

Linares

When you get to Linares you are not there yet. After descending from Madrid through the Spanish interior for more than three hours, the train delivers you at a small station in the village of Baeza. Outside the low, white station building this is not immediately clear. On the small square a rural liveliness prevails, easy-going and unassuming. There is nothing to indicate whether you are in Linares or not. A few teenagers sit on their scooters, smoking cigarettes with an experienced look on their faces. They are watching, without interest, two tired looking young mothers pushing prams. A bit further on, an old man with dark glasses, who is gesticulating emphatically, is telling a story to one of his contemporaries. I have been coming here for some ten years. I know that I will have to take a taxi for the last few miles in order to arrive at my final destination: Hotel Anibal, named after the Carthaginian general. Hannibal crossed the Alps but in Linares he conquered his beloved Himilce.

When I came here for the first time, I had fortunately been forewarned. "Don't be alarmed when you take a taxi," the wife of one of the chess players told me, "because before you know it, this taxi will leave the built-up area and you'll think you're being robbed." That was what it felt like that first time, despite the warning. And that is what it still feels like even now, with the silver-grey haired driver with his grandson sitting next to him, who moments before with modest helpfulness lifted my suitcase into the boot. At my request, "Hotel Anibal, please," the cab driver manoeuvres his car through three straight streets out of Baeza and then, after a sharp bend, suddenly takes it uphill to a junction, which reveals only at the last moment what is hidden behind the abrupt, short incline. I know full well by now that the world does not end after this unexpected climb but that the junction marks the start of the short motorway connecting Baeza and Linares. Even so, there is once again the feeling of relief that the road continues and doesn't suddenly end up in some remote spot surrounded by bushes, where I am to be left without my luggage and my money.

The taxi picks up speed and through the driver's half-opened window a pungent smell of olives enters the car. The olive groves stretch away to the left and the right of the road. Behind us, sharply silhouetted against the dusky evening sky, is a row of tall olive-oil tanks. A few

minutes later we enter Linares by way of an industrial area, irregularly interspersed with show rooms, storage depots and work shops. Not the best part by which to drive into town, but why mention the best part when many people will agree that no such part exists at all. Look it up in a travel guide: the author will tell you in a short chapter that this small town of sixty-five thousand inhabitants is predominantly ugly. It is hard to say when this story began doing the rounds but it certainly has turned into a mantra by now. Linares is an ugly town, as everyone is fond of repeating. Perhaps Linares is irreparably ugly because for a long time it owed its existence to the mining industry.

According to Mauricio, the history of Linares is quickly told. When I asked him about it once, he wrapped it up in a few sentences with the venom and irony he is inclined to display when the history of his country is brought up: "The Romans discovered some ores, and as a result there were mines here until the beginning of the century. The prosperity that derived from these mines vanished when they were closed one after the other. At present, Linares' economy depends on the olive industry."

These olives are big, green, fleshy and have a strong taste. With every meal, a small plate of olives is put next to the bread basket for starters. A similar plate, but now with some toothpicks added, is served when you order a glass of beer in a bar at cocktail hour. The oil made from them is among the best in Spain.

Another important employer is the Suzuki car plant, which, under the name of Santana, provides work for some two thousand people. There used to be more but the 1994 crisis did for a lot of jobs. At first, a complete closure was threatened but this caused such emotions and resistance that the plan was hastily withdrawn. It was one of the few moments when the chess players discovered that there were other concerns here than their tournament. A group of demonstrators forced their way into the hotel and threatened to bring the tournament to a halt. The chess players opted for a well considered reaction that gained them a lot of sympathy. Led by Spanish grandmaster Miguel Illescas they signed a petition declaring their solidarity with the threatened workers. They could not have reacted in a better way. The demonstrators proudly posed with the chess players behind a gigantic banner and after that they all went to fight their own fight again.

Luis Rentero, the director of the chess tournament and active in local politics, also expressed an interest. He told a baffled journalist that he

would know what to do with the Japanese factory owners. He would line them up in front of the town hall and then feed them one after the other to the angry mob. The journalist's pen hesitated at the bellicose words. Just long enough for Don Luis to tell him with an authoritative gesture: "Yes, yes, go ahead. You can quote me on that."

When the taxi stops at the Hotel Anibal, I look at the Chinese restaurant next to it. Ciudad Feliz, happy town or lucky town. It is one of the few spots in Linares that still evokes memories of the unrest over the threatened closure of the car plant. The growing anger of the locals made the owner so nervous that out of pure self-defence he stuck signs to his windows proclaiming: "We are not Japanese!"

The spacious hotel lobby is virtually empty when I enter. The long reception desk is untended and in the deep, brown settees there is just one lonely Spaniard reading a newspaper under the bas-relief of the two chess players. On either side of these stone-carved, nude players pondering a four-by-four-square position with their fists pressed against their heads are the portraits of the grandmasters who competed here in 1991. A year after Kasparov first won the tournament and called Linares the Wimbledon of chess, Rentero initiated a new tradition. Each time the tournament was held he erected a memorial in the lobby. These are monuments of a striking simplicity. Separately photographed colour portraits of all participants are grouped together on a section of wall reserved for a particular year. There is no more room for them in the lobby by now. The portraits of the players who wrote history here in the past few years are hanging in the bar, in between the lobby and the restaurant. These portraits must be an overwhelming experience for any chess lover entering the hotel for the first time: the best players the world has to offer so often together in a provincial town in Andalusia. To me, they are welcome reminders of games, stories, events, whirling around in a hazy notion of time - memories that make you feel somehow that chess is nowhere better than here. Not because the games are always better but because there is no better place to experience the inexplicable allure of the game.

Kasparov once described Linares as an annual retreat, a secret council. It is here that the strongest players meet to prove in direct battle who is who at the moment. It is here that they draw up the annual balance for themselves and each other, and decide in curious isolation what the balance of powers will be for the time being. True, Kasparov