

## A Swedish Frisian in Milan

During one of my last readings of the season I was asked a very difficult question: ‘What does your ideal Europe look like?’

Like most writers, I can only provide quick responses in my fictional dialogues. So my answer only comes to me a week later in Milan while sitting in the backseat of a Fiat 500 beside the Swedish writer Mikael Niemi. At 1.95 meters he is 15 centimetres taller than I am – our seating arrangement has already made us very intimate. Mikael talks to me in Frisian. But I only manage to grasp a single word since I do not speak the language. But regardless Mikael is deliriously happy that he has discovered a colleague that lives less than 80 kilometres from Dokkum. Our driver Cristina Gerosa occasionally interjects to tell me what Mikael means. She doesn’t actually speak Frisian either but since she does the PR for his publisher Iperborea she already knows Mikael’s biography inside and out.

Mikael Niemi grew up in Pajala, a city in the far north of Sweden near the Finnish border. Most inhabitants of this region have a Finnish background and speak Meänkieli, a Finno-Ugric language. In 1977, Mikael moved south to Luleå, but then after 20 years he returned to the area of his birth. He feels a strong kinship with the people who live among the reindeer and provide the stories for his books.

His humoristic novel *Popular Music from Vittula* was published in 2000. It features a boy who grows up in a bilingual environment with everything that that includes: frustrations, conflicts, shame and misunderstandings. The book was translated into 30 languages and sold over one million copies. Mikael’s crime novel, *The Man Who Died like a Salmon*, appeared in 2006 and the book is as great as its title. ‘But,’ I ask in English, ‘how did you end up with Frisian?’

During the 1990’s a cultural anthropologist from the University of Amsterdam came to do research on North Swedish burial rituals. It was love at first sight. This Eelkje Tuma grew up in the village of Ee between Dokkum and the Wadden Sea. Eelkje and Mikael got married and had two children. And since Eelkje spoke Frisian with their children, Mikael learned the language along the way. But meanwhile he spoke Meänkieli with their children. And they also learned Swedish at school and Finnish from the television.

Learning Frisian had other advantages for Mikael: he could speak with his in-laws and read his wife's books in their original language. Eelkje debuted in 1992 as a writer with her Frisian novel *Leafste lea*.

Cristina presses down the gas pedal. Mikael has just presented the Italian translation of his crime novel, and tomorrow I will be presenting *Nella Casa del Pianista*. Between these two events our publisher has organised a dinner. But it is busy in Milan and it looks like we will be late in arriving. This gives Mikael the chance to introduce us to his Dutch brother-in-law. He lives in Groningen, barely 30 kilometres away from Friesland. But he refuses to speak Frisian with his children and therefore his wife has given up speaking it as well. Therefore these children cannot talk with their grandparents. Ridiculous! Especially since the other grandchildren who live in the far north of Sweden can talk to their grandparents!

Mikael likes to visit Friesland and the Netherlands. 'Nice towns,' he muses. But after a week or two he really needs to return to Pajala. 'The Netherlands has no nature,' he explains. I feel a sudden pang but then say that we Dutch don't really need nature. 'Instead we go in search of it in Sweden, or in Tuscany.' Mikael laughs.

I look at the facades of Milan. This is the ideal Europe: Swedish, Meänkielisch, Frisian, Dutch, English (Cristina behind the wheel) and Italian (Cristina when she yells at other drivers). It's a patchwork blanket that spreads out from Milan. It's not uniform like the US. It's a cacophony that is both amusing and alive.

A week later I am in the Spain's Basque country. I eat in a simple restaurant with only one menu and three types of wine: white, red and rosé. The Basque waiter prefers not to understand 'vino tinto', nor does he understand 'vin rouge'. Instead he gives me a bottle of rosé. It's a moment when my ideal Europe is very far away, and I regret that I am unable to empty this bottle with Mikael who would have taught me how to say 'cheers' in Meänkielisch. Or in Frisian.

Jan Brokken

*JAN BROKKEN is a well-known journalist who made his debut as a writer in 1984 with the largely autobiographical novel *De provincie* (The Province), the story of a youth spent in the countryside, which was made into a successful film. He has published gripping travel books about, among others, Africa,*



*Indonesia and Curaçao, and is the author of the acclaimed and bestselling novels De blinde passagiers (The Blind Passengers, 1996), De droevige kampioen (The Sad Champion, 1998) and Jungle Rudy (2006). His work, which has been translated into several languages, has been compared in the international press to that of Graham Greene and Bruce Chatwin. Baltic Souls was on the longlist for the European Book Prize 2011.*