

## **M. Akkerman**

### **On the other side of the bridge is another world**

Although Milandië remains in general quite clear from ethnic violence, it was shocked last week by the murder of a young girl in Esnrecej. Melta Slasnicin (19) from the Alesticite part of the city was killed by her brother because her boyfriend was a guy from the Milandian part of the city. In many different media opinion leaders expressed their disapproval of the action. The reaction by Livras Mintruwjne, Milandiës most famous baseball player who was born in Esnrecej, caused a lot of controversy as he said that people from outside of Esnrecej do not understand the city, and do not understand that murders like this are coming from a long history of ethnic violence. Of course, he condemned the act, but some people saw a sort of justification in Mintruwjnes words.

Esnrecej is, together with the regions forming Mesluriaj, the only place in Milandië where ethnic violence is not exceptional. Over the course of the last 30 years, at around 100 died in ethnic acts of violence. 2003 was the most violent year; 13 people

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died, 7 people were murdered and 6 were killed in a bombing at a celebration of the treaty of Djegoze (the treaty through which the Alesticites got the ownership of the territory south of the Masla river). On the other hand, during the years 1990-1994, there were almost no ethnic incidents, apart from a couple of beatings.

The history to the conflict in Esnrecej goes back to the 18th century. The Alesticite town of Esnrecej is a wealthy town because of the silver mines in the hills directly north of the city. Across the river Masla, lies the town of Masloehiotsa, whose citizens are Milandiërs. This town is town basically lies in the floodplain of the river and is prone to flooding. Its residents at the time are very poor, and hunger and disease often occur. The towns are linked together by a bridge but form separate municipalities.

In a newspaper article from 1714 it is mentioned that already then there are tensions between the two parts of the city. "At night, the streets of Esnrecej become dangerous. Hoards of young men from Masloehiotsa cross the bridge, and loiter in the streets of Esnrecej. Those that come out of the bars, intoxicated, are the easiest victims of these crooks. The money they have won with playing cards or 'pistake' (a local board game) is taken across the river. Those that are unfortunate to have lost their

money are beaten up." In another record from 1734 burglary appears to be a big problem. "It is not seldom that a group of people from Esnrecej is waiting at the bridge at night. When a burglar is trying to escape across the bridge, he has to be stopped before reaching the highest point in the middle, because beyond that point, the policemen from Esnrecej cannot arrest anybody." In the same newspaper article it was stated that: "Masloehiotsa has a vibrant silver trading industry. That is odd, since no silver is mined on that side of the river. None of the miners in Esnrecej trades with Masloehiotsan traders. Everything is traded here or brought to Hetsketsjer. I cannot but think that the silver trading in Masloehiotsa is the result of thievery, not from honest labour." Also papers from the side of the Milandiërs wrote fierce articles about the differences between the towns. In 1719 a beggar from Masloehiotsa was killed in Esnrecej and writer Begara Likajas wrote: "Completely ignoring their own cultural heritage, the people in Esnrecej do not seem to care about the poverty across the river. Were they true Delegists (Milandië's religion), they would help a beggar. Not kill him. That is exemplary for the arrogance north of the river."

In 1769, after years of relative peace, it was decided by Emperor Jasni II that Esnrecej and Masloehiotsa should merge into one city. The result was an almost civil war like situation, because the Esnrecejans feared that they would have to transfer lots of

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money to Masloehiotsa, to pay for facilities that were in Esnrecej, but not in Masloehiotsa, such as sewers. In the days following the announcement the bridge across the Masla was blown up and 30 people died as a consequence of severe riots. The mayor of Masloehiotsa was hung on the main square in Esnrecej, because he had welcomed the merger. The army had to be called in to restore the disorder. At that time it was already noted that the support outside of Esnrecej was very limited. From the records of those that were sentenced to jail for their roles in the riot were only five people from outside of Esnrecej. Some families which consisted of members from both sides of the river moved to other towns, because they weren't accepted in either parts of the city.

Later in the century, there were sometimes severe riots between inhabitants from both parts of the city. When a barge from Tejsasin ak Masla sunk after a collision with the bridge in 1784, people from both sides of the city rushed to recover the cargo of the boat. The barge happened to carry silver. This led to another warlike situation in which 23 people died. The emperor acted quickly and solved the situation by confiscating the contents of the boat and by bringing the silver back to Tejsasin. In years without such big incidents, there will still often murders. Some of them became notorious, like the murder on a women from Esnrecej who had committed adultery with a man from Masloe-

hiotsa. She was killed by an angry mob and parts of her body were spread over both parts of the city, for she didn't belong in either part of the city.

In the second half of the 19th century the economic tide turned. The railway station for the city was located in Masloehiotsa and it became an important hub in the region. North of the river, unemployment rose as most of the mines had to shut down because they were depleted. The jewelers, who relied on the supply of silver mostly went bankrupt. Nevertheless, the image that Masloehiotsans were profiting from the Esnrecejans prevailed. Although labor was short in supply in Masloehiotsa, most Esnrecejans refused to work on the other side of the river, and workers from other places were lured to the city. Ironically, at least half of them was from Alestician origin. Esnrecejans were rather unemployed than that they worked on the other side of the river. The financial flows in the city started to flow the other way around.

With the changes in the way the cities were governed, the nature of the conflicts also changed. As political representation became more organised, for example through the city council and associated parties, the conflicts changed character. In the city council, the parties representing the both sides of the river are usually more or less in balance, with one or two small independent fac-

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tions doing what they consider to be in the interest of the city. In the elections of 1920, both sides ended up with an equal number of seats, with one seat for one independent party. This led to an enormous pressure on the chairman of the independent party, Sintra Krolioete. Because he was threatened and molested many times, he was allowed by the mayor to vote by mail from an unknown location. Nevertheless, he managed to build a bridge between the two sides, and in 1924 he was asked to become the mayor of the city. He led the city for 15 years, in which it was relatively quiet in the city. Although Esnrecej was big enough to become a provincial capital, the emperor decided that it would be better not to grant the city this status, to prevent a discussion over where the provincial buildings had to be located. Castorettes became a provincial capital and its growth since 1930 is directly linked to the influx of government officials and their families.

After Krolioete passed away, the city fell back into a state of civil war again. A particular strong uprising, which led to an intervention by the emperor, was about the decision on where to build the office for the social services agency in 1941. A vacant site in Esnrecej was the most logical option, but the Masloehiot-sans did not want to go to Esnrecej to collect their allowances. The budget of the city was not sufficient to build a second office in Masloehiot-sa, so the status quo could not be solved. When

the city council finally agreed to build the office in Esnrecej, a march was organised from Masloehiotsa to the proposed building site and it was occupied. After two days, the police, supported by Esnrecejans came to clear the site and it ended in a violent clash, leaving 15 people dead. The anger was now directed against the Esnrecejan police. The Masloehiotsan and the Esnrecejan police worked together to protect the Esnrecejan police, but that was not sufficient to prevent bloody attack bomb explosion in the Esnrecejan police station in which 10 police officers and 8 inmates died (these were mostly Masloehiotsans who were captured after the riots). One Masloehiotsan police officer smuggled the bomb inside on a meeting to discuss the current riots. That night, heavy riots followed and again dozens of people were killed.

The situation got out of hand and the army came in to restore the order. The emperor had ordered that people were not allowed to cross the bridge, and if they had to, they had to be accompanied by soldiers. This situation lasted until a permanent solution was found. The blockade was a rigorous measure but it worked well. In the six months before a solution was found, there were no incidents. In the end the emperor solved the situation by imposing a tax of 1MD per capita for all inhabitants to contribute to the erection of a second social services building in Masloehiotsa. In the meantime, the intervention of the army was

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costly, both the city economy as well as to the nation. The emperor came to the city and warned the citizens on both sides of the river that the costs of any future interventions by the army would have to be paid by the citizens, as the problem was thought to be a problem of the city and not of the country.

The citizens feared huge costs, and the local leaders urged everybody to stay calm. The repressive strategy of the emperor worked and for a period of 30 years, no severe incidents occurred, although occasionally still some people died. The last real violent outburst occurred at the end of the 70s, and this time it were the lyrics from a famous singer that sparked the violence. Ilka Seretenevne, an Esnrecejan who had considerable success as a singer, released a song called 'The river'. Its lyrics contained references to crossing the bridge across the Masla, such as: 'Across the river is where I don't wanna die, for I don't belong there' and 'Across the bridge are dangers that are not at home. The villains don't like to cross the water'. The villains crossed the river and killed Ilka. A protest song was released by Masloehiotsans, and the singers of this song were also killed. In the evening, there were regularly clashes at the bridge. Groups of men would wait at both sides of the bridge, and occasionally some men would meet in the middle of the bridge and fight. The fights originally ended when somebody got unconscious or severely hurt, but over the course of the weeks they got more fierce.

When one Masloehiotsan brought a gun to the fight and shot his opponent, it came to a major clash, in which several died. The emperor threatened to send the army and the peace restored, but the tension lingered on for years.

Since then it has remain considerably quiet in Esnrecej, with the exception of 2003. The history of violence seems to have created a gap that is hard to bridge. Where Meslurians and other minority groups often marry outside of their group, it is still unheard of for a Masloehiotsan to marry an Esnrecejan. Professor in Ethnic Strife at the university of Lopratos, Tarna Stulna, followed the strife ever since she was young. Her parents moved to Tejsasin, since it was too dangerous for a married couple consisting of a Masloehiotsan girl and an Esnrecejan man to live in Esnrecej. She has several explanations for the fierceness of the strife in Esnrecej. "First of all, there is a strong divide between two parties. In Mesluriaj and the Kamajni-areas, there has always been the threat of a war with a third party. This made the rivalry less strong, and united Milandiërs and the others. Secondly, there is a long spiral of violence. Back in the early 18th century, there were already murders. This is originally caused by the difference in wealth between both parts of the city. This spiral has not been stopped. Thirdly, in the more recent years, the conflicts were often aggravated because the parties meet each other in the city council. This inevitably leads to problem when one party is

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doing something in its own interest instead of in the city's interest. In the Meslurian districts, although there are districts where Meslurians are a significant minority, there is no place where there is an equilibrium as there is here. In that way, the decision to merge the two cities into one is a historical mistake. In the last couple of years, the city put its hope in social media to change the situation, but after incidents like the recent murder, ruin these efforts. Another problem is that there is no treaty possible. It is not a conflict about land or resources, it is something different. "

In the days after the murder it was relatively quiet. This is probably because the murder did not involve a Mesluriaj and an Alesticite, but two Alesticites. There were some protests on both sides of the river, and at the bridge, an action was organized where people from both sides shook hands at the middle of the bridge. But the mayor and the police live with the knowledge that a slight incident can flare up the tensions again.