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“Neither here nor there” migration struggles in Antwerp exhibition



by Daan Bauwens,

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SUMMARY

In a new exhibition at the Red Star Line Museum, filmmaker Bülent Öztürk and photographer Mashid Mohadjerin take a thoughtful look at the long trek many Flemings with migrant roots make every summer

A strange homecoming

It's a recurring event at the start of every summer. The caravan gets moving, and tens of thousands of Belgians, most of them with Moroccan and Turkish roots, get into minivans and cars heavy with bags to embark on the long trip back to their country of origin.

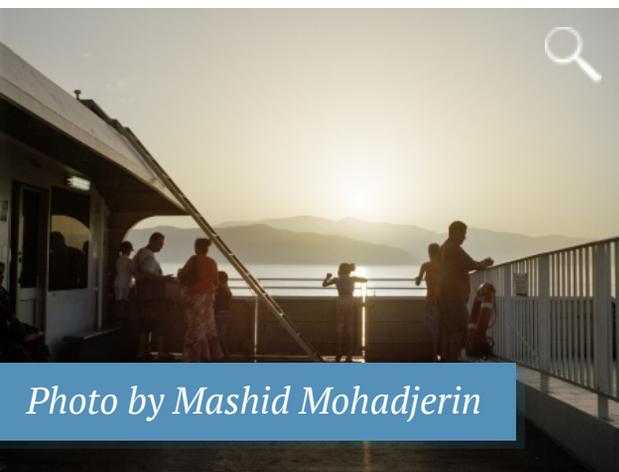


Photo by Mashid Mohadjerin

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Turkish and Moroccan labour migration to Belgium and the accompanying half century's worth of back-and-forth travels, the [Red Star Line](#)

[Museum](#) in Antwerp asked two artists with migrant origins based in the city to make the trek together with Turkish and Moroccan families and to document their impressions in works that are now on view in the *Home Sweet Home* exhibition.

Iranian-born photographer Mashid Mohadjerin and filmmaker Bülent Öztürk, from Turkish Kurdistan, both accepted the challenge, but opted for different approaches.

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“I made the trip to Morocco myself instead of travelling together with a family,” Mohadjerin explains. “That’s a much more universal approach ... I wanted to depict the feeling of travelling itself instead of documenting how others experience the trip.”

Mohadjerin – whose work usually focuses on themes of identity, the human condition, migration and minority groups – also interviewed and shot portraits of migrants in Antwerp from different generations. While the portraits are on show in the museum, the interviews can only be read in the accompanying exhibition album.

Filmmaker Öztürk was asked to travel to Turkey for the Red Line Museum show, but he couldn’t. “I am not allowed back into Turkey,” he says. “But more than that: I cannot imagine how it feels to be born and raised here and to travel back every year. I wasn’t born and raised here; I can’t go back. This is not my story.”

Instead, the filmmaker chose to build a wooden *tahta*, a Turkish four-poster-bed and a reference to one of his most beautiful childhood memories of growing up in Turkey. “From May until October, we used to sleep under the open sky on the roofs of our houses, surrounded by the sounds of crickets and swallows,” he explains. “I want people to experience this, to read stories to their children or grandchildren, to rest and be calm.”

Red line

Although the artists’ approaches are far apart, one element connects both works: “The feeling of detachment,” says Mohadjerin. “You can’t feel at home in the new country, but after a while you lose the feeling of being at home in your old homeland. It is inevitable,” she says, adding that detachment was the central theme in each of her interviews with migrants in the city.



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“*The more connected you feel to a certain place, the more difficult it is going to be*

- PHOTOGRAPHER MASHID MOHADJERIN

But according to Mohadjerin, an important difference exists between generations of migrants when it comes to feelings of detachment. “People from the first generation – those who moved out of their home countries – face the most difficulties,” the photographer says. “The more connected you feel to a certain place, the more difficult it is going to be.”

Mohadjerin explains that migrants born in Turkey or Morocco typically speak the local language and still feel connected to their home village or city when they return to visit. But at a certain moment, their lives change, she says. “After awhile, they’re not considered full members of the community anymore. That is painful.”

In Mohadjerin’s view, it’s a different story for second- and third-generation migrants. “I had the impression they still feel very connected to the homeland, but it was as if they knew how to keep the correct amount of distance,” she says. “They travel back with feelings of curiosity and wonder. Also, they do not expect to be seen as members of the community.”

As free as a swallow

While shooting the photographs and writing the interviews for *Home Sweet Home*, Mohadjerin drew heavily on her own experiences as a travelling migrant’s daughter. “The feeling of

An award-winning Limburg museum has teamed up with the Colosseum in Rome to mount a unique exhibition that transports visitors back to gladiator times

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detachment connects everyone who once left their homeland, although many of us don't realise that," she says. "I also made summer trips as a child in the back of the car, back and forth to Norway, where my aunt and grandmother lived. While I was travelling to Morocco, I relived episodes from that period."

“*Antwerp is my home now, and I can fly here as well as anywhere else*”

- FILMMAKER BÜLENT
ÖZTÜRK

In Öztürk's Turkish *tahta*, the feeling of detachment is symbolised by the sound of swallows. But unlike for Mohadjerin, in Öztürk's world feelings of detachment are not a negative. "The swallow symbolises the feeling of not belonging anywhere – or, better yet, the total absence of that feeling," he says.

Öztürk points out that the swallow is a migratory bird that flies from one place to the next. "Migratory birds can keep on travelling as long as the earth allows them to," he says. "It's the same with people. As long as fascism and racism don't get the upper hand, we can keep on travelling and settle down anywhere. I feel like a swallow – just as free. Antwerp is my home now, and I can fly here as well as anywhere else. I don't feel detached."

Still, Öztürk's *tahta* bed also refers to his lost childhood in Turkey, a period he remembers as warm and carefree. "Things quickly changed; I started thinking and asking questions," he says, looking back. "There was a civil war going on, and I refused to serve in the army. Then I had to leave the country. With the *tahta*, I go back to the nights in the village of my childhood. I turn back

to that sense of warmth.”

*Until 14 September, Red Star Line Museum, Montevideostraat 3,
Antwerp*



Red Star Line museum explores “neither here nor there” migration struggles in new exhibition.

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All aboard

Setting sail for a new life across the Atlantic was the realisation of a dream for nearly two million migrants embarking on a Red Star Line ship in the port of Antwerp between 1873 and 1934. Some 100 years later, the opening of the Red Star Line museum in the shipping company's old warehouses is the realisation of yet another dream. The Red Star Line museum opened to the public Saturday, 28 September.

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