

## FOUAD ELKOURY – THE LOST EMPIRE

## ESSAY

Negar Azimi

## MUTE WITNESS

He always arrived with a bottle of whiskey and a smile, just in case he had any problems getting in. Some encounters were more strange than others. In Hungary, he found dozens of menus scattered around, traces of soldiers' mess halls from five decades before. In Germany, he walked into a warehouse stocked with crisp never-before-used officer fatigues. Somewhere else — he can't remember where — he found young men racing their motorbikes along ancient airplane landing grounds. More often than not, sleepy sentinels—for there were often guards standing about the derelict architectural carcasses — raised their shoulders in sulky indifference to indicate that these abandoned military bases were not of their moment, but rather, that of their parents and grandparents. This was just some job. They didn't have answers to the questions.

It is a queer thing to trace the footprints of great historical epochs. Unlike the photojournalist who yearns to be there in the moment — as the wall falls, when the dictator flees, amid the crowds heaving — the photographer of traces takes his time, thinks hard about the where, and sets out on a long walk. These walks take hours or weeks. Sometimes they take years, for if anything, they are not "timely." The photographer says he has a sort of predisposition and sympathy toward these liminal spaces (for it is not clear if these sites are in a state of becoming or unbecoming). Maybe, he says, it's a sort of a natural affinity. He has set out on journeys not unlike this one in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Nicosia. In all of these places, the quality of the sound is the same, he says. Silence, it is thunderous, wraps around you like a blanket.

History becomes a puzzle to decipher. Sometimes, a place might unleash an avalanche of memory. When Jacques Austerlitz comes to know pieces of his occluded past in the novel of the same name by W.G. Sebald, he says of a gloomy room in London's Liverpool Street station that it seemed to hold "all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained." Sebald, the Bavarian author who passed away in 2001, may have been the last century's great writer-historian. While his immediate concern seemed to be the still-fresh ravages of the second world war in Europe, it is in and around the gaps of his narratives that this vexed history speaks. Silences are pregnant. Past traumas are subtly alluded to. Objects can be bearers of riddles. Throughout his novels, one encounters ghosts, obfuscations, retellings: the landscape is littered with them. Nothing is addressed head on. There is no clarity. Here he is again, in another novel, *Rings of Saturn*: "We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was."

*We do not know how it was.* Elegant understatements of past horrors, Elkoury's photographs offer themselves up as Sebaldian traces. And like Sebald's principle character in *Rings of Saturn*, who walks for the length of 300 pages in a heroic zigzag through the British countryside, Elkoury, too, walks. He finds memories jaded. People have died. The curious few are left to sift through the inscrutable wreckage of this modern life.

Sometimes, Elkoury's ruins, if you can call them that, take on the appearance of other ruins we have known. In *Kluczewo*, two bunkers sit in the back of the frame, a little like the squat Mexican pyramids of Teotihuacan. In *Furstenwalde*, pillars from a now-destroyed structure (or was it never built?) approximate long discarded Greco-Roman pillars holding up nothing but sky. And everywhere, there are strange stand-ins for the human forms that once populated these abandoned spaces. In *Gross Doln*, over-tall lamps stand out like attenuated bodies. In *Jutborg*, two ventilators on the side of a building take on the aspect of ancient eyes.

Somewhere between becoming and unbecoming. And yet, one of the defining characteristics of these remnants of a Soviet past is that they exist in spite of the world. Everywhere in these photographs, a persistent grass grows — invading concrete crevices and cracks or inching along retired walls — as if reminding us that these wars, these empires, are mere specks on the historical record. The history of humans is a small thing. Nature persists.

One final image. Two boulders lie casually on a promontory, before a lake. There is no trace of the retired military base that is surely in the surrounds. The boulders appear to us as mute witnesses, having been here for decades, if not centuries. And while they are likely to hold many answers — for we came here with questions — it seems all too evident that they are not about to reveal a thing.

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