

CROSSING THE SCHENGEN EXTERNAL BORDER

As part of my study on control of persons in Europe, I decided to cross the borders between Austria and her two non-Schengen neighbours – Hungary and Slovakia. I choose these particular borders because I would experience control from two perspectives: the Schengen by the Austrian border authorities and the traditional border control by the Hungarian and Slovakian authorities. The objective was to investigate effectiveness of Schengen Information System in border control.

CROSSING THE AUSTRIAN - HUNGARIAN BORDER

It was a Saturday morning on 3.3.2001 that I boarded Vienna – Budapest Keleti train from Westbahnhof railway station in Vienna. Perhaps because it was a Saturday there were not many people travelling that morning. So I was able to occupy one compartment of six seats all alone. Many passengers especially those travelling alone seemed to do the same. Those travelling in a group of six or less were also able to occupy one compartment.

The train departed on schedule at 8:25 am. We passed through the residential and commercial suburbs of Vienna. Just a short distance from the city of Vienna, the suburbs gave way to farmlands. Since, during this time of the year it is winter season, the farmlands were bare and the trees looked dry having shed their leaves the autumn before. The scenery was not attractive at all as the weather was cloudy and grey with threatening downpour and the landscape monotonously flat. At such a time travellers take refuge into their reading materials, books or newspapers or those on a business trips their paper work or laptops and for children games brought along or pocket computer and mobile phone games. I resisted the urge to bury myself into a book I had brought along and instead kept staring into the unattractive landscape whose monotony would occasionally broken by the intervention of an urban village and some buildings here and there as we cruised along. I did not know exactly what I hoped to see but I kept on looking. I presume because this was my first time along this route I did not want to miss anything of interest. The first interruption to my silent observance of the landscape came from the train ticket conduct who wanted to see my ticket. I gave it to him and he stamped it and left with a word of "*danke*" to continue his routine ticket checks with other passengers.

A short distance again and we came to a little railway station and if it were not for a sign board that proclaimed "*Willkommen in Bruckreudorf Burgenland*" it would have passed unnoticed just as another railway station. In fact this was a border station but there were no border control guards or any other physical object to indicate we were now crossing the Schengen external border and entering Hungary.

A short while as the train took off again came two uniformed officers. They were young dressed in dark blue service uniform, with Gendarmerie looking caps. The first entered into my compartment while the other remained outside at the corridor.

The one in my compartment demanded to see my passport, which I obligingly gave to him. He looked at it, first, the first page bearing my personal details and then he threw a quick inquisitive look at me and back at the passport again. He perused through the pages of the passport and then spoke to his colleague. When the other responded he called out the number of my passport and I could see the other officer enter the information on a laptop computer he was carrying. After a short while the officer murmured something to the first officer who without hesitation handed back the passport to me with a word of "*danke*". So this was the end of Schengen external border control by the Austrian border authorities. It was short, quick, impersonal and not confrontational control. I was clean seemed to exclaim the magical Schengen information system. The negative hit had cleared me and confirmed that I was a desirable person. For Schengen purposes, I was now free to proceed with my journey to Budapest.

Before I could ponder what had just happened entered two military uniformed men. They wore full military lingerie and pistols dangling from their trouser belts. One didn't need to be told who they were. Of course, they were Hungarian control authorities, which reminded one that not in the long distance past this nation was a communist state. The communist hangover was still evident in their attitude, dress and looks. They looked mean and at the same time surprised to see this black man seated in a compartment all alone. Their looks, especially the first one to enter was cunning and proclaimed victory over their prey even before he announced the nature of their business. When he thought it was now time for business, he curtly demanded to see my passport. As he looked and read the information on the passport cover I could see his expression change to a cunning salivating smile. I, at once, knew that this guy meant only trouble and nothing good. But I remained calm as I knew that there was no fault with my document. As he opened the personal information page he read every entry carefully until the end. Then he stared at the photograph and cast a long doubtful look at me. Then he turned back to the photograph and back to me. The sea-saw continued for some minutes. Eventually he stopped the game and now started to peruse the document page after page minutely reading every information written in there. If there was nothing written in, he stared at the blank page as if expecting it to magically reveal what he was looking for. After reaching the end of the document he removed a reading lamp from his pocket and lit it and with its purple luminescent light he scanned every single page of the document. Back to the personal information page he scanned the page repeatedly until he gave up. He moved to the corridor and with the natural light of the sun he scrutinised the personal information page over and over again. Failing to get what he was looking for he turned back to me and asked if I had any other identification document with me. I replied I had none. He inquired whether I had a driving license with me. I replied I hadn't. This seemed to confirm his suspicion. However, I volunteered that I had a bankcard with similar details as in the passport. He quickly dismissed the idea but he still demanded to see it. I gave it to him but it did not seem to strike any positive impression on him. He returned it back to me. Still I volunteered that I had a letter from the University of Vienna that could help elevate his doubts. I handed it to

him but he did not look at the document twice. Either he could not read or understand the German language it was written in or he did not like the idea that my identity could be true. He had a fixation that my identity was false and the document was a fake. However, although he did not trust his working instrument, there was no way he could prove it wrong and no way he could have his way. He eventually accepted the inevitable, that my document was genuine and he stamped it with an entry visa. He quickly left the compartment. It was now the turn for the second man who had not so far uttered a word to state his business.

As if to declare that he was a customs official, the second officer asked me for my luggage. I pointed to my small rag-sack bag. He demanded to know whether that was the only luggage I had. I said that was all. He then asked how many days I was going to stay in Budapest. I replied that it was only one day. He asked whether I had any money with me. I said yes and he demanded to see it. I showed him 7,000 florints I had. He asked whether that was all. I replied that I had credit cards too. He asked to see them. I showed them to him and he looked satisfied and left.

After this unpleasant ordeal, I tried to sit back and catch up with what I had missed outside. Pleasantly, when I looked outside the window the dull flat landscape had given way on the left side to a contrasting range of hills covered with patches of snow. To the right the same flat landscape continued but now made attractive by a thin layer of snow that covered the ground. The change of landscape was soothing to the mind and I seemed to relax and forget the distressing happenings a few minutes ago. However, as I was settling down to a resting mood and anticipation of Budapest, the first Hungarian officer accompanied by two others, a man and woman, all dressed in military uniform entered my compartment. This mission did not look good at all.

The new man demanded to see my passport. I gave it to him but this time determined to continue with my day dreaming I decided to ignore them as they carried out their business. But they were not going to let it to be. The man asked me whether I was born in Kenya. A very unnecessary question as the document stated so. I replied yes even without looking at him. He continued and asked me how long I intended to stay in Budapest. I replied still look outside one day. He quipped cynically “tourist!”. I replied yes. He asked me if I had another identity document but the first officer seemed to tell him that I did not have. I however replied I did not have. As he did not speak to me again I decided to check what they were now doing and saw him scanning my passport page after page with the same purple illuminating lamp. As he reached the end of the document, he did not seem to know what to do next so he started shaking it vigorously as if expecting some of the pages to fall off. This did not happen. Then with frustration marked all over their faces they began to consult together, perhaps about the next course of action. Then I saw the lady reach out for a piece of paper and started scribbling referring from my passport. Afterwards she handed me the paper and asked me to write down my details. What she had written down was *Etternavn, Fornavn, fødselsdato, and utstedt*

den, Norwegian for surname, given names, date of birth and date of issue. I filled in the information and handed the paper to her. After this they seemed to give up and she asked me to sign the paper. I signed it and then when she compared the signature with the one in the passport, she conferred with the others and they all seemed to be in a defeated agreement. She handed me the passport and they hurriedly left.

The rest for the trip continued without any interruption except for the Hungarian ticket controller who came in and checked my ticket and then left me to my own thoughts. We were approaching Budapest and it was raining outside promising a wet Saturday in Budapest. Once in Budapest I took to the main street basking in the light shower occasionally entering into shops and checking their merchandise. I reached the Liberty bridge and had a view of the Danube. Afterwards I entered into an indoor market where I was informed of yet a bigger and more exciting indoor market at Budapest-Nyagati. The two Nigerians were kind enough to direct me how to reach there by taking a subway train. Buying a ticket from the slot machine was a hustle, as I did not know how much it would cost me. However, with the help of hospitable Hungarians the task was always made easy. Once at the “*Western End Market*” as it is called I took a stroll following the moving human current. First the ground floor, then the second floor and then the third. Surely, this is the largest indoor market or shopping mall I have ever visited. Now, it was time to catch my return train, which was the last train to Vienna. Again I availed myself the hospitality of my Hungarian hosts to find my way to the underground to Budapest-Kileti. Of course, I did not want my memories of Hungary to be betrayed by the work of overzealous control border authorities. A bottle of *Tokaji*, the Hungarian trademark white wine, was a pleasant addition to the best memories and hospitality of these great country and people.

The trip back to Vienna was filled with the good memories of Budapest. Even the lack of lights in my coach seemed to go well with the need for relaxation. So I decided to doze off as the journey started. The only interruption was from the Hungarian train conductor who came in and left after his business. Then half way the journey I was awakened by the entry of the Hungarian border control authorities. This time a young man and an elderly woman all dressed in their military uniforms. They demanded to see my passport and as I handed it to them I could sense, even with the darkness in the compartment, their disbelief and doubts. Another ordeal was about to unfold.

The young man with illumination of spotlights they were carrying perused through my passport page by page to the end. Then he came back to the personal detail page and scrutinised the photograph before rudely casting the beam of light to my face. He did this continuously without stopping for more than a minute. Then, he directed the light to the passport again and then back again to my face. He seemed to be in even greater doubt now, or so he made it look, because that photograph was only two years old. I could not have changed that much to create such difficulties of identification. But as it may be, he seemed determined to have it his own way. He

removed the now trade mark purple illuminating lamp and started to scan page after page of the passport. When he came to the end, he looked more frustrated than ever before. Then, as if to say he was not short of tricks, he removed another light from his pocket and placed one end to his right eye. It reminds one of the instrument doctors use to check one's ears or the one used by watch repairers to examine tiny parts of the watch or jewel dealers to establish authenticity of stones. With his new technology he scanned again the passport page by page. Whatever he was looking for was not there but he was not ready to give up.

He resorted again to another trick. He removed a piece of paper from his bag and gave it to me. He demanded I fill in the required details. I told him I could not do this in darkness. Then it occurred to him that I needed light to carry out his command. He illuminated with his spotlight as I filled in the details. However, in the middle of the exercise he changed his mind and told me that they required to perform out more controls on my passport and therefore I should accompany them to their office. I obliged and took my coat and bag but as we moved on they kept on with the control of other passengers and I had to stop and wait while they carried out their work. Eventually, the train stopped at a railway station and the young man asked me to alight. This is when I realised that they did not have an office in the train and we had to leave the train to an office at the station. I disembarked and the young man followed behind. Just outside the platform we met an elderly officer and the young man started to explain to him the problem with my passport. The officer asked me if I had a credit card. I said yes and gave him my bankcard, the same I had given to the other control officer in the morning. The bankcard bore my photograph and similar personal details as my passport. The officer compared the two documents and concluded that there was no problem of identity. He stamped my passport and returned it to me apologising for the misunderstanding and asked me to return to the train and wished me a safe journey. At long last there was a reasonable man in the Hungarian border control squad. A man who did not let his prejudices colour his judgement and sense of duty and who was able to accept that a black man can have a valid foreign European passport.

Back in the train, the Austrian Schengen border controllers came. One entered my compartment and asked for my passport. I gave it to him and after perusing it he gave my name to a second officer who had a laptop computer. Again, my name and passport were checked against the Schengen information database. The laptop officer mumbled something and the other one handed me the passport and they were gone. Again the Schengen control was directed, fast, short and without confrontation.

A short while there after, the train conductor came and asked us to leave our coach as it was going to be detached from the rest of the train due to the lighting problem. We moved into the other lighted coaches and soon afterwards the journey began again. The Austrian ticket controller came and did his ritual also. I was then left alone to enjoy the rest of the journey, which continued without incidents. Soon we

reached Vienna Westbahnhof station. I left the train and headed for the underground subway line 3 to the city centre and later walked to the comfort of my room at Benedictushaus, Schottenstift to begin writing on my border control experience before the details faded away.

What conclusions can one reach out of this experience? The first and foremost most is that the Schengen system has made the work of decision making for its officers easy. It is either a hit or no hit. Second, the Schengen system makes controls less burdensome for the travellers. There are no searching questions or confrontation if your identity is in order. The identity is established fast. As it were the Schengen system works splendidly well for someone “if you have nothing to hide”. Of course, even with the Schengen system there is room for prejudices. For example, a person of “black origin” will often than not have his passport checked against the system. On the other hand, the Hungarian officers seemed to be motivated by prejudices. They also seemed to have very little faith, if any, on their own control mechanisms and instruments. Perhaps they were also suffering from inferiority complex for lack of a modern and efficient system like their Schengen counterparts. They, therefore, stubbornly wanted to establish that their method is still the most effective by proving the Schengen system wrong.

However, another important lesson one can learn from this episode is the effect of Schengen/EU border control measures and policies on “non-European or non-white” citizens travelling on European national passports and foreign nationals with resident permit in one of European countries in third countries. It is not uncommon for third countries’ authorities to carry out severe and confrontational controls on “non-white” citizens and foreign nationals with European resident permits due to the pressure exacted on these countries by Schengen/EU countries. The Schengen/EU States have imposed the task of checking the genuineness of their passports on these countries, a task they are poorly equipped to carry. For example, in January this year while travelling from Kenya back to Norway, the airline staff were supposed to check the genuineness of my passport and of all other “non-white” travellers using a European national passport. They did not have a secure way of doing this. Instead they resulted in taking photocopies of all the passports of those concerned. They also demanded like the Hungarian officials for additional proof of identity, such as identity cards. I also know of a case where one traveller was refused to board the aircraft because the airline officials suspected his passport not to be genuine. The matter was resolved when he got a letter from the embassy concerned in Nairobi the following day. The controls are as a matter of fact creating unnecessary difficulties (bordering to discrimination) for these travellers while the problem lies with poor inaccurate control procedures based on suspicion.

CROSSING THE AUSTRIAN – SLOVAKIA BORDER

After the encounter at the Austrian-Hungarian border it was time to experience the controls at the Austrian-Slovakia border. The train left the Vienna-Südbahnhof station for Bratislava-Petrzalk, Slovakia on schedule at 10:15 a.m. on 07.03.2001. As we headed eastwards, we passed through Vienna suburbs. The suburbs soon gave way to farmlands on both sides of the rail-line. The landscape was flat as far as the eyes could see. As the weather was sky blue clear with a bright sunshine, the day promised to be beautiful and interesting. Some patches of the farmland were spotting the early spring green vegetation. The rest were either newly ploughed or still bore remains of last year's harvest. The trees and shrubs were still without leaves, which gave them a dry withered appearance. The contrast in the farmlands and the fine weather gave the landscape a pleasant appearance. Staring outside was a relaxing and pleasant experience. The only thing that seemed to cast a dull atmosphere was a light blue smog that hang up in the air.

The journey proceeded without any incidents except the appearance of Austrian ticket controller who performed his duty and left. The train was quite empty with most of the travellers occupying compartments of six seats alone. The distance between Vienna and Bratislava is short about 64 kilometres and expected to take about one hour. With the good weather and beautiful landscape the journey seemed to be even shorter as we approached Bratislava. The train made its second stop at a outskirts railway station in Bratislava. The railway station looked empty with unfinished constructions but very modern. Some passengers alighted here and since there was no visible sign to indicate which station this was I decided to get out at the corridor and ask. The man who was near me could not speak English but a lady to the end of the corridor came to my aid and explained in some good English that we were at Bratislava. However, she further clarified that if I wanted to go to the city centre I should alight at the next station, which was the last one. I thanked her and went back to my compartment and waited for departure.

While sitting there lost in my thoughts came the first border control authorities. This was an Austrian gentleman wearing a dark blue uniform with inscriptions Gendarmerie and a pistol dangling on the side of his right hip. He requested to see my passport. I handed it to him. He had a through look at the personal details page but a causal look at some of the pages. He then handed it back to me. This time there was no inquiry made against the Schengen system. I thought that this was a mistake and perhaps there was a second round.

True, the second round was there but this time by the Slovakia authorities. Again only one person came, a young tall heavy built lady. She wore a green jacket with an emblem and American khaki trousers and a green cap bearing an emblem also. She did not carry any weapon. She pleasantly asked to see my passport. I handed it to her and she keyed the passport number in a hand machine she was carrying. She then, rather fast, perused through the pages and near the end she put the visa stamp.

She then handed the passport back to me and left. This left me with a mixed feeling. Something was not playing right here. I still expected to see these officers again. Soon afterwards the train started moving and we were soon crossing a huge bridge over the mighty Danube. The train meandered through the suburbs, which bore traces of hard times. A few new high-rise buildings and the castles of Bratislava could be seen from the distance. The impression one gets from here is of an old city, which had been neglected but now getting a new facelift. Eventually, we entered the railway station. When I got into the main railway lobby, I proceeded to the tourist information office and bought a map of the city and got instructions on how to get to the city by foot. The first route I followed took me to the old city. Here only old government buildings and residential flats with a number of shops on the ground floors made their mark. However, modernity was also coming into this area and new commercial buildings are emerging and imposing their presence.

Later, I followed another route that took me to the heart of the shopping centre of the city. The shops are equipped with western merchandise and the streets were bustling with people. Time was running short and I had to find the way to the railway station after walking zigzag in the city and losing sense of direction. Gladly, the Slovakia people are hospitable and ready to help, the only handicap is a communicating language as very few could speak English. However, in their determination to help we always understood each other and finally I could find my way to the railway station. Checking the train departure timetable board I could not locate my train. I decided to inquire from the information office. When the lady at the counter checked my ticket she informed me that my train was departing from another railway station and not the current one. A sense of panic almost hit me but the attendant came to my rescue and gave me instruction on how to get there by taking bus route 82 to Petržalka. At the bus station the bus did not take long before it came and I embarked but I could not buy a ticket inside the bus. The driver tried to explain to me where the ticket automatic machine was but I could not risk going out and be left by the bus. The time was running short as I had 34 minutes only before the train left. The bus drove through the busy streets of the city with numerous stops at red lights and bus stops that I was worried I will not make it. At long last we reached the railway station with ten minutes to departure time. This was the modern railway station I mentioned before.

Here I could see the train departure time and platform clearly on the timetable board but I could not find my way to the platform No.1 from where the train was departing. Again, I decided to avail myself the hospitality of my hosts Slovakia people. Fortunately, the man I asked could speak English very well and he informed me that I had to pass through immigration controls. He was kind enough to accompany me to the door leading there. The first desk one came to belonged to the Slovakia border authorities. The lady behind the desk casually looked at my passport and then handed it back to me and asked me to proceed to the next desk. The next desk was the Schengen control desk. Two officers sat behind the desk and I handed to the first one the passport and he looked at it and then gave it to the other officer

sitting with a laptop computer. He keyed passport information into the computer and then he talked to his colleague who handed me back the passport. I asked them where the platform was and they kindly pointed out the platform and the train. I got into the train and one or two minutes afterwards the train set off for Vienna.

The exhaustion of the last hours had really taken toll of me. Immediately I made myself comfortable in the seat and I dozed off. The Slovakia ticket controller had to wake me up to see my ticket. As soon as he was gone I continued with my sleep which again was to be interrupted by the Austrian ticket controller. After he left, I was now full awake and I began to enjoy the scenery again. The landscape looked more beautiful this time with the impending sunset. Vienna Südbahnhof railway station was not far away and as soon as we reached there I took a tram to my hotel room to relax and write this report when the details were still fresh in my memory.

Again, the Schengen border control proved to be less cumbersome, quick, targeted and without confrontation. The same principle seemed to apply “you have nothing hide, you have nothing to fear”. It also seemed to aid the officer in reaching a decision quickly and conclusively. The Slovakia authorities also were quite sure and had confidence in their control system and did not display any indecision as with the Hungarians. They also did not seem to operate under prejudice and therefore their judgement was not blurred. However, one could also say that they may not have been keen on their border control for other reasons. Like perhaps they seemed to trust the Schengen control system. If the Schengen control did not reveal anything wrong then there was nothing to worry about. In addition, since Slovakia may not be in the first round of countries to soon join the EU they may display a slacked attitude towards border control.

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