street in the centre of Prague. The window has a little Algerian flag stuck to it. But the owner and assistants are the only people of Algerian descent in this fast-food restaurant. “Algerians go to other places, you see lots of them in the Grossman Passage in Wenceslas Square and the nearby Politických Vězňů Street. That is the ‘Arab Quarter’” says Amis, the bistro owner. And when interviewing him at the bistro I can see that he is right. About eighty percent of his clients are Czechs keen on oriental specialties; about fifteen percent are tourists, while Arabs or Turks settled in the West make up a mere five percent. Clearly, *Chez Amis* is no favourite among the Algerians living in Prague, even though the owner believes he enjoys huge respect in the local Algerian community.

The Black Decade

Migration from Algeria to the Czech Republic is mostly associated with the 1990s. The period is called the “black decade” in Algeria when the civil war cost a hundred thousand lives. Due to the previously close relationship between Czechoslovakia and Algeria, there was a direct flight from Algiers to Prague until recently. Czechoslovakia's universities were a frequent destination for Algerian students while Czechoslovak engineers, doctors and other professionals worked in Algeria. The nineties saw a small but evident wave of Algerians migrating to the Czech Republic. The statistics suggest the current number is almost six hundred. Members of the Algerian community estimate that the number in the late nineties was three times higher.

Although this is still not a large community, the search engines tell a number of alarming facts about Algerians in Prague. In April the media reported about an Algerian gang of pickpockets which was later dissolved. More information is to be found in the Interior Ministry reports on drug crime which suggest that part of the local Algerian community was involved in heroin trade in the late nineties. I once knew an Algerian man, Omar, who sold hashish in a notorious bar called Château Rouge in Jakubská Street. Another source of reports on Algerians living in the Czech Republic are Internet forums with messages posted by Czech girls who have had personal experience with Algerians. One of the messages says, “my boyfriend was the most wonderful lover, a good friend for bad times, simply everything you would dream of”. Another ministry report and other messages posted on the Internet suggest, however, that some of the mixed marriages shatter due to cultural differences.

A large number of the Algerians in the Czech Republic come from an ethnic minority called Kabyl, of Berber descent, found in compact settlements east of the capital Algiers. Almost all of the Algerians I spoke to in the Czech Republic made sure that I knew they are of non-Arab origin. One of them was my informant. Since he wished to remain anonymous, I called him Zizou, a respected nickname for the former captain of the French national football team, himself of Kabyl origin. Zizou sells tickets for concerts of classical music in the centre of Prague. When I first talked to him in early April, he was wearing two thick winter jackets: he spends all his days outside, inviting tourists to concerts of Vivaldi and Mozart. He decided to come to the Czech Republic because his brother had married a Czech girl. His brother later left for Norway and Zizou settled in Prague and got married, too. He was unwilling to tell me more about himself. One of my contacts, who is close to one of the Kabyl culture organizations, later told me that Zizou and the other ticket sellers are only paid on commission. I was unable to find out, however, exactly how much money the sellers earn with each overpriced ticket sold. Therefore I tried to contact ‘Concerts in Prague’, the company employing sellers outside the Municipal House concert venue. When I wrote an e-mail asking for an interview, I received no reply. It was not until much later that I found out the company is owned by an Algerian man.

One of the things that many of my informants suggest is that Czech authorities are prone to corruption. This makes it possible to facilitate visa proceedings and avoid deportation. But some say that the almighty officials helped them even without bribery. The state police is said to be lenient with illegal migrants, and deportation is often postponed. Mustapha Aboulaiche, an Algerian living in Brno, admitted that in the late 1990s there were people who made a fortune helping those in need. He recalls another Algerian man living in Brno who ran a business arranging documents required for permanent residence and, virtually overnight, started driving a big mercedes. The strategy of surviving in societies in which the *state* is the synonym for civil servants of unlimited powers has encouraged the Algerians to develop a special adeptness at handling any type of situation. Some can go even further than that when these skills are matched with their great trading talent.

Giving “help” to Algerian “rats”

I have met few traders with better skills than Amis based in Spálená Street. He is very proud of his investment abilities: for example, he likes to remind everyone that he bought ten tonnes of rice during the public hysteria over the food crisis. His weak solidarity, limited to the laws of supply and demand, is offset by his religiousness. Although most of his clients are Czech, his fast-food restaurant often plays music based on religious motifs. And those interested in some information about Islam can help themselves to several books in Czech, most of them funded by Saudi foundations. As Amis speaks about the nineties, he has a flash of frustration in his eyes: he recalls how he returned to Algeria after his economic studies in Montreal, Canada. It was in 1994 that he traveled to the Czech Republic via the embassy in Rabat, Morocco. In those days, it was relatively easy to obtain a Czech visa. Amis, one of the first Kabyls in Prague, has used his position to help a number of newly arrived Algerians to settle down. In this way, he believes, he helps the migrants as well as their families back in Algeria. The Algerian illegal migrants, who leave the kitchens only at night for fear of being caught by the police and being deported, are called *rats*; Amis, for his part, admits he is willing to “help” someone by finding them a badly paid job. The important thing is, he says, that the migrants accept the salary, receive the money, and send their families what they manage to save. A source close to an organization which is no longer in business now and was devoted to helping the “rats” says Amis used to accommodate Algerians in his flat, though none of the “rats” were willing to speak to me about that. These people naturally want to keep a low profile, and their number seems to have dropped sharply after the Czech Republic adopted stricter rules for granting visas and residence permits to foreigners before the country joined the European Union and the Schengen Area.

When Amis set up his own fast-food restaurant in a busy part of Prague, he spent all his time there. His confession that he lost his wife because he was spending up to sixteen hours a day at work certainly sounded plausible. I admire his constantly positive approach to his clients, which is so unlike Czech restaurant owners. The meals, prepared by a team led by a Turkish cook, are really delicious at Chez Amis even though the airan seems to be diluted with too much water. By the standards of late capitalism in the Czech Republic, there is no doubt that Amis is a successful migrant; at the same time, he is an example of an unscrupulous businessman who lies to himself and others, saying he “helped” people when, in fact, he profited from their misery.

Translation: David Mraček



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