# TALES FOR THE BORDERLANDS

# A TRIPTYCH

# HOME: EXILE: RETURN


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## PREFACE

This work represents the culmination of more than twenty five years of continuous involvement with an exiled community, a Diaspora, which the passage of time has now entirely removed from the world. It seeks to present experiences, memories, journeys, the turmoil of displacement and return. It is written as a Triptych, a structure which is readily recognised in the Borderlands of Eastern Europe. It owes much to the oral tradition, since most of us recall and return to, the past in terms of tales told one to another; as fragments, bursts, giving meaning to a continuous existence, in limited, yet intimate recollections.

The influences and support which have combined to enable me to create this Triptych are many, varied and widespread. In the Borderlands, Professor SvitlanaNovoseletska, Dr. Vadim Kossolapov, Dr. Svitlana Bobyr, Dr. Peter Romchuk, PavloYevstifeyev, Olga Vakulenko, MyckolaFedchuk and ViktorShkuratyuk have given frequent insight into the history, suffering and paradoxes of a people I stumbled upon by accident. In Wales, Dr. Paul Wright, Dr. Dic Edwards, Reverend Dr. Ainsley Griffiths and Professor Menna Elfyn have provided advice, guidance and encouragement throughout. The individuals of the Diaspora, from whom much inspiration stemmed, are now all vanished, their ghosts, their *Prizraki* returned to the western steppes which bore them.

Above all, my debt is greatest to the late Professor Josef Patsula of Rivne. For without his influence and encouragement, I wouldn't have written a word.

Robert Morgan.

Note:

The Borderlands of Eastern Europe have no defined borders of their own, being drawn and drawn again by conquest, and ravaged by conflict, pestilence and famine. They change eternally, along with the place names and dominant languages. The unhappy period before the outbreak of what we call the Second World War, that destructive conflict itself, and the aftermath of exile are well recorded, the prospect of return, and its achievement much less so.

The events and possibilities of these tales are, like their characters, historically sound, but fictitious.

# HOME

**SHADOW**

Soviet L'vov. June 1941.

*"He is guilty who is not at home."*
Borderlands Proverb

Suddenly, as though bidden by an invisible hand, the street lamp in the wet courtyard beyond the thin trees pulsed into light. A moment before it had hung in the gloom of dusk, a great barren fruit unnoticed by the world of men as they struggled by. As the glow increased, and the halo gained strength, all the room began to change, not once but repeatedly, effortlessly, as the external rays replaced the failing power of the vanishing day. The rain on the window panes played with the light, and on the far wall waves of gold wept downwards. Then the light caught the sparse net curtains, and gossamer patterns slipped over those butter-gold waves, running towards the carpet, never to be found again.

A gust of wind threw a mouthful of raindrops at the glass panes and disturbed him. It had been more than an hour since he turned the book over, and trembling, crossed his arms in thought, not thought of the novel he'd been reading, or at least making an effort to read, but of what news he had heard.

Taras was terrified. He hated storms like this, sudden, unexpected violent weather. As the storm rose and fell outside, he hummed and whispered an old childhood tune of comfort, hugging himself.

*"By the window a maple tree .... A lost bird sings with great love .... My darling how the lost bird sings ... there is no good that comes from love."*

His mother would have cradled him as she sang:

*"Cloudy weather, stormy weather .... It rains cats and dogs."*

He'd come home early. Alone. Another power cut, another 'act of sabotage'. The Germans not far off they said. As the dismal day wore on the young man sat near the window of his room, sipping bad tea, immersed in Turgenev's *House of Gentlefolk*; he'd reached the part where Ivan Petrovich falls ill, goes blind and dies. The part where Turgenev shows his skill by killing a man in the space of a page, denying him even his soup. The lights in the distant blocks had come on again, dimly, but he didn't stir to turn on his own lamp. The thunderclaps held him in his place.

Taras heard the key turn in the stiff lock far down the hallway. Was it Misha? He was about to call out when he heard the other voice. Male, middle aged, not deep, but with a Muscovite menace in the masculine nouns.

"In! Smart about it!"

This was no student.

Misha responded timidly to the question. No. Everyone was at work or at the University. Hours before they returned. Two sets of footsteps walked along the corridor, the threadbare carpet muffled no sound. They stopped at the door next to his. “Here?” Misha answered the man’s questions tremulously, and turned the doorknob. Taras heard the two step into the next room. A cupboard squeaked open beyond the paper-thin walls. A ruffled drawer, a grunt, something was lifted and examined.

He sat silent, rigid, page unturned, listening intently above the tap of raindrops. He realised he was holding his breath. The menacing voice had found what it wanted. Misha let out a sob, now he was crying. The loud man, whose words seemed to have burgeoned to fill the apartment, flung a weeping Misha onto the hallway floor.

Taras was ice-cold, terrified, scarcely able to breathe, fearing that even the shallowest breath would give away his presence. The Muscovite barked an order. A second man answered and more footsteps rushed into the hallway. Misha sobbed, begged, wept, and was dragged screaming away beyond the threshold. A new voice, subtle, sinister, appeared and asked questions of the menacing man. Seniority spoke smoothly. It was satisfied. Calmly, almost graciously, the smooth voice decided Misha’s fate.

“Brigydki! Take him!”

Sitting in his ill-lit room, bathed in sweat, Taras was held as still as Stalin’s statue. Yet the whole building seemed suddenly serene, washed clean by the relentless rain. Brigydki. The NKVD Prison.

He was tense even now, tearful more than sixty years on, as he told me of those last days in L’vov. “The Germans entered quickly, and the Soviets ran very fast indeed. Mothers came and searched the killing pits at the prison for days afterwards, they said there were so many tears they washed the blood from the stones.”

“But what of Misha?” I asked him.

“Misha,” said Taras, “was mislaid, uncounted. He became a victim.” Misha was murdered somewhere between victors and vanquished. Never found.

Misha had been his lover.

Taras’ old, arthritic hand trembled as he raised the glass to his lips in a long-practised toast.

“Misha ...”

**EXODUS**

Dubno. August 1941.

*"Wherever there are men, there is also misfortune."*
Borderlands Proverb

Mephody toyed with the vodka glass, and adjusted the micro-recorder to sit precisely square on the dining table between us. He was a precise man.
"Just so!" he said.
We sat as we always did. I sat with a pen and writing pad to jot down quickly any questions, sometimes a word of command, or a military term came into his mind, in German, even Russian, needing further explanation. He, frail and eighty two years old, sat as he always did, imprisoned within his wartime memories.

"I am ready now. We will begin. Yes?"
I nodded.

It was the day after the heavy artillery batteries rumbled for hours through the small Galician town, raising so much dust the horses and gunners, even the houses and trees along the street were coated a deep dark red. "Men and beasts looked like they had come out of hell, which was in fact where they were going". It was, he said, just after dawn, when the town lay still and quiet after a still, quiet night.

A solitary *Luftwaffe* plane high in the sky glinted as it flew east into the sun. "My long, lonely shift at the Police Barracks had ended, and I wheeled my ancient bicycle, one of the few the Germans hadn't taken, round to the wide street, and propped it against the broken fence."

Nineteen, a bored student and with the Institutes closed, some said permanently.
"So, I joined the Germans newly created 'Galician Police', established to maintain order in the wake of the escaping Soviets and the busy Wehrmacht." he laughed.
"Well, at least it got you fed!"
He paused a moment, reflecting.
"I actually had a uniform, an old threadbare blue Polish police tunic, an even older peaked cap with a shining trident cockade, and a big white armband." He demonstrated circling his upper arm "It showed I was *'Im Dienst der General Gouvernment'*. In the service of the new German order, eh?" He laughed again, his laughs were hollow and thin.
"They had even given me a gun, in a big holster, an ancient 'Reichs-Revolver' stamped 1879, that weighed more than a kilo."
He lifted a finger.
"And three bullets too."
He smiled, paused and sipped his vodka.

"As usual, Viktor," his replacement, an uninspired former student of the L'viv University Faculty of Literature, "was late for duty."

A distant hum from the high road to Ivano Frankivsk caught his attention, as a small dust cloud rapidly drew into the long street, past houses where dogs and the very old, always first to stir, were beginning their day. The 750 cc Zundapp motorcycle combination ripped to a

halt outside the Police post and behind it a dusty *Kubelwagen* staff car and then a big scruffy Gaz truck, one of many the Red Army had mislaid in its retreat earlier that Summer. The small convoy settled quietly into silence. A middle-aged officer stepped from the car. The young police recruit, recognising the immaculate mouse-grey uniform and silver death's-head insignia of an *Obersturmfuhrer* of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, cream of Himmler's *SS*, saluted as best he could manage. Returning the youngster's salute as if he was on parade before the Reichsfuhrer himself, the officer gestured gruffly, Mephody followed him inside the Police post, accompanied by a jovial elderly Sergeant. The officer, who spoke remarkably good Ukrainian, handed him a folded piece of paper.
It was a list.

The order given to Mephody was crisp and unquestionable.
"Officer in Charge. Police Post 138. You are to obey the orders of this officer without question. On the highest penalty."
There was a signature too, "and a big stamp." He gestured with his fist on table.
The old Ukrainian sipped his vodka, and sat silent for a moment.

The police recruit took his place behind the desk, the single sheet of paper placed before him. The *SS* officer barked an order at the sergeant, who saluted and left, but not before he smiled and deftly removed the unloaded old revolver from Mephody's holster and tucked it into his own belt.

"All day the Jews came." he whispered.
"They came, some singly, some in small groups, others in families." Shocked, bewildered, frightened and uncomprehending. Some bruised and injured. Some sobbing, and more than a few were bleeding. The Germans escorting them shouted the names at Mephody, who crossed them off the list.
"It was a long, long list." The German's pronunciation was dreadful, but he knew almost all of the men in shabby working clothes and women in smocks and pinafores who were dragged, beaten or pushed through the door.
School friends, neighbours, tradesmen- the kosher butcher in blood-stained shirt, the old cobbler in a patched leather apron, many familiar faces. Even the Doctor's wife was dragged in weeping. With as much precise, efficient and methodical humiliation as the soldiers could muster, belts and braces, shoes, dresses, jewellery and valuables were all taken from the prisoners, and thrown into separate piles.

He moved his old hands over the table to signify each pile. He sipped his vodka and gestured to one of the piles he saw in his memory.
"The shoes were so different." He waved his old hands. "Men from the salt works wore wooden soled clogs, which thudded down on the floor, old people wore soft slippers, farm workers heavy boots, stained red with earth, there were children's tiny *'bashas'*."
The Doctor's wife, well dressed as always, cried and protested as she took off a pair of elegant shoes, a deep blue pair which must have cost a week's wages in Polish times. "The backhand blow from the jovial Sergeant silenced her", Mephody murmured, "and she took off her dress with barely a sob from a bloodstained mouth."

By early afternoon it was all over.
"The last to arrive was the Doctor. Arrive he did. He wasn't brought, beaten or bound as others had been." Mephody stressed this keenly, as though it made any difference in the end.

“Tall, thin, careworn in a dark brown suit and fedora hat, he swept past the Sergeant who was tidying his piles of booty like an experienced pawnbroker. He loudly demanded to know where his wife was. Throwing his heavy medical bag on the desk, he turned to face the officer.”
A single word uttered from the Nazi’s mouth, and the rifle butt took the Doctor low in the back. He fell with a groan, and the smiling Sergeant gestured to two soldiers, who dragged him inside.
But not before the Sergeant had tugged off his shoes.

The list was complete.
“The men,” he said “were locked in two small cells”, and the women and children left under guard in the barrack room. “Where could they go? What could they do?”
Mephody went outside, for a thoughtful breath of air, away from the heavy odour of fear and sweat. He watched the chatting Germans load the old truck with sacks containing the Jew’s possessions and clothes. He didn’t recall seeing any money. None at all.
The hot afternoon returned to quiet shuffling, murmured prayer and birdsong.

Along the wide street roared a helmeted despatch rider, who noisily braking, wrestled his little 125cc DKW machine to a halt alongside the parked staff car.
“Always full of self-importance despatch riders,” the old man smiled as he remembered. “Later in the war we came to hate them, all soldiers did, for they always brought bad news.” He laid his hands on the table, palms down, and rested a moment, eyes closed, before continuing.

“The *SS* officer, brandishing the list in his gloved hand, emerged as the rider sped away. He spoke sharply to the Sergeant, who saluted and trotted off.” Turning to Mephody, he spoke again in excellent Ukrainian. “All was arranged!” In one hour precisely, the Jews would be removed from the building. Until then, Mephody must stay on duty. He was expected to salute and he did.
“It was getting late, Viktor had not shown up at all, and I was hungry. One of the Germans gave me some black bread and sausage. Good sausage.”
In one hour precisely, as the German officer had said, a cloud of dust heralded the arrival of three big Opel trucks.
Mephody went back to his desk. He heard orders shouted, whistles, dogs barking, the trampling of boots. Rifles and submachine guns were unslung.

“First the men were taken out, silent, dejected, enduring; two of them, big men from the salt works, bearing the broken Doctor across their broad shoulders.”
The women came out weeping, lamenting, pleading for their children, an undulating mass driven to the Opels by the silent guards.
Next came the children, a score of them.
He shook his head.
One small child almost imperceptibly brushed close against him, dropping something into the open holster. He sensed rather than heard it. As the wave of women were forced outside, the Sergeant ordered him to go and lock the empty, stinking cells and barrack room.
“When I returned, it took barely a minute or two, they had all gone.
The ancient revolver lay on the desk. I picked it up, and walked slowly out into the warm sun.” In the distance the convoy dwindled away back to high road.

He began to gesture slowly, precisely. “I balanced the gun in my hand, and replaced the old, useless piece back into his holster. The holster was blocked by a solid object.”
He felt, and retrieved it, rolling it in his hand.
“It was a *Pisanka*, a painted wooden Easter egg, much worn with the bright paint and village design faded; a child’s treasure obviously, and a treasure from happier times.”
“Happier times?” I said, but I knew what he meant. The time before that brief bitter year of Soviet occupation and the rushing in of the Nazi armies.
“A *Pisanka.* No Jewish child could have owned such a thing!”
“Perhaps one of the children wasn’t a Jew at all? “I suggested, but very, very quietly.
Mephody shrugged.
“I hadn’t counted the children, I knew very few of them, babies, infants, born since I had been away at the Institute in some cases.” He spoke slowly, excusing himself perhaps?
“They were not on the list. Children. That efficient German officer’s list was only a list of adults.”

No-one in the town ever asked for a missed child.
Or mentioned that hot day’s exodus.
And he never spoke of it.
The Jews had gone.
“No. Definitely not on the list.”

The old man finished his vodka in silence. No more would come, I sensed it, and switched off the micro-recorder.
“One child in so many?” I said.
He sighed.

**SNOW**

Sokal. November 1942.

*"In the Kingdom of Hope, there is no Winter."*
Borderlands Proverb

Following the incessant, melancholy rains of Autumn, the first frosts of the Winter came suddenly. The mud dried and the long, slow, military convoys moved past again on the hard, shimmering surface of the high road. Eastwards, always eastwards, trudging men, strings of weary horses, and occasionally heavy trucks, straggled along. Sometimes all the grey day and far into the long night they passed through the village. Then, unsummoned by man, came the first fall of snow. It fell on St. Alexander's Day, the twenty third of November, Petr's vanished father's feast day. Brought by clouds flung from far beyond the Urals, the old men used to say, and by the way the first snow fell they could tell a hard Winter from one destined to be so cruel that it would break stones in the fields.

The snow began to fill the skies just before it became too dark to work outside. The wind rose, imperceptibly at first, and the clouds softened, moving earthwards almost to touch the trees and low roofed houses. Along the road, crawling slowly up the low hill, three grey-black armoured vehicles, half tracked 'Hanomags', each covered with tarpaulins, threw off the flurry of falling flakes from their black-crossed carapaces as they growled by. Even the anti-aircraft gunners had hidden deep in the steel shells away from the white winds whipping. Only the commander stood above the hatch of the first machine, smothered against the shrill storm like a silent watching bear.

All through that night the snow fell, but Petr was ready. Before his grandmother had called him and 'Galshi' the old dog in from the yard, he had disappeared into the lean-to shed and found the big shovel. After supper with the dog sleeping at his feet, by the soft light of the paraffin lamp, he carefully cleaned the broad blade of the shovel with a rag. It had, his grandfather told him, been made for the Tsar's army thirty years before.

"Look, Petr! You can still see its issue number. From the Tsar's day. Here, look, 48-1 on the well-worn haft, but the mark of the old Imperial double-eagle above it has been chipped away, by some bloody-minded Red sympathiser perhaps."

When the boy asked where such a shovel had come from, the reply was, and it was true, "It was left against the field fence along with packs and blankets, bags and other military gear in the Great War." One small military object among so many abandoned by the Tsar's men as they walked away from the front and went home to their distant farms, leaving Volhynia to its fate.

Grandfather ran his hands over the haft. "This is no ordinary army spade." It was long, quite heavy too. "An engineer's tool," he told the boy, "Made of good iron and with a metre-long ash haft to wield it; old now, like me, eh!" Yet, still as useful as when the conscript to whom it had been issued abandoned it on his homeward path. When the boy had finished his task, and was pleased with the final gleaming result, he stepped over the slumbering animal and placed the spade beside the groaning door.

Outside the convoys had faltered for the night, men and machines blinded by the snow storm, but Petr could hear through the thick door as bitter winds scythed across the landscape, one moment moaning softly, the next slapping the wall like a drum beat. The ancient cottage, and

it was old even when Bonaparte's Frenchmen had marched on Moscow, settled itself for the long Winter, easing its frames as though it lay under a thick blanket. It seemed resigned to vanishing from the world while the deep snow covered all around. It settled as only such aged dwellings can, for one more Winter, into the smell of cabbage and of buckwheat *'Kasha'* filling its interior, along with the stench of the old man's harsh *Mahorka* tobacco, and of the few gaunt hens which was all they had left.

"Off to bed." His Grandmother called to him, looking up from her darning. She sang to him as he kissed her and settled down. "The dreams pass the window…and sleep by the fence. Where, my love, where shall we pass the dark night."

Night passed, and morning barely arrived for the snowstorm continued for two days more, until at dawn on the third day the light came, like cow's milk trickled into water, opaque yet bright. The clouds still lowered, foreshadowing the return of the Siberian wind and snow, but at least for the moment the air was still, all the sky's boisterousness carried far beyond the Volhynian plain into the west.

The old man swore softly under his breath as he removed the wooden bar which locked the door. It needed a few sharp blows of the mallet to move it, and Petr and he lifted it carefully out of the iron stirrups, and laid it aside. "Gently, as though you were teasing a fish." Grandfather opened the door a hand's breadth, then a little further. "Ah." Before they had closed the door, Petr and the old man had dropped the snow board into the frame, and there it sat, half a metre of sound Carpathian oak, with the glistening snow curved like a wave set over it. Pure, untouched, almost incandescent as though lit by some ethereal source far below the hard earth. "No." said his Grandmother, "first you must eat.".

Petr, filled with a breakfast of hot buckwheat kasha, for there was little else these cruel days even on the farms, turned away, and picked up the Tsar's shovel.

"Snow! Galshi, come on!" The dog bounded over the snow board.

Thus began the second Winter of the war, of the 'Great Patriotic War', by Moscow's standards, though as everyone knew that was a lie. November 1942. It was the fourth Winter now since the Red Army marched into Volhynia splitting the old province with Stalin's German accomplices. November 1942. Two Winters since Petr's father had been taken by the Army of Workers and Peasants to serve in a forced labour battalion. Being tainted as a former citizen of detested Poland he was unfit to bear arms, and so he was sent as a slave to build Stalin a new airfield near Zhitomir. One damp Autumn evening his father clambered into the back of a horse-drawn cart and waved silently to the boy as the small convoy of forced labourers, escorted by a shabby truck filled with grinning Russian infantrymen, their bayonets fixed long and bright, pulled slowly away from the village.

It was the last time Petr ever saw him. The old people never spoke of him, but Grandmother wept from time to time, as mothers do.

November 1942. One single Winter since the Germans had learned what Winter was like in the East, and the steppe of Volhynia was better than some places. In the North beyond the Pripyet Marshes, snow had fallen in the first week of October in what even Grandfather had said was the bitterest Winter to visit the world in over a century. One night two sentries around a munitions convoy sheltering in woods near their village had frozen to death as a blizzard came swiftly and unexpectedly. They perished as they stood, facing into a driving

white storm which had gathered its bitter cold from the passage across thousands of kilometres of frozen Siberia.

In anger at the elements they couldn't control, as though the blizzard could be blamed on mankind, the Germans had shot four men from the village, taken as they shovelled snow from their own doors.

"Only four. I knew them all." Grandfather sighed when he heard.

November 1942. Nine hundred kilometres to the east a huge battle of attrition was taking place on the River Volga at Stalingrad where half a million Germans were learning just how miserable human life could become.

Steel froze.

The common belief in western Europe, and one generally accepted by the lower ranks of the *Wehrmacht* at least, that the 'Russian Winter', that is to say Winter anywhere beyond the River Vistula and the old Polish border all the way to the distant, unreachable Urals, produced a snow-bound frozen wilderness for over six months of the year with temperatures remaining constantly far below zero, would not in fact stand close scrutiny. The Winter of 1942 was to be far milder than that which astonished everyone the previous year, and in the province of old Volhyn snow and frost endured for less than four months, though as he stood at the cottage door with his shovel, Petr wasn't to know that any more than the Germans did.

"I like snow" Petr said to the old man, "It makes everything look clean and bright and…"

"Ah! Petr. Petr. Wait until you grow, and your bones ache almost to break in the cold weather. Snow!"

Swift strokes cleared the upswept ridge of snow, and the boy threw it to his left, westward, away from the winds that might carry it back to the doorway again. 'Galshi' bounced at his heels as the snow level dropped below the oak plate. The boy sang an old children's song:

"The cockerel is riding his horse, a big horse, a great horse. Where are you going. Oh! Where are you going the hens cry. The hens cry!"

He trilled, and the dog barked. The man stood silent, watching Petr work, just as his father had cleared snow in lost, remembered Winters. Grandfather wondered what this one would bring.

"I am leaving you hens goodbye. So goodbye." Petr sang.

"Still", the old man murmured to himself, "we three are still alive.". Satisfied that the boy could cope, he returned to his work inside. The household possessed but one timepiece, a battered pocket watch, a generation older than Petr's Grandfather, and that was rarely wound. So, with the sun hidden behind the overcast and cloudy sky, and only a few short hours of daylight ahead, Petr worked with all time forgotten, steadily and slowly, in the odd half-light, a pearly opaque luminescence where only the snow seemed to give substance to the world. Wielding the shovel with measured strokes, he moved towards the road, only a matter of twenty metres away.

"I am leaving hens for a Great War. Goodbye. Goodbye."

From time to time, Petr rested on the shovel, and watched the dog scamper through the new-flung drift, growling and snuffling as though it might somehow disgorge a rabbit, a rat or a mouse for sport.

“For a Great War. A Great War.”

Eighty, perhaps a hundred metres away across the broad frozen roadway a neighbour had already completed his task of clearing the snow, and to the eastern side of that ancient dwelling, a solitary snow peak, like a mountain of hard, sparkling iced sugar, had lifted far above the roof, blown upwards by some particularly compulsive blast of the storm. Petr sang louder as he worked away.

“Where are you, cockerel. Where are you.”

The boy had almost reached his goal, the straggling fence and broken gate which bounded the road, where in late Summer the great sweeping necks of the sunflowers would stand rippling in the breeze like golden swans dipping vast heads towards the black earth. The dog, ’Galshi’, having found neither rat nor rabbit to taunt, had lost interest in whatever games the snow had once offered and scuttled away in search of new scents in the deeper drifts behind the small outhouses and lean-to’s that held the old building up as best they could.

“Goodbye hens. Goodbye.”

The day, if it were at all possible, had grown greyer, the world undefined, half-seen. The clouds heavy and sullen now, even though it must be near mid-day, shaded the whole sky. Grey over grey, for all radiance had vanished from the aphonic snow. Then slowly, steadily, the easterly wind began to lift its voice from a whisper to a mutter as though the land was filling its lungs ready to ululate through another bitter storm. Petr stopped for a moment, and looked round to catch a glimpse of the dog, which was out of sight.

“Oh. No, cockerel. No. The hens all began to weep.”

He had finished his task, and dug the old shovel into the snow behind him, but the noise that filled his ears was not the gathering wind, he realised, but the struggling engines of trucks.

“To weep, to weep.”

In what was, in all truth, little better than a soft twilight, it was difficult to judge distances, even the nearby houses had dwindled to dim outlines in a sea of snow, so the first machine was upon him almost before he knew it.

“Goodbye. Goodbye.”

The great hulk of a sandy coloured Opel *’Blitz’*, with the number 10 crudely painted in green on the door, slowed to a crawl as it passed him, and two dark figures dropped silently from the back. One, muffled in a German greatcoat, swathed in scarves and heavy felt boots, pointed a machine pistol at the boy. Petr stood still, dumbstruck, his feet rooted in the snow. The other man, a huge creature in a great fur *’Ushanka’*, like a bear’s head, lifted the youngster physically into the back, throwing him ungraciously over the tail gate. The big man bounded after, as though the height of the truck was nothing, and dropped an immense arm to pull his comrade back into the body of the truck and under its canvas tilt. Gathering his wind, the German motioned Petr to sit. He was not alone, some half dozen or so dazed men and

boys and one solitary weeping woman sat huddled towards the front of the truck. The giant grinned from a filthy stained mouth. He spoke in a Russian dialect.

“Welcome to the Snow Battalion, boy.” He saluted, and prodded a huge finger at him. “Now you’ll dig snow for the Reich!”

Petr, who found himself sitting on a pile of boxes and sacking could easily see over the tail of the truck as it crawled dismally along the road. His last blurred glimpse of the doomed house and the slowly receding village for over fifty years was of ’Galshi’, the little dog, sitting beside the Tsar’s shovel sniffing the air, as though wondering if this was just another game with rats and rabbits.

**FOREST**

Rovno. October 1944.

*"… amongst wolves howl: amongst pigs devour."*
Borderlands Proverb

The young village boy who had led him far through the night to his allotted place vanished like a ghost into the darkness, without having spoken a word.

"God go with you, child.", he whispered after the shade, "And go with me." A shade among other shades, for there was no moon, and the few stars blinked only as dim disinterested observers of the world below. He lay along the damp bank, his back against a fallen tree trunk. He waited as men who have never told the time of day or night by clocks wait, sensing the passage of the secret moon across the heavens as the world moved quietly onwards. Once, a little while after he had settled, an owl glided close above his head. A vague unlighted silhouette. Silent and all seeing as it passed by. It let out its prolonged piercing territorial shriek as it swept on into the endless night. It surprised him as night time cries surprise all men who hear them without warning. His hand reached to his throat, and he held the talisman for a moment.

*"Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night."* he whispered the words of Psalm 90, worshipping each syllable.

Across the darkness he heard the foxes, and could smell their scent on the breeze. By their calls he knew how far off they were, and in which direction they were hunting, heading to a farm or *dacha* perhaps, over and far beyond the old road to Rivne. He knew the road was there, close by where he lay, but failed to discern its outline, accustomed though he was to prolonged darkness, and to long cold nights waiting for men to come. Or go. Or pass by counted but unhindered.

The dead Autumn leaves which lay in wind strewn mounds on the black ground rustled faintly, then louder, ruffled by movement. Something passed along the ground close to his boots, a small night mammal probably, out hunting. Just as he was hunting. Or a rat. He didn't mind rats. In the work camps they became like old friends, or at least neighbours, and sometimes fell captive for the pot, lured by a prisoner's carefully laid crumbs of bread. He prayed that it wasn't a serpent. Since he was a boy he'd been afraid of those long satanic snakes. The poisonous gliding reptiles which cursed the cornfields at the harvest's end, seeking the rats and mice with a cold, unblinking eye. Resisting the temptation to jab his boot at the sound, he imagined the creature skimming silently by him. Now still, anticipating, poised to strike. Now moving, searching again, undulating with speed.

He shuddered at the thought of a snake, and drew the thin greatcoat closer about his throat and his soul's protection. He was frightened now, he knew that, because he was muttering to himself. "This coat barely keeps out the dew" let alone the soft wind which was beginning to disturb the night air. An Italian coat, for warmer battlefields, taken from the stores captured when the garrison at Lut'sk fled from the Red Army the Winter before. "Viktor of course, had managed to find a better coat. One of those warm *Wehrmacht* mountain coats with a fur collar. I could have had that coat." But Viktor's coat had been torn apart along with the big man himself, when distant Soviet artillery had found the range of their forest campsite.

He listened, patiently holding his breath and lying as still as he could. Eventually he heard the small nocturnal traveller as it climbed the opposite bank tossing leaves aside, and went busily on its way into the night. “A stoat after all.”

*“…he shall cry to me, and I will hear him.”* again he breathed the words.

He realised he was in a small depression, not quite a circle exactly, but round and longer at one end, like a teardrop. He could tell that from the slender trunks of the birch trees, standing darker against the dark night. The leaves and branches rustled softly above and around his hiding place, as though the night was filled with the sound of shivering giants.

“Colder now, it must be close to dawn.” Carefully he lifted his head above the fallen log, and thought perhaps he could tell the line of the road, and make out the tree line where the other *Strelets* should be, and the men with the machine gun. Waiting, watching. All of them as cold and hungry as he was. All of them just as frightened. He moved a little just to warm his numb legs, boots grating on the stones, and flexed his fingers as a musician might, moving the cold, hard barrel of his rifle closer to him as he eased in his place.

“At least this is a good rifle.” Not like one of those long, clumsy old Soviet guns, which could trip a man up as he ran. “No, a good German *’kurz’*.” A short-barrelled Mauser with a beautiful bolt action, and a five round magazine. Only 4 kilos it weighed. “A real sniper’s weapon.”, he chuckled to himself. He loved the gun, and unlike many of his comrades who took any chance to throw away their heavy rifles and pick up a lighter sub machine gun from a Red Army corpse, this was his delight. He smoothed the half metre barrel lovingly, but resisted the temptation to ease the bolt. The oiled snap of the metal breech would make a sudden noise, and men had been killed by such careless sounds, in colder places on darker nights.

His comrades, strange how they still used the old Red term, not brothers but comrades, in the small company of fighters still alive, believed him to be a crack shot. A single deadly hunter among patriotic farmer’s boys and small-town philosophers. He owed it all to what he would never confess was a single lucky shot with his beautiful *’kurz’*, silencing an enemy machine gunner, behind his chattering gun, with what the old men called a ’wolf shot’, between the gunner’s eyes. That one and only round was the reason he was here.

“Fool.” he said softly to himself. “If you’d missed that bastard you would be home safe and warm, and not alone on the far side of the road to Rivne, waiting in the darkness for another chance to kill.” Far off the foxes barked again, much fainter than before, a sound barely audible to men, but he could hear it and shrunk back behind the log. “Or get yourself killed.”

*“He will overshadow thee with his shoulders.”* He kissed the talisman once more.

He settled into the silence, listening. The wind had picked up a little, and the birches shimmered like a pan of water almost reaching the boil on a camp fire. Each tree was gently shedding a leaf from time to time. He could see them in their final flights to earth.

“Lighter now. A little lighter.” He looked upwards. To the east the sky above the horizon had turned cobalt. The fallen tree trunk gradually became clear in outline, and he was better able to consider his surroundings. The rotten bole stretched a body’s length to his right, and behind him disappeared deep into the undergrowth. The smell was the perfume of his Carpathian childhood. The musky odour of the fungi consuming the dead trunk, that sweet scent of the crisp bark of the living trees, the reek of dying leaves, and the vast moist bouquet of the deep, damp, all-consuming earth. Suddenly all this returned to his throat like incense

lingering, unnoticed in the corners of a church. Recalled to life by a muffled bell or whispered prayer.

Or soft returning light. Why he wondered did the darkness smell so strong; as though heaven had trapped earth close, wrapped in the night's all-embracing cloak. He was cold, and could see little, but slowly the cobalt skyline gave way to indigo, and his surroundings became clearer still. He found that he was lying at the edge of a deep hollow, on the gentle slope of what must have been a shell crater long ago. From the Tsar's war perhaps, or when the Poles had fought for the province. The heavy shell had carved old trees apart and younger growth replaced the shredded woodland. The centre of the hollow was meshed in a stand of old nettles and tall umbelliferous flowers, sickly now in late October, heads drooping, bordered and lightly veiled by the skeletons of dying birch leaves. Beneath the profusion of the explosion site something rich and sweet was still feeding the flowers above. A pessimistic thought crossed his anxious mind. "This is a good place to hide a soldier's grave." He shuddered.

"…*nor shall the scourge come near*- Amen. Amen", he whispered.

The wind crept over the edge of the crater, and the flowers waved in the breeze, dispelling the mist around them. What poets would call the spreading fingers of dawn crept with it, bringing the first sounds of songbirds. Buntings, making their endless *'tsi-tsi-tsi'* which, he realised, meant they were waiting much closer to the marshes than he thought they would be.

"Much closer." His mind worried at that.

"This crater could be anywhere, this could be any road." Betrayal was as common as loyalty since the NKVD returned to Ukraine. The guide was only a boy, or seemed so. The youngster had not spoken, not a welcome, nor a prayer, not one single word of the old Rus tongue.

"Perhaps he was a *Moskali,* a Russian? Or a Red Army soldier?"

Many *Strelets* had been sold to the NKVD for the price of a father's life, or the promise of a lighter sentence. Sold even for money by a village *hetman* with a traitor's ambition. He hadn't been to the village. Some patriotic sympathisers, old 'Home Guard' men from the *General Gouvernment* days had met them near the river bridge, in a hiding place from where they could see the sentries far off, pacing listlessly back and forth as the village men hurriedly conferred with the *Sotnik*, an elderly veteran of more than one battle on this Ukrainian soil. As night fell, they were handed some rations and tea. Rations. All the villagers could spare, with the Collective taking more and more as punishment for Ukraine's failure to resist the Fascists to the last man.

"Stalin and starvation.", he spat out the words.

He turned and felt behind his back for the hemp bread-bag which lay there on the damp ground. Laying his rifle carefully against the dead log, he felt for the hunk of flinty black bread, a hard baked *bublik* wrapped carefully inside. With his knife he cut off a small piece, and lifted it to his mouth, smelling the familiar dark flavour of rye. He chewed slowly, ruminating. His grandmother had made rye bread like this, before the war, hot and spread with rich white butter. He'd run from the house to school with handful of it to devour on the way. He drank some cold tea, just a mouthful, from the battered tin bottle; he didn't want to have to move to pass water, not now the light was growing stronger.

The road, not much more than a wide track in reality, led from the devastated ruins of the recaptured town, towards what the Soviet Propaganda men called The Front, far beyond L'viv more than a hundred kilometres away.

"The Germans," so the *Sotnik* said, "are leaving us with even more speed than they arrived three years ago!". Their own Ukrainian 'Front' was here, here deep in Volhynia and Galicia, where scores of UPA units, some as many as a thousand men under arms, fought to keep the Red Army at bay. For that reason, for that faith alone, across this rutted road, in among the trees and bushes there lay a dozen men, hidden, waiting in silence as the slow day broke above their hidden heads. They were waiting for one man.

"A General! A Soviet General! A Hero of the Soviet Union, and a favourite of Stalin, 'The Boss'." Their *Sotnik* drummed it into them: "A General!". He would reach this point on his journey from Rivne to the battlefields, "but would go no further." They all laughed at the prospect.

This was a quiet forest passage. A few shell holes scarred the roadside, the remains of a military cart, a single grave topped by a steel helmet marking another, more permanent passage. The light was much better now, and what little mist there was lingered in odd patches, like small malevolent spirits reluctant to end their night's work and relinquish the land to the day. Few, if any the village men had told them, would pass by. "Perhaps there's a farmer or a herdsman lucky enough to have livestock left." He spoke under his breath. No-one else. "No children, please God, no children, laughing, playing. Dying, like at Pstruh." He shuddered at the mistake he'd made that day.

Hearing the tinkling bell, he rolled over onto his stomach and slowly raised his head enough to see out of his hiding place.

Along the road, or rather moving close alongside it, to avoid the ruts and bumps left by tanks and trucks in their dozens, came a *panje* cart. A low four wheeled open bed piled with a few cabbages, pulled by the thinnest horse in the whole world, rattled noisily along with an unmistakable peasant farmer flicking the reins idly as they moved at a pace which would disgrace a snail. Fortunately, the man, who looked almost as thin as the horse, had no dog to run in and out of the trees and disclose their hiding places. So, plodding along their steps marked only by the little bell, man and horse passed on their chosen way in the history of the old road.

No-one else came. The low moaning of the breeze through the branches and a few song birds alone disturbed the morning air. Larks for the most part, and, now and again, a call he didn't recognise.

"A Wryneck maybe?", he wondered, "Or a Scaup?". Cradling his rifle in his arms, he lay on his back in the quiet morning, and looked through the thinning leaves up to the sky beyond. High up on a warm spiral of air he watched a single hawk ascending as though towards heaven. All the birds fell silent, sensing the presence of its omnipotence over all the land. There were no storks now, no easy pickings for the hawk; they had clattered their noisy way south long before, taking their luck with them for the Winter.

"Perhaps this General will not come.", he chuckled.

He was hungry. In the village, the men would be eating what breakfast the women could find, and the children would set to feeding the hens. He was always hungry at this time of the

morning, long years in field and forest had set his body's pace. He sucked and munched slowly at another hunk of the black bread. He was thinking of food.

"An egg, a soft white egg, with a warm heart shimmering like the golden dome of the cathedral in Kyiv.". Yes!

"With salt. And real, hot coffee."

He was hungry. In the camps they thought of food more than life. Fifty grams of bread had been worth more than a man's breath, but an egg. An egg was worth a soul. He patted the talisman once more.

*"For he hath delivered me from the snare of the hunters…"*. He muttered an Amen.

Once, once he remembered, when he was a boy, they had all gone to a big town. Zhitomir. He never forgot it. Days of preparation to ride for many hours to the town, all six of them, mother, father and the three girls and him. They had left Misha the dog behind, as he might like the town life too much and stay there with a fat butcher, so his mother said. This country town father told him was where his great-great-grandfather had bought, with real gold, his family's freedom from serfdom.

"Freedom." He shook his head. "Freedom."

But the boy thought little of Zhitomir, as indeed anyone with a passing knowledge of the better towns of the steppes might not, but he remembered one shop. A small wooden fronted shop with cakes in the window. Great big priest-blessed 'Poltava' cakes, smeared with jam and walnuts, and honey cakes, drenched in real white sugar. A dozen of them waiting on a virginal cloth. Not hard cakes like grandmother made before she fell ill, but soft, and moist and shimmering, like snow-white angels piled on an altar.

There was a noise. Far off, but quite discernible over the wind's low murmur. His fellows would hear it too, by now. Engines. He thought for a moment it was an aircraft coming to capture the hawk's supernal domain.

"No. No!", he murmured. The high-pitched sound was coming along the road. Quickly he reached for his rifle, flexing his fingers to warm and ease the muscles. He checked the small box magazine. Five rounds, dry and ready. With practised hands, he pulled the bolt, clicking a single 7.92mm round into the chamber, and flicked the sight upwards. Ready.

Once more his hand reached to the talisman and his lips moved, almost without sound.

*"I will deliver him."* "Deliver me too, Lord.", he whispered.

The noise of engines grew louder, and he could sense the urgency with which his prey rushed onwards. A small column, three dark green '*GAZ-67's,* 'Gorki's' the Soviets called them, came bumping noisily into sight, their Red Army drivers throwing them along beside the rutted roadway, passengers bouncing beside them. Off to the left a machine gun started firing, a slow stuttering, and the first field car slewed to a halt, and like a dying tortoise fell on its flank. Wounded men fell from the open sides into the dirt, with screams and curses.

*"A thousand shall fall at thy side…but it shall not come nigh to thee."* Then he swore as he slid the breech closed.

He fired his first shot, working the bolt rapidly. The symphony of firing grew as others began to join the ecstatic chorus. The second 'Gorki' stopped. Khaki men fell or threw themselves down alongside it. He fired again, and, aiming as carefully as fear and fight allowed, raised himself onto one knee, looking for the 'wolf shot'. Bullets were humming through the trees around, like crazed hornets speeding homeward, angry at finding no living thing to sting. He could hear nothing but the machine guns and engines. More field cars were arriving at high speed. The Russians opened fire with a heavy machine gun. He saw it, urgently swinging in a high arc, like a dancer's flight. Sonorously it cut through trees and ambushers with ease, felling life before it like a headsman's sword.

Again, he worked the bolt, desperately seeking the 'wolf shot'.

"Yes. Yes!" He laughed and swore as he fired.

And again.

*"…the arrow that flieth in the day."* "Yes! ... and … a…".

The khaki soldiers worked their way slowly across the ambush site, spread in a long line, each man a metre apart. NKVD troops a few metres behind the line, far enough from the danger of a dying renegade's last shot, watching each of the soldier's movements with mistrusting eyes. The NKVD had taken the dead General away an hour ago. The Sergeant dropped over the edge of the crater, almost on top of a shattered corpse, followed by another man. The slaughtered ruin lay there in a patch of blood drenched earth and leaves, one stilled hand held to its prayerless throat, rifle cast aside in death. Above the dead man a host of tiny flies spun silently in a seraphic cloud.

The Uzbek soldier, the High Command preferred soldiers from distant nationalities for this throat-cutting work in Ukraine and the borderlands, slung his sub-machine gun, and picked up the rifle. A good rifle, a Mauser. A *'kurz'* they called them. Worth good money if he sold it to a hunter back home. He worked the bolt, eased the box magazine and grinning held up the last unfired round to show his Sergeant.

Behind them, an NKVD man stood on top of the depression.

"Anything?"

The Sergeant picked up the bloodied bread bag, and tipped its contents on the ground. "No … Nothing worth eating or keeping."

His final glance saw the talisman quite by chance, the brass gave off a dull glow beneath the unmoving fingers. He drew his knife and cut the thin leather cord around the neck, picking the brass cartridge case out with the point. The Uzbek drew near, maybe sensing value, as the Sergeant worked open the pinched brass end, and a small scrap of parchment fell into his hand.

The Sergeant, a Moscow man, read the old church Slavonic words with difficulty: *'Psalm 90'* "Ah. Yes.", he said. But he was clever enough not to read aloud with the NKVD around.

Some country priest, some lettered brother or careful mother, had copied this psalm out in beautiful script. He remembered it well from the old days when God lived in Russia. He rolled the parchment thinly again, and slowly replaced the sacred script inside the metal. He threw it to the NKVD man, who let the word of God fall beneath his boot.

The Uzbek looked at him, unknowing.

Pulling himself out of the hollow, the Sergeant said under his breath *“I will fill him with length of days; and I will show him my salvation.”*

He spoke too quietly for the NKVD man to hear, and to the Uzbek soldier said in a low voice: “He thought it would protect him.” The Uzbek shrugged, and moved on.

**RUIN**

Pripyat. May 1945.

*"Love and fear cannot be hidden."*
Borderlands Proverb

"The earth was slowly coming to rest, settling as the rolling thunder of the guns echoed away across the river.", Osip continued with his tale. "Like a wave dies back, yes?" He, a University man, had been a Column Commander in the post-war fighting. His authority still lingered around him, like a rough aftershave, a halo of recognition, and of leadership.

Unseen batteries were still bombarding the distant village in a desultory, reluctant way, as though some great battle of importance was raging, and not merely the hunting down of a broken band of traitors to the Motherland. The occasional brisk crack of rifle fire signalled where a desperate man had broken cover only to fall almost immediately. Overhead, the sparkling dawn sky slowly gave way to a livid, swollen pall of smoke which rose persistently heavenwards as though Elijah himself was carried upon it.

At the forest's edge, where what might in a real war be called the front line of the depleted company had begun its futile last fight, the ruined blood-dripped timbers of an old abandoned dacha clung to the edge of a dank, smoking shell hole in the rich, black earth. For twenty metres around a sickly garland of death, a smashed torso or two, a head, a limb here and there, some innards of a pig or a man, it little mattered which, strung on lower branches and not yet stinking. Osip's description of the battlefield was as vivid as a television documentary. He was there again, his face florid, animated, his voice quivered with age and with rage.

"At the bottom of the damp crater sat the man, swathed in the acrid smoke of the war. He was a young man, or old. Who could tell. Dressed in blackened rags that might once have been a uniform, one bootless foot was wrapped in bloody straw." He shook his head, a tear fell. "A storm-tossed scarecrow might have been better founded than this poor creature. Not an ounce of fat stuck to his bones, indeed his very life barely clung to them." Osip gestured, hand to heaven. "He was a man, just." His brittle soul, the last desire for being, refusing to escape until the final shallow breath had uttered from the broken refuge inside him, had knowingly crawled from the deep recesses of the living corpse, ready to leap from the empty eyes at an instant. "Around his shuddering feet lay the remains of a meagre soldier's kit, a jammed rifle, some cartridges, a torn bread bag and a tattered woollen cap, barely enough to signify a warrior's presence."

"His scrawny buttocks involuntarily squirmed as though to gain purchase on the steep crater side, and he voided himself again. The wretched being, now little more than a battle ruined imbecile put his matted head on his knees, covered it with his muddy, bleeding hands and began to moan softly, as though intoning an unheard prayer, or expressing some old country song which drifted from a childhood memory. Who knew?"

"It was a lull.", Osip spread his hands wide. "The fight had stopped."

Sudden, unexpected, the tranquil moments allowed a small bird, a bull-finch, to be heard away in the forest, unmolested by war.

“The guns had stopped firing, but the smoke still drifted upwards over the river. The well-fed Russian soldiers were waiting in the forest, only a few hundred metres away, waiting in silence for one of the few hungry survivors that remained alive among our dead to give away his position with a careless rifle shot.”

Above the moaning man a soft noise sucked through the black mud, and with a low groan, a second fighter pressed his aching back against the dacha’s dank ruins. Soft lichen, damp moss and drying gore brushed over the insignia on his collar, as Osip breathed heavily, slowly and listened to the sounds from the hollow pit below. “I lay still, very still. My heart broke.” A few metres away to his left a group of three of his fellows, ragged, torn and beaten, shouldered their rifles and cautiously slithered and crawled off to the river and their escape. “Go! Go quick!” Osip whispered to them, waving a shaking hand. Hollow exhausted eyes spoke a grim message to their leader as they passed the crater and vanished down the slope, leaving just two men alive behind them.

Osip halted, sipped from his glass, and drew a breath.

“I crouched against the charred wood, whispered the broken wretch’s name, encouraging him to crawl out of the mire and escape. I called his patronymic, gently reminding him of home, and ordered him, urged him, then begged him to come away and live.” Urging swiftly and with desperation, Osip tried his best, his voice trembling.

“At the bottom of the shell hole, far more than halfway to death, the scarecrow gave out a long thin inhuman cry, like a forlorn animal, a desolate wail of despair that carried over the forest’s edge and far away into the distant morning. The solitary bird was silent now, but the rustle of the low branches, and a sharp snapping home of rifle bolts told that the enemy soldiers were edging forwards.” Advancing cautiously, they were anticipating a last resistance as was so often encountered, from a dying man or a zealot intending to end his war expensively.

“I could wait no longer.” he murmured.

Slipping the sub-machine gun strap of his shoulder and laying it down, Osip the leader drew a heavy nine-millimetre Makarov pistol from his pocket. He cocked it, mouthed a word of prayer, and aimed at the broken man. “Suddenly the wretched, blackened figure started up, throwing out its doomed hands to heaven.” Surprised, Osip hesitated, and the man slowly looked around lifting his grim face towards the sound of the pistols snap.

“I fired twice in quick succession. Big pistol,”. He mimed the shots.

Below him, almost without sound the mortal body collapsed as though it was nothing more than an empty sack, sinking down into the black warm earth, the soul imperceptibly twitching away to its own destiny. He hastily replaced the weapon in his pocket, and as the sounds of the approaching Russians grew louder, Osip crossed himself wearily, then, shouldering his sub-machine gun, crawled snake-like away and followed the others to the river and safety.

Silence, bearing a thin, tremulous thread of regret, floated over the room. To meet it, I raised my glass and sipped a little of the harsh lemon vodka, then replacing it on the table-top as quietly as possible waited for some answer to questions I could not ask, an explanation for the tale I had just been told.

The old man sat wrapped in the deep shadows of memory and after a time, stirred slowly. “Are you alright?”, I asked. It was a stupid question.

Now in terms of the hundreds of small skirmishes, scores of ambushes and endless betrayals that saw the inevitable defeat of the Borderland partisan groups in the 1940's and 1950's at the hands of the Red Army and NKVD, this was a minor encounter. Just a few dead Galicians, a Soviet throat or two cut, another village burned, and a dozen families exiled to their fate.

I said as much to Osip.

He shrugged and shook his head.

"The broken wretch" --- he named him at last as Andriy --- "couldn't be left to be taken by the NKVD", he responded, and I knew that well enough. "They would 'acquire from him' through the skills of the Georgian knifemen," --- Osip used that exact term, 'acquire'--- "his real name, that of his home village and thus discover his family. In torment he would send a ripple of death far beyond him back even to his childhood, before meeting his own inevitable end by bullet. Or rope. Or worse.". He shuddered.

"One death?". He lifted an old arthritic index finger.

Old Osip put the question in that simplistic and obvious way that the Galicians always use.

"One death or hundreds?"

I sat without uttering a word as he threw back his vodka and cleared his throat.

"In this case however," in this small pointless battle fought near a forgotten river, outside an unnamed village, "in this case," he explained with a tremulous voice, "the man at the bottom of the pit was Andriy.".

"Andriy?", I asked the question.

"Andriy.  My elder brother."

**LOST**

Volhynia. June 1946.

*"The field can see. The forest can hear."*
Borderlands Proverb

The sky, the very air surrounding Galynka was dismal, unnatural, deadened by the absence of penetrating light, relieved only by a few thin wisps of mist which drifted as half-remembered ghosts among the silent trees. An odd, preternatural form of complicity seemed to have come into being, to have somehow slipped into existence across the forest, established between the few unseen animals, the infrequent birds, the deep shaded plants, and even the trees: especially the trees. Forbidding, slender and silent, some cloistered in conspiratorial clumps, others solitary, single soaring shafts, scarred with dark lichen, ignored by their close-copsed fellows.

Here, in the deep forest north of the Irshava road, when night fell, fading out the falling day, the terrors of that long dark passage of unquiet time before dawn would be unbearable to any but the strongest spirit. A place where wind and rain and cold would join with malevolence, encouraging hopeless flight. She must be away from the dank forest before night came deeply, irrevocably on. Black and hideous, filled with death cold vapours spoken by harsh winds. Night. Moonless, hard. Alive with its secret perils, it struck fear into Galynka's soul.

She stopped at the top of a fern covered bank, set down her bundle and stood listening to the wind, looking around mournfully in hope of a landmark; the great crucified oak she had passed by a long time ago, or the stream she had crossed a while after. Daylight, what there was of it, was waning, grudgingly giving way to gloom. Already the deepest shade was knee height, and deepening still. Somewhere near, they must be near, her father and brothers would be waiting for bread and news. She must have passed them by. Why hadn't they seen her? Called her name? Come after her? A breeze stirred the fern fronds against her legs, questing fingers waving in all directions and in none.

She would go back. Not homewards, but the way she had come through the forest. The way she had been told. She would find them. They must be here. Galynka walked slowly, silently through the sunless shadowed spaces which closed in behind her troubled way. As she dropped down a steep bank, ferns whispered threats to her, and the trees struck at her spirits with their own dark passions. The last suggestion of the passing day had almost vanished from the world. Soundlessly, night and its nightmares overtook Galynka. She was lost.

At last, wiping a tear away, he spoke again. The café was quieter now, the girls behind the counter were chattering, we were among the last lingering customers.

"She couldn't find us.", he told me broken voiced. "There were only a handful of us left by then, and we were driven from the last refuge, westwards, away from the deep forest towards the marshes. The Russians moved slower than us, but they moved day and night, without stopping. They had dogs too."

The hint of despair in his voice hadn't dimmed with the passage of the years. I could tell. Within his old frame, the man was still running fast through the lightless, endless forest.

"We kept running. For days, yes, many days. Then we found Taras and his group of fighters, not far from the river. We all moved westward again, maybe eight of us. We hid, we stole food, until the soldiers came and found us we didn't even know we'd crossed into the French Zone."

He stopped and breathed deeply.

"We had buried our dead, as best we could in the wet, black soil of the forest. My father, my brother too, his wounds bled for many hours, and he cried. That was the day Galynka was to come. Somehow as night began to close in on us, we lost them for a while. You know the Russians often found other amusements besides hunting us." He sat hunched, as though fixed with pain.

"I was at the rear, covering the others as they waded across the stream. My brother's cries were pitiful, the others were swearing, breathing heavily, but I heard it. Far off, it was, and high, like a vixen's scream, sharp, quick. One scream only, dying on the cold night wind."

He waved a hand uselessly. "Somewhere out there in the forest, my sister still lies. Now after more than fifty years I know she didn't return to the village." For a moment he was silent.

"Maybe she fell?", he lied to himself. "Maybe they found her and……". His voice trailed off.

"She was just ten years old."

The café was much quieter now, empty bar for us two, and the girls behind the counter, cheerfully clearing up.

"Time for me to go. My daughter will be missing me." He shuffled into his overcoat and we shook hands. I never met him again.

"What are you doing?", asked Viktor the driver. "Why are we stopped here? There's nothing but forest forever out there."

The road behind us was quiet. The forest stood still and silent in the hot sun. He shrugged his shoulders and got back into the old Skoda, fiddling with the radio. We were thirty kilometres west of Irshava. It was somewhere north of here, I was sure.

I walked just a few meters into the dark trees. Not a sound apart from a hidden thrush cheerfully making his way hunting snails above my footsteps.

I stood, drew a breath, and shouted at the top of my voice.

"Galynka!"

I eased myself back into the passenger seat. “Why did you do that?” Viktor asked. “What for?”

“For someone’s child.”

“Whose child?” He asked slipping into gear. I shrugged.

**SAVIOUR**

Carpathian Mountains. October 1947.

*"For every illness, a herb grows."*
Borderlands Proverb

"The American, if he was in fact an American, but yes, I think he was one", Yosip shrugged old shoulders, "he came late at night."

Autumn was almost gone. The distant warmth and the lingering, cloying feel of a poor, half-hearted and ill-gathered harvest, had all but faded from the memory of the village, as it settled and steeled itself for the coming of the iron-hard darkness of Winter on the eastern edge of the Carpathians.

No frost yet, nor any rain worth the women's chatter and an old man's thoughtful judgement. Apart from a few sharp and desultory showers which left the fields glistening each morning, there was barely a puddle remaining by dawn broad enough for even the smallest child to leap.

"God, it seemed, still forgot us. I was laid in a corner, a bed not far from the warm stove, where the widow Olena could keep an eye on me, and I wouldn't be left to bleed or worry to death." His hand strayed to his thigh.

"How did it happen? The wound I mean, not the American.", I asked, settling into the deep chair. The wind was rising and the first heavy drops of rain skitted against the darkening window. He gestured and I stood to draw the curtains close against the night. "An UPA propaganda raid into Romania. Stupid. I was a guide for part of the way, and we ran into a patrol. They were silenced, of course, but I got a bad flesh wound in this." He tapped his right thigh. "To make it worse I fell, and broke the big bone too. Mikhail carried me most of the way back here. Two days."

"Lucky, eh?", I asked.

"Yes. None of those UPA men came back. Betrayed." Yosip shook his head. "Betrayed again. Me? The village bone-setter fixed my leg. A good job too. Not so much pain, even now. Well maybe sometimes? The wound was worse, and the old women tied big poultices, hot, around it. The smell was bad. But, as you see," he waved his hands like a conjuror," I lived!".

A gust of heavier rain struck the window behind me. "Three months, maybe a little more, I lay there." I nodded and he drifted back to the village.

The tiny ikon gleamed with a dull reflective light next to the small stuttering candle. There old Father Fyodor kept quiet vigil.

"The old Father watched me too, and prayed, you know?". Half a smile from Yosip.

He had been their priest for a generation and a half, no-one could fail to recognise that. The 'Moskali', stupid oafs, had killed their own priests thirty, forty years before, and now none among them knew that God's acolytes still existed in one distant corner of Ukraine, though God it seemed, still forgot the borderlands. Father Fyodor dozed fitfully on his bench, lifting

his bearded chin from his chest and raising an eyelid at the sound of muted voices coming over the threshold. He sniffed an unfamiliar scent.

Yosip eased himself, stretching his leg.

“He was not tall, the American. Yet he had to stoop to enter. The man spoke the language well enough, though with a few, what do you call them? Ah, yes thank you, inflections, from much further eastwards, and yes, you could tell his father from his face and bearing. He stood like a bear, no, no a wolf perhaps, and the eyes. Cold, eternally watchful, alert in the dim illumination of the oil lamp.

No-one took any notice of me, lying there in the darkened corner. Maybe they explained, maybe not. I saw it all.”

Within a few minutes they knew all of them, the aged village Hetman, Dmitri the baker, even stupid Hnyda, that the visitor could never pass as one of them. Sasha who had been to L’viv as a young man, just once, and ever afterwards was regarded by all the district, especially the women, as well-travelled, if not actually sophisticated, recognised it.

“It was the man’s smell. A lifetime in an American city had scrubbed the dark soil of home from this man’s pores. No trace of the country stench of the borderlands. Of kvass and horilka, of cabbage and kasha, the thousand small flavours and lingering reek of generations of village life, none of those lay within him.”

Yosip chuckled. “He was too clean.” He sat pensive for a moment.

“Sasha thought, or so he said after the man had gone, that he smelled soap, or maybe it was a foreign fragrance, not like the deep rich incense of the secret church, but softer and sweeter, you understand?” I nodded.

At a distance, they all agreed sagely, he could pass for a Galician or a Pole, a town dweller possibly; he would not be noticed in a crowd, unless you were looking for him. But close, here in the small dacha, grained as it was with the grime and rough living of many generations, there could be no mistake.

“The American wore his mantle of cleanliness like a saint’s halo.” The baker said so. Father Fyodor raised his rheumy eyes and looked with benign interest at the newcomer. In the suffused light of the battered lamp he could see, and smell, the man’s halo distinctly. It subsumed his body entirely. Perhaps, the old priest mumbled to himself, it was more like an incandescent martyr’s shroud. He closed his tired eyes and went back to sleep.

“The entire village slept. My wound troubled me too much. I lay still, trying not to trouble it more.”

Only the small circle stayed awake. The anxious Hetman longed for this welcome, yet unwelcome visitor, half avenging angel, half angel of death, to be gone from their sinner’s midst. Dmitri, fretted that now his loaves would go unbaked on this long night of vigil, and Sasha the ‘ladies’ man, longed for a warm, full bed, and later sleep. The ancient Father Fyodor stirred once, and seeing that nothing had altered, crossed himself and slipped easily back into his venerable slumber. Hnyda lay curled by the stove, alongside the untroubled dogs.

“The American sat at the rough oak table, hands before him, palms down. Silent. The Hetman asked his name, and the curt reply was ‘Friend’, nothing more. Dmitri brought him a bowl of kasha with lumps of fat pork sausage in it, and Sasha apologized that they had no ‘American beefsteak’ to give him.” Yosip laughed at the memory of the words, “beefsteak, eh!”.

The stranger merely looked at him, and after closely examining the wooden spoon he was given, he began to eat. Slowly, and methodically, without pleasure or hunger, he ate. Distanced from food and place he moved the spoon in regular small motions. The Hetman followed each spoonful from dish to mouth with famished eyes.

“It was wrong. All wrong! Sasha glanced at Dmitri. They looked at me. No-one in the whole of the world, surely, given a bowl of the widow Olena’s meat kasha, she who was known to be the finest cook in all the district, would fail to devour it as such a dish deserved to be devoured. I watched as the traveller took the piece of bread carefully, and broke it into small pieces. After each spoonful of kasha, he neatly placed a piece of bread in his mouth and chewed slowly, as though tasting nothing. Dmitri was dismayed, for this was his bread. Fine bread. Rye with caraway seeds in it, as fragrant as a lover’s kiss, and soft and dark and rich. His best baking.” Yosip smacked his lips remembering. “The visitor did not touch the glass of horilka at all. He drank nothing.”

As he ate his supper in silence, his hosts studied him further, though he had given little, nothing, away. After all, he was one of them, if a generation distant and a world removed. They would surely know that.

“The Hetman thought he had weak hands.” Yosip studied his own wrinkled aged bear’s paws. “Strong enough to carry out hard work. Or to fight. But they were unmanly hands, showing pale and almost white in the light from the lamp. No scars, no cuts, no marks.” They bore no stigmata to show the passage of a hard life in the outdoors of the great Carpathian Mountains in Summer and Winter.

“Maybe he even wore gloves? Dmitri envied him his black leather Soviet tankers jacket.” That alone was perfect, though it fitted too well perhaps, the man looked decently fed for a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in these times of want. “And the army boots were too new. Like a day-old Quartermaster’s issue, I thought, but perhaps the man had a long road to walk in them, eh?”

The baker, who exuded his own dark and subterranean redolence of rye and corn and yeast, wondered if the Red Army pack which lay at the man’s feet was stuffed with gold. Or dollars. Almost certainly, he thought, a gun.

Sasha, who lived his life in occasional danger from the unwanted responses of angry husbands and outraged fathers around about, wondered why the visitor carried no knife. All of the men, the real men, in the province, apart from the priests and the pistol armed party functionaries, carried a knife. Not to kill, and not always for brave posture, but for the thousands of small tasks required of Carpathian life in field or forest.

No-one asked why he had come to them. He simply passed through their lives, touching them briefly, as he went on to carry out whatever mighty task had called him to this wind-torn corner of Western Ukraine. Better perhaps, thought the baker, that they did not ask.

“Sasha at last cleared the man’s supper bowl and spoon from the table, and we noticed that not one single crumb of bread remained to be swept away, all had been consumed. He left the

glass of horilka untouched, the other two had placed their hands palms down on the oak, just like the man had. Like poker players!". I laughed with him, urging the tale.

The soft and occasionally flickering light dropped from the lamp wick. The baker's strong, kneading hands were ingrained with decades of flour. The Hetman's blotched and deformed from half a century of hard work, arthritis and now poverty; a faint tremor running through the fingers of the left hand, almost imperceptible, as the brushing of fingertips across an invisible piano, touching, not playing, invisible keys. Without even thinking, Sasha did the same thing, placing both hands before him.

"Now, his hands were small, his fingers long, like a clerk's hands," Yosip gestured with vast digits, "and not a farm boy's hands. The long scar running from wrist to ring finger along the back of his left hand, I know, was a memory of an encounter with a young woman who simply did not understand why her sister was more attractive to Sasha. That wound, which had been deep, had healed badly, and with snow, and especially with rain, it hurt, and sometimes in cold years it even bled. I remember it."

Conversation between them, if any had taken place in the real sense of that word, lapsed completely, and the only sounds in the dacha were the gentle contrapuntal snoring of Hnyda and Father Fyodor, and the occasional sound from the snuffling dogs. The hint of a rising wind beyond the walls was no more than that, a mere breath at the door, a slight whisper at the chimney.

The four men sat.

Silent.

Three villagers observing the outsider, though none would have called him 'foreigner'. As though playing a soundless, unseen hand of poker.

"No-one took any notice of me, I watched everything. More than once the Hetman's head slumped forward a little and he woke himself with a start. I just lay there."

I held my breath, as Yosip did, feeling for the words.

"Sasha, he told me later, desperately wanted to ask this man, who had seen beyond the borders, beyond the mountains, what it was all like? To live in a place where people smelled fresh. Where there were cities like L'viv, bigger maybe than L'viv? Where people did not do back-breaking work for lies and a bowl of meatless soup?". Yosip snarled these words.

Even if he had asked, Sasha knew that the man could not answer him. His cold eyes gazing, far away, towards a promised land which could only be guessed at, and not by these three unwise men.

The wind rose a little further as the night drifted onwards, and still they waited quiet as mutes. In the darkness around the halo of struggling lamplight, for the ikon candle had long since spluttered to a hopeless end, it seemed as though a thousand ghosts sat watching the three watchers, anticipating some word or gesture, willing a question, demanding a sign, begging a response. Then, the dogs moved a little. Then one of them, Kolyma, the biggest, and long the best dog in the village for hunting rabbits, lifted his grey head and sniffed the air. The three men looked towards the dog, and then swiftly at each other. The American

followed their glances, as though almost for the first time he realised where he was, at a beginning or possibly, just possibly at an ending.

Kolyma stretched and stood unsteadily, facing the door and yawning with his enormous canine jaw. Beneath him the other dogs were stretching into wakefulness and Hnyda the idiot was wriggling, missing the warmth and reluctant to get up from his comfortable spot. Father Fyodor had opened one eye, then the other, only willing it seemed to observe and not participate in whatever was about to happen. Whatever that was to be.

“The knock at the door, soft and in three short taps was expected. It was for this coming the men had waited all night long. This was the knock of an UPA sentinel, but all knocking at doors surprised us then.”

For a knock at night, hard made with the butt of a rifle or a knout heralded deportation or death; and the two were usually the same in the end.

The American had been on his feet, pack in hand, before the baker, the Hetman and Sasha had even clenched their hands in damp fear.

“Sasha stood unsteadily and gently unbarred the door, then a whispered curse, a password perhaps, I couldn’t hear, was uttered in the darkness and the ragged man shuffled quickly in. Three years living hand to mouth in secret camps, raiding and killing, pursuing and being pursued, had turned this new arrival into little more than a cautious skeleton, with moist eyes larger than an owl’s.  His glance took in the entire room, dogs and idiot and men. His dark eyes lingered on me, then he doffed his cap to Father Fyodor, recognising holiness, shouldered his gun and crossed himself before the darkened ikon.

The cadaverous UPA fighter spoke one word to the American, ‘Come’ and walked out over the threshold into the moonless world, followed silently by the visitor. The door swung to with a soft click that sounded inside the dacha like the crack of doom. “I realised that without seemingly moving from the spot where he stood, the tattered foot soldier had drained the glass of horilka and inverted it to deny the devil a taste. You know this old way of ours?” I did.

The Hetman turned the lamp lower still, and Sasha and the baker went to the door. Outside darkness covered the Carpathian world, though a better countryman than either of them would have recognised the first tentative glimmer of a threat of morning, not so much in the sky as in the lifting breeze that kissed against their faces. The American and his deathly guardian had vanished into the chasm of night’s ending.

“The two men, without a glance or a word, walked back inside, and Sasha dropped the bar across the door.” Yosip mimicked the action, but gently, as if closing the entrance to a tomb.

Father Fyodor, in anticipation perhaps of God’s return, had lighted the ikon candle again. “He was praying very quietly. The dogs settled down next to the stove alongside the idiot Hnyda, and the silent night continued for a little while longer but my pain had eased, and I too slept.”

Yosip sighed, and lifted his head to listen to the rain outside.

## ROAD

Austria. October 1947.

*"Who does not gather up walks more easily."*
Borderlands Proverb

"Anywhere", I said again, "It could be anywhere between, oh, Kirchberg and Kalkalpen or as north as Alterwald. Austria's a pretty hilly place with more than a handful of passes. And that village, well 'Leopold's' their patron saint, there must be hundreds of names like that!".

I reached up and closed the open window against the first breath of Autumn drizzle. The study was cold, too big for modern times. He raised his thin hand in acknowledgement of my act. "Thank you, anyway," he said, "My descriptions are, as you know, some fifty years old, more than that, almost sixty." He shook his head at the passing of time, and smoothed the vast paper spread before him on the table. "It looks so different on a map, eh? So big. So interesting." I folded it away and sat down.

"Well, you set off, and in weather much like this?" I asked. He settled himself and continued, nodding gently.

"As far as I could tell, that lonely road ran away from me in a gentle curve. It seemed that as time passed the way was turning, climbing, almost imperceptibly towards my left as I steadily tramped onwards through the damp air which hung in droplets around. Yes, it soaked my thin coat, moistening my face as I walked on. The only sound in the whole world was the soft crunch of my boots on the roadway, and the softer effort of my breath. You know, I still listen, if I walk on gravel, or up a slope, to my feet and my old lungs."

Sometimes, he told me, he hummed, a country song, snatched from memory. Sometimes, more often, he sighed. An opaque wall moved with him as he strode on, like a shield protecting him from whatever existed to left or right of the roadway, hiding his path from sight. He thought there was water, somewhere off to the right, where he could hear a steadier trickle than the buzzing of the moist morning mist. Sure enough, he passed a stream, a small rill running downwards, so perhaps there was a hill on that side.

"I stopped for a moment. Not to take in my bearings, for there was no chance of that, my world, of vision and of sound, was nothing more than a poor stone's throw in any direction." He stopped to look at the little runnel, half-hidden in moss and grasses, gurgling like a happy child as it trickled over the stones beneath. In that soft, wet, claustrophobic air the stream alone proved that there was life along the road he walked.

"No bird song troubled the air; the birds had fled the thick mist and were singing in another world far from the road. No sign of any animal, not a sheep or goat, not even a hare loping off along the way, disturbed by the oncoming noise of a lone traveller, eh? I should like to have seen a hare, they bring luck in the Borderlands, you know that?". I didn't know.

“The slope was steadily increasing, I felt the breath come just a little harder as the path onwards steepened. Ahead something real, or half-real, began to form on the left-hand side of the way. As I walked towards it, it drew all of my attention, for there was nothing else for these wet eyes to focus on.” He shaped something indeterminate with his long fingers, something he often did, as if his words blessed something unseen, unknown.

“A large stone, taller than a man and three times as broad, leaned towards what might have been a precipice away beneath it.” Again, he stopped for a moment. Glad of the company, the presence of something which was real, and reminiscent of the world which he hoped still existed somewhere beyond the enveloping mist he was trapped in.

“I reached out and touched the cold stone; the surface was smooth, you see, it bore no trace of moss or lichen. No human mark either, save one which might have been that of a wedge, driven in to split the rock from its birthplace to deposit it here. It stood, vast and silent, like a sentinel guarding the way, marking the route for those who had one; suggesting, hinting at a direction for those who had none.”

Standing there, still, he heard the water trickle on from another tiny rivulet, and the humid, saturated air filled his ears with a tingling hiss, as though there was a snake close by. Alone in that vaporous world, he turned his back reluctantly on the great stone and walked on. “It was hard to leave it, maybe it was an old stone, one of faith or power, eh?” The rough road unfolded from the depths of the enveloping cloud as he moved steadfastly on towards its ever-moving mask.

Reaching what he took to be some sort of plateau, he sensed it was that, the road became softer somehow, ragged at the edges, as if the surface had been torn away by unseen hands. He walked slower now, planting his feet more carefully, looking downwards more frequently, then lifting his gaze quizzically into the invisible distance.

“Some time later, a long time, I passed a fallen tree, a branchless broken corpse, half submerged in the wet earth, like a shattered remnant of a wayside Calvary.” He spoke the word more gently, as though it brought him comfort over the years. “From somewhere among its mossy ruin a small bird unexpectedly twittered a brief, hopeless threat, falling suddenly silent as I, the distracted intruder, trudged by. Beyond the plateau and on upwards, the air became a little cooler but the mist still smothered the world beyond the little road.”

“My feet hurt, and I was tired. Hungry? Oh yes, always hungry!” The elation, anxious, taut, with which he started the day, heaven-hidden, insulated, protected from intrusion by the covering clouds had faded with isolation, and now loneliness overwhelmed him. The time-spent answers, before he left the village, well meant but spoken with a shrug, given in response to his eager questions,

“’How Far? I asked one man. ‘Maybe not so far.’”

“‘How Long?’ Another sullen, replied, ‘Maybe half a day. Maybe more than half.’”

All had become meaningless. “Oh, yes. They wanted me to go, be on my way. Quickly, before troops came. And trouble.”

He listened. Always he listened. Silence answered from beyond the soft stillness. “Though it was far from cold, and there was no breath of wind, for some reason my nose began to run as though it was a Wintry day.” He sniffed and breathed deeply in, chuckling to himself.

The first of the bushes, he thought, when it began to take shape at the wayside, that it was a rock, silver grey; enveloped in a cocoon of webs and wetness, it was small, no bigger than a bullock’s head. Then another appeared below the mist. A third. Then a larger cluster. Some tight-knit spheres others spindly, all to the left of the roadway. He stopped once more, wiped his face, and glanced to the right; the wall of mist offered nothing there, but to his left the straggling plantation of furze, prickly, scant of flowers, moisture-smothered, held his eye.

“Perhaps three or four minutes later, what does time matter,” he laid his hands before him, a gesture of doubt, perhaps, “after the first of the jagged stones began to tussle with the furze bushes for possession of the glistening road side, I saw the bicycle.” Far off on the bypass, a siren wailed, then another. He waited until the sound ebbed away.

“It was leaning against a large bush, smothered with silvery webs, a spider’s plaything, still and cold. It was an old and heavy machine, very old indeed. Once a postman’s bicycle maybe, or a soldier’s maybe?”

He realised he was examining this unexpected artefact by standing quite still a few metres from it, silent, like a rabbit caught in a beam of light, drawn to the object; mouth open he said nothing, nor did he hear a sound above the humming of the vapour all around. “But there, among the dismal rocks and furze clumps, I felt, I knew I was not alone. Something was alive nearby.”

He adjusted his frame in the chair, and gathered time-run thoughts.

“Well, my first thought was to lift the bike from its resting place, wheel it to the roadway and cycle onwards. It looked after all to be in working order. But, there was a sound. I heard it. A soft sough, like a dog’s dying yelp, or a man’s failing breath, above the smothering, singing of the mist. I walked upwards a little, between the boulders and bushes. There it was. It wasn’t a soldier, nor was it a beast.”

The prone figure, he guessed the man to be around forty years old, short, thin hunger-worn, but who wasn’t after six years of war, lay half buried in a large clump of dew-jewelled furze; as though his own shroud was growing through him. Almost effervescent, the dampness sparkled on the dripping face, and shone like a thousand pin-heads of light over the shabby, dank coat worn half-open. One hand clasped the left side of his body; fingers half-crusted to a faded shirt, but the blood still seeped slowly out. The coat, once clearly a tailor’s pride, was a reservoir of dark redness, and a thinner, darker serpent, sanguinely slipped away from it to vanish in the sodden grass.

“An old wound, I guessed from looking at the man, and a bad one, come back to haunt and kill a meagre body. The moist eyes were wide open and the mouth was speaking, but little more than a whisper into wet air, barely breathed.” He fell silent, this time for several minutes.

“For a time, no, no, I don’t know how long, I stood, quietly, listening to the man’s low murmuring. Not a Slav language, and not German certainly, but a strange tongue to my ears, rounded and soft. I didn’t know, nor understand a word. Nor could I guess. I still don’t know, though I have to say there are moments when the sound of that death return to me.”

The half dead man seemed incapable of any physical gesture, he just lay, damp, dying. He lifted his eyes from the still body at his feet, the mist eternally enveloped the world all around them. Without another glance, he walked to the bicycle, and wheeled it to the road; then wiping the saddle dry with his sleeve, he quickly mounted, and pedalled away from the furze and rocks, downhill towards the zone, leaving the dying man whispering a prayer to the hidden world and a god who had abandoned him.

“It was an encounter I carry with me all my life.” He kissed his fingertips, then gathered himself.  I asked the question as simply as I could.

“Yes, perhaps it was that silent meeting, that death, which made me become a Priest.”

**JOURNEY**

Bratislava. March 1948.

*"Every road has two directions."*
Borderlands Proverb

"Yes, I've been there, but the whole city's just a jumble of Stalin's concrete towers and ugly monuments no-one's got around to tearing down yet.", I answered his question. It was, for once, a decent Summer's afternoon, and we were sitting in Roman's garden. Beer and memories.

"It was back then, even for that most squalid of Europe's hard-hit cities, an awful place." The old exile brushed a crane fly away. "Lyosha stopped at this particular corner, stood, silent for a moment, considering the cramped, crooked little street. I'd followed him you see. A poor thoroughfare it was, mottled here and there along the worn and broken cobble-stones by elusive slivers of brittle sunlight in which clouds of small flies flitted awkwardly. The oldest quarter of the old town, and its most decrepit quarter at that."

There were scores of towns and cities like it after the war. Ghettoes. Tall, bare house fronts, the grim facades of narrow, mean tenements, here one burned out, and a little farther along another, half-collapsed. They all seemed insolently to lean over the narrow way from either side, almost touching, some coalescing completely, wrapped into each other's eaves, like the folds of a grimy winter cloak.

"It was the middle of the day." Roman sipped his beer. "But not warm like this." He waved a hand.

The fact it was midday being apparent by a single vertical shaft of bright light which played erratically on the rivulets of black, foul-smelling waters which ran along the gutter. Here there were more flies, as though all the flies in the broken country had found an enormous corpse to feed from.

Lyosha stepped carefully along the pavement, where that dubious luxury existed, moving as quickly as he could through the stench of filth and decay. His footsteps faltered as he looked earnestly about, then turned into a narrow passage. Passing through a line of limp and listless washing which hung like the flags of a defeated army, he found himself standing at the black cavity of an empty doorway.

"I hung back, watching out for him, but he was quite alone with the ghosts and dead."

We sat in insect-laden silence for a moment, the ghosts and the dead were coming back to Roman. He sighed, and looked about his garden.

"Lyosha hesitated once more, and stood quietly, breathing as shallow as it was possible for any living creature to do, not wishing to consume any more of the rotten air about the place than was essential to sustain a life." He listened. A few sounds, far-off, an argument perhaps,

a dog somewhere in the distance. Nearer to hand in the narrow yard where he stood, water tinkled off into the darkness, dripping on to tin from a wet roof.

“Thank God there were no rats. You never get used to rats, you know? Never.”

His eyes were by now accustomed to the dim light, and Lyosha looked at the doorway, then far within. It bore no mark of ownership or possession other than a broken *Mezuzah* box on the door-post, and below it the vague flaking remnants of a painted number, perhaps a 1, perhaps a 4.

Deep within, as though it lay at the bottom of the deepest well in the world, what might have been a candle glowed faintly, illuminating virtually nothing.

“He was afraid. I was too. Fear was everywhere. It held men’s hearts like the jaws of a wolf. Yes!” Roman gestured Lyosha’s path.

With a slow, determined step he passed through the portal, the merest touch of his hand enough to swing away the half open door and admit him. The smell within was everything of home, and nothing. Cabbage and oil, dirt and fat, and tobacco and sweat. The overlying scent was that of a host of eternal parasites, parasites ranging from mice to men. It was the smell of humanity in tatters. He moved clumsily, making his way along the corridor towards the source of thin light, passing doors firmly closed, stepping right then left to avoid piles of crates and huge cans.

“I moved closer to the doorway, and waited. Petrol. I smelled petrol.” Roman raised his head, his nostrils emphasising the word.

The tunnel seemed endless, the light so far off. It surprised Lyosha when he came to the sheet hanging between the long corridor and the source of light, and surprised him even more when a grimy female hand clawed away the cloth to allow him to enter.

“When he told me all this later, it was as though he was telling me a dream. No! Not a dream, a nightmare. Remembering small details, as though they were still passing again and again before his eyes.”

Lyosha shuffled forward and blinked. Not from the sudden illumination, for the smoking lamp set on the table gave little enough of that. What sad light it managed to throw on the scene seemed to amble away, almost to escape, only to fade and die in the dark, far corners of what he realised was an enormous room.

The woman at the doorway stepped back quickly, catching his glance. She was not old, but frayed, little short of lamentable; dressed in pieces of salvaged soldier’s uniform, she was of grey countenance, with an arrogant eye, and well used. She vanished into the gloom, along with the insubstantial glow of light, as though physically eaten by the darkness. “Yes. Yes, she saw me, standing far behind him, she had been raped, and raped often. You can tell these things from a woman’s eyes.” He shrugged at me, as though I ought to know.

At the table, with the lamp to its right sat a huge Polish greatcoat, and hidden within its depths sat one of the smallest humans Lyosha had ever seen; no bigger than a famished child. The head of the tiny man, he knew it must be a man from the straggly threads of facial hair, gleamed, greasy and slick with the lingering remnants of one of the thousand diseases which alone thrived in that broken city.

Roman almost drifted off into a tale of sickness and plagues, and I had to bring him back to Lyosha's tale. It was getting warmer.

When this shrivelled sick dome spoke, it called him 'traveller', and uttered words in measured low tones interrupted by deep intakes of crackling breath. A miniature hand shot from the greatcoat sleeve, and gestured to a chair opposite.

Adjusting his beer glass delicately, Roman continued: "No-one was ever a Jew, a Balt or a Pole, or a Russian back then, you understand that?", Roman pointed a determined finger at me. "All men wanted something. A paper, a document. A chance maybe, eh? Lyosha was not a soldier with the 14th, he had travelled a far different road. One which might have ended badly for him, as you might say. You understand?"

I nodded. Oh, yes. Maybe he'd been in the *'Einsatzgruppen'*, or had graduated from Trawniki, where the Nazis trained their loyal camp guards in a special form of evil.

I understood all right.

The 'traveller' sat down on the broken chair.

All it seemed was in order. The immature, fragile fingers moved to a pocket and took from it a pair of spectacles, and slowly searched for a sliver of grubby cloth on which the hand rubbed the lenses.

"All was in order." The head used the German term. Crisp and formal.

The 'kilo of salt' had arrived safely. The visitor, the 'traveller', wondered why the sickly mortal spoke the old term, of the value given to betrayal? As though he had paid 'thirty pieces of silver', a handful of shiny coin, rather than the blocks of stolen army field rations.

"Maybe you don't know this expression, eh? If the Poles handed over a Jew to the Germans, or just to their own killers, they got a bag of salt in return for the betrayal." Roman had seen many kilos of salt change hands. He smiled and sipped his beer.

"This time the 'salt' was for life and not death?", I suggested.

He nodded.

The head, they spoke of course in German, as Roman explained, seemed pleased to help a fellow … what? Jew? Pole? Deserter? A fellow 'Victim of Fascism'?

"No, simply a fellow in need.", Roman smiled knowingly.

A single drop of sweat fell from the brow of the little skull and pattered on the table top, to be brushed away with the grimy greatcoat's cuff. Roman shook his head, "The smallest details, the very small things. These Lyosha remembered for the rest of his life. You know?"

There was one of those moments that occur, not at the beginning of such conversations, the purpose of which is pre-determined and perhaps illicit, but a little before the critical point is reached. A brief moment's pause, before a frail, yet conspiratorial glance was interrupted by the slightest gesture, the merest inclination of the oily, crumpled cranium, then the scrawny hand of the indistinct woman placed two damp glasses on the table before them. A moment later a splash of vaguely clear liquid filled each, and hand and woman vanished once more into the turgid gloom, beyond the lamp's close boundaries.

"The toast was in Polish, the vodka was Russian, and when the 'traveller' lifted his vodka he noticed an inky thumb print on his glass." I wondered why he should recall such a little thing? Roman shrugged again. The sweating head merely moistened his own lips, and replacing the glass, moved his right arm with a slow robotic action which mesmerised the other man. Hand and sleeve dropped into the greatcoat's buttonless orifice, as a turtle might rummage within its shell.

Whatever secrets lay within the coat's dark carapace responded to the incursion, and the sleeve moved with a slow, stuttering motion, as though the man's heart, liver, and lungs were being moved, and gently stacked to one side as the little fingertips continued their quest. The visitor, the 'traveller', sat silently cupping the vodka glass opposite the painful mime, which ended in an instant. With a soft moan, a packet was withdrawn from within and lay upon the table. For the first time, the grubby glasses set awkwardly on the stunted countenance, he looked straight at his anxious guest.

"The packet was opened." Roman practiced it with his own hands lightly above the table. Opened carefully, almost surgically, by glistening, nimble fingers, and three documents lay exposed to the 'traveller's' gaze.

"Three documents!", Roman indicated with his stubby arthritic fingers, "Three!".

"You know, they were life. Freedom, yes, and escape.", he repeated each word so that I would grasp its importance. "For him, and his family too. He could not stay, they were close. Very close.". He paused, and looked around his long garden. 'They?'. I knew he meant the Russians, or maybe another group of hunters. There were so many debts to be paid.

The doll's head became more animated, and spoke in detail about these documents, these life-giving drafts, his somehow elegant hands moving like those of an artist explaining his creation, displaying his creative passion to a bemused admirer.

The 'traveller', Lyosha had begun to accept the name and description since it was true enough and names in reality meant nothing in those times, took little in. The feeble hand seemed to grow a little stronger as he watched it hover over the thick, yellowed papers. A trembling finger tracing a circle around the official and essential stamp, reciting in a distant faint voice the place names and the dates- whence they came, and where they would go.

The voice died softly away, exhaling the last few words, as the long fingertips floated, then retreated from the passes. Their sonata played. Their music finished.

“There was”, as Roman recalled, “no parting handshake.” The stunted artist, like so many of that creative, crippled ilk, shunned contact with the physical world he could not meet on equal terms, or so it seemed.

No final toast, to ‘liberty’, to ‘success’ or even just to ‘life’ either. Merely a gathering up of the three cold treasures, and then a single graceless nod.

One simple gesture, one that consigned the departing traveller and his fellows to their fates. Whatever it was to be.

The street, as he stumbled quickly away, was much, much gloomier now.

“I waited in the deepest shadows. Hell, that place stank.” said Roman.

Lyosha moved around the shattered square, cautiously clinging to the shadows and empty corners. Beyond the railway tracks with their long, slow-hauled trains of war reparations drifting east through clouds of malignant steam, he was almost home.

“I was a little distance behind him. But there was no-one. Only the broken people. And few of those.”

The barrier at the corner surprised Lyosha. The few old people and women stood silent, craning thin necks to look beyond the vast bulk of the uninterested military policeman who protected it. To look beyond the earth-dark trucks which in the distance were scooping up small groups of bag laden figures; pushed and cajoled by armed men with whistles and shrill foreign voices. It was over in a few moments. Sirens blared, and deep rich noise filled the air as the trucks headed away from the street. The barbed wire was rolled back, and the policeman was gone, like a golem into the twilight.

From doors and alleyways drab people crept as though out of secret warrens or burrows. The sirens faded far off, and he ran, as run he could, given his hunger and exhaustion, to the battered tenement where they had led their submarine existence waiting, waiting for the moment to come when with papers they could escape the city.

“I walked slower, looking around, watching.”, said Roman.

“I climbed the empty staircase, past open doors and empty rooms to the top, roofless landing.”

Here stood the old woman. It had, or so they said, once been her house- all of it. They had, she cried bitterly, searched her room too, she who had lived in the city all her life. Lyosha stopped her with an anguished word.

“It was too late. All too late.”, Roman brushed his forehead with a heavy hand, “I stood with Lyosha as she spoke to him.”.

The care worn woman drew in her breath. “A *‘greifer’”* she said, “A catcher, a child-catcher, had come to hunt them out. Like in the old days with the Jews.”. The children were most vulnerable as they played small games on the big staircase, or skipped outside. “This *‘greifer’* had been a woman,” she said. Asking the simplest of questions.

In Russian to some. In Ukrainian or Belarusian to others.

“Do you know the song about the Old Grey Cat?”, she smiled.

The children nodded. Some but not all.

“Will you sing it for me?”

Some children sang, while others excluded from the subtle test, ignorant of the language, ambled off to some new game.

Roman droned the words for me. In Russian first, then Ukrainian. He translated:

*“Don’t wake the baby, no*
*the baby will be sleeping.*
*The cat she is purring.*
*Ah! Ah’ Sssssh! Ssssh!”*

“It was enough. Only a ‘soviet’ born child would know these words, eh?”. He laughed, and pointed a thumb at his own chest.

Here there were families to be gathered back into the arms of the indissoluble Union, where they rightfully belonged.

A gesture at the doorway from the catcher, a waved hand and the raid began.

“Their room was almost as he left it, you know? The bed made, the curtains half closed against the grim half daylight. The bags, packed ready for flight had gone. A few ragged, unimportant, worthless items remained. But Anastasia and little Ksenia, three years old, were taken.” Roman seemed truly upset, rare for him I thought.

Lyosha’s wife and child, after so much, borne away forever on the siren’s wind. On the window ledge one small thing remained. A little grey cloth mouse, with pink ears and nose. Ksenia’s favoured ‘Didus’. Her tiny protective guardian from the night’s terrors.

Lyosha slipped ‘Didus’ into his pocket and went out.

Through the broken roof a shower of rain had begun to fall. Without looking at the babbling old woman he left.

“The military policemen would return. Soon.” said Roman. “I took him away. Quickly.” He shrugged again. “He had the papers, you see?”

This was a story that Lyosha himself had never told me. I knew of course much about his skill with animals, his love of farms, and life out-of-doors.

Something too of his escape, at least in the latter stages.

I met his wife, a short plump woman bred in the Welsh valleys, and his grown son and daughter, but not that often.

I did not know this tale until Roman told me all this some weeks after the ‘traveller’ had died.

It was at Lyosha’s funeral, and the old Borderlands exile had lived to a good age, some eighty seven Summers, though for the last few arthritis and an ailing heart had diminished him. I stood with the small crowd as the Uniate priest intoned the closing words of Psalm 91.

*“With a long life I will satisfy him, and will show him my salvation.”*

A ripple of ‘Amen’, and wife, daughter, son, grandchildren and his surviving exiles in the ‘Diaspora’ stretched forward and threw long stemmed flowers, irises, flecked blue and gold in on the coffin. The family and most of the others began to drift away.

Roman came quietly from behind where I stood, looked straight through me with tearful eyes, paused at the side of the open grave, then into it dropped what looked like a small toy, a little grey mouse.

## TOYMAKER

Marburg. December 1948.

*"As many steps a man has paced, so many sins has he committed."*
Borderlands Proverb

He spent the night with a prostitute. She wasn't that young, and far from pretty, or even attractive, but he wanted someone who would not be questioned if she remembered a particular man on a particular night, as a pretty girl, a young girl might. He'd paid her what she'd asked, to the mark, and had tried to seem as desperate and as physically in need of a woman as any man back from hell could.

He even slept.

Not long after a drab December dawn brought a barely perceivable lightness into the attic, he woke to look at her as first she washed in a tin bowl, then drew back the tattered rug of a curtain to expose the cracked window. There was a print of the Virgin high on the wall, ripped and colourless in the half light of the dim morning. She gave him coffee, *ersatz,* muddy and tasteless, but at least warm, and the small stove took the raw edge from the cold morning. He dug into the pocket of his old, worn army greatcoat, and brought out a paper twist of powdery sugar, tapping some into the swirling mug, he screwed it up once more then passed it to her.

She smiled at him. Sugar was rare as real coffee these days.

A few unremarkable sounds rose to the forgotten attic. A tumbrel heaved by far below on iron-shod wheels, a man whistled a few notes of a country tune. Somewhere far off a trolley-car rumbled, and a bell, solitary and sonorous boomed from a church tower which had somehow survived the fate of the broken world that surrounded it. They parted silently, she touched his coat as he passed out of the doorway into the world that called him, but spoke not one word of farewell. It would snow soon he thought, tasting the air, the cold morning was filled with that sharp bite of frost. At the end of the cobbled lane he stopped to get his bearings. This was not his city. He had been born not far away, in a much older town, and his visits to the city of the saints had been few as a child. True, he had enlisted here, at the barracks near the river, and had marched through the streets on more than one occasion, but that was in a past life.

A long time ago.

He turned to the left, walking steadily uphill towards the Old Town, slowly, surely, as though he belonged. At one place he passed a group of shabby women who were moving stones from a ruin, working with bare hands and filling handcarts, singing as women do when they work in unison. It made him think of bridge-building, he one of a company of men, stripped, standing in the water, that fat Corporal with the bass voice calling out the time with a tune as old as the Emperor. Unthinking, he fell into step with the women's song. Just for a moment or two. As he walked on he took in the sights of the city's ruin. There were great gaps in the elegant street facades, where tall baroque buildings had been sliced away by bombs and shell fire, their surviving sisters battered by splinters and smoke. A single smashed interior exposed high above him, shutters hanging, stairless now, and too risky even for a looter to climb to. As he turned a corner the city's history poured its waves of half-memory over him; old history in a small, tree-lined square named after the forgotten composer who had once

lived there- the square incredibly passed over by all signs of the war. And new history in a splash of bullet scars against a pillar, where some unfortunate deserter had been caught by the field police as the front crumbled, and brave men and cowards ran away together.

He caught a tram, which took him part of the way up towards what a rather stupid General, intent on giving the enemies artillery batteries a reason, as if they needed one, to destroy the hill and all on it, had once called 'The Citadel'. His war-weary troops had other ideas, and the General was left alone to place his pistol in his mouth and fire the only shot his abandoned 'citadel' heard. The tram rattled slowly along up what, if all the rubble was cleared, and the craters filled in, would once more be a wide, cosmopolitan, boulevard. He stood crushed against the back gate of the tram, watching the streams of men and women push on and off as the ailing street-car stuttered and struggled on its way. He was not the only man in an army greatcoat, some wore the warm blue of the French issue, which was always popular, and others had white alpine tunics or Soviet fur caps. The women, sad and downcast as though rape was only yesterday, were less warmly dressed. Recognising a street name he pushed his way to the step, and dropped off the crowded tram as it slowed on the steepest part of the incline.

On that steep hill, and along the tiny side streets which fled away from it there remained a few squalid travesties of shops. There was one with its window glass left in place sheltering some women's clothes fashioned from abandoned or looted uniforms, another, doorless and piled high with passable furniture which had once stood in far better places. One cubbyhole had boxes of books, testaments to all the languages of *Neues Europa,* French and German, Czech and Polish. Even Hungarian and Yiddish, guarded by an elderly bearded man who in better times might have been a learned teacher, but remained by his calm, patient endurance a scholar still.

Books do not fill a man's belly, so he found by the strong smell of cooking and a rough cardboard notice, a small basement with half an iron railing curving down to the depths of a rancid cellar with some tables lit by candles. Here, a man displaying the callous indifference of a company cook, ladled out small wooden bowls of sausage soup, passing them to a graceless harridan who laid them before the handful of silent customers, cutting each a hunk of coarse black bread from a loaf as big as a branch. She sawed the loaf as though she were slitting a throat, sullenly taking each man's coin with a moist, grubby hand, handing him a spoon then turning to the next.

He ate slowly. He was in no rush to be gone. His time was to come when darkness fell. So, he gazed as waiting, thinking men do, into the flame of the candle which burned steadily before his eyes, munching the bread and savouring the hot soup. It was little better than the *Wassersuppe* with which his soldiers were fed at the war's end, and he could guess where this cook learned his trade. He watched the flame flare and fall back as a cold gust felt its way down the cellar steps in the wake of a customer, realising that this was a wide church candle, plundered like the spoons.

After tipping the soup bowl to his lips to devour every last drop of greasy warmth, he slipped what remained of the bread into his deep greatcoat pocket. He would eat it later.

As the cold morning reached a sunless noon, he walked steadily on. Eventually he passed to the second level of the city, and found himself within the inner wall of the Old Town. He entered under a scarred stone archway surmounted with a Biblical inscription cut deep into the worn edifice. It was carved in fine old German, good Lutheran not Latin, and he mouthed the words silently:

*“Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?”*

Inside the gateway, he stopped, turned and looked back along the steep way he had come, over the wreckage of a once magnificent city. Above his head, though he did not notice at first was the conclusion of the biblical quotation.

*“Behold! And see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.”*

The gate builder, whose earthly labour was commemorated below the text by a badly eroded name and date, had also inscribed for the benefit of passers by the information that this text was from the Lamentations of Jeremiah Chapter 1, verse 12; but few of those who passed this way, heads down, and muffled as best they could be against the harsh wind slicing off from the Baltic cared for any builders God or for his chiselled word.

Here inside the walls, the streets were narrow, quieter, fewer people were abroad. The way was shadowed and dark even in daytime; around him renaissance doors and leaded windows pierced damaged walls of ancient brick. His footsteps echoed on the cold stones from the upper storeys jutting over his head in salients of carved timber, burned in places, and of broken panes of glass; the smell of flame lingered everywhere. It was as if the War still raged intermittently along the thin lanes and alleyways, surging out to smash another house before vanishing into a lost courtyard or slipping through a secret door. He had little difficulty in finding the house he sought, even in what many a wandering soul might regard as a maze of footways and streets too small even for a dog-cart. He climbed a steep flight of worn stone steps, and passing a softly lit pane of coloured glass, he entered a thick studded door under the tattered sign of the Old Black Bison. Stooping low, he negotiated a room of sturdy oak beams, filled with endless carving and scattered with alcoves and unexpectedly changing floor levels. A jungle of dusty tavern impedimenta, bottles and pots, antlers and faded daguerreotypes, surrounded him. A cat, venerable, disdainful, lay sprawled before the stove, and briefly lifted a feline eyelid to consider him, then went back to sleep.

The Black Bison was empty, utterly deserted. An old garrison drinking place, with no soldiers now to fill it. He started as the sound of clogs climbing a staircase from far below resounded through the bar, dying reluctantly away into the empty alcoves.

The wearer eventually came into sight, and the cat stirred itself. An elderly man, florid, careworn, dressed in a cook’s apron, and wearing a stained waistcoat far too large for such a frail body, passed him by, walked to the door, and threw the heavy bolts fast. He beckoned the visitor to follow him, and in convoy, with the cat as rear-guard, they descended the spiral of stairs into a small kitchen lit by one sibilating lantern. This was the warmest room he’d been in for many weeks, and following the old man’s gesture he sat down at the table, in a rough chair. He pulled it closer to the fire, and, watched carefully by the cautious cat, he warmed his hands, easing his fingers and flexing his wrists to restore the circulation. The host of the empty tavern bustled steadily for a moment or two, pouring rough white wine from a chipped pitcher, pushing a cupful towards him. The clogs rang across the flagstones. A plate of hard cheese and bitter green apples was set before him, a brown loaf broken open, and the cup of wine replenished. The younger man sniffed at an apple, slipped one into his pocket. Then he drank silently, watched over by the two inhabitants of the Old Black Bison.

The innkeeper poured himself a cup of wine and with a gesture saluted his solitary guest. Then digging deep in the pocket of his waistcoat with arthritic fingers he drew out a small circle of brass. It was the button of a Grenadier’s tunic. Once it had gleamed bright, but now its lustre was thin and worn away to a memory.

The man responded by delving inside his grimy shirt, and bringing into the warm light a similar button strung on a bootlace. They shook hands wordlessly, and the old man drained his wine and clumped away up the stairs. Every slow footstep resounded through the building, wood on wood, as he eventually returned with a small leather bundle held in one hand. Pushing the plate and pitcher to one side, he lay the package on the table before the visitor, who unwrapped it with a touch approaching a mother's caress.

The pistol was more than familiar to him, he had seen dozens of them, hundreds, during the war years. It was a *Pistolet Radom Wzor 35,* a Polish gun, many thousands of them had seen service with the Reich. Heavier than the German automatics, and the Russian pistols too, the kilogram weight weapon had a powerful reputation. The *Wzor 35* fired a 9mm parabellum round with an immense muzzle velocity. It could destroy a man with a single shot into the upper torso. It had no applied safety catch, so it was quick and silent to use. The Germans had often used them for executions, where a very public propaganda point was to be made; few observers would forget the human spoil left after a round from a *35* had hit a victim. What was it the SS men used to say? *'Ein auf Kopf. Ein auf Hertz'.* One in the head and one in the heart. He smiled to himself. One anywhere above the waist was usually enough, but, in this case, there was a point to be made. The old man produced a small leather pouch from his pocket and laid it alongside the gun, then went quietly about his household business.

For the next hour the man silently stripped the pistol, cleaning it with the leather cloth, and at last opening the pouch tipped sixteen shining parabellum rounds into his hand. Eight for each target. He quietly slid half of the rounds into the pistol's box magazine and slid it home. Replacing the others in the small bag, he dropped it into his pocket. With consummate care, he wrapped the heavy pistol in the leather cloth, and placed it in his greatcoat pocket. He stood up, scraping the chair on the stone floor. The cat yawned and raised itself, purring as the old innkeeper led the way slowly up the stairs. At the front door, the old man slipped the bolts, shook hands once more with his departing guest, and, as the stranger clattered down the stone steps to the alleyway, closed the door noiselessly, and humming an old army song to himself, descended once more to his kitchen followed by the cat.

It was getting on towards evening, almost a half-light by now, and nipping and eager the air bit shrewdly through his greatcoat as he climbed further into the once lively heart of the dismal city. As the last light faded away he stopped for a moment to get his bearings beneath a headless statue set into a lichen mottled cranny. No-one at all had walked past him for a long time, and the close walled thoroughfares were solemnly sinking into the beginning of a long dark night. The small alleyway he sought was marked by a huge torn poster stained with age and spittle, advertising a political rally which had never taken place. The toymaker's shop stood about twenty metres along it, and a dim light fell onto the pavement from its one small window. No other sign of human existence made itself known. He looked carefully around taking in every point of the surroundings, making sure of himself with a soldier's eye. There was complete silence, only the sound of his boots marked the fact that there was life anywhere in the Old Town.

The door-catch slid open easily, and he slipped inside, lifting his hand to prevent the dangling door-bell announcing his entry. Closing the door with care he drew the *Pistolet 35* from within his greatcoat pocket. The toymaker's shop was deceptively large, and the shelves were covered with small dolls, with wooden animals. There was a Noah's Ark, and a half finished rocking horse stood at one side, never to be completed. There were painted toy boxes of all sizes, much like the painted toy box which had killed his men as they carelessly examined it that night. He moved into the centre of the dim room. The lamp was behind him in the

window and a few feet away a torn curtain closed off all inner recesses of the toymaker's premises. He lived upstairs, the man knew. He lived alone now, as every man must live alone who fears the past will engulf any who stand beside him. Whatever small sound the visitor made he did not realise, but the curtain was suddenly flung back, and there his victim stood.

The man they called the Toymaker.

Stooped in age, worn with war and haunted by fear. One moment in time, barely a second, and the toymaker knew the man facing him. He turned towards the stairs, trying to reach for the small Langenham automatic protruding from his jacket. The first 9mm round ripped away the toymaker's right arm, and he fell to his knees but did not scream. Then the breath rushed from his body as the second shot broke his spine, and tore apart the chest cavity. The third round was fired to simply make the point. As the corpse tipped forward, the intruder fired it into the toymaker's head. The ruptured, ruined corpse lay at the foot of the staircase, subsumed in its vast pool of gore.

Calmly wrapping the warm pistol in the leather cloth, he stepped over to the window and extinguished the lamp. Turning the shop sign from *Offen* to *Geschlossen,* he quietly closed the door behind him, then stepped out into the darkness. The tiny bell rang just once, and was still. The man walked briskly to the end of the alley, and looked to left and to right. The wind was bitterly cold, growing in strength and blowing from the east. It would snow very soon. He pulled up his greatcoat around his ears and walked quietly away down through the Old Town.

# EXILE

**UNITED!**

Bryn Camp. November 1948.

*"There are very many lies, but barely one truth."*
Borderlands Proverb

He sat well back in his upright chair, for we always sat at the table on the occasions when he would tell me the story of his journey, here to the fringe of the coalfield from that far-off province, and of his life when he arrived. The farms, the hostels, the mines and steelworks, all played a part in his long voyage of eighty six years. The old man poured two small glasses of Horilka, a gift from his grandson, a young man not long returned, full of surprises and dismays at what was to be found in the villages and towns of the Borderlands. He pushed a plate of dark and aromatic sausage towards me, beckoning me to take some. "Eat!", he urged.

Vasyl' being a small man, and one who suffered the torment of an aged back, sat straight as a ramrod. He raised his glass in toast, "To memories!", he sipped his drink, and slowly reached into his frayed jacket pocket.

"A photograph." He flourished it. There were few of these among the exiles. In Stalin's time I knew a photograph could be more than a memory. Much more. It could carry a betrayal then, an accusation, and still might do so many years later. It could provide a lethal trail from one country to another and on to yet another, leading to a family member, to an old comrade-in-arms, or to a friend. It could bring death, it could bring the camps a step nearer. It could destroy.

He passed the print across the table. "What do you see?" It was an unusual size, about twenty centimetres by twelve, or thereabouts, and from the creased, slightly scuffed edges, there was no white border left, I assumed it had been cut down a little from a larger photo. "A football team", I replied. "A team with its officials. Filling the picture almost completely, with just a sliver of a shed roof and a burst of angry sky above to complete the scene.", he laughed.

The high gloss of the black and white photograph still lingered. "This started life in a newspaper, by the look of it." Vasyl' nodded, "Yes, true." I turned it over, as everyone does when shown an old photograph, and there on the back in faded, bluish chinograph pencil was written 'FOUNDRY UNITED 1948-49'. I might have expected their names, as you'd find with a local team of footballers, but in those days in the DP camps, they were to say the least a mixed bunch of men cleaved from across Europe and beyond in some cases, so one man's name and patronymic might be too much of an effort for another to write or even speak. A lifetime on the touchline and in the goalmouth of odd pub and school soccer teams provided me with the obvious questions. "Local?" A nod in reply. "What League and Division had they played in?" Well, I had heard of neither; both had long ago vanished with that euphoria that led to an upsurge in soccer after the war's end when it was actually possible to acquire a football once more, and, despite the coupons and rationing, even a kit. It couldn't last of course.

The team colours were no surprise, sky blue and golden yellow. I sensed, rightly, a Ukrainian hand in the organisation of Foundry United. "Your hand? You ran this team?"

"No. No." The other details were sparse and exactly what might be expected. He told me the ramshackle pub they played from, close to the DP camp, by then renamed a 'hostel', as much for the benefit of the local residents as for the poor devils who had no other home. That pub

too had disappeared, to become nothing more than a footnote in the history of a brewery that had also gone forever.

“Sixty years. A long time, and a lot of history, Vasyl’.”

Vasyl’, like so many of his countrymen, despite his long widowhood and failing health, was vain. I guessed he was barely able to make out the shape of the figures as he squinted at them. He coughed just once. Brushing an imaginary crumb from the table cloth, he carefully laid the print down, adjusting it so that it sat four-square before him. Slowly, almost elegantly, he reached inside his jacket, and drew out a tin spectacle case of immense age; opening it he took out a vast pair of bi-focals. They must have been twenty or thirty years old, and would have suited a short-sighted owl. As precisely as his arthritic fingers could manage, he took a small cloth from the case, and with all the time in the world, as the very old do, he polished first one lens, and then the other, with a sparing breath for each, and all the while he looked at the photograph. Finally, satisfied with the way the world would look through the lenses, he put them on, and reached forward, firmly picking the print up in his crumbling hands. I watched him silently, though I pulled my notebook and pen a little closer, suspecting a tale would unfold. The old man examined the photograph, sighing, occasionally making a small noise deep within his throat as his eyes travelled far back to the wet wintry playing fields.

Slowly he laid the image on the table, and rotated it so that I could see, tapping his forefinger above the footballer’s heads. “Now.” he said, pensively.

“I am the last survivor.” And this I felt sure, looking at the old rheumy eyes through their immense lenses, and listening to the grating sound from his chest, which made a sound like a soft breeze lost within a tomb, would probably be his last Winter. He knew it too, whatever the Doctors said. He was indeed the very last member of Foundry United. “You know me in this picture?” I reached forward and indicated the figure, young and strong, with a head of hair sleeked back with Brylcreem. At least I could identify Vasyl‘.

“Yes!”, I tapped the image. “This must be you.”

He nodded with a smile, and told me he had been full back, probably on account of his short stature, for Vasyl’ would struggle to reach a ball in the air. Two of the others, not long dead, were also recognisable; young men only twenty five years old perhaps, and apart from the full heads of hair, and the less ample midriffs, I knew their faces well. We moved slowly through the two stalwart ranks of Foundry United.

“The manager”, he said, “died not long afterwards in an accident in the tin works.” His name meant nothing at all to me. Another, a fair headed young man: “Now, he was a Czech who went to America and died there quite rich. Very rich, maybe!”

He knew that, but couldn’t recall the Czech’s exact name. One or two others had emigrated, re-emigrated, perhaps, a better term, to Australia or Canada.

“All dead and buried.”, he sighed. “All gone now.”

As we moved through the players, he could usually remember their positions. The goalkeeper he reminded me I’d met some years earlier, but then he was in a wheelchair, and broken by pain and sickness, could not speak.

“No, I can’t recall him Vasyl’.”

There were other nationalities. The coach sported an enormous beret. “Now, he was a Pole from Krakow,” whence he returned seduced by promises. “Only he died in a Polish slave labour camp. Good man, too.” That was a small personal detail that had not been discovered by the ‘diaspora’ until the Poles spat in the Muscovites’ eyes in the eighties.

So Vasyl’ spoke, slowly unravelling a detail here and there, remembering a long-forgotten goal, and a season with a cup tie in which Foundry United had succeeded against all odds. He remembered a valley pitch so steep and uneven a Carpathian mountain goat would be needed to keep the left back position. He laughed and dragged a throatful of poisoned breath from within his ruined chest. As he talked, I made notes, just a few here and there, but drew a quick small sketch of each player’s positions to help my own memory. We moved, he and I, like royalty inspecting a regiment, from man to man, until he hesitated and then seemed to indicate he’d finished. “Good days, good days. Yes!” There was however one footballer remaining, standing in the back row, sporting a grim smile and with mud smeared across his cheek and shirt. This was a tall, fair man, crop-headed, not I thought Ukrainian or Polish. So, maybe he was a Russian or a Balt? His was not really a Slav face, perhaps there was some German blood. “Who is this?” I asked. “Was he a ’borrowed’ Welshman, an ‘A.N. Other’ just to make up the team for the afternoon?”

“That man, that man”, grunted the old widower, tapping the glossy face with his finger tip, “He was the one they killed in the camp.”

They play with you, the Borderland people, all Slavs do. They take you on a merry voyage around the garden, chatting simply, happily, and then when you come to the last mulberry bush, they drop the bombshell in your lap. He picked up his glass, and moistened his lips with the horilka. Time now for me to wait, and the tale would come in his time, not urged by me, nor asked for, but in his own slow way.

The camp for Displaced Persons had been built originally to house Americans training for the Normandy landings. It sat empty for over a year after they left, watched over by a handful of bored guards too old and unfit to be slaughtered on the beaches of France. It was a drab collection of khaki green huts of all shapes and sizes, erected next to the sprawling municipal cemetery at the top of a long hill which dropped down to the town; the most temporary of wartime camps, the very end of the last and longest bus route, when the bus bothered to come at all. Windswept, sited to catch every drop of the Atlantic rain that blew up the long estuary for days on end, the camp looked unhappily towards the damp grey hills to the north. It was bleak, and perfect for the purpose; any Pole or Czech who found himself sitting at the rain spattered window of one of these gimcrack huts would soon pine for home and be on his way to America in search of warmer climes.

By the start of the 1948-49 football season, the camp was beginning to look empty once again. America, Canada and Australia had siphoned away the most skilled and the most ambitious young men, and those with little chance of anything holding them in Wales. The eastern Poles and the Ukrainians were different. They liked the coal-field, the mines and the heavy industry suited their skills. Those who had farmed in the Carpathians liked the wet uplands, and so they stayed, reluctant to be moved on. The football team would last another season yet. The interrogators had long passed over them, and the camp and its residents were left pretty much to its own devices. Every so often one man would leave with much shaking of hands and waving, set for a new life in another town, or another would slink out of the camp at night carrying his cardboard suitcase, filled with misery, bitter with resentment; soon forgotten by his fellows.

The discovery, in that unseasonably wet Autumn, that among them there was a traitor came in the strangest of ways. “All of the men knew that the senior Ukrainian. He was once employed by the Nazis as an interrogator of, how do you say, some skill; told everything of importance and much else to the camp authorities.” Yet that mattered little to them. Anyone who had lived under the Reich or in old Poland was used to being watched, and here no-one knocked on the hut door at midnight or roused them with dogs and rifle butts.

“This informer was different.”, Vasyl’ spat his words. “He worked for Stalin.”

“There had been many such men”, Vasyl’ explained slowly, though perhaps just one a camp might have been enough. They came with the DP’s, in dribs and drabs, sometimes describing themselves as deserters from the Red Army, or labourers from the Todt Organisation’s work brigades, walking across Europe among multitudes of men who were unlikely to ask questions about wearing which uniform the next man had passed the years between 1941 and 1945. The methods were simple, and straightforward, Stalin liked it that way. The traitor acted in no strange or unusual manner, it wasn’t necessary; he just listened and recorded what he heard. Eventually, with the details, the home villages, the families, the parents, sisters, brothers, the children sometimes, of as many of the DP’s collected and carefully recorded, the traitor would leave. He would go back to the east, feigning homesickness, or the inability to come to terms with the new world he found himself in. That was easy enough, the British authorities were glad to be rid of any human problem, and this one could be repatriated easily enough through Berlin. A cursory interview, some paperwork, and this character would be history.

With Winston Churchill’s ’Iron Curtain’ descended firmly across Europe from Stettin to Trieste, and the NKVD just as firmly in control of friends old and new, it was time to deal with those who had failed to acknowledge the wonderful benefits of the Soviet system. Most of all, to deal with those who had decided to establish a new life in the West, or rather those they had left behind. Vasyl’ slowly unwound the thread. “The traitor when he returned home, would provide the names and the villages, and the NKVD would do the rest.” Vasyl’ pointed a stubby index finger at his temple to make the point clear.

“When Krushchev said at the Twentieth Party Congress that Stalin only baulked at deporting all of the Ukrainians to Siberia because there were too many of them, he was right.” I agreed. “Stalin didn’t have enough trains to move forty million people to Siberia.” He nodded sagely. “So. Examples. Lots and lots of examples would have to do.”

“Yes.” he said quietly. “Examples. Yes.”

“Now. Listen. The details were in a Bible.” He shaped a book with his old hands. An Orthodox Bible, written in old Church Slavonic with the distinctive cross cut into the leather. It would be of no interest at all to the Catholic Uniate DP’s from Galicia and Volhynia, or further West.

“They certainly couldn’t read it even if they wanted to.” He became more roused as he spoke. “If the traitor”, he stressed the word vehemently, “hadn’t cut his hand badly, and been taken to that War Memorial Hospital to be stitched up, it wouldn’t have fallen into the hands of Stefan.”.

Quite by accident, as such momentous things so often happen, it seems the man dropped it when he cut himself on the glass of a broken door. “It could have been quite different,”

Vasyl' explained. "Stefan was a slow simple-minded being who could neither read nor write. Not in Russian, nor in Ukrainian, nor Polish. He was the son of a Kulak couple, fat and wealthy peasants the Reds called them, exploiters of their poor neighbours, but more likely just honest people who opposed Stalin's collectivisation and suffered for it." He tapped the photograph staccato, like a morse key. "That was why Stefan had not been allowed to go to the village school, why they were always hungry in Stalin's land of plenty, and why when his mother lay dying the Soviet doctor refused to treat her. I know this. Now you do too." I nodded.

"So, Stefan picked up the book. He knew it was a Bible, even if he could not read it, and took the book to his friend Mephody." The old man settled back, and drew breath. "Mephody had been educated, by the Poles admittedly, but educated nevertheless, and at one time he was intended for the Seminary!", he laughed. "Mephody! A Priest!"

"Mephody told Stefan that he'd keep it safe until the injured man returned, and as he held it in his hand, he opened the book and glanced at the awesome, complex text." An imaginary volume flipped open in Vasyl's broad hands.

"There were notes, like maybe a shorthand of some sort, written on the title pages of the Books of the Old and New Testaments. Later Mephody explained all to me. On 'Joshua' there were a few short scribbles and numbers, more on the title page of 'Ruth', and more again on 'Daniel'. Of all sixty six books of the Bible, hardly one was unmarked."

"Now this, the front of the Book of Psalms was covered with a map, a rough map, with odd markings, numbers and Cyrillic letters. This then", he stressed the point sternly, "was not the text of a believer! NO!"

Mephody asked Stefan to go and fetch Vasyl', and having done so, the Kulak's son went about his business. It was less than the work of half an hour for the two men, who had after all achieved senior NCO rank in the Waffen SS, to establish that this was a map of the western half of the old province of Volhynia, with towns and villages, even small hamlets marked and numbered. Barely a code at all. Vasyl' looked for his own home town. "I found it on the opening page of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. My name was there, and so was Bogdan." Bogdan, who was that very evening sitting alongside the extremely agitated owner of the Bible in the waiting room at the Hospital, keeping him company, as he occasionally dripped blood on the tiled floor. Viktor, now in Toronto, was on the page, and Dima. "It took us only maybe a few minutes more to work out that there were over two hundred names written in the pages. Two hundred! This man had been in the camp a long time, eh?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Two hundred names. You understand."

"Yes, Vasyl'. I understand."

It meant two hundred families, with at least as many as a thousand people who were closely related to them. Men, women and children who might, who would, pay with their lives, rotting to death in the frozen Gulags beyond the Urals because their father or son, their brother or uncle, even their next door neighbour, or school friend, had chosen to fight against Stalin, or to desert his cause forever.

"This", said Vasyl', "was a matter which had to be dealt with.".

Stefan was sought out. He spent his time in the wireless room where his joy was to listen to the big radio set which had been left behind after the troops had gone. He would sit for hours listening to boxing and football, and to his new love Jazz, dozing in a chair. It took a little time for Mephody to explain to Stefan that he was to put the Bible in his pocket, and when the traitor returned, as soon he must, return the book to him, with the information that Stefan had seen him drop it when he cut himself.

"Which was true, of course."

Stefan did as he was told, to the letter. The traitor knew, naturally, that the book's finder could not read, and, when asked, Stefan told him the book had been in his coat pocket all the while.

"He was satisfied. He thought he was safe, eh?"

Mephody and Vasyl' took remarkably little time that night to decide how to kill the man and dispose of his corpse. This was, after all, a camp in which every man had killed in one way or another, for one cause or another, or indeed for none at all. They went to Gideon. A strange name for a Ukrainian, Gideon, and, as Vasyl' told me, "Gideon was not his real name, but a biblical name is as good as any other. Gideon was a gravedigger." A broad and powerful man, he spread his arms to emphasis it, of average height. "Strong." The gravedigger spoke little to anyone, "but, during the war, in the service of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army he had killed more Russians than any other among them. Yes!" Gideon would be the instrument by which their enemy fell. Vasyl' repeated the story step by step as though the events had happened barely an hour before.

It was a damp, miserable season, drifting towards Winter with frequent rain and high winds, and that night a soft cold drizzle embraced the hillside and the camp, blowing leaves through the graves and rattling at the windows. The bad Autumn weather brought many deaths, and that day Gideon had opened two graves, hard work even for a man of his strength. One grave would suit the purpose well. It stood close to the boundary fence with the camp, far from the road and screened by hawthorn, laurel and privet, barely twenty metres from the gap which Gideon used to go to his labours without the long walk around to the main cemetery gate. Gideon left them, for a long while, and returned, muddy and damp with a nod that all was ready at the grave.

The killing of Stalin's man was the easiest part of all. "Now," Vasyl' told me, "maybe only in Hollywood movies men kill with a knife if there is any alternative, for to kill quickly one must cut an artery, and then," he chuckled at some long past recollection, "then men bleed. Everywhere. Woosh! All over the place!".

He was smiling at his memory.

"No knife." It would be Gideon's powerful embrace that would exact revenge. They found their prey in the upper recreation room, sitting in thought with his little traitor's bible in his left hand, the right useless, swathed in bandages. He knew immediately he saw the three men, but Gideon was upon him before he could rise and or even shout out.

Vasyl' entered into a grim pantomime portraying the death. With his immense hands, the gravedigger gripped his head, and, with a short series, Vasyl' said, "of well-known movements, he twisted the head up and to the right. That's the only way!" Gideon forced the skull backwards, tearing the neck muscle, breaking the windpipe and crushing the middle three cervical vertebrae. As neat a job as any hangman's drop. The air whined softly from the

empty body, and Gideon let it fall gently to the floor. The corpse had voided its bladder in death, but there was little mess, if any at all, to indicate the killing had taken place.

It was late, and apart from Stefan listening to his jazz in the wireless room, every living soul was at rest, one of them for eternity. The three men had brought a single sheet. “So, we wrapped the corpse in it, then wrapped that inside an old, frayed blanket, and tied it with string. Tight.”

“But first we took off the boots, and I slipped the bible into my own pocket.” Apart from a solitary light over the gateway to the main road, and a few half-hearted glows from distant windows, the night was dark, and wet and windy.

“Gideon shouldered the bundle alone, he was strong, as I told you.” It flopped over his short back like a discarded rug, and they set off the forty yards to the boundary gap. Mephody carried an old American flashlight, but didn’t use it. The other side of the hedge, Gideon stopped, and gestured for the two men to wait, as he sought the grave. They could hear their companion breathing heavily above the wind brushing through the pine trees. Gideon laid his package down, and waved them forward. He took the torch and shone it very briefly into the grave.

“The grave had been made deeper earlier, by a good half a metre.” He spanned the space with his hands, “so.” Enough to take a carefully laid additional, but uncoffined body. Gideon reached behind him for his little ladder, and placed it at the foot of the grave. He shouldered his burden once more and vanished below, a grunt brought a single brief flash of the light into the abyss.

“Gideon had laid the blanket carefully, for the traitor was a tall man. You saw.” He tapped the photo again. He slowly climbed out, and fetched his great wide shovel from under the hedge. A few dozen swift movements had filled the pit either side of the bundle, and, as a cold squall of rain rushed over them, Gideon dropped down into the grave once more, tidying his work precisely. In the time of his absence from Mephody and Vasyl’, the gravedigger had picked up four long boards, of the sort that are placed each side of any grave to lower the body, and these the two men lowered to him, making a floor over the body.

“They would not be missed, Gideon had chuckled, local people were always stealing them for firewood. This was true!”

Gideon climbed out for the last time, and squatted with the flashlight to examine his work. One short illumination was enough. The rain grew harder and lashed at them like talons of ice. Gideon, with a skill that astonished his companions, threw a further layer of red earth over the wood, completely covering it.

“I think no-one but a grave-digger could tell that this was not an empty grave, my friend.” I nodded. “Yes, few men look into graves until they have to say a final farewell to the occupant.”

Gideon whispered that he would add a good layer of sand; an old graveyard trick when burying in wet weather, it prevents puddles and splashes over the coffin as it’s lowered to rest. Sand hides everything.

Gideon was satisfied, and as they walked back through the night in column, Vasyl’ wondered how Gideon had thought of it. “Well, maybe he’d buried others this way. In the darkness and the rain, eh?”, he smiled.

The few necessary details were dealt with easily. Stefan looked after the camp boiler and furnace and Mephody took his friend's keys, and, in a moment's work, the clothes and few possessions from the dead man's room were despatched in their little suitcase into the fire. Finally, Mephody threw in the boots, grumbling even after all these years. "Huh, it was a pity to waste a pair of good boots that were virtually new." Vasyl' kept the bible, however, and, the following morning, with the rain lashing across the cemetery, he stood at the gap and watched the small funeral party amble slowly away, as Gideon shovelled the earth over the coffin, humming quietly to himself as he worked.

It was assumed that the missing man had left for reasons of his own. "A woman in the town possibly?", Vasyl' shrugged the suggestion, "Or an offer of work from far away?". He'd certainly received a letter a few days before, and that worried the three men. They'd found no letter to dispose of; but nothing came of it, and soon the missing footballer was forgotten, one more 'DP' lost to a system that cared little for them.

Vasyl' polished his glasses once more and returned them to their case. Lifting the glass, he drained the few drops remaining. He seemed amused. "You know, even after half a century or more, I still think it amusing that this traitor, almost certainly and officially he was an atheist, was buried with the rites of the church." I could see his point, even if the words spoken over the grave were addressed heavenwards on behalf of his companion in the afterlife. He still kept the Orthodox bible, he didn't destroy that. Slowly he stood from his chair and crossed to the dresser. Opening a drawer, he took the book out, and laid it on the table before me, with a simple comment.

"Look. Me, my family, my mother, my three sisters and their little children, are in here. You will find them on the title page of the Book of Ecclesiastes.", he murmured quietly.

So they were.

**BERYL**

Ty Gwyn. Spring 1957.

*"Where the devil could not reach, he sent the old woman."*
Borderlands Proverb

Her room was on the second floor. The duty nurse, a pleasant, broad Irish lady signed me in, and passed on a few not entirely jovial comments about the elderly resident I was visiting as we climbed the stairs. Ushered inside, I greeted Beryl with a few of my very few words of Polish- Ukrainian. The little head, tucked into a deep bed-jacket, pillowed and blanketed around, nodded sagely, "Hello. Hello. Come in. Please." Hopefully she appreciated my ingratiating effort; for all I knew I could be cursing her village. The nurse withdrew bustling, but the promised tray of tea never arrived.

The room, cosy and light, overlooked a vast park, through which a smattering of Lowry-like figures watched dogs roam or walked in isolated contemplation. Beryl, I never called her anything else, motioned me to sit down with her tiny clawed hand. As the plastic cushion gave beneath my weight the smell of every old folks' home in the world, half disinfectant, half urine, with a subtle hint of lavender, or was it a dash of lilies of the valley, rose to meet me. I'd visited before, along with Tym, the Disapora's self-appointed *'Hetman'*, who dropped in regularly with a lot of gossip, and, as he put it, 'a drop of grog'. So, well prepared, I delved into my coat pocket and showed her the quarter bottle of five-star brandy I'd brought on Tym's instructions. "I hope this is the right brand? None of your Tesco stuff!" She nodded in assent, "Thank you for your gift. Your kindness." After breaking the seal so that she could open it easily with her arthritic claws, I slipped the brandy into the vast handbag which lay open at her feet. At her gesture I took my raincoat off and dropped it alongside my chair, then took out and placed on the table a couple of sheets of notepaper, pale blue lined Basildon Bond from a writing pad. Never, after the first mistake long ago, a notebook. No. Not under any circumstances, not with anyone telling a tale. Notebooks were for interrogators, for policemen, for precise recording, for detail, for evidence. But a couple of sheets of notepaper, simply an *aide-memoire*, somewhere to jot, casually, a place name or a patronymic; maybe test the spelling of an unfamiliar word used in the monologue. We settled. I liked her.

I was there not to chat with Beryl, far from it, but only to listen, to the story or whatever part of it, this frail, bird-like old lady wished to tell me. I thought, as I walked across the wide park, that it was going to be the story of how a young girl, of just twenty-something from Polish Ukraine, won the rare gallantry medal she wore in the gold framed photograph on the bedside table. The *Virtutii Militari.*

"No! I don't know where she won the thing!", Tym had said. "Maybe she'll say. Maybe not. This Beryl is a woman no-one really knows. No-one remembers. She was here before any of us. This I do know."

Beryl began to speak, in clear, precise, consonant-heavy English. I strained to hear the tale unfold. It wasn't what I expected.

At irregular intervals through the day, the old Albion bus would stutter and struggle up the hill from the valley below, up to the crossroads at the village, where it shuddered into a rough silence as the few passengers shambled away. Village was a generous term to describe the place. A couple of short drab terraces rippled upwards on one hillside; on the other, a longer terrace, almost a street, that was a little more prosperous with neat front gardens and gates, drifted off beyond the corrugated walls of Seion Newydd, the stouter walls of 'The Drovers Arms' and the two small shops which marked the centre of the community. The upper limb of this sort-of-street, which ran out of asphalt and pavement within a few hundred yards, led steeply upwards beyond the shortest terrace of all, becoming a track leading past a few isolated houses which looked as though they had broken away from the rows below them, in some desperate attempt for freedom.

It was along this upward way that Petr walked home each evening. Slowly, with the discomfort, the old pains, and the weight of memories. In the late fifties, with rationing far behind, and the war almost a generation away, things seemed better.

"Our neighbours, though Petr knew few of them to acknowledge with more than a nod, even had his English been up to it, seemed happier. We simply endured; we lived, each of us with a long-borne burden from the past, each of us bound to the other by suffering and by silence." Her precise, her fine, English surprised me. With Tym she spoke heavily, short phrases. To me she spoke with the flow of fluency long gained. Petr walked home slowly, as an old Borderlander, too proud to lean upon a stick, might walk; carefully, just a shade less than hesitant.

"It took him longer and longer, sometimes fifteen minutes or more, to walk up from the crossroads to the house.", she told me. "Many of our faintly inquisitive neighbours- there were no friends- those who knew him as 'Peter the Pole', might be easily forgiven for believing that Petr was approaching retirement age, though in fact, the man shuffling up the hill with a ruined back and scarred feet was barely forty years old." She hesitated, for a moment, Petr was there with her.

"Some evenings, maybe I sensed when he was particularly slow, I would come to the front door, or pretend to be examining something of worth in the privet hedge", she giggled. "There was a thin hedge which separated the house from the track, and I would watch his progress. "Their house 'Ty Glas' was the last but one of the handful flung upwards from the village, and small enough. "Two rooms up", she lifted a finger skywards, "two down and a lean-to kitchen at the back, the glass roof of which crackled like a tin drum in Winter wind and rain!". Behind the house a poor fence created a long sort of garden. "A fitter man of Petr's Ukrainian peasant stock would have made a spade sing and grown all the vegetables we needed." The old voice stuttered. Sometimes she delayed completing a sentence, reaching back into the past for the right word.

"Only one house stood up the hill after ours. 'Last House' it was called." Its forgotten builder-given name, 'Ty Gwyn', was never used by anyone locally. Up beyond that house the track perished- and became little more than an old miner's path used by a few village children

in Summer and the all the world's sheep in Winter. 'Last House' was really the end of all pretence at soial integration in the village. To an unfamiliar viewer of romantic inclination, glancing up the hill from the crossroads on a sunny day with no wind, it might be seen as a charming dwelling, perched far above the scurrying of busy humanity, and just below the solemn strength of long miles of green forest stretching away to the old Roman Road. To anyone on business, the postman perhaps, on those occasions when 'Last House' was let, furnished, to some town dweller anxious to escape from a pursuing creditor, or a half-witted citizen of literary inclination with a novel within him, it was a long worthless haul. No milkman delivered to the door of 'Last House'; even the fishmonger's van which, like clockwork between 9 and 10.30 each Friday morning (Bank Holidays excepted) toured the terraces, didn't stray that far.

Beryl, and her ailing Petr, lived quietly. "We lived like mice in a tomb." Once a month they would venture by bus into town, to the market, but didn't stay long. His work at the small factory, he had been a good engineer once, was all that took Petr away from home. She had a small pension from a grateful government, a very grateful government indeed, and wrote things in long reports which Peter didn't understand, every so often posting them to London. Once a man came to see her, and gave her a good deal of money, for which she had to sign. As he was about to leave he opened the boot of his car. "He pulled out a box of things which we both thought had vanished from all the world. *'Sopocka', 'Pryaniki'* and best of all, *'Bojceck'*. Wonderful, wonderful!" She laughed to herself, and forgot me for a moment.

Life was quiet, and Beryl, who was some years older than her husband, cooked and washed and sewed, as Petr softly faded, inch by inch before her eyes. She smiled. "The Doctor thought him an old man, and could barely believe the broken body he examined, but Petr would not go into hospital. Not yet!" Work became harder, the walk home slower. In truth the wages Petr earned meant little, for Beryl's money provided for both.

It was less than a month after the factory Doctor, an old Army Medic who recognised more in Peter's broken body than the GP had, signed him unfit for the job, and at forty one years of age, 'Peter the Pole' retired from the world which had done him so much harm.

Only a few weeks after that, a day in a good late Summer, an Indian Summer, he chose to sit at the front of 'Ty Glas', enjoying the warm sun, listening to Beryl behind him in the kitchen humming as she scurried about. "He loved the sun, the sun on his face.", she said. "It took him home again."

A car, a large Humber saloon, black and glossy growled its way along the travesty of a street, and, then, slower still up the track towards him. It slowed as it passed the house, bucking on its springs as it went along. The two men inside glanced, just for an instant, at the old man on his kitchen chair behind his low hedge, and thought no more of him as they motored on up the hill to pull in on the patch of waste ground that kept the village side of 'Last House'. The passenger, swinging himself stiffly out of the car, was a tall gaunt man. Peter knew he would be, for slaves never forget those who enslave them. Beryl fell silent again, for a few minutes, picking at her sleeve. Then she spoke again. "I knew the story." She half smiled. "All of the

story, but maybe not all, he told me this on many dark nights, after the bad dreams. The screaming."

As though sitting in a runaway slide show of cascading images and glaring light, Petr knew him. "*Obertruppfuhrer* Berger of the *Organisation Todt.* Born in Western Ukraine, a *Volksdeutsch* name, and a loyal, a truly loyal servant of the Fuhrer. Right to the end, and even beyond that." Beryl's thin voice tightened like a snare drum.

Beryl spoke firmly, steadily now. "It was Berger who, with his trusted bands of armed *OT Kameraden,* swept the villages at home clean of half -starved unfit men to serve and die as slave labourers in the building of Hitler's fortifications. Berger", she almost spat the name, "Berger, who commanded the slave gang where Petr's strength and life were thrown into the pit of the Atlantic Wall. Berger, when inspecting his little concrete kingdom, an unfinished set of artillery bunkers in a strongpoint near Le Havre, had a tendency to 'improve' the slave labourers' efforts by felling one or two, as an incentive to work harder. This he did with a gleaming, short-hafted Wehrmacht entrenching tool; the blackened blade of which was polished regularly by his orderly. These fallen creatures Berger would kick or roll into the waterlogged foundations, to drown or bleed to death, as he saw fit. Petr carried the mark of the *Obertruppfuhrer's* sharp-edged tool across his left shoulder; a deep, troubling, thirty centimetre scar that among so many other scars, the factory Doctor had barely commented on." She shook her tiny head. "The old Czech next to him was not so lucky. Petr looked down to see the man's red life ooze into the French clay. On the last day, the day the Canadian tanks came, the *OT* men had vanished, and Berger with them. The slaves were alone. Alone, but free. Alive." She paused, thinking on her words.

"I had come out of the house on hearing a noise. It was my husband sobbing." Using all her strength she lifted him off the chair and carried him into 'Ty Glas'. Up the hill less than two hundred yards away, as the afternoon sun softened towards a fine evening, *Herr* Berger and his companion unloaded trunks and cases from the car. Beryl brought in the chair and closed the door. "I'd heard the car of course, but thought little of it." Another temporary resident, she guessed, escaping marriage, or debt, or gaol. "I'd heard Peter cry often enough too. But he told me who he had seen, had recognised with no possible chance of error; the nose, the empty eyes, the scarred mouth." She sat still, a long time, cradling him, thinking. She rose from the fireside to look through the window as the car motored slowly down the track towards the real road. This time Berger was driving. "I noticed him, sixty, or sixty five perhaps, and a hard man." Her description was detailed; she had been a watcher in her time, no doubt of that. Two hours later, the Humber's big owl headlights illuminating the way in the gathering dusk, he returned. "Quite alone." she said.

Over the following days, Beryl ventured out, and listened to the people in the Post Office and in the shop. "They said the newcomer was a retired engineer. So he was, of sorts." Beryl smiled at me as she remembered it. "He'd escaped from the Germans right at the end of the war," the Grocer said, "he'd been forced to work for them. Like a slave almost."

"Terrible." he shook his head.

Yes, thought Beryl.

Terrible.

“The man was looking for a place to retire, quietly,” the house agent had said, and rented ‘Last House’ until the Spring. “I checked carefully. You know?” She smiled again. Now I was beginning to warm to Beryl.

The slaves among the Borderlands Diaspora all died young. None lived to make old bones, and so it was with Petr. “He never left the house again, and if the big Humber prowled by, and, in truth, I swear, it rarely did, he hunched in fear and tears rolled down his cheek.” Some evenings, when he was calm, Beryl teased from him a little more of the story of his brutal enslavement, a little more of what he knew of the man she now intended to kill. She smiled wryly at me as she said it. “Kill. Yes. Kill.” So matter-of-fact. Then she stopped, becoming silent for a moment. Beryl was back in the little living room at ‘Ty Glas’ with Petr dead in the warm armchair beside the fire. No-one was surprised he died, and what the Doctor wrote as cause of death on the Certificate wasn’t true.

“Petr died of his memories. His wounds too. My husband.”

The tiny woman let out a great sigh, a sigh so deep it was hard to believe that so much breath could be contained within such a small body. Perhaps embarrassed that she would cry, I expected her to, but I was wrong, my eyes drifted to the window. The park was almost empty now; just a boy on a bike, a running dog, the shadows were lengthening.

“I did not weep.” she told me, and I believed her.

Even in that ancient, thin as porcelain, voice with its accented English, it’s old fashioned manner, I could feel rather than hear it. Revenge, hatred, vengeance, maybe even justice? As so often in the hearing of these stories, I sensed that the teller of the tale had opened the crucial door. As I watched and waited for her, a line from Kipling found its way onto my notepaper .....*“To certain death, by certain shame attended”*.

She continued the tale.

“I would not forgive. I will not forgive now. I planned his death.” She paused. “With great care. What else did I have to do?” Here, I felt, was Beryl’s trade; we had stepped into her field of expertise.

The road, then the street, and the track actually had a name, Heol yr Mynydd, and there was no traffic apart from the Monday morning council dustcart to venture that far up. The postman was a great rarity, and any other potential caller was inevitably deterred by the prospect of such a climb. Neither of the two uppermost houses received visitors, but once a week, always on a Friday, the big Humber swayed down to the road into the valley. Beryl waited. Her patience had been trained and tested and tried long ago. She knew that on that particular day, the car left a little after nine o’clock, to return between four and five o’clock in the afternoon. “The days were drawing in now, but that would make no difference,” she

shrugged, “for, like all Nazis, this one was a creature of well-established habit, a beast of rigid routine.” she nodded.

“I would kill him on a Friday night.” There was a pause. “Petr died on Friday.” She laughed. “Christ too, eh?”

At exactly ten o’clock on an overcast and damp Friday morning she heard the tinny parlour clock strike the hour. The Humber had long gone past. Beryl walked out of the back door, locked it carefully, and went out through the small wicket gate. Turning left, she stepped onto the narrow sheep track which climbed the hillside behind the house, leading up to and far beyond ‘Last House’, where she walked quietly into the overgrown and rubbish strewn back garden. She knew there was no dog, but still she moved as only small people can. Her trained eyes soon found the key, under the third pot from the back door- step, one which held long dead and rotting geraniums; the key was poor quality, covered with a coat of oxide and slime, a key which hadn’t been used for a very long time. He probably didn’t know it was there, nor would the house agent. Her gloved fingers wiped the metal clean on the hem of her pinafore. She was still wearing it, as though this was merely a housewife’s step next door to borrow or chat. “I always wore my ‘pinny’, as they call it.”

Beryl stood up to the step, slipped the key into the lock, and turned it with a soft click. Lifting the latch, she stepped into ‘Last House’ and surveyed her surroundings. She was in the scruffiest of lean-to kitchens, a sink, an old stove, a small table and two chairs, one piled with ancient newspapers, the other bore a pair of men’s black shoes. “I took in everything, even the scent of burned fat, and of sour milk. Beside the sink, a cardboard box filled with a haphazard collection of cheap vodka bottles all empty.” She shook her head. “Here was a man who drank himself to sleep, I had known many of that sort in the war.”

She nodded. “Good. Good.” Her description of the house and its contents was as thorough as an Auctioneers. I told her so. “I remember like in the war, eh?”

The door to the living room stood ajar. The fire was unlit between the two huge threadbare armchairs, and the house was silent; her footfall no more than a passing breath of air, troubling nothing. On the table was a heavy old radio, a crumb covered plate, and a smeared knife. Three bottles too, one more than half empty, with a single glass beside it. The air was heavy with strong tobacco and old sweat, grubby and dark; drab curtains half closed kept out the grey morning as best they could.

Softly the little widow flitted through the house, silent as a moth. The front parlour, cleaner than the rest, was bare, apart from a small sofa and a stained rug, and clearly unused. The staircase, a fraction narrower than her own and uncarpeted, creaked, making her draw breath on the third and eighth tread. One bedroom, the smaller, was piled with dusty old boxes; the bed, dismantled, lay drunkenly against the wall; here was the abandoned detritus, the flotsam of an earlier resident. The larger front bedroom sported two windows, long in need of cleaning; the curtains hung alongside like damp sails on a windless day. The single bed unmade, strewn with dark clothing, the room stank of sweat and human waste. Halfway beneath the bed and bedside table a filled chamber pot stood, and a there was a low candle in

a waxy saucer. No clock. No clock anywhere in the house she noticed. This too, by the signs, the bottles and spills, and glass or two on the little table, was a room to drink in.

“Here he would die. In this place I would kill him.”

Beryl descended the stairs, avoiding the noisy treads, and walked to the front door. An inner door stood wedged hard open, and the heavy outer door had two great bolts, unshot, made useless by coats of old gloss paint. Like all houses in Wales back then the big door key hung by a length of string, ready to be pulled through the letter box and used to open the lock from outside. Though in this case the string was looped around the upper bolt chase, and so denied access. One more brief circuit and she left the house, satisfied, and thinking. It was just after midday that she looked at the clock in her own kitchen and filled the kettle.

“Now I would make him pay.” Her voice, in the telling had grown, it seemed to me, not in volume but in strength, in determination. It might take a week or two for the circumstances to be right, to be fortuitous, but she would be ready to dispose of the man who took away her Petr’s life. I wondered how a small woman, and she would then have been in her late forties perhaps, could hope to kill as big a man as he must have been.  A gun obviously? I must have spoken the words aloud, or showed surprise.

“I would cut his throat of course!”, she retorted with a sudden liveliness, “with this.”. Beryl reached down into the depths of her vast handbag, rummaged with her arthritic fingers for a few moments, and pulled out an old faded Jacquard silk scarf. Her hands, cramped and contorted, fumbled with the soft material. “Take it. But be careful.” So, she passed into my hands an immaculate Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife, which I unwrapped with some care. A delightful, almost legendary, weapon considered by many arms specialists to be the most beautiful killing blade ever manufactured. The Commandos, the Resistance, and other selected killers used them during the Second World War. The perfectly balanced dagger’s six and seven eighth inch blade could slip easily between the ribs of a man to puncture the aorta, or be drawn across the throat to open an artery. Her crabbed fingers tapped the knife I held gently, gingerly, in my hands as she described the movements needed for each method of despatch. “I have owned this weapon since 1941.” she told me, “and I know how to use it to, what is it they say, to best effect?” Of that I had no doubt at all, but it did cross my mind that perhaps Matron was unaware that Beryl had this splendid piece of the military cutler’s art in with her pills and potions.

There was silence for a few moments.  I don’t know what she was remembering, she didn’t say, but I had time to read ‘Wilkinson Sword’ on the cross guard more than once. In the end, Beryl broke her silence again. “It didn’t come to the knife.” Yes, she’d visited, the exact word she used, ‘visited’, ‘Last House’, her blade tucked carefully into the pocket of her pinny. The nights had drawn in considerably, and the weather was getting wetter. Dry feet and a steady hand were needed, so she wrapped up warm and wore leather gloves to walk the narrow path uphill, counting the yards as she went. It was a little after eleven o’clock. A posse of dirty blackened sheep wandered past the mass of the Humber as she approached, as silent as an owl. She gently opened the back gate, and moved into the garden up to the back door. “No

torch", she said, "but a 'bit of a moon'." Inside there was a lamp in the living room which threw a bleak light out. *Obertruppfuhrer* Berger sat in his armchair, glass in hand, conducting loud music on the radio with gusto. Beryl couldn't make out the tune. "He was very drunk. Very drunk."

Suddenly he stood up, threw back his drink and lurched into the kitchen with a sailor's gait. She realised he was going to the outside toilet, and retreated behind the gate and fence as the backdoor swung open and the belching man stood in the portal urinating into the night air. Before Beryl could make a decisive move, he slammed the door closed, and locked it from within. Beryl waited and waited as the night passed on, and, then, when he had stumbled noisily up the stairs, she tried the door, but the key had been left in the lock.

"He did not die that night."

The following week she went back. Having chosen Friday night as the most 'suitable,' her word that, for him to die, she kept to it. He would have just returned from his day long trip, and whoever he went to meet would not miss him for another week.

"I waited and waited. Another week, and another.", she shook her head. "But I was patient, as women must be."

Friday again. The moon was in the third quarter as she moved into the back garden of 'Last House', and a strong breeze, promising rain, threw black clouds across sky and stars. She stopped and looked up as a steady stream of smoke blew eastwards away from the chimney pot. The kitchen light was out. Carefully she looked through the kitchen window. She gestured as she tried to explain the craft of such subtle observation, but I failed to grasp it. Berger sat slumped in his chair, glass tilted, a half-burned cigarette between his fingers. She slipped her key into the lock. It was clear, and she turned it with the gentlest of gloved hands, breath held. The house was quite warm, and she eased the killing blade into her expert fingers.

"One good hard kick to wake him up, and as he moved, then the knife thrust!" she said. "But no kick was needed. The man sat at a strange angle. His eyes were half open and a thin dribble of saliva dripped from his mouth onto the chair arm; the big body eased, but not a limb moved. He flopped uselessly, like a broken marionette, eh?" The man had suffered a seizure. Beryl stood, knife in hand, and looked at him, with, or so she said, some surprise. She threw out her left foot, hard, and caught him on the knee. He grunted but didn't move, he couldn't move. "His eyes followed me as I walked back into the lean-to and retrieved the key from outside, to lock the door from within." Beryl, with her vengeful intention postponed, if only for a short moment, sat in the deep armchair across the fireside from this sickening remnant of inhumanity. The fire blazed steadily, and the rising wind eased the lean-to's flimsy glass with heaven's breath, as she watched him.

The end game was hers. She thought for a few moments, gazing into the coals.

"'Lest there be any misunderstanding' I spoke first in Ukrainian, then in Polish and lapsed subtly from time to time into the bitter command language of the Reich. I told him why I had

come, I was thorough." Every detail of what Petr had told her of this Nazi's crimes, of his treatment of his own people, she stated in a slow monotone, like a court indictment, which in all truth is what it was.

"From deep within his throat escaped a regular tin click like a broken valve," and she thought she heard an attempt at a word. "But no word came."

Now he knew.

Secure, and in complete control of her situation, Beryl played with the Fairbairn-Sykes knife, tapping the hardened pommel into her hand. Frightened eyes watched her, like a rat in a trap. The fire was beginning to die back.

"All this while", she explained to me, "I had been considering where to make the cut. The carotid artery perhaps, that wound causing unconsciousness in only three or four seconds and death in under a minute." I was learning something. Beryl searched for a word. "Flamboyant", she suggested, "like in the cinema." The subclavial artery thrust, "a favourite in training" I learned, she rejected as "too fast for what I wanted." She wanted suffering. It was as clear to me as it must have been to him. I was enthralled as I listened. Beryl wanted to watch the hot blood haemorrhage out from the ruptured body, the unavoidable mess mattered little to her. She wanted him to know what was happening as he slipped into death. The tiny frail being solemnly explained the options to me, as she did to him on that night. With the honed edge of the dagger she "could slit the brachial artery at the elbow," and watch the red life force flow out of him as he shrivelled away in four or five timeless minutes. Or "the radial artery at the wrist, just as lethal, but with the added bonus", she told me with vigour, of a little more time to savour the pumping cadaverous wreck come to its end.

The eyes of the *Obertruppfuhrer* were fixed in terror, but how much they saw she couldn't tell. His slumped body agitated pointlessly in the big chair, and she suddenly realised.

"He had become my hostage. I didn't need to kill him.", Beryl croaked, pointing at the knife which I still held. "All the time in God's world was there for me. He could not move, he could not speak," not even a spittled half-stammer. Soon he would die, she had thought to herself. "Soon, soon but slowly and in great pain and fear." She prepared to leave. The fire was dying down, dying much quicker than he was. Beryl switched off the light, and carefully locked the back door. Placing as her wartime field craft taught her, a sliver of grass in the door jamb as a warning sign in the incredible, maybe one in ten million, chance that he might somehow recover his strength and get to the doorway. "I stood outside the back gate for a while, five minutes, perhaps ten, so that my eyes became acclimatised to the darkness once more, then walked carefully past the sheep down the path." She felt the first touch of the stiff breeze ruffle the dark grass around her, as if it was the sea, gently speaking in subtle secrecy. Then she was back home, at the door of 'Ty Glas', just as the first drops of rain threw themselves at her. "I had forgotten to wear my mackintosh.", she recalled.

Saturday passed in rain and wind. Cold mist, then gloomy cloud, covered the hillside, hiding forest and road and village, and Beryl quietly watched. Watched the Welsh weather pass over

the house and track; first in great waves, with here and there a hailstone stinging the window. Later as the day went on, the rain eased off and the wind dropped to little more than a whisper. In ten hours of watching she saw not a single soul, only the sheep moving across the damp green landscape in bemused clusters, and a few storm-thrown jackdaws.

Night fell and through the damp gloom the soft, weak light of one or two of the distant streetlights made the effort to mark its existence. She washed the tea things, drying them methodically, thoughtfully, then banked the small fire, carefully replacing the guard. She opened the heavy front door for a few minutes, watching the far distant lights, and seeking a glimpse of the thin moon above the moist soundless forest.

“The world seemed silent, empty. Nothing around me. Only Petr’s soul. Maybe.”

At exactly eight o’clock, she stressed this, but I didn’t ask why, Beryl went in, put on her coat. She was dressed more warmly than the night before, she said. She closed her back door. The small woman walked in silence along the track to her destination. All was as she left it. The back door was untouched, the house was pitch-black and grave-cold. Much colder now with the little fire dead and dusty.

The bulk of the *Obertruppfuhrer* lay in the armchair, the acute smell of faeces and urine and, again she stressed it, “The smell of his terror,” had edged in to replace the rank old odours of tobacco and sweat. Beryl slipped out of her wellingtons and switched on the light with her left hand, her right gripping the dagger for a quick downward thrust, just as in the field manuals. Nothing moved, the only sound the shallowest, sonorous breath. Beryl greeted the creature in perfect parade ground German. He slouched before her, almost as grey as the fire’s dead ashes. Head to one side, a dried-up stream of ill-coloured phlegm ran from his lips, over his unwashed chin, onto his shoulder, forming a stalactite. Berger’s eyes were open. They followed her. The right arm trembled, lifted barely a centimetre, then settled back uselessly. He had fouled himself, the stench was unmistakeable. “He was still my prisoner.” she laughed.

With the blade in hand, she toured the house once more. Then, after a while, sat opposite the man; possibly an hour passed, possibly a little longer. Beryl reminded the broken man of why she was there. All the while the long knife lay on the wide chair arm beside her small, still hand. He looked long at it, at her, at her hand. “Perhaps,” she told me, “he was willing me to end it with one swift deep cut.”

“Not yet!”, the frail old voice piped, smiling at me as I listened in complete silence.

The room, the whole lonely house, was cold, and the damp night stole in through the stones. She stood up, pocketing the dagger, slipped back into her wellingtons and switched off the light without a word or backward glance. She locked the door once again with her safe, secure routine. Locking in death with what little life there was left in her victim. Out of the darkness a solitary sheep chewed grass as it stared at her, then, late startled, fled into the night with a bleat.

“Sunday”, as if Beryl needed to tell me, was in Wales in the late fifties, “quiet as any grave.” A day when the world held its prayerful breath; a silent day when the only sound imagined, let alone heard, was a distant hymn borne on the wind over the hills from a far off valley. It was, in fact, a little earlier that she prepared for her next visit to ‘Last House’, and its dying resident. “Earlier because,” as she said with a sigh of fond recollection, “Petr and I had always had Sunday tea at five o’clock. Why should I change that?”

“On the third day he died.”

As she switched on the light, her abrupt word of command, terse and filled with destiny, fell on his unlistening ears. The head was thrown back a little, the throat exposed, his eyes open wide, his right hand palm upwards, crab-like, supplicating. Beryl knew the smell of death, the gathering flavours of decay. He’d been dead for some hours, and the dampness was beginning to bring the musky graveyard into the cold silent room. “In case, just in case”, as she had been taught, “I stood above and to one side of the cadaver, touching and pressing lightly on the adam’s apple with the dagger point. There was no flicker, no response from eyes or skin.”

The small woman sat for a moment, looking at the corpse, then walked out into the dark hallway. She stopped to gain her vision, and unwound the string on which the great house key hung. It clunked and swung for a moment, a slow pendulum, just below the level of the letterbox. Night and the cold air slithered through the cracks. A skilled eye ran over the living room and the kitchen. Even to the careful observer, the excessively curious, the most inquisitive, this man had died of natural causes, alone and filled with cheap drink.

Beryl carefully locked the back door, rubbed the key in moss and dirt and replaced it under the old flower pot where she had found it. Last of all, she dragged the half empty dustbin through the gate and left it alongside the Humber, ready for the morning collection.

“Then, I closed the gate and walked quietly back home.”

I didn’t ask how the corpse was found, I waited, until she told me after a few minutes silence looking out over the empty darkening park. It was a week later, on a Monday morning that a Post Office telegram boy buzzed his red moped up the track, stopping first outside ‘Ty Glas’, reading the name then like an indecisive wasp riding on unsteadily upwards to ‘Ty Gwyn’, his destination. Beryl could almost hear the knock, almost feel it resounding through the dead rooms, but no-one came to the door. The boy peered in through the front window, and, then, walked to the back gate, calling, wary of a silent waiting dog. Behind him, the refuse cart had lurched up the long track, and a head-shaking group held a small conference beside the empty dustbin before the boy mounted his little machine and rode swiftly away.

“They came the following morning. Two middle aged men in a heavy Rover 90. They knocked and waited. I was watching.” They examined the car parked alongside ‘Last House’, even lifted the lid of the dustbin before one cautiously opened the back gate. The more intrepid visitor called to the other, too low for Beryl to hear or identify the language, and they

peered under cupped hands into the house. In a moment they were back in the car and accelerating down towards the main road.

When the Police arrived, the first thing the Sergeant did was feel through the letterbox for the expected and present, front door key. After it had all quietened down a pleasant young constable knocked at Beryl's door, but she wasn't able to help. She kept herself to herself since her husband had died, and only noticed a man in a big black car pass by sometimes. He wasn't really a neighbour she said. The policeman drank his tea and went on his way. The Rover 90 didn't return.

Folding the paper, placing it in my pocket and closing the pen cap, I wanted to come back to talk to her again. After all there can have been few Polish women, born in Ukrainian Galicia, who gained the highest medal for bravery. Here would be a story to listen to, if she ever told me. "You promise to come?" she squeaked, holding out her hand to me. "Beryl.", I said, "I promise. I'll come back before too long."

It never happened, of course. The frail ninety one year old widow was buried before the winter ended. When I phoned to make arrangements for a visit which would not take place, a promise to be broken for eternity, the Matron told me that apart from a few of the staff of the home, only one mourner had stood at the graveside. He was a very dignified man, elderly and of a military bearing. Possibly an old friend? No-one asked him. Of her few precious possessions, nothing remained. I wondered what had happened to the Fairbairn-Sykes 1941 Fighting Knife- second pattern, which had, I admit, utterly entranced me. Beryl, not surprisingly wasn't even her real name. I guessed it was a 'trade-name', one she acquired during the war and forgot to give back in peacetime.

I should probably have kissed her goodbye, and wish I had. As I opened the door to leave, the Irish nurse bustled in with her medication.

Still no tea, I noticed.

**DAWN**

Cwm Diras. Spring 1959.

*"The steppe and freedom is luck."*
Borderlands Proverb

Dmitro, facing with stoicism his own life's end, had decided I would know the real story of Kulyk, the unlucky hill farmer. "Unlucky in love maybe," said Dmytro, "but in some other ways, very lucky indeed, maybe? Long dead now, as you may realise, he would be well over a hundred years, no, more. Old even for a Carpathian man, eh!"

Dmitro had written his memories of Kulyk, and drew from his paper words, but he never showed them to me. He began the tale, translating beautifully from the long letter he had sent home for remembrance's sake.

Kulyk woke quite suddenly, not startled, no, but immediately aware of his surroundings. He awoke, as those men live who are not imprisoned by mechanical hours, but sense the passing of time, wake. He slowly lifted his bulk from the worn counterpane on to one elbow and looked towards the uncurtained window, a dimmer grey rectangle than the deeper grey of the room. There were no stars, no moon, no hint of brightness in the bitter sky which showed outside.
It was cold.

The bed springs, strung on a bed frame even older than he, in that oldest of the valley's houses, struck a sonorous note as he moved across the bed, just as they had sounded dawn after dawn for all the time he'd lived there. It was the only noise, apart from his shallow breathing. He was fully clothed, all bar his work boots. He had never lain down on the bed fully clothed in all those years; even when dog-tired after lambing. The springs sounded once more as he reached down to the floor and pulled his boots nearer, grunting with a low oath as he bent to tie the laces, and ease his back before standing.

A hint, a mere hint, of approaching day seemed to suddenly slip over the far hillcrest and tantalise the sparse tree tops.

He needed no light, and crossing the room on creaking boards, he picked his worn leather jerkin from the hook and slipped it over his shoulders. Opening the door, darkness into darkness, he slowly made his way down the narrow stairs, moving a step at a time over the aching floorboards. At the bottom he stood for a moment, half expecting the dogs to come to him, but they were gone. Taken, taken two, no three days ago for testing they said, along with the guns, but they hadn't brought them back. The worn flagstones gritted on his boot soles, as he crossed the room, and the warmth of the blackened kitchen range drew him to it.

Kulyk bent and stirred the ashes with slow deliberation, added a few broken sticks, a twist of yellowed newspaper, and prodded the fire back to life; carefully adding a few lumps of coal until it caught. The thin smoke drifted up into the narrow, grimy chimney, and from there into the yet lightless morning air to flow free and be forgotten against the dark sky. He remembered, as he always did when lighting this pitiful fire, the huge and roaring pot-bellied stoves of home.

He sat back wearily on the great oak settle.

And waited.

Dmitro paused, and looked at me over his thick glasses. “He waited as men born and bred on the steppes in Stalin’s time knew how to wait.”

Time, elusive and uncaring passed on.

The old man’s grandfather clock, a great monster of an engine, stood shackled by a rusted iron clamp to the kitchen wall. It had surprised him when he first came to the farm with her. That huge clock tick-tocking the hours away with an irregular heartbeat that clucked from deep within its mechanical soul.
The time it showed was wrong, just as it had been wrong ever since Kulyk arrived here after the war’s bitter end; it had probably been wrong for a generation before that. It would never change now.

Listening in silence, I felt that cold dawn creep into my own heart.

A crackling, then another from the fire, a burst of warmth, made him reach out and swing the old iron kettle, blackened with age, over the heat. He tapped the spout and it turned gently on its chain gallows. It was far from empty, it would do. Lifting his head from the mesmerising flames, from the spreading crimson glow, he looked towards the window. From somewhere far off the merest streak of lighter greyness had appeared, and the objects within the broad room began to take on life in the reality of the day soon to come. A day late in the year, a year well-turned, and with a hard, cold Winter already testing its grip on the old hills.

The kettle began to murmur and bubble. He stood, and as though in a dream, stepped, as he had always stepped, over the sleeping dogs, now vanished from the poorest of rugs before the fire.

He didn’t notice.

On the table lay the farm bread, the crock of salt Welsh butter, a slab of hard cheese, and the old basin. He took up the loaf and the only knife they had left him, and, with slow sweep of his hand, nicked a thick edge from the butter pat. Kulyk spread it evenly crust to crust over the cut edge of the bread. Holding it close to his chest as he cut the thick slice, unknowingly matching his action to the sound of the great time piece behind him. His heavy, work worn hands broke the bread into the bowl, with all the ease of a long-awaited communion. The last crust torn and dropped in, he turned back to the fire. The mottled brown teapot, a wedding gift, a last surviving remnant of her time, sat warming on the hob plate. He reached up to the mantlepiece and felt his body ache, ache with age, and with anticipation, as he spooned the tea into belly of the warm pot.

“Yes, Dmitro, I know this, the old Welsh farmer’s poor breakfast. They call it Siencyn Te.” He barely nodded recognition, and moved on. Speaking slowly, as though no time was passing.

Kulyk’s rough hands needed no cloth, as hers would have done, to swing the kettle across and

tilt it to pour the boiling water over the startled leaves. He moved the kettle back, a single gesture, leaving it to hang from its chain. The soft groaning of warmth, of life, ebbed away as it rocked to stillness at the chain's end.

His eyes drawn by the kettle and the flames, he stirred the tea pot and dropped the lid in place. He sighed, and standing as upright as his aching body would allow, he stretched powerful arms. He eased the mortal man but not his mind.
It was much lighter now. Even in the towns and cities far from the valley, people would stir and know that it was morning.
That day had come.

Grey colours washed down the dirty window panes, from pale, and thin and light, to dark and dreary; the sky showed the morning, but the farmyard still gripped its night recalling shades, refusing to give them up. In deep corners, under decaying eaves, behind a handful of broken relics of old farm business, darkness was still protected.

He lifted the warm teapot and poured the dark liquid slowly over the broken bread, with unspeaking lips in silent prayer. Here and there a sliver, not engulfed, floated upwards in the bowl, golden with melted butter. His thick fingers reached forward and, lifting the milk jug to his face, he sighed and sniffed its contents, as she used to do, hoping for a scent of freshness, of purity.

The quick white torrent was followed by fingersful of dusty sugar cubes.
He sat on the big chair, pulling the bowl towards him.

A thought of childhood rose from the table; of the hard rye bread, the great loaf of sugar in a Volhynia long gone, a taste of the past, a snatch of laughter flowed back to him. His hand sought the spoon, and, finding it, he polished the back against his trouser leg, like times old mirror. Kulyk stirred the breakfast, carefully, as she had long ago shown him, so that the sugar dissolved through the bread, and the thick golden butter floated to the surface like dreams.
Dmitro paused again. "Volhynia. Volhynia. A dream now."

Before him, through the thin steam rising from the bowl, through the wide window, it was day. A magpie flew across the outbuildings, and beyond he could make out the undulating outline of the ridge. As he lifted the first spoonful to his lips he saw headlights, suddenly switched off as a car too distant to make out, left the forestry behind and reached the crest.

The cold of early morning seeped through the cracks in the window frame and touched his hands and face, lacing its way through the settling steam of the bowl. He ate steadily, capturing one drowned morsel of buttered bread after another.

Then, almost imperceptibly, they were there. He could make out a long line of dark bodies, of dark bodies and dogs. One was on a horse. They carried long poles or sticks and moved out to right and left at neat distances, then stood still like ancient warriors facing battle.

I wanted to ask so much, yet I simply couldn't break the spell of Dmitro's measured words.

A blast of Atlantic wind, cold, strong, blew along the hill crest, slinging a shower of rain, buffeting the tree tops and forcing the men to turn their backs on it. They began to move

slowly down the slope, skirmishing with the wintry gusts. All of the hill side, the trees, the grass, the rocks even, seemed alive and moving. The crows flying low, careered and fled on the harsh breeze.
Soon he knew, filling his mouth with a spoonful of hot sweet mess, they would reach the place. They had already searched the barn and outbuildings, had almost dismantled the farmhouse; discussing in low voices and taking away many small things he had forgotten even existed.

There was only the hillside and the turbulent stream-bed left.

There they would find it.

Shallow, a grave scraped out with the old adze, broken a dozen winter's ago on a stone hard tree root; scraped and dug as deep as he could go in this poor earth, but not deep enough by far.

A pause, a sip of coffee, and he continued.

There they would find her covered with the red earth, betrayed in earth now eager for the kiss of the first frost. Covered over with clumps of rough grass and heavy stones, to stop the foxes, and the farm dogs too. Her broken body, and the axe with which he had struck her lay there; and over the corpse like tainted confetti, the rotting torn letters that had betrayed her at the end.

Kulyk fished the last oozing crust of bread from the basin, lay down his spoon, and looking through the window steadily, he lifted the bowl in benediction and drained the last sweet dregs.

Dmitro spread his hands wide, his tale had ended. Almost. He stopped my stream of questions with a raised fingertip. "No.", he said.

"They did not", he said, "hang him.". I tilted my head in slight surprise. I knew nothing of the case at all, but almost sixty years ago, in the 1950's, a reprieve from a death sentence, I thought, must have been a rare gift of life indeed.

"He was guilty of course, and was sentenced to die for the crime. He had murdered his young wife, and buried her alongside the stream. There were however some, well, certain circumstances which altered the outcome."
What I wondered, taking a sip of my beer, were those 'certain circumstances' which suddenly occurred to him at the end of the tale. Dmitro was playing with his words like a Moscow lawyer, and he knew it.

He lifted his glass, and, distracted for a moment by the passing of a pleasantly attractive barmaid, paused for clearly for effect.

It worked of course. I had to urge the tale onwards to its end.

"What had happened to save the man?"

"Old Kulyk was not the most thorough of my countrymen. Yes, he found many letters from

the lover to his wife, and tore them up and buried them with her, scattered over the corpse which he wrapped in an old oilcloth."

Here it comes, I thought, the truth at last. Or as much of the truth as Dmitro thought I wanted to know. Or ought to know!

"You see, my friend", he said quietly, a thin smile playing on his lips, "Kulyk didn't find all of the letters. No, no, not by far. When they searched the young lover's cottage in the village they found a large number of her love letters to him.".
I nodded. "Well, were they important?"
"Yes! Oh, Yes!"
"They saved Kulyk from the noose. You see, the wife and her lover intended to kill him."
The wife had in fact begun to poison him, subtly and slowly, with a little pesticide. The lover had bought it for her.
"You see, each morning she would rise and make him breakfast, the old breakfast of the hill farmers, which he'd eaten for many years, first with the old man, her father. Into the bowl each morning with the sugar cubes, a spoonful of slow death, stirred in lovingly."

Dmitro stirred an imaginary cauldron before him with an invisible, gigantic spoon. "She explained to her lover how she was looking forward to seeing her husband's agonies." How long it would take, weeks it appeared, with increasing effect. She went into detail about how they would dispose of him; first burn the body and then throw the remains in a grave in the deepest part of the forestry, a grave the young lover had already prepared. The earth there was soft and wet, and there what was left of Kulyk's corpse would soon corrupt.

I ventured my opinion that this was certainly an interesting set of 'circumstances'! "What had happened to the lover?" Though the wife was dead, this man had been involved in another crime, almost as fatal a crime as the killing of the woman.

Old Dmitro nodded sagely. "Yes. True, my friend. But, of course, he was never found. It was assumed he'd fled to escape the charge."
He smiled and waved a hand with nonchalance.
"Of course, who knows, this young man, he may be dead and buried somewhere else. Somewhere not far away."
He finished his beer.

**TEARS**

Albert Row. March 1964.

*"Blood is no water."*
Borderlands Proverb

"Rain."

There, another spatter of great drops, driven against the window pane, like slingshot on a Hoplite's shield. Running like a mother's tears down the cold glass.

"Cold."

Between the bands of driven rain, the tear drops run away to leave a softer heartbeat, drip, drip, drip; and now I can see the big tree, agitated, shaking in the storm outside. Here and there a late lingering leaf flies off, leaving the branches as bare as the bones on a gibbet.

I pull my scarf a little tighter around my neck, as much against conscience as cold. On the long table to my right, my work books stand open, untouched. My pen lies alongside them. My notebook, commonplace, bound tightly shut with a thick rubber band, shouts silently to be opened. My fingertips brush the cover, ill at ease. I must write it. Soon.

"Why me?"

The tale is, was, transmundane. Impossible to grasp, coming from another world. Even in stories told in half-truths and hearsay, woven with death and brutality, with hatred and hopelessness, his tale was an awful account, an ending of haunting, horrifying suffering. Why tell me?

They sent him home to 9, Albert Row to die. That's what they do these days. Someone comes in, sometimes even the Doctor calls. That's what happened. I called. On a grey, late Autumn day, with rain threatening and breath cold in the air. It wasn't expected, but half arranged, and it gave her a chance to let someone else watch him slip away towards his death, while she got on with things. Only a neighbour after all, young and kindly, paid for her time, but overwhelmed. There was no-one left for him. No family. In the plain deadpan voice that the dying often acquire, he told me first half a tale, then all of it. He told me everything. The big air freshener plugged into the wall socket did little to diffuse the scent of drugs and disinfectant with its 'breezy cherry' cheeriness; death has its own smell, and I could taste its foul fog, faintly gathering in the corners of the room.

"Why tell me?"

I suppose I must have been his last visitor. A visit at someone else's suggestion; for me, a chance to hear another story. His last visitor, or, at least, the last to hear him speak in real sentences, in a conversation, before that kindly fog approached and misted his mind and memory, leaving little to be said apart from snatches from childhood and youth, mumbled in

the old language. Mumbled incoherently between fitful sleeps, each sleep slipping closer toward eternity. “A little song, sung softly, a moment before he died”, the neighbour said, “The Paramedic was just too late.”.

Thinly, undulating, the tale was told. It was assumed by the surviving old men of the ‘Diaspora’, few knew him well, and fewer knew her at all, that his wife, older than him by a decade or more - plain, they called her, and sullen - had taken her life in pain. A good handful of tablets, barbiturates, secretly stored, washed down with Lucozade of all things. She had been bed-ridden, and, before that, house-bound for a long time. A long, long time. Few people saw her in the last years, and no-one saw her die. The crippling arthritis had been too much, the Inquest heard, but perhaps the overdose had been a mistake? Accidental death the inevitable verdict, and it seemed to suit.

In slow exhales, underlined by a tiny, tinny rattle, he told me she had killed herself.

“But she was dead a long time before that.” My mouth dried, and the slightest of shivers ran down my spine as he told me why.

As he talked, that line in *Anna Karenina* about families and unhappiness, blinked before me again and again. The preamble was half hearted and brief. The War, of course, Russia then Germany. Defeat and ruin. Exile, the DP camp, work and marriage. Marriage, loveless, but protective and comfortable, suited both it seemed, at least at the beginning. A child, a single child, a daughter was born but brought little warmth into a life of drudgery and regret. Where, for many of these tales told, there had been some happiness, relief, maybe a new page on which to write a new life, here there had been nothing at all. Just unspoken misery and bare, banal survival.

I could read it in his ashen face, hear it in the dull monotones of his fading, death-bound voice. He told me, and I knew it was true. Sometimes, of course, a tale simply will not come; the street is swept, the carpet rolled out, but no-one recognisable steps from the coach, which, then, gently continues on its way undisturbed.

I feared this would be the case. He seemed to be slipping between clouds, not of consciousness or life, but of hopelessness, regret. Somehow desperately gathering inside his doomed frame the will to utter, almost as a kettle emits a stream of silent steam, the story he held tight within.

I sat there, exchanging small, unimportant comments, the sort I’d learned to say over many, easier tale-tellings, and said them largely to myself; avoiding all temptation to look at my watch. There was no clock in that sick room, but no clock in a condemned cell either. One and the same place for us two souls, on this grey afternoon. Suddenly he began. Life flowed back to him, and his eyes turned with the sickly head, and an insubstantial gaze passed through me, back to the Western steppes of Galicia.

He served, he told me, not long after the Reds had ‘run away’ beyond Kharkiv, beyond the borders of old Ukraine, with one of the ‘Special Companies’, as he called them, partisan hunters who never saw a partisan. Led by a “fine, handsome officer”, he pursed his cracked

lips remembering the man's name, "Folterer -- though perhaps that was not his real name", he chuckled, with a thin smile. They "dashed", he told me, "here and there, everywhere". From village to village, delightedly eliminating Jews, as well as a few misplaced intellectuals and troublemakers. "Yes, and Poles of course, wherever we could find them."

He must have been a classical scholar, Haptscharfuhrer Folterer, though I kept the thought to myself. He didn't like to kill virgins. The old man coughed half a laugh. Just as the Romans thought to kill a virgin offended the gods, and paid the executioners extra to rape them before death, the men of Herr Folterer's unit were ordered, but needed little encouragement, nor any extra pay, to follow suit. When the men were separated from the women and children, the real fun started. That's what the old man said, exactly how he said it. Anything less than the ugly, senescent, or plain grotesque would be interfered with. Sometimes, looking for valuables, a soldier would slip a long bayonet deep into the vagina or the arse, and rattle it about a bit. "Once", he remembered with almost a chuckle, "a foetus dropped out. Small", he held up his gnarled hand, finger and thumb a cigarette length apart. "Alive too," still moving in a bloody pond in the dirt, until a boot pulped it.

Herr Folterer preferred the younger, more obvious virgins. "Fifteen, well twelve years, ten maybe. Some even younger. Much younger." A half smile covered the wan face. At first the Ukrainian volunteers had shrugged, "but what the hell, these were Jews, they would die anyway." The screams didn't upset him naturally, any more than it would upset any Reich soldier. Maybe they didn't laugh as loud as their officer, but it eased matters when they were far from the field brothels, and there were never enough ripe or pretty Jewesses to empty them.

He looked sideways at me, and nodded barely moving his head. "Yes. Maybe two hundred, three hundred. More maybe?" He moved his hands apart in a futile gesture." Not just Jews of course, Poles, Red women too, but never the Gypsies, they were all rotten, diseased with pox and lice." Gypsies died quickly. Untroubled.

We sat for a while. I could hear rain patter at the window, light kisses, wind thrown. I could hear his chest and throat too, above the pitter-patter on the panes.

"I do not know", he said, "It happened." His wife was sullen, cowed, perhaps beaten, to silent loyalty by a man who could never tell her what he had done, but she knew all too well what he was doing. "As though I was alone, yet locked in a crowd, one soul falling silent as the curtains sweep open on the final act of a murderous ghost story, it dawned upon me. My soul ached."

His daughter.

"She was eight maybe.", he said, in a whisper, picking at invisible threads on the counterpane. She was not a Jew. She was not destined to die, at least not by his deliberate hand. She was not to be passed around like a stained and ruptured hill shepherd's wine-skin, but she suffered. "Again, and again, in silence and tears, at night I felt it was, always at night, a child in darkness, the screams silenced, and the tears unseen. Finally, a fool would say

inevitably, in the Summer of her fifteenth birthday, about to leave school, she fell pregnant." The daughter had no friendships, no-one ever visited the terraced house in Albert Row. No-one asked for her. These were far off days, long before safeguarding and social workers, and inquisitive professionals." She never left 9, Albert Row.

"The baby?" I asked. The child must be forty, or forty five, older possibly, by now.

"It was born." he said quietly. He didn't look at me. The bringer of many deaths, in the face of his own death, he could barely speak of that one fate.

"Too soon. And Ill. Very ill." The room shouted in its silent anger.

"We put it safely away." The silence grew loud and louder still.

I was sweating, and profusely, but a cold sweat and with a steel grip grasping my throat and dropping my breath to a dry whisper.

"I knew."

"The baby was killed. By his hand. Or killed by his wife maybe? No. No, not her, but she must have known what was happening, but she said nothing." I felt a door sadly closing within me, and my dry mouth said: "What happened?"

"She was ill too, like the baby. It was not good."

The child, born alive, and living at least for a short time. Then dead. Dead. The child was a silenced memory. His weary, raw voice, droned on as though the syllables were torn, slowly, one by one, like dead petals from a wreath.

He was telling me about his daughter now. I never really knew the place he was describing so intimately, though it was not all that long ago. When I came here, the pit, the old works, the railway and the canal had all passed into history, no more than unnoticed photos on a drab pub wall. Only the old men of the town would know what he was describing. The bridge I did know; the pub alongside it long sold into flats, and the line below; the old 'LMS', torn up and turned into a cycle path and picnic area which had enjoyed a brief popularity with local families, until the drifting youth, the dealers and the knotweed took over.

"She slipped out", he breathed the words rather than spoke. Unwatched for just this once. She went, late at night. It was moonless and dark. There had been early Spring rain, and wind strewn clouds almost touched the rooftops, threatening more to come. "She wore her mother's old coat over a winceyette nightdress and worn slippers. No scarf, and nothing to warm her." She crossed the unmade, unadopted, street over rough ground lit by a solitary lamp post.

Later, much later, when things had settled and my own mind was clear, I walked the way she must have walked; first by day, and then on a wet, dismal evening. Across the once quiet B road, and along the neglected path between the whispering trees and the wisteria clad garden walls of the new houses. Just five minutes walk through puddles and over greasy stones to the

side of the bridge. She must have waited until the pub was quiet, no-one coming or going. There were fewer cars around in those days.

She would have heard it first, rather than seen it coming, through her tears, and then a dark cyclopean mass of metal moving down the valley, clanking and straining. She was young, and it was easy for her to lift her body onto the broad stone parapet. Perhaps she waited then. Perhaps the coal train blew its whistle. Perhaps, perhaps, I hoped, she looked to her left at the Engineers Arms, in case someone came out. A saviour. A beer-fuelled hero. Or just a half cut witness. She wouldn't have needed to jump, a simple step forward, a final shrug of life, and she would drop to the track, eighteen or twenty feet below.

I was a schoolboy in the year that she died, and ardent in my love of the railways and steam. The soot blackened engine which, without malice or design, ended her life was without doubt an 0-6-2 saddle tank of the ubiquitous and much admired '56' Class. On the slightest of down-inclines, like this, a seventy ton steam engine, pulling five, maybe six, hundred tons of anthracite coal at a sedate twenty five miles an hour, would crush and amputate well enough, but suicide under the wheels of a train is always a most uncertain thing. For railway lines are four feet eight and a half inches apart, and even with a perfectly composed step into the darkness, an awkward fall might mean the head and torso left intact, and conscious, stunned, shocked and silent in anguish as the blood haemorrhaged away through crushed and shattered limbs. Some jumpers, they say, take a while to die. At night the driver and fireman would have known nothing, they wouldn't have seen her, or felt a bump.

She was left there, broken and discarded for the late fox, and dawn- feasting magpies. A platelayer, walking the track for an early start, found her as the day brightened to morning, burst and broken, strewn across the blood-washed ballast. The post mortem and the Coroner's Inquest proved nothing. The physical destruction of the body was utter and visceral; cold, clinically presented, it showed nothing untoward.

"She was unhappy. She was withdrawn. She did not venture out. She would not eat. She rarely spoke." Thin answers. Most of what was said was true, but no-one said why, and no-one asked. The case was gently, but very firmly, closed. After all, she took her own life. No-one took it from her.

Yes. Yes. He did. Her father. Her abuser. Her forbidden, forceful lover. I wanted to scream, to shout.

"He took it!"

The afternoon was wearing on, and in Albert Row, the neighbour had returned. She was bustling in the distant kitchen, bustling noisily enough to know that it was time for his medication, and for whatever it is dying men have for tea.

"If I could remember what my last words to him were, I would write them now, but they were worthless sounds. As worthless as the wheezing farewell in old-fashioned Polish-Ukrainian that he spoke to me. I know I didn't take his hand, or wish him false hope or luck."

Soon it would be finished.

I walked to the bridge again this evening, as dusk fell. Before I began to write down what he told me. Some tales are best written, no, some tales can only be written, when the world is dark. I rested my hands on the damp stone blocks of the parapet, and looked over. Below me, the knotweed whispered in the breeze, ever so softly, like a child’s sob in all the world’s darkness. That’s all I can tell you.

**TRUNK**

Albert Row. Thirty years later ...

*"In your own home, even the walls help you."*
Borderlands Proverb

Number 9, Albert Row was just a small terraced house, originally of the 'two up two down' sort, with a few bits added on. Tucked well away from any bustle or business, any possibility of glamour or interest, lost in the unfashionable valley end of the decaying Welsh town. Even in times of housing 'boom', any Estate Agent faced with the task of producing a paragraph or two to stimulate the desires and excitement of a prospective purchaser in the property, would have surely struggled hard. In times of economic downturn, as the television pundits like to call it, the little house had stood empty for more than five years after the elderly Ukrainian died.

Mrs Evans next door, the neighbour at number eight, though she had been on 'pass the time of day' terms with his late wife for a few years, and even managed a gruff nod from him, had never crossed the threshold of their silent home. She tried hard, as any typically inquisitive Welsh housewife would, but never quite managed it. Even when she was ill, or he finally; it was that piece from number fourteen who went in. Not her. After the old man died, when the house clearance men were busily filling the vans, and after that a big yellow skip, she was still rebuffed at the door. They took her tea of course, and when they'd gone she had a good, but pointless look into the contents of the skip.

Now these being stone built solid old dwellings of the 1880's, the walls were far too thick to eavesdrop, and the back gardens, long, narrow had high walls, which, in the case of number 9, disclosed little beyond the washing line, the roof of a small greenhouse, and in Summer, the lance tops of runner bean poles. Like hers, all the windows of number 9 had net curtains, which the clearance men thoughtfully left in place, though grimy and with the odd tear here and there. The cat had moved on.

Eventually the 'FOR SALE' sign came down, and Mrs Evans kicked herself for not being there, on the doorstep with her falsest smile and a clean pinny, to meet the new neighbours as they moved in. But Wednesday was her day for her sister's and she was late back. By that time the grubby nets were down and a coat of whitewash covered the glass panes. As she turned her key, a young couple, the girl taller than him, skipped from the door into a small car, and laughing, drove away into the evening sun. They didn't glance at the elderly woman on the next doorstep, and so, Mrs Evans, for decades the self-styled guardian of Albert Row's news and secrets passed unrecognised into the history of number 9, never to surface again.

There was remarkably little for the new owners to do. The old exile had built a solid extension when he'd bought the place, and such walls as might be taken down, had been. He was, in all truth, a neat man who died in a tidy house. Well, a new boiler, yes, and a new

bathroom suite. Some decorating of course, but little else seemed essential. Not without the time for daydreaming and planning. All in the future of course.

A year passed. Mrs Evans died. And at number 9 a small decision was taken. Not quite collectively, but he agreed to placate her, and to avoid another row. Each side of the chimney breast in the seemingly unused back bedroom stood two floor-to-ceiling cupboards. Up to this point they'd been used to store the sort of debris any relationship brings. From old hobbies to unwanted gifts, racquets, unread books, a tent, sleeping bags, and rucksack from a Summer trip which would never be repeated. No, she was certain. Alcoves. Alcoves would be more suitable, with half cupboards below, and subdued lighting. Then perhaps, new wallpaper and blinds. So, on Saturday morning, she worked the occasional Saturday, he took off the two cupboard doors, carefully saving the brass hinges; the previous owner had obviously been a man who believed in sturdy workmanship and good materials. The handles, too, were saved, and the doors went downstairs into the narrow hall, resting against the wall until his idle brother in law could be bothered to come and collect them.

An hour later and the shelves, not board or composite but real pine -- he admired the wood, running his hands over it-, were all taken out of the first cupboard and slipped into storage under the bed. The young man stepped into the space, and spanned it with his hands; about two feet wide, well over six feet high, and a bit too deep for an alcove, really, he thought. Ah, well, he'd keep that to himself. The fewer opportunities for her to start an argument the better. He sipped his tea thoughtfully, considering a dead man's craftsmanship, admiring his thoroughness.

When he looked at the second cupboard space, leaning against the opposite wall, he thought it looked a bit well, different. He stepped up to it; just as high and as wide, but it didn't seem as deep. Not at the bottom anyway. The top shelf was, and the second, and the third, but the fourth shelf down. Very strongly secured, with bolts by the look of it. Below that the space was only half as deep, not more than twelve, maybe fourteen inches or so. Why hadn't he noticed before? It was so skilfully designed, only close examination without the door's disguise would show it. He rummaged in his tool box for a steel tape, humming to the radio as he delved. Yes. The shelf was exactly fifteen inches deep, and the one below it, he thought he'd try that too, was exactly the same. Less than half the wall space. He finished his tea and started back to work. It was going to rain, the local radio said so. He looked out of the back window and went quickly down the stairs. He stopped to wash his hands, they were dusty rather than dirty, and dashed out, past the cat to fetch in the washing. One row stopped at least.

Upstairs the cat was sitting in the half-dismantled cupboard, sniffing the air, when he walked in. He lifted her out and sat her on the window sill, but in an instant she was back, hunched forward, sniffing the back edges of the fourth shelf, tail flicking, immersed in some unseen scent, tracing the air with her nose, she dropped to the floor and repeated the task. His first thought was gas. An old pipe maybe? More likely a dead mouse or rat, something for the cat to delight in, but she'd be mortified. Rodents were not an option! Closely watched by his feline companion he tapped the back of the space with a screwdriver. Hollow alright, and the

bottom panel resonated just as clearly. The cat moved aside, and sitting on her haunches, waited patiently, watching him work. Kneeling he traced the screwdrivers tip around the space; solid enough, pine as before, the back wallpapered and painted over, very neatly. Painstakingly undoing a dead man's labours, he rummaged for a Stanley knife, and, with a few slow digs and cuts a corner of the paper gave way, but it took ages to peel it back, layer after layer, like a flat, drab onion.

Half an hour later, he'd uncovered a small cupboard, secure within the shelf space. A narrow wooden frame held a hatch sealed on all four sides with thick paper tape, old fashioned tape. "Must be years old", he murmured to his feline companion. Tracing the rectangle, he found the edges of the hatch, cutting through the tape. "Not much of a gap." he told her, and the cat seemed content to wait. What surprised him were the locks, one each side, offset. Little teardrops, each covered by a curtain of waxed paper, the shape beneath as distinct as a mummified hieroglyph. He traced one with the tip of the blade, dipping into a reservoir of sluggish grease. This lock would break with a little pressure, the lightest blow. One tap, another; the heavy blade of the screwdriver nudged in and the lock yielded. Giving the cat a conspiratorial wink, he turned his attention to the second lock. Click. For a moment he sat back on his haunches, listening to the cat's purr and the raindrops rattling the window pane. With the panel out the cubby hole was revealed, and so were its contents. He dipped into his toolbox for a torch. So, he knelt beside her and shone it on an oilskin wrap. It was tight to lift out, not heavy, and, with a gentle toing-and-froing, it emerged onto the shelf. Behind it the torch showed nothing but a lined cavity. Steel?  No lead! That surprised him. "Ah well" he told the cat, "Let's see what we've got.".

He lay the oilskin on the bed, and unwrapped a small, leather suitcase, bound with two leather straps. In wonder rather than anticipation, the young man loosened the straps, and with the screwdriver broke open an ancient, but unrusted, lock. Under the handle he could make out two letters, but couldn't understand them. One looked like 'R' backwards.

An old sort of army blanket was wrapped around a series of packages, like a picnic, each neatly wrapped in greaseproof paper. The cat, bored with her empty space, intrigued by a new smell, joined him in his exploration. The smell was not overpowering exactly, but powerful, like an old workshop. His grandfather came to mind, pipe and oil can. The case had been packed tight. First there was a book. He unwrapped it. It, too, was held by a thin strap, and covered with strange letters. A diary, maybe? There was a flag, in poor shape, looked as though it had been burned at the edges, torn too, faded yellow and a dampish blue or grey. There was a Bible, he could recognise that, and a wrapped set of buttons and cloth badges. In another pack, double wrapped, a set of old photos, stained and sepia. Photos of men and boys mostly, some in uniform. He could recognise the Germans among them, helmets and boots, "Straight out of 'Saving Private Ryan'" he chuckled. In the bottom of the case, a long bladed knife, carefully wrapped, the blade heavily greased. There were tattered maps, covered with letters like the book. The cat sniffed at and dismissed them.

A long roll, like the centre of a kitchen towel, nearly a foot long, and quite heavy in his hand. He unwrapped it and a circular packet fell into his hand, then another, identical, a third, and

then one more. Replacing three he unpicked one, and out fell a stream of dull gold coins. One side of each bore a double eagle, the other some foreign inscription. He flashed one, polished it and decided it was valuable. It was gold! He quickly repacked them, laid the roll aside, and tickled the cat behind the ear, whistling along with the radio.

The last packet of all opened with difficulty, the contents wrapped in another flag, completely faded. He handled it gingerly, and laid it aside gently recognising what it, and the half a dozen long black rectangles were, beyond any doubt. “Real CSI stuff, eh?” he told the sniffing cat. He heard the radio DJ speak, and glanced at the clock. Barely eleven, she’d be hours yet. He hummed as he picked up the roll of coins, and went downstairs. The coins he put into his training bag with his football kit, and took it out to the car, locking it carefully in the boot.

Then he phoned.

The police when they arrived were an unlikely pair. Two women, hard eyed. They stood, radios crackling and spitting in the bedroom looking at the contents of the suitcase, as though it was a sort of military ‘Kim’s Game’. They phoned in. After a while-, he didn’t offer the women a cup of tea-, an unmarked car arrived, with a bloke who reminded him of Sergeant Lewis in that ‘Morse’ TV series, and another very serious, in a good suit. They seemed efficient, and ‘Lewis’, slipping on a pair of latex gloves, carefully opened the packet containing the gun and loaded magazines as it lay on the bed.

“You don’t see many of these” he said, “Old Russian Makarov automatic. Nine millimetre job. Don’t recognise any of this other stuff though.”.

“Prisoner of war, maybe.  Couple of souvenirs?” said the man in the suit. With no obvious crime present, they became chattier in a bloke-ish sort of way. The two women officers left after a brief conference, radios still crackling, but they didn’t close the front door as the cat showed them out.

“In the old days these things were always turning up. Lugers usually, smuggled in by squaddies. Samurai swords, old SS daggers, stuff like that. In F Division they found a live hand grenade a couple of years back. Sitting on a shelf in a garden shed, nicely polished up, but the little buggers who broke in only wanted the tools.” They laughed. He made the tea.

While they waited for the gun officer to collect the packages, the suit, he was an Inspector, borrowed the torch and squatted to look in the cavity. “Neat job,” he said. “Hard to find.” He couldn’t explain the lead lining either. He sipped his tea, there were no biscuits.

It was just at that moment the young man explained to them, quite by chance that the wife had wanted the alcoves changed. ‘Lewis’ grinned in the way men forced into DIY by their wives all understood. He took the torch from the Inspector and shone it under the cavity. “It’s the same down here, at the bottom level. I suppose there might be something in there too?”

Silence first. Then rapid movement followed. The Inspector spoke into the radio and the Sergeant ushered him out of the house “Best come outside while we take a look, eh?” They forgot the cat.

Within a few minutes there were half a dozen uniformed officers and the sort of taped lines you see in television murder dramas stretched across the lampposts. A handful of neighbours stood sullenly, watching behind the red and white tapes. Mrs Evans would have loved it. The young man sat in the Inspector’s car and gave as full an explanation of what he’d done that morning as he was ever likely to give. They were more interested in who had lived there before, anything which might have been left behind from the previous owners? That sort of thing. “No,” he told them. “I knew it was somebody old, and I heard, foreign, but the house had been cleared of everything, not a light bulb left behind!”

A few scattered raindrops fell once more. It was after midday, and the neighbours, temporarily homeless, drifted off to sit in their cars or to other distant houses. Time passed, the rain eased and started again. The neighbours were replaced by a larger group, kids and the pathologically curious, oblivious to the rain. Some eager, some intrigued by this rare and bustling display of authority. A reporter came. A plain van drew up, and out came a dog, with a military looking man wearing a flak jacket and a helmet, a bit like the Securicor men who go to banks. He stopped to have a word with the two young coppers at the door of number nine, and the Inspector slipped out of the car, skipping through the rain to avoid the drops.

“Just a precaution”, said Sergeant Lewis. “Whoever left that gun might have left something else in the other cubby-hole.” Suppressing the image of his mortgaged-up-to-the-hilt house vanishing over the football field in a plume of smoke, the young man remembered his wife. “She’ll be on her way home by now.” The Sergeant wound down the window, gestured to a constable and gave her a short instruction. The Inspector’s suit was getting wet, as he chatted with the now helmetless dog man, who seemed ready to go on his way, the dog wagging a happy tail beside him.

The two policemen settled back into the car, after more discussion. “Don’t worry,” they told him. “The lads are just going to open up that little shelf of yours and take a look at what’s inside. They’ll be very neat, bit of a DIY man himself is P.C. Evans.” He gestured at a burly man in overalls, lugging a huge toolbox through his front door. “By the way, your wife’s arrived. I’ll come over with you.” The Inspector winced his way through the wet afternoon to the barrier, but failed completely to reassure the stunned and tearful woman he spoke to. He assumed her shock and angry outburst were down to the pregnancy. Five or six months gone, he thought.

The young couple were sitting distant and alone in a miasmic room at the local police Station when a man, announced as Chief Inspector something-or-other, came in with the Sergeant. There was, he told them, a problem. Nothing they had done, but, well they wouldn’t be able to return to the house for a while. No. Only a fleeting visit for clothes, and nightwear, and a very reluctant cat. He couldn’t say what the problem was, but would need the keys, please.

Even at a distance in time, it seems difficult to recognise that they were never to live in that house again; never to wake in the small front bedroom, make tea in the kitchen or feed the cat. He went back just once, with the removal men. She never crossed the threshold again.

It was the beginning of the end of the marriage.

The search was thorough, as though they were dissecting a doll's house. The neighbours complained of noise and dust for days afterwards; of endless streams of turbulent policemen, and more than a few reporters. Another dog arrived, and then a third. Things went quiet for an hour. Then the racket began again.

Where there is a body, and a mystery, there is an inquest. And there was a body. A very small body. It made the national press. The Pathologist seemed very matter of fact when she described how "five of the cervical vertebrae were crushed, and the seventh thoracic vertebra too." Her elegant hand described an arc in the air. "A heavy blow, more probably a crushing hand, ended the life of a male infant between the ages of birth and four weeks." She could be no more precise than that. "No. Not an accident," of that she could be sure. "In the wrapper and material in which the body had been found there was a state of sterile mummification." The lead lined cavity had also 'protected the contents', as she put it, from total corruption. A date? "Well, at a guess forty years ago, anything around that would be a rough estimate."

But, there was one other possibly important point, she told the Coroner. The reporters looked at each other bemused as the Pathologist uttered the word. "Achondroplasia", she said, carefully as though she might be asked to spell it. "The infant presented as suffering from an obvious congenital state. It was what laymen", the Coroner a local GP, looked annoyed as she spoke the words to him, "might call a dwarf. The arms and legs were significantly short, and, yes, it would have been obvious to the mother and those present at the birth. Rare, yes, and in such a pronounced state quite possibly hereditary.".

She was speaking to a silent court, very silent indeed.

There was no-one left to ask about that household who were now all dead and accounted for. The Police tried, of course; they had files and inquest reports, and could hint at an answer, but no more. Mrs Evans was deceased too, and the neighbour who cared for him, had long ago moved away, abroad to a daughter's someone thought. The few remaining old men of the diaspora said nothing. They were never asked.

I can't stop, but I'm pacing the room, rehearsing the words I want to write.

"When the corpse of an unnamed, misplaced, or murdered infant is cremated there's a pure white coffin. The Undertaker charges nothing for a child's funeral, its tradition, a small, priceless honour in their deathly trade." I was there. "The Inspector in charge of the case carried the tiny white box into the Crematorium, he wore his expensive suit, and a handful of his officers were present. They paid for a huge bunch of pure white blooms, bright lilies and irises, and most of them wept like babies."

So did I.

“The ashes were scattered in that tiny corner of a remembrance garden they keep for the still-born and the lost. The quietest of places, almost an alcove in what a poet might call a glade. Sometimes people strew a few petals, usually roses or lilies. One sadly infrequent visitor, wordless, lays a posy of blue and gold flowers, but whenever I set them down, the breeze and raindrops quickly following my soft footsteps, remind me to come back.”

**MONEY**

Newtown. Autumn 1996.

*"Every Rouble bears a sin."*
Borderlands Proverb

The funeral was, as so many are, unmemorable, except to those immersed in grief, and I saw few outpourings beyond a moist eye and a flourished handkerchief. The interminable, impersonal Mass drifted on and on, and the Priest's sonorous address seemed less a memory of a man he barely knew than a request for a full collection plate. The small congregation clattered down the damp church steps, and drove in silence, pensive and thirsty, to the hillside where he was laid to rest with his late wife. As they lowered him the wind began to rise again, and the clouds brought a slap of rain across the leaf hurling trees, wetting gravestones and mourners alike. The group gathered over the open grave, much smaller than that in the church, then drifted quickly away to their cars, carrying memories, memories sad, but much lighter, no doubt, than the sure and certain knowledge of the man I carried with me down the dismal hill.

The pub, at least, was welcoming. I nodded to a few Slavic faces, second-generation 'diaspora', whom I recognised, then stood, glass in hand, gazing over the blustery, battered common at the spoiled October day. My watch said only ten to twelve, and I wondered how quickly I could slip away, without seeming anxious to leave. I didn't want to waste the whole day in the slow motion daze in which I had passed the morning.

My glass was empty. If I went to the bar again, I'd fall in with the group of elderly men seriously engaged in emptying the landlord's vodka optic. The arm which nudged my elbow held a glass of wine, and handed me another.

"Not many left now", she said. It was the standard comment at every Ukrainian funeral these days, and, in truth, the same remark had been made for some years. A group of active, able-bodied men, ninety strong at the outset, now numbered a handful of shambling elderly survivors. She waved her glass at a distant circle, huddled over a table, "Look at old Kuziv. Nothing of him. He'll be next.".

I nodded. The name escaped me, his youngest, the only daughter of course, about forty-five, and clearly the pattern of her late mother; she'd escaped inheriting the harsh jaw and heavy forehead of the steppes.

"You'll miss him." I said. It seemed the right utterance to make.

She smiled, not saying a word.

"I'm his executor." Of course, her brothers, both taxi drivers, 'strappers' with, shall we say, problems, from police records to debts and discarded wives and mislaid offspring, would be unlikely to deal with anything requiring common sense.

I nodded, without comment.

“He mentioned you in his Will.” She turned to look directly at me, as though anticipating some response. “You didn’t know?”

“Me? In his Will?” I was, indeed, taken aback. We had just buried a man who had, as far as I knew, spent thirty-five years, more probably, as a steelworker. Ending his days far more comfortably than he had begun them in a small upland village in Galicia, but not, certainly, a man of means. Well, it wouldn’t be money for sure, maybe a keepsake, a piece of memorabilia from old Poland, or from the Emperor’s day.

I wondered if it could be something very memorable.

She smiled at me, sipped her wine, and then kissing me on the cheek she said “I’ll be in touch.” The kiss was a surprise.

As she tripped towards the buffet, I tried hard. What was her name?

The envelope arrived about three weeks later. It contained a letter from one of those three-handed Solicitor’s partnerships, sounding much like that one in ‘Private Eye’ all those years back, ‘Sue, Grabbit & Run’. I had indeed been mentioned in his will. The details were sparse, but the name of his executor appeared in the opening paragraph. Elena. I couldn’t have remembered it, even if I tried for a year. She was unmarried, at least, I thought so, and lived not far away from the old man. Close enough to do far more for him as he drifted towards the end than either of his sons living a few streets away.

He’d left me money.

A thousand pounds.

“Well, I’m damned.” I said to the cat.

Not a great amount, certainly not a life-changing sum, but one I suspected his sons might begrudge me, even though his intentions were set out plainly. The money was to help me in what I was doing in the east. It was a purse which would pay for two or three visits, air fares, lodging and bribes, but a sudden thought stopped me in the midst of the spending plan rapidly forming in my mind. I’d focussed on the money, a typical human failing, of course! There I was already buying the air ticket from KLM, and packing my thermal underwear, and not taking in the rest of the letter!

There was something else. He’d left me a small wooden box, described as carved from Carpathian oak; it even gave the dimensions, exact and in inches, as though there might be a score of such coffers littered through the bungalow. The letter closed, suggesting that I make arrangements with the Executor to collect it in due course.

I felt like a lottery winner, well of sorts.

I had seen this box, once and in the recent past. Not big I recalled; about the size of a shoe box, and decorated with pine trees and storks, those favoured symbols of the mountain people. Once he'd brought it out, retrieved a key from behind the clock on the mantlepiece, and opened it with his tattooed hand to delve carefully inside for a letter which might refresh his memory. We were talking over a glass of *horilka* and a slice of black sausage about the DP camps, and he was meandering through a story about his time on a farm. The tale itself was nothing important, nothing but an old man's reminiscence, but his almost throw away comment was.

"My soul is in this box." he told me with a wry smile. "My soul. My secrets. Maybe my history eh?" I admired the object, as I thought I should. There was an air of sadness perhaps, a scent of secret places, a glimpse of deep remembered pasts in the soft patina of the wood; and he handled it as though it was some Transylvanian artefact, a pumping heart held tight within. This was indeed a treasure.

Sitting on the westbound train a month after the funeral with the rain streaming across the windows, and the sky dark with far more bad weather to come, I thought of the box and what its contents might be? Most of the exiles had come to these shores with nothing but the clothes they stood up in, a photograph or two maybe, a bundle of tattered letters from home. Very little else survived whatever their service or fate during the war years and after. Whatever was in it, I'd know soon.

From his home village, from the Eastern Front, from Austria and the collapse of the Reich; then down through Europe to the big internment camp at Rimini, and on to Britain and its miserable camps and hostels, the box had come with the man. Along with its contents.

Of course, I knew his background, at least I knew as much as he wanted to tell me. His service as a twenty year old in the Galician Police, and his eventual 'transfer', as he would describe it, to one of the Galician SS Police Regiments when the partisans become more active in 1943 after the big German defeat at Kursk. He ended the war in Austria, fighting the desperate rearguards as a million men of all nationalities imaginable fled from the clutches of the Red Army to the relative safety of the Allies at Trieste. At least that was what he told me.

The rest would be in the ark carved from Carpathian oak. I felt certain.

He said the box contained his soul. For me it would be a host of stories. A mountain of research material. Certainly, one of openings into a collective memory which all too frequently failed or ran for cover to the traditional Ukrainian, and sometimes Polish, claim to be victims assailed from all sides, especially when one of them was asked a direct question about the war.

For me this was a busy time. I dropped a card to his daughter expressing my liking for the old man, of my gratitude for his generous help to return to Galicia, and ending with a comment that I'd give her a ring to arrange to collect the Carpathian box in a week or two when things were settled. Eventually I did. She was formal when I called her, I'd be wrong to say curt, but not that far wrong. Of course, she had lost her father, and there would be much to sort out, far

more than just a box for me, however much I wanted it. Her brothers wouldn't be much help either, they bore away nothing of their fathers apart from his name and anything which might be sold for profit.

The bungalow stood on a corner plot, just along from the primary school, and halfway up a steep hill, a hill which had been cobbled when I was a boy. Few cars passed that way, the school runs took the easier climb. It was Saturday morning, mid-November, the day before Armistice Day, and breezy, with a little hint of coming frost in the air. Just enough to remind the lungs and limbs that Winter was on its way.

I rang the doorbell. Waited, then rang again. I knocked, knowing that Elena was around somewhere, a pale blue Citroen was parked right outside the gate. Fortunately, there was no sign of either brother's taxi.

I leaned on the garden wall, reluctant to peek through the window, conscious of at least one flapping curtain across the little street.

I rang again, and looked at my watch to assure any onlooker of my honest intentions and my right to be present.

Eventually the door opened, and she beckoned me in, the wind closing the door loudly behind her.

"I'm in the garden." she said, and I followed her into the hallway. "A while since I've been here. It always smelled of coffee when he was at home." I was trying to make some sort of conversation, but she didn't respond. She didn't kiss me on the cheek either. The bungalow seemed barren, ready to be abandoned, a box stacked here and there; the ikon vanished from the wall. Empty, greasy nail holes marked its former place, and a thin dark red stain of candle grease ran from where the candle sconce had been. She led me through the little kitchen and lean-to conservatory out to the paved backyard. It was no garden worthy of the name. At the far end, under an old wall one of those small bin shaped incinerators with a funnel in the lid stood smouldering as the wind ruffled the smoke and, occasionally, snapped a flame from the debris within. A pile of leaves and cardboard and sundry rubbish stood close by. Elena, inelegant in overalls and wellingtons, had been poking the burning bin with a long stick for a while before she spoke.

"The box is on the table over there.", she pointed behind us.

I thanked her and walked over to the old garden table, picking it up. Even though it was made of oak, it felt light. It was empty, I was sure.

She smiled at me. A very knowing smile. From her pocket she took out a key on a piece of green plastic string, and handed it to me.

"Here. You'll need this." Like some confused game show contestant, I clumsily fitted the key into the old worn lock, and turned it. The lid sprang up at me.

The box was empty.

Elena answered the questions on my face.

“I know what the tattoo on his hand was”, she said, and so did I.

I nodded, and told her. “It was the ‘*bruderbund’* mark of Galician SS-Police Regiment Number 5. A young SS man’s badge of loyalty and membership. Yes?” She nodded in response to my description. “An ear of corn with the elaborate cyrillic number over- laid on it.”

She poked the fire again.

She sniffed, and turned to face me.

It seemed impossible to me that her father, or any other, would sit down and discuss with his youngest child his diverse wartime role as an SS partisan hunter, collector and killer of Jews, Gypsies and undesirables, a burner of villages and enforcer of the Reich’s draconian laws.

I was right.

“How did you find out?” I asked.

“When he went back to visit the Carpathians in the nineties. His sisters were still alive and one brother, very old indeed. It seemed odd to me that my father would have a tattoo in his late seventies, let alone add to one already existing.”

Yes.

“The ear of corn had become a flower and the figure a bee. The whole of the image over-drawn with new ink. Elena flourished the stick like a paint brush. That was some eight years before his death. The tattooist must have been intrigued.”

We both knew to go back to his home village bearing that mark of service might have doomed him. Not to disclosure or arrest, of course, but possibly, quite possibly, to an act of violent revenge for a father lost, a farm burned, or a sister raped fifty years before.

A wise precaution. I knew of other exiles who despite everything insisted there was no-one left to go back and visit, no village or hamlet to recognise, no friends to remember. They were simply afraid of someone’s sharp memory and an unfortunate accident.

She took a deep breath, and said slowly. “It took a while, but there are all sorts of weird people in Russia and across the east who do nothing but research the Nazis, every last scrap of information, details of ritual and uniform and weapons, a catalogue of evil. Charlie helped me. You know Charlie?”

“Oh, yes, I know Charlie”, I replied. He was a Hungarian exile with some slight links and influence among the younger Ukrainians, Slovakians and Poles. He’d arrived in ’56 after the uprising, and, like many of his countrymen, held a fervent admiration for all things connected

with the Third Reich. He must have been surprised that she didn't embrace the old man's wartime activities with pride.

I looked sideways at her, clutched the empty Carpathian box, and gazed into the smouldering incinerator. She turned away from me, picked up a handful of cardboard and leaves and flung them into the bin. A piece of burning celluloid flew outwards in the breeze and landed almost at my feet. It was a photograph. Stooping, I knocked the glowing ash from it, and looked carefully.

In my hand I held the remnants of a creased photo of two soldiers. The right- hand figure no more than a pair of singed tall boots, but the image of the man at the left was virtually intact. He stood, smiling, in the uniform of the Reich SS, field cap tilted back, hands wrapped around a German MP40 sub-machine pistol. I swear I could see the tattoo on his hand, but it wasn't possible to determine whether the corpse at their feet was man, woman or child. It was simply a bundle of ruined rags, from which a naked foot protruded.

I threw the fragment back into the flames. After a while I said some sort of goodbye, as best I could, replaced the box on the table, and left her to prod and burn her father's history into eternity.

"Go, please" she almost shouted. "Go!"

It must have been the smoke from the incinerator, blown by a gust of Autumn wind which made her cry.

**BACH**

Cefn Coed. Spring 1998.

"*He perished, like the Swede at Poltava."*
Borderlands Proverb

Even the most self-sufficient of sullen Welsh countrymen, or of eager in-coming English escapees enthusiastically seeking the 'good life', would have called Neuadd Ddu isolated. It stood, or leaned awkwardly, on top of a hill, utterly remote from the world's great business, forgotten perhaps for good reason. It was in a way, it seems to me now, in a sort of 'Heathcliffe' fashion, doom-laden, dank and darkly forbidding. Who knows what the crews of the RAF Tornadoes, which seemed to be the only things which ever disturbed the neglected silence of the small hill-farm, made of this ramshackle collection of buildings crowded round an old slate roof, as they flashed by overhead on the way to the bombing range at the coast. A man's place to live, Taras had been there for years. And never in any sense of the word could Neuadd Ddu be taken for a family home. No feminine touch at window or door, no sign of any safe place for a child to tumble in adventure on a long Summer's afternoon. No forgotten playthings, no remnants of well-used homeliness thrown out and, yet, never truly disposed of.

When I first saw the dwelling, it was from the rocking seat of a growling Range Rover, with the teeming rain drifting away across the mountainside, leaving the whole farm looking as though it had been dragged drowned from the waters of Treweryn. It seemed a place where warmth was rare, and Summer was a season which rarely came to call. A colleague, reluctantly driving me miles out of his way over rivulets and pools and pits, leaned on the steering wheel, shook his head woefully, and aptly, named the place 'Bleak House'.

"A forbidding steading, is Neuadd Ddu.", I shook my head, taking in my surroundings. "Cheers!" We were sitting in that damp, miserable kitchen, at a heavy table, drinking brandy from a quarter bottle Dima brought with him. He had the only glass, I drank from a mug. It reminded me of Bob Cratchit's hovel fallen on worse times.

Dima laughed in agreement, though I'm not sure he knew what a steading was.

"Once, and only once, I called here at nightfall, you know.", I told him.

"It was an October dusk, the light fading away in cloud before me, past the broken gate where I was dropped, and the score of bulky Leylandii, which screened the farm from the distant road, were rippling in the stiffening breeze, like dark and tainted water. Grim, very grim.

Well, Dima, as I splashed, past that ancient Austin Gipsy to the unknocked door, the last phrase of the same sad, furious music died away with the slow opening light on the threshold."

"No engine that truck!", he added. "Not for years!"

Within the low farmhouse, there was electricity of the weaker kind, powered by a generator as old and grumbling as the man himself. We sat before a gloomy, smoky fire drinking what

he called vodka, but I knew to be a sickly, overpowering home-made concoction, made from who knows what.

“Yes”, Dima chuckled, he was in a lively mood. “You know, in the villages near the Carpathians they call it ‘samogon‘, half-way between moonshine and, yes, yes, poison.”

Taras regarded it, and he relied upon the home-brew; men from that part of his homeland often did, as an alcoholic remedy for all known ills, a sort of disinfectant for the body.

And the soul.

The vodka encouraged a few words that dark night, not many, for this was a man of little social interaction, even with his fellow exiles among the diaspora. There were huge gaps in the almost one-sided conversation, and, in the human silences, I listened to the streaming rain, sliding over the broken house and spitting and scratching at the thin windows.

From time to time he spat into the fire, almost with venom.

“Accch!”, he would curse, adding a word in a language unknown to me.

He told me how he came to the west. A convoluted, complex, progress. A pilgrimage towards freedom uttered in short bursts of unconvincing speech. It was a lie, as so many other tales told to me of the same journey were lies. Farmers did not walk away from their farmlands, nor often, even in despair did their labourers. For, when the food is scarce, those who gather and grow eat first and eat best; that’s a basic rule of wartime.

Dima sagely wagged a finger. “One potato is not worth the journey to market, as the Volhynian proverb goes, but it feeds a man, yes?”

Taras was once a soldier, I guessed. Not with the Red Army; those who deserted Stalin’s ranks were only too pleased to tell me when and where and even, half-heartedly, but with a ring of truth, what they had done before they decided to abandon home and heroic leader forever.

“No, this man had served with the Nazis, well served them too.” Dima lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing. “It was easy enough to tell,” I stressed. “Those who took service with the Third Reich never lost the brutally instilled sense of obedience. A curt word, uttered in an officer’s voice; just the man’s name, ‘Taras’, or a simple word of command, which spoken softly would be a request, like wait, no, or stop. That would be enough. The man would stiffen, tense, keyed-up for the next order, and then realising would uncoil, but not quickly enough to hide it.”

Taras had not, I recognised, served in the ranks of the 14$^{th}$ Waffen SS Galician Division. For other old men in the diaspora, those who had worn the arm eagle, called one another brother in a proud way, not simply friend, and they were closer than others could ever be. I didn’t need to say it to old Dima. This man was neither brother nor friend. He truly was an isolate.

“Perhaps”, I teased, “he had served in one of those dreadful ‘Schuma’ anti-partisan battalions, burning and burying those who crossed their paths with an energy envied by the Gestapo who bid them to it? Or in a flak company? No probably not that. Or the Galician Police?”.

A guess would have been useless, and it was impossible to ask the direct question. Impossible to ask, not only of stubborn Taras sitting sipping his foul vodka in his dim, drab kitchen that night, but of all of the others.

It was an unspoken rule. What was told could safely be told in life. After death, a little more might emerge. Or not.

I could not have guessed then, and now, more than a decade on, it still seems hard to believe.

The story of Taras the smallholder drifted to its inevitable conclusion. The big Allied POW and DP camp at Rimini, and a lucky escape to Britain, and then finally to this lonely wet Welsh hillside for forty lonely years. I'd made a few notes, no tape recording this time. In the two hours that had passed since my arrival, the tape would have yielded little in the way of language.

"He showed me no photos, Dima, nor any memorabilia, trinkets or badges, nothing to link him with the area he pointed out to me on the map I held to the weak light. His pre-war memories were few, and I thought he carefully selected them."

There was nothing more.

"Maybe. Maybe." said Dima.

I stepped out of the creaking door from the warm kitchen into the wild night. The wind had risen, but at least the rain had eased for a moment, and the witch-black clouds had parted to show a bomber's moon over Taras' lonely hill.

"I switched on my torch, an insignificant light, and looked out for the deep puddles on the way to my lift at the far gate. Slowly turning, I held out my hand, but he didn't shake it, and the door closed swiftly behind me. I walked carefully across the wreck of a farmyard, and, suddenly, I could hear the music again. Faint in volume, yet strong in purpose. "I knew that music, I was sure."

"Haunting." I said, but Dima just shrugged, it was his habit.

The postman found Taras' corpse, two months or more after my last visit to Neaudd Ddu. He had shot the dogs first. Then, slipping a third Eley 'Alpha-Max' shell into the breach of his unlicensed,- much was made of that fact at the inquest-, and immaculate Spanish 'Kestrel' 12 bore shotgun, the elderly Borderlander leaned it against the broken fence; and, so it was surmised, used a long piece of broken broom-handle, found under the body, to depress the trigger of the left hand barrel, which was firmly positioned under his jaw. Death was instantaneous, almost. In falling, his leg, his right leg, was raised and hung like the remnants of a discarded scarecrow on the rusted wire. It was that leg the postman saw as he drove over the ruts to deliver a rare letter from some obscure agricultural agency to a farm that had produced nothing in decades.

The crows and magpies rose inelegantly, and flapped away from the bloody mess as the postman walked the thirty yards across to the scene, as slowly as he possibly could. He vomited at the sight of what a twelve bore BB shell could do to a dog's body, and to a man's head. The birds had flocked to fight and feast over the softer exposed parts of man and beast for days and days, but the heavy rain had kept the smell of death in the minor key. He vomited again before he reached the van, and sat shaking, his hands gripping the wheel with tears streaming down his face, for a long time, before he could summon the strength to drive back down to the valley for help. As the van pulled off, the hovering birds watched, then, eagerly returned to their disturbed feast.

"'Help?' Well, that was the word used in the Coroner's Court, as you remember Dima. The postman gave his evidence haltingly. He could still, by the look on his face see the image of grim slaughter before him, and I thought he would throw up again before he finished speaking."

"Yes. Yes."

The pathologist was as straightforward and calmly descriptive as any man could be, any man for whom sudden and unpleasant death was his daily bread that is. The man had been dead some twelve days, or more, he concluded. The single shot with which Taras killed himself ripped away the entire mandible, the few remaining teeth, the tongue and palate. Tearing open the upper jaw, disintegrating the sphenoid and zygomatic cheek bones, and removing the left eye from its orbit, the shot passed into the cranial vault. He continued sonorously: the skull had been torn out over the left frontal bone, thus, a substantial portion of the frontal lobe of the brain had been destroyed or forced out of the cranium, and the exit wound measured roughly three and a half inches in diameter. He kindly translated the measurement he had taken into centimetres for the Coroner's benefit, and the Coroner nodded his thanks as he wrote his careful note. They were a matching pair these two. The formal language, the precise terminology of the Coroner's matter-of-fact questions, and the Pathologist's responses made the reality, the blood and filth of the death scene, somehow, neutral, remote, acceptable in a legal and medical format. The postman's face showed otherwise.

I scribbled a few brief notes of my own, and glanced at Dima, who sat alongside me, the sole representative of the 'diaspora' present in court.

The inquest ended, the whole performance took something less than an hour. There had been no indication, no warning, no knowledge of any particular reason for him to kill himself: not money, not relationships, and certainly not health. The pathologist described the dead man as robust and fit, for so he was. The thorough search of the farmhouse provided no letter, no note, nothing out of the ordinary, and so the verdict was simply suicide.

"No-one seemed particularly bothered about the two dogs." I said.

The funeral and the disposal of Taras' sparse belongings fell to Dima, who, as a matter of fact, had rather more to do with the dead man than most people knew. He had asked me to come with him to the farmhouse for the final time. There was little left. The lease had been concluded, and what scraps of furniture, the scant household items and clothing, remained were destined for the fire or the skip. "You just wanted a final look, maybe?" I suggested. He shook his head. The brandy had gone, and he carefully, thoughtfully, washed the mug and glass and set them on a grimy draining board.

"We will go now, but I have something you must see." He dried his hands on his handkerchief.

Dima locked the rough door with an enormous key which would have graced a cathedral's portal, and we sat in his car for a moment, watching the clouds gather yet again to drench the hillside with the fading Winter's rain. He knew of my talks with Taras, and, in a matter of fact way, he told me what he'd failed to mention at the inquest. I realized he had been testing what I knew of it all, over the brandy.

“There was a note.” Dima sniffed. “Or rather a letter, quite a long letter.”

Earlier in the day on which Taras had taken his unlicensed 12-bore from the cupboard, filled his coat pocket with a handful of red-cased shells, whistled for the dogs, and walked out to his death, he had driven down to the town in his decrepit Austin Gipsy. Through the letter box of Dima’s neat terraced house he pushed a letter in a grubby envelope which bore his own full name, address, and a big pencilled question mark. Dima, though Taras didn’t know it, was ill in hospital, and didn’t see the letter until over a month later, and by then the sole occupant of ’Neuadd Ddu’ was lying dead on the wire of his barren hill farm.

Dima started the car, and we bumped slowly away. He began to tell me why Taras had killed himself. Now Dima, as I recognised, was something of a ’fixer’ for the Diaspora’s less communicative members, and he had made certain arrangements for Taras on his lonely hill-top.

“On the first of each month Taras would have two visitors, actually three, but the frightening lesbian minder of the two girls would always stay in the car, waiting for their safe return.”

Who actually paid for these prostitutes was not mentioned, but in his man-of-the -world, matter of fact voice Dima explained the nature of the visit to me.

“There would be a big grey blanket spread before the fireplace, and a single upright chair alongside it. There Taras would sit, unbuttoned. The two girls, always in their early twenties, though they changed frequently, would be thin, small breasted, dark haired and utterly naked, wearing no make-up, with none of the frills and fantasies that were normally demanded of them.”

Dima spoke with an eloquence I didn’t know he possessed.

“The music would start and the two girls would make love to each other, ferociously.” He shrugged, again.

“The music was always the same,” Dima told me, “I knew it well, for I had once been intended for the Conservatoire at Krakow.” A fact he reminded everyone from time to time.

It was Johann Sebastian Bach’s Solo Violin Sonata no 1 in G Minor, BWV 1001. I play it from time to time now that all is finished. It lasts in total just about fifteen minutes, ending with a vivid ’presto’, a climax in all senses of the word. The opening Adagio fills the air with a sadness hard to accept, though I don’t know, I can’t know how it sounded then, or what images it evoked in Taras as he sat watching and listening. The mournful Fuge raises the pace to an Allegro, but makes the coming release, the heartbreak, all the faster. The short Siciliana, solemn and sedate, slowly but surely brings the end nearer, but it’s the final Presto, just three minutes of frenzied bowing, which lifts to an urgent, almost saturnine, end, and dies away leaving the musician silent and alone.

“It haunted Taras’ that single piece of music.”, said Dima. “Carried within his soul, here,” he struck his chest. “It’s sighing stringed voice had followed him a very long way from the Borderlands to this lonely Welsh hill. He could not leave it behind, you know that?” I nodded.

As the 'Iron Curtain' rusted away, so the girls who came to him each month changed from dour, unhappy town girls, or blank-eyed runaways, to foreigners from the east. Nothing could be done about that. "One evening there had been a Russian, typically passing herself off as a Pole, but Taras had not been fooled. It was always possible to tell a Russian," said Dima. "He told me about it."

A few Czech girls came and went. He liked them. Then one evening, it was the last evening of all, a girl who, unlike most of the others seemed less enthusiastic, and more inclined to hear the music and watch the man, than perform on the slender brunette who lay with her.

She knew Taras for what he was, or what he had been. He must have felt uneasy as the girl, who was certainly Ukrainian, tripped to the car with her pretty friend. He closed the door and switched on the music once more. He always did that when a visitor left, but I wondered how Dima knew the rest. He continued his tale, slowly.

"It was of course, in the letter that the girl, her name was Galyna, wrote."

He pulled in to the side of the road, and dug deep into the left hand pocket of his overcoat. The letter, or perhaps it was the man himself, smelled faintly of some sort of household polish. It was in a dirty white six by four envelope, with a first class stamp on it, a Christmas stamp, bright with robins. Across the name and address was a big question mark, and a dirty thumb print. Dima slowly removed the A4 sheet from its packet, and began to read, translating and emphasising slowly as he read onwards.

"I know who you are", the letter began.

There was no address, no appellation, no date, nothing, simply those five words, words which would expand into an accusation, a betrayal perhaps.

"I am not a Jew, the writer continued, I am Ukrainian." He stressed the name.

"I am here to study, I am not a whore."

Dima was avoiding my look.

"The girls told me about you, and your requirements before I came to your filthy house. About the dirty blanket on the floor, about having to strip naked in the cold kitchen, and run in and perform in front of you as you performed for yourself. They said there was music, but none of them could tell me what the music was, except that it was a single violin. They all knew that the visit took about a quarter of one hour. They told me all about you. Some of them were frightened of you, but said no more. They were paid."

He paused at the end of each sentence, ensuring I had heard plainly and clearly what he was reading.

Galyna had written in a good hand, and in perfect Ukrainian, unblemished by the introduction of Russian words, as is the writing and speech of so many young people of that country these days. Dima continued to read to me.

"I had heard about you before I came to your hovel. From my grandmother. Many of the big camps like Dachau had orchestras of talented, famous Jews to play music for the new arrivals, to cheer them on their way to the chambers and the ovens, but Bitczacz was not such a large place, nor were its victims so accomplished as to provide even an ensemble or chamber quartet to enliven death."

He stopped and reminded me that Galyna had used the old Polish name for the town, not the Ukrainian, nor the Russian or German name, but it didn't matter. Bitczacz had a warehouse, next to the railway, and here the camp was established. She knew a lot, and put it in writing. With a clear and concise hand, she put it to Taras. The arrivals at Bitczaz were not numbered in hundreds of thousands as they were at Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Here they came in merely dozens, or sometimes hundreds, Jews, outcasts, Poles and many, many Ukrainian nationalists. The fitter men and women were destined for the infamous D-4 road construction camps which sprang up in Galicia, organised by the Todt Organisation. The older, the infirm, were passed on, gassed in a delightfully painted mobile gas chamber. She described the huge van in detail, the fresh paint, the bright sign naming it as a 'Gift from the People of Leipzig'. Galyna could have been describing a playbus or a circus truck. Some victims were kicked to death, broken and bludgeoned by the guards as they shuffled in. Perhaps they looked askance at one of their new master's dogs, or failed to adopt a sufficiently submissive posture as they entered the gates.

For others there was a more bizarre fate.

"'You remember, do you not', she wrote, that there were few Germans at Bitczaz. The Commandant was German but he spent most of his time looting and lining his pockets, only rarely did he come into the camp and provide his own immaculately unformed Aryan example of how to kill a man without wasting a single bullet, or to crush a crying baby."

Dima shrugged uneasily under his big coat. "The guards were Ukrainians, just like you, just like me. You were a guard, one of the black uniformed killers at the gates. You wore the black uniform, with the bright green collar, and the shining silver bars, I know just how you looked."

My mouth was dry. I listened in silence, consuming every word.

"My grandmother was a music teacher.

My grandmother played for you.

My grandmother survived.

She told me about you. She told me how you would select young women, two at a time and make them perform for you on a blanket on the ground, while you sat and pleasured yourself. All the time my grandmother would play the violin, to accompany your whims, as the frenzied girls sought to please you and hoped to survive another moment. She would play Mendelssohn and Szymanowski, but you liked her to play one of Bach's sad Sonatas. It went well with the weeping of the young women, you used to laugh. When the music finished you would kill one, always with a single bullet through the eye."

My memory raced back to the rotten corpse on the barbed wire fence.

"How," Galyna wrote, "did you choose which one lived a little longer, and which died?" Dima paused and uttered a sigh as he turned over the sheet.

"I remember the scar on your face. Grandmother told me. It was a gipsy girl, little more than a child, who gave you that. Not properly searched by the men who dragged her in to the camp, and when you ordered her to strip and play your quick game of love and death, she

sliced at you with a little knife, opening your cheek up like a pig. My grandmother kept playing as you beat the half- grown woman to a slow death with the butt of a rifle. She played on because she didn't want to die along with the gipsy. She told me how you stood there, blood dripping down your black uniform, and the brains of the young gipsy spattered all over your boots.

Still my grandmother played on to the end."

A farm lorry bounced slowly past us along the road, and Dima waited until it vanished into the distance, as though its driver could hear his muttered words. His voice was lifting, higher, more strident, like Bach's music.

"I am my grandmother's memories.

I know exactly who you are and what you did.

I don't know how many girls you killed, but there were many.

You are still the man in the black uniform.

The black killer at the camp gates, a Ukrainian, killing Ukrainians.

I recognise you.

I despise you."

Here, Dima stopped. The letter, which had risen to a bitter climax, and brought Taras the murderer to an ending at his own hands, far from the camp and the Sonata, was finished. Murderer barely seemed enough as a word to describe the man I'd heard read from the page. I was about to try to say something, anything really, when Dima passed me the stained sheet of paper. He suggested, avoiding my gaze, that I could read the last few sentences for myself. They were written below Galyna's signature. Written in English. Neat, properly spelled and concise. Perhaps she really was a student.

I read the lines aloud.

"Now you must live, knowing that I know who you are.

That I know what you are.

I know what you did.

Every day you will remember me, as you remember my grandmother's playing.

Before she died, my grandmother forgave you.

Now I forgive you, but for her sake alone."

A single question framed in my mind and passed my lips.

"Why then did Taras kill himself?" I turned to look at old Dima, who seemed suddenly diminished. "It seemed clear that his far-off victim had forgiven him, and his young accuser too. So why?"

Dima gently lifted the paper from my hand and folded it into the envelope. As he slipped it into his pocket, he told me the answer.

“Taras had never learned to read English, beyond a few basic signs and place names. He read Ukrainian, some Polish too, but the last few lines of the letter were a mystery to him, that’s why he took it to my house the day he died.”

“Forgiven”, said Dima, shaking his head. He started the engine.

**PHOTOGRAPH**

Y Lolfa. September 1999.

*"It is easy to undress the naked."*
Borderlands Proverb

It was a question simply put to her, and with no motive beyond the possibility of a few lines, a page of potentially useful notes at most. Words which might, if I was fortunate, slip into a story somewhere, or liven up an essay intended for students in the east.

"Perhaps we could meet for an hour or two at some stage, and have a chat about your dad.", I said. "You never know, something of interest might come up."

We met only a couple of times before her father, Ivan's, death at what, hereabouts, they call 'a good age'. He was ninety four and, I think, the oldest of all of them. His Welsh born wife was long dead, and the other daughter, long estranged, unmentioned, lived in Australia. At the funeral Nina recognised me. She knew I'd been talking to the old man. A little prompting and I remembered her name, and we exchanged mobile numbers on the basis of my request.

Here was a brisk woman with some affectations. It became apparent later that she had begun to call herself not simply Nina Shaw - she had married briefly in her early twenties - but Nina Ivanova Shaw, adding the Romanov style patronymic in a way her father probably wouldn't have approved of.

"I'm so pleased to meet you. I'm Nina Ivanova Shaw. His daughter. He may have told you of me." Well, no, but Nina Ivanova was interested. A little late some might say, but she was interested. In her deceased father's life, in his history and his background. She was interested in the sort of things he talked to me about, but, for some reason, had not mentioned to her.

That was often the way, for the old men the war and their women rarely mixed. We met in the Grand Hotel, "The Grand for coffee. Tuesday. Eleven o'clock." It was an instruction. "Well", I said aloud to myself, "She's certainly her father's daughter!".

Sipping my coffee, I began my story, or at least the story so far as it had been told to me. "Ivan deserted from the Soviet garrison in Berlin in December 1945, as quite a few disgruntled or fearful soldiers did. In a raging snowstorm, in a hard Winter, he popped his Nagant rifle in the corner of his sentry box, pulled his *Ushanka* deep down around his ears, and, a whitewashed ghost unseen by all the world, he walked the few hundred metres into the British Zone."

"I surrendered!" he used to shout, laughing, throwing his huge hands into the air. That's how he came Nina, brought out of Berlin in a Pioneer Corps uniform, on a crowded British troop train through the four-power corridor. He had an Army pay book describing him as Jerzy Polanke, born a Pole." She positively lapped it up. "A Pole, eh?" she purred.

Well, I thought to myself, not far off the mark given Ivan's thick Volhynian accent.

She loved the story. Loved it all. Lapped it up, eagerly wanting to know about 'his' war, 'his' battles, 'his' journey across Europe. She planned trips. She read avidly, Ryan's *'The Last Battle'*, Beevor's *'Stalingrad'*, though I knew he wasn't there. I didn't tell her. It was pointless. The vision had replaced the man. She loved her father more as a dead ikon than she had as a living being. Nina Ivanova was returning to her roots. She phoned and told me news frequently, "I want to learn the language." She had a choice there, of course; her dad spoke fluent Ukrainian, fair Polish, bad Russian and bad German too. I didn't tell her that either. After a few valiant attempts, the language failed her. Our now regular chats moved on.

Now old Ivan kept a box. All of them did. In his case, she told me "A heavy beech wood coffin, about a foot long, and almost as deep. He'd carved it with care years ago- I was a small child then- and not a bad piece of workmanship either for a man who claimed he started life as a blacksmith." Now that I didn't know.

The lid was deeply etched with stork-flown mountains, clouds and stately trees. On the sides birds and small animals ran or flew around polished *Pisanka* and tumbling flowers. There were three brass hinges buried deep inside the forest, and the front of the box bore a heavy plate; a keyless lock hidden beneath a pin-mounted plate inscribed with the initials ***I C.*** We looked at it for a while, Nina and I.

"What can I do?" she told, rather than asked me. "There's no key. Or, if there is, I can't find it anywhere in the house." She traced the outline of the box with her fingers.

"Too beautiful to force the lock", I said. "It will certainly damage the box or what's inside it." She looked at me with some disdain, Nina often did that, I noticed. "It has to be a locksmith."

She seemed happier with that idea.

We phoned, or rather I did. In half an hour a rather sad faced man of about thirty turned up. Sipping a mug of tea, and admiring the workmanship, he turned the box on its edge and examined it with a jeweller's eye glass. For twenty five pounds, cash naturally, no receipt, no VAT, he opened it- somehow! He made us turn our backs on what he was doing.

"Standard trade practice, folks." he assured me. There wasn't even a click.

When I returned to her living room -- I'd seen the locksmith out, and paid him too for that matter -- she was carefully lifting rather fewer items than the weight suggested from box to table top, chuckling and cooing as she did it. A series of thick waxed envelopes first of all. Each of them contained a Soviet medal. Then a small cloth pocket from which dropped a dull gold wedding ring. A man's wedding ring, made for a big ring finger. Nina slipped it on, but it was huge on her small hand; she set it aside.

Then some papers tied with string, in Russian. His pass and pay book I guessed, and there was some Occupation Currency as well. A pre-war map of Berlin too, ripped from a book. There was a yellowed threadbare handkerchief embroidered neatly in the corner with ***I C***, the first letter in yellow gold the other in sky blue.

Nina Ivanova chattered endlessly. “Look at this!”, caressing each find she drew out, before she lay it down with the others. She laughed when she noticed the petrified mothballs in one corner. “What chance did a moth stand with that lock!” she giggled. At the bottom of the box, almost filling the space was an old, old drab brown photograph album. The sort my Grandmother had, with tissue paper between the sheets. Post war, but only just, austere and ominous.

She gave an orgasmic gasp of joy. “Photographs! He had photographs! Why did he never show them to us, to me!”. She spoke as though the rest of her family, mother, sister, dead brother didn’t matter. She was the one to carry his light onwards. His memories, his keepsakes, all hers.

Raising the album before her, as though she’d found the grail itself, and brushing imaginary dust from her tablecloth, she laid it carefully down. The old man’s box was empty now. “Nothing more”, she cried, tracing the internal angles with her fingers before returning to the album. All else, medals and map and the written things, slipped back in to shadow. This joyful discovery of photographs turned into a slow elaborate ritual. She slipped on her strong reading glasses, polishing each lens at length, with a breath first. Each photograph was held in place at the corners by silver edged slits cut into the pages. I don’t know how many in all, maybe twenty or so. “These are old, small, pre-war snap shots.”, I said, “Look, they’re sepia and some are cracked in places.”.

Old people in one photograph; the woman plump in folk costume, the man awkward in an embroidered shirt. “My grandparents perhaps?” she stated rather than hoped. “Perhaps” I responded as positively as I could to her buoyant enthusiasm.

A large family, some twenty or more people in another photo, a village photograph perhaps. Then a forge with a team of horses. A shot of two young men, smiling. Ivan, she recognised immediately, proud and strong. “Look, look, my Father.” Possibly, I thought, there were too many cracks in the bad shot for me to be as enthusiastic. Nina carefully removed each photograph and examined the back. She was right; on many of them were blue pencilled notes in thick indecipherable Cyrillic lettering. “I’ll get these translated later!” she trilled. She meant, I’d ask one of the old men to do it.

She turned to the last page of the album excitedly, she had after all seen so much, but unknowing, had only looked at old dead faces she would never know. Still, Nina Ivanova wasn’t deterred. The last page was empty. “A pity, but look, look, there’s an envelope, tucked carefully into the back-cover’s seam.” She picked it up, and out slipped two photographs, cracked and crinkled, faded from long years hiding. She looked long at one of them, vaguely motioning to me. A young man stood, aged maybe twenty, in a badly fitting suit outside an Orthodox church. On his arm in white, clutching a big bunch of flowers, a pretty girl, all smiles, love almost beamed out of the print. “Surely that’s Ivan?” I exclaimed, and I turned it over in her hand. In thick blue print were written two names, I could read them. *’Ivan and Nadia’* over a date, and even with my poor skills, I could make out *Easter 1937.*

Nina let out an exclamation, almost half a sob. “A wedding? I don’t understand. How? In 1937?” Softly she ran her finger over the image, and carefully laid it down on the album page, then picked out the second photograph without a glance at me. She fell silent. I’d vanished from her world, and the quest for the old man’s history was halted in its tracks. As Nina held the last photograph out before her at arms length, she whispered quietly

“Nadia.”

In this, the simplest of family snapshots, the same young couple sat smiling, in party clothes, folk costume, sitting on a wooden bench surrounded by flowers. It must have been a warm Summer’s day. This time they were not alone. Gently, I took it from her fingers and turned it over. The caption was not difficult to read, there were four names.

*‘Ivan and Nadia & Yulia 2 and baby Nina.’*

The two little girls were as lovely as their young mother. Nina Ivanova Shaw was still and silent for a long time. She drew in her breath. I couldn’t easily make out the sentence below the names at all. It wasn’t written in blue pencil, but in thin black ink. “A biro”, I said to her “and much more recent.” Quite neat, flowing, and in English, surely this was a woman’s hand. “Your mother’s writing?” I asked. She nodded; a sob filled her mouth and her heart.

Nina sat down, saying nothing, her hands holding the box, almost without touching it. I could hear her tears fall onto the wood, and it was a long while before I spoke again. I read aloud, quietly, the thinly scribed sentence which had stopped the world of Nina Ivanova.

“If he had known how you would die, he would never have left you.”

Nina wept for a long time.

**GRANDFATHER**

Cartref. February 2000.

*"An axe in the house spares the carpenter."*
Borderlands Proverb

On the eleventh of February 1943, just a few days after the German garrison at Stalingrad stumbled from their frozen cellars into captivity, and the fate of that war truly turned, two eleven month old infants, Joseph Wapniarz, and Frieda Reiss, were thrown onto a train leaving the beautiful cathedral city of Angouleme, not far from La Rochelle. Their destination was Auschwitz, and, long after they died, the babies acquired a place as a footnote in the annals of the Holocaust; for they were recorded as the youngest Jews deported from France during those bitter years. Since the journey by cattle truck from the western coast of *Festung Europa* to the plains of Poland could take weeks, it seems almost certain that Joseph and Frieda died en route, were killed to silence them. After all, babies do cry without food or warmth or comfort, and the provision of none of these commodities were priorities for the Reich authorities as far as Jews destined for death camps were concerned.

I disliked and distrusted the aged, arrogant man as soon as I set eyes upon him. Yet, he was a member of the diaspora, and others of that fading band said I should speak to him, though he was, even as far as many of them were concerned, an isolate. He would have a story, as they all did, and I should at least hear it. Now, this Volhynian lived in a small terraced house not far from the railway station. It was easy enough to find, and neat and tidy. His wife had died some years before, and he lived alone in those final few months, cared for by a bustling brood of married daughters, one of whom let me in, and chatted for a moment as she slipped on her heavy coat, ready to head homewards. It was a cold February day. The scent of furniture polish and a distant waft of nondescript cooking smells testified to the purpose of her visit. He didn't stand up when I walked into the comfortless room, having been briefly announced in clipped, and unfamiliar tones by the departing woman. Nor did he shake my hand. His own hands lay along the wide arms of the deep, worn chair which he inhabited, the left one trembling slightly as it rested. He indicated the second chair, far from as deep or comfortable, positioned on the opposite side of the fireplace.

"Sit. Sit. Yes!". He spoke coarsely, his voice rough, heavy with accent.

I took my coat off and sat down, taking in my surroundings as best I could, laying the notepad and pen alongside me. I was offered nothing, not by him, nor by the daughter. No tea, no vodka, no warmth, and no welcome either.

The room was fairly large; one of those two rooms knocked into one places, a big space now, in which neither half of it looked right. It could have suited as a stage set for a Pinter play in the fifties, all tables and odd chairs and mirrors, and featureless prints on the walls; if there was a television, I couldn't see it.

The man was sitting very still, very still indeed. Behind his chair, next to a frayed standard lamp, a zimmer frame rested, and to his right an old fashioned radiogram filled a shelf, with a pile of books and magazines on the floor. His was a hard face, lined, and with a vague feeling of cruelty around the eyes. They were not eyes to trust. Hair, surprisingly full and pure white, swept back from the brow, in typically Slav fashion. I guessed he was about five nine, tall for

a Volhynian, and had been heavy, and looking, even now, much larger in the vast grey cardigan which totally enwrapped him. Obviously, a powerful man when young, I recalled Sashko telling me he had been a blacksmith in the colliery for years after the war. A few minor scars on forehead and cheek glowed blue with the coal dust remnants under the skin of an otherwise pale flaccid face. He moved not a muscle in legs or feet, and only the huge right hand seemed to have any power, or interest in activity. The room seemed quite chilly, though, somewhere far off, the boiler had loudly puffed into action as I entered the place. He wore no glasses, they lay on the radiogram, but the eyes drew me back. Unpleasant, and unsettling, they were a deep grey, almost as dark as his thick wooly mantle.

But the eyes.

The eyes.

Life would not trouble to keep this old, diminishing man for much longer. I wondered if it was fear of death stealthily approaching that I could sense within him, a fearful soul mirrored in the depths of the old face. Six months left?  Just two, or three perhaps?

Not long.

As we began to talk, and he answered a few of my questions about his early life, in the years before the war began, an arrogance crept into his voice. An intonation which suggested a sense of identity, a purity of purpose, even a right to privileged existence, an assertion which the aged body denied wholeheartedly. This was surprising, as he'd told me very little of importance about the village, now subsumed in a concrete suburb of the Brezhnev years. "Go back? No! Why?" He shrugged away his home, and the few sparse details of his family seemed to mean even less. "Brothers. Two. Yes. Two. But…who knows? The war maybe?".

The war? That war however, meant so much more. "It started, as far as I was concerned when I decided to leave the village and the plough to take unpaid service with the vigorous singing armies of field grey troops which marched across the steppes."

His voice lifted. "They marched towards Moscow!"

In the early months of 'Barbarossa' the front line Germans generally liked the Ukrainians, perhaps not as a race of human beings, but as useful and unquestioning tools for their purpose. I was looking straight at an example. Large and strong, and fit and young, he would have been about twenty two then. He would be of use to the Wehrmacht.

"For a few weeks, in the warm Summer- 1941", he reminded me, "I fetched and carried and did as I was told, and I was fed in return. Good food too. Every day.".

Generally, he was used for looking after a few horses, and using his impressive strength. There was obviously little intellect to trouble his conscience.

An officer had come along late one afternoon, with a corporal, and he found himself despatched towards L'viv with a few more men and some prisoners. They slept in a barn, along with fifty or so others, and the following morning as dawn broke, they were set to dig.

"The trench we dug was maybe a hundred metres long", he suggested with a flick of the index finger of his trembling left hand, "and twenty wide. Deep too, five metres or more. It

took all day to dig, and half a day more even though here near the forest the ground was soft and easy." Even at this distance he seemed pleased that he could dig with such strength.

"We were marched, tired as dogs, back to the barn. They gave us soup, and bread, some vodka too," he smiled, and wagged a thick finger. "Not enough vodka. Then they locked us in with a guard to keep an eye on us."

Late in the afternoon they heard trucks, lots of trucks, and over the noise of the engines a few voices intoning prayers, a few more women's voices shrieking, wailing. Children too.

"Jews." He said the word as though it hurt his mouth to utter it, sideways, slow, low and with distaste.

"Soon afterwards we heard the shots. Fast volleys first, ba-bang, ba-bang, like that, then ragged firing, then some single shots." He thought for a moment. "Maybe a few bursts of machine gun fire." He waved a pointed finger from side to side, like a child's cowboy game. The sun was beginning to set; it grew quiet and the barn doors opened. The trucks slowly ground away along the track, and they marched back to the long pit.

"It took far less time to fill it in than to dig it out, eh?" he laughed, and spread his one active hand before him. "There were hundreds of naked, and half clothed, men and women, and scores of children and babies lying in a huge mass, the red steam rose from it and the smell was incredible." Even he thought so, and he had often killed a pig at home. He said this as if there was no difference, and to him there probably wasn't. The heated air above the trench was tainted not only with the smell of death, though there were more than a few faint movements to be seen below them, but with the gathering silence which covered the executioners with an aura of palpable astonishment.

Some, remarkably, were actually moved by what they had done. He seemed surprised to tell me this. The officers in charge, neatly dressed 'mouse-men' ordered the sergeants to march them away.

"It was long after dark, a darkness lit by just a few oil lamps, when we finished the job. Many of the Ukrainians and Poles wept as they shovelled earth and sand over bodies which in some cases were still not corpses yet."

His flat monotone voice told me even now that he had suffered little in the task. "The mound stood a man's height above the ground when we finished, taller than you, and then we were marched back to the barn, throwing our shovels in a pile outside the door. They gave us more vodka!" That he remembered better than the dead.

"Next morning, we were lined up and given a meagre ration of bread. Before the men were marched off to climb aboard the trucks, a sergeant beckoned to me. I stayed."

"Yes." I nodded to him. His strength and size would be useful. Sixty long years after his selection, his voice oozed the sense that it had been a natural choice for any Wehrmacht NCO to make. Why not?

It was after the third, or perhaps, it was the fourth, long deep pit in the forest had been filled with victims that he became more than just a bystander in events. "I became a real 'Hiwi'!" His eyes blazed with pride or arrogance, or both maybe. By now he had a uniform of sorts.

“Many of the volunteers had. It was old, and once worn by a Czech soldier, but it was a uniform. I carried no gun of course. Not yet!” The right hand flourished as he said the word, as though somewhere within he still kept the desire to feel the balanced weight of a pistol. When there is killing to be done, and killing on a huge scale, a powerful man totally owned by the killers, and yet ’disposable’ in his turn, has significant value.

He killed Poles, Russians, party men, Jews. It goes without saying, he shrugged at this. And Ukrainians, his own people, those who protested. Those who had been members of once-lauded nationalist groups, and intellectuals.

“Enemies of the Reich. Killed them all. It made no difference.” And when he told me this the old man emphasised the point tapping his index finger on the chair arm with each word.

“Gypsies were the hardest work.” he said with a nod of recollection. “They fought all the way to the grave, and sometimes beyond. The first time they just shot them all in the carts and got the Jews to carry the lice-ridden corpses to the pit.” He laughed as he remembered that even the Jews, minutes from their own deaths, protested.

“That was the day they gave me a pistol!” he told me proudly. His good hand, his effective hand, flexed around an invisible grip as he described his firearm.

“It was a big Austrian M12, a Steyr-Hahn, one of those heavy nine-millimetre weapons left after the First War. You know?”

I did. He spoke of it as a mother might speak tenderly of a child. He had killed many with it, he assured me.

Partisans were despatched with inventive brutality of medieval proportions, tortured and mutilated, like early martyrs. The way this frail creature sitting before me mentioned, almost in passing, the ’special treatment’ afforded to those prisoners made my spine shudder. The man’s memory was sharp, the pride within undiminished. By now, after a little more than an hour, in which time I had said or asked little beyond the original questions about his childhood and home, he was unstoppable. Without inducement, he recounted death after death across the provinces of Volhynia, Podolia and Galicia, sometimes singly, sometimes scores or hundreds of them, with a clarity undiminished by the passing of more than half a century. He regretted, he actually regretted, “That I missed out on the early killing of the Jews, the ’Aktions’. You know of them?  Particularly at Kamyanets-Podolski, and at Rivne, many there, many, and at Vinnitsa. Especially Vinnitsa!” He emphasised the town’s name, as though it had been a favourite football team and a magnificent victory.

As time passed, marked by a clicking walnut clock on the mantle-piece, the light began to fade, and he reached behind him and flicked the switch of a lopsided standard lamp.

“Light? Yes?” A hard smile crossed, what must have been, harsh lips set in a cruel face in his younger days, as he recalled a point which he gestured, more than hinted, I should take note of.

“Maybe you don’t know. The women to die were always a problem, especially those with babies and small children.”  It unsettled many of the members of the Einsatzegruppe who carried out the killing, causing ‘psychological difficulties’, I knew that well enough, and told him.

He shrugged. “The answer”, he told me, “very, very simple. First kill the baby, and the mother will go to her own death; she will go silent and stunned, like a rabbit, eh?”. The officers of course were conscious of the cost of each ‘Aktion’, large or small, to the managers of the Reich, and no-one would be permitted to waste a bullet on a worthless child. “The smallest babies”, he said, were “simple to deal with. Look.” He grunted, leaned over the side of the chair, and, as he reached his arm down to the floor, a hiss of pain heralded his own impending fate.

To my surprise, with his good arm he lifted a small cloth doll, and I realised that there were a few toys on the floor next to his chair, a grandchild’s leavings tidied away by the daughter perhaps. He considered the doll for a moment, holding it by the neck.

“Baby, eh?” he smiled. “All you do,” and now he fixed me with his frigid gaze, the eyes hard, “to silence the mother and child is break the infant’s spine with a single movement. Like so!” And here he shook the doll with a remarkable ripple of movement, a movement of practised, measured strength. The doll’s head lolled backwards, and he dropped it, negligently, into the shadows on the floor. He lifted his good hand in the glare of the lamp’s light as a gesture of fulfilment. His eyes turned to ice like steel in a frost.

“Finished. Yes!”

The obituary note in the local free newspaper described him in a way which would seem ordinary comment for any ordinary man. Hard working, a good neighbour. A loving husband and companion to his late wife, and a much beloved father to his three daughters. Above all a devoted grandfather to his seven grandchildren, aged between fourteen years, and the youngest just eleven months.

The funeral, which took place on a bleak April afternoon, with a brisk, cold wind biting through the city, was well attended according to Sashko, but I stayed at home. I’d had enough of death.

**BOOKS**

Charity Shop. March 2002

*"Only what is seen is envied."*
Borderlands Proverb

The sitting room, dining room, parlour and study, all these in one, of Sasha's small top floor flat, would have been sparsely furnished, if it had not been for the mass of books. Books written in the Ukrainian language, in Russian, French and German, some in Polish, some in English, and even a few Esperanto titles, were all piled haphazardly on shelves and chairs, on the table, and on the windowsill. Books spilled over onto the enormous chesterfield which may well have been ancient when Sasha's hero, Tolstoy, died. This last item was, without any doubt, the most unprepossessing piece of furniture ever made; shabby in the extreme, of indeterminate hue, and, sustaining in its every fibre, a smell which might have been tantalisingly reminiscent of a rat which had burrowed deep into its entrails and died there, miserably and alone. A visitor, if there was one, would find himself moving among piles of books leaning against table legs, walls, and even free-standing half a metre high: and moving across the threadbare carpet, as if he was a storm-tossed ship desperately trying to avoid a fatal encounter with a well-read rock or calf-bound reef.

Dust. Dust lay everywhere in the room. Dust on the tumbledown chesterfield, and dust over the crocheted shawl which lay across the back of it. Dust on the table, dust on the well-worn mats, dust on the heavy reading lamp and on the books. Especially the books. Here and there, nonchalantly, an empty tea glass stood, stained ochre with a faint reminder of a liquid; and an inkless pen equally dusty, lay abandoned on top of a pile of Goncharov or Gogol. He liked to keep his authors separate, discrete, it seemed. An empty chocolate box lay forgotten on top of a vast Russian dictionary, open at *Ha* and turned aside to gather its quota of dust. The window would not open, but once it must have done; so perhaps the sash, loose and jarring in wind or rain, caused annoyance to the quiet reader. That would explain the nail which had been hammered awkwardly into the frame, splitting the wood and killing all possible vibration. From the last inch of that protruding, badly rusted nail, there dangled incongruously an air freshener in the shape of a Christmas tree; scentless and dusty, as dusty as everything else in the room.

Dust. Dust everywhere. Dust of all kinds of dust. The dust of years of benign neglect. The dust of silence. The dust of memory. The dust of despair and ultimately of death. The door to the tiny, dusty kitchen stood slightly ajar, the door to the tinier dustier bedroom firmly shut.

"Dust in the air suspended, marks the place where a story ended.", I muttered Eliot's lines to myself quietly. This place brought on a literary turn, no doubt of that at all!

Around me, around my feet, I sensed the written word rising like a melancholy mist, a somehow wondrous wave of words, a ripple of reason and truth, of thought and of reflection. In all the years he had lived in the cramped space, he must never have culled nor jettisoned a

single book. It dawned upon me, suddenly, that there were no newspapers, no papers at all in fact. He read them at the library of course, and such small offerings as came from 'home' were loaned from other members of the Diaspora, and travelled onwards in the same way.

In the fifteen years I'd known him, this was the first time I'd climbed this staircase. My first visit to Sasha's apartment. I had paused for breath after the steep climb. Apartment. He always used that word; it sounded so much grander than the partitioned attic with shared toilet and bathroom which it was in reality.

I wasn't alone that afternoon. Yuri was with me. He was executor of the bibliophile's short will, and for many reasons didn't fancy the task of dealing with this huge collection which was scattered about every possible surface. Yuri had been a good friend to Sasha. It was said he'd saved him at the end, when the 14th surrendered, and the Soviets were close behind. But Yuri was in no sense a literary man, as anyone who met him would recognise. So, it was my particular job to categorize, roughly count and briefly describe Sasha's library. It was destined for one of those small exile libraries which can still be found in London, Manchester and one or two other places where the Diaspora once gathered in numbers.

"It won't be a complex task." I said to myself. Yuri had arranged for boxes, enough for the job, and I had my notebook. I guessed, and wasn't far wrong, that there were five or six thousand volumes, more or less, stacked, sprawled and sloping around the room. Some of them had wonderful bindings, leathery and gold embossed. On one pile, with titles cut in old Cyrillic, five editions of Gogol's *'Dead Souls'*. Turgenev, Zola, Balzac, all well represented at first glance. The Librarian would be disappointed. Here were no vast diaries of pre-war politics, no journals of the long war and longer exile, no autobiography, nothing but the written word of great writers, and a few less great than that.

"Coffee?" Yuri muttered, and drifted away while I took my bearings. All of the books in the room were plainly in sight, there was only one open fronted bookcase, crammed naturally, and they would be easy to count and describe, I didn't have to list them. I wondered out loud if I needed to count them all? I did anyway, roughly, in round tens, and the total came to five thousand nine hundred, more or less. "A fair old collection." I shouted to Yuri. He didn't reply. A wide-ranging collection too. Dickens, everything imaginable by him, including the obscure stuff people only pretend to have read- Dumas, Kafka, Tolstoy and Pushkin. Standard reference works as well.

"Lots of Nabokov, Bulgakov, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and so many piles of Chekhov." I was talking to Yuri, but he wasn't listening. "I remember Sasha telling me that Stalin loved lists, and would often begin his ridiculous speeches by reciting a list of cities, of nationalities, of rivers, of scientific, all attributable to his paternal leadership naturally." Yuri was a typically silent Borderlands listener. The authors present in Sasha's flat would make a magnificent literary list, but of course Stalin had killed more than a few of them. Jotting some brief notes, I commented on the piles as I went among them. Most of them I hardly disturbed, the librarian would have to do the leg-work for himself, though I did comment on the fact that many of them were exquisitely bound. Any librarian worth his salt would only need a

beginning, a mark in the sand, to start his own journey into Sasha's chosen literature. Yuri and a couple of the other exiles would box them shortly.

"You'll need a lot of boxes, Yuri." I told him, and a good supply of black bin bags for the more fragrant litter. The coffee was awful.

There were no real surprises as I came to the end of my cursory glance at the attic's contents. Very little by women writers, I noticed that. The bedroom contained no more than a hundred books, the majority of them paperbacks, well thumbed, frequently read bed time stuff. On the bedside table, next to a pile of plastic pill-boxes, a half-bottle of very cheap vodka and a glass with a spoon in it, lay three books. Yuri closed the top book, a half-collapsed Penguin copy of *'Nostromo'*, and handed the other two to me. A delightful slender hardback of Dickens' *'The Mudfog Papers'*, and a thick, ominous Orthodox Bible. I admired the Dickens, but didn't open it with my now rather dirty hands

"Take it!" said Yuri. "Sasha wouldn't mind. You are the great reader. Take some more if you want." He waved his arms with largesse. "No, just the *'Mudfog'*, as a momento." I'm not sure why, but I packed the Bible into my bag as well. "Bibles, family Bibles, sometimes tell history." I said to my uninterested accomplice.

The very generously named kitchen yielded only one book, a stained, stuck together and generally useless copy of Bohdan Zahny's ancient *'Ukrainian Cuisine'*, not a title much admired, and his recipe for Hetman Soup was one I'd eaten before but with luck would never eat again.

In under an hour I'd finished, made the notes I needed, and could escape the stink of Yuri's tobacco and constant encouragement to a glass of Sasha's awful vodka. I wanted to get home and type the notes up, add a comment or two of my own, and my details, in case the librarian wanted to get in touch. The thought of the ornate, well bound volumes, the embossed spines, being displayed properly pleased me, but then my wife says I'm a bibliomaniac, not a bibliophile, but what's the difference?

My three page letter was placed in Yuri's heavy hand the following afternoon, written in English and written to encourage a response. I wish now I'd taken a photo of Sasha's living room before everything was moved. It had a look a bit like Dylan Thomas' writing shack. But what was I to know then? These were just beautiful books, an exiles well-loved library. When I arrived to hand over the letter, there were around forty boxes, I didn't count them, strong, close-sealed, with big numbers on them waiting to go. Yuri hadn't relied on the old men, he'd enlisted his sons' help, and all four of them were finishing off the operation with a few glasses of vodka; the boys had worked hard to get it done. "Josef's son is driving up to Yorkshire for a load later that night; he'll take the lot with him and drop them off in the morning. He knows the place fine." Yuri said confidently.

"Yes, he'll get a receipt." The boys laughed at my obvious concern.

“Yes! Yes, the driver knows they have to be handled carefully, but these boxes -solid enough.” He tapped one with his foot, and anyway, Yuri said, what was I worrying about? I accepted a vodka while the boys heaved the boxes downstairs, and we toasted the late Sasha and his now empty attic.

“That’s it Dad!” one of them shouted up. What was it Anthony Powell wrote “Books do furnish a room”; well, they’d certainly furnished this one! All that was left was the table a few sticks of furniture and the pathetic chesterfield, shimmering in a cloud of lost and homeless dust.

Yuri locked up, and we went our separate ways.

I wish now I’d lingered in that room. The dust was, somehow, a dust of haunting, of memories.

The hefty Orthodox Bible I slipped into my own bookshelves, thinking maybe I’d leave it with the Priest when next he turned up for a feast day with the Diaspora. The beautiful *‘Mudfog’* I read on the train back from London a few weeks afterwards. It’s a short book, less than a hundred pages, a novella, or a longish short story at best, and a bit ‘Pickwickian’, but rich and entertaining, like any Dickens work. For some reason, and one I couldn’t guess, Sasha had copied out some stanzas of poetry inside the covers, and on the endpapers. Short pieces, and written in a curving Cyrillic script I couldn’t make anything of, naturally. I knew they were poems, but he’d not written the poet’s name either, so that was that.

Eventually, and Sasha must have been gone quite a few months, I remembered to slip *‘Mudfog’* into my pocket on my way to a Friday gathering at the former Diaspora club. Sprightly Stefan would be there, with his second wife Anna. She was not long in the country, a fifty year old, competent teacher of English, with three or four other languages beside. She would certainly be interested, and would, probably, know the poets too. It was rumoured she had written back home, *Samizdat* poetry and criticism, back in the seventies.

“No, no.”, she didn’t recognise the poet. “But the verse is beautiful, and well written.” There were four poems in the little *‘Mudfog’* copy, a fifth was incomplete. She read them aloud first in Ukrainian, fine and resonant, then gave her husband and myself a brief, apologetic stab at translation.

“I don’t understand where they came from.” she said.

One of the poems, I told her, as she read it again, reminded me of that ‘Candle Burning’ poem, the one Pasternak wrote as Zhivago.

“Interesting thing”, she pointed out to us, “each of the poems ends with the letters *AH*, and in capitals, but the real ending of a properly placed word.”.

Anna was emphasising her point with pinched thumb and forefinger, precise, confident. “You would not recognise it, since you don’t have this old fashioned language. Not many do

nowadays, even in places like L'viv or the Universities," she laughed showing off her gold tooth, "but the writing is very elaborate, perhaps a little exotic, clever too. Beautiful, rather like sad Gumilyev I think".

Again, Anna said firmly, she didn't recognise the poet. But I thought I might.

"*AH* were Sasha's initials in Cyrillic, Alexander Nikonov." I reminded her. "These four poems might be his work, not copied from another volume, but final pieces, and one of them unfinished, lacks the ending."

She asked the obvious question: "You have more of them?".

I'd hinted at, but now explained the despatch of the books to her and to Stefan, who summoned a very merry Yuri from the bar. He, well-lubricated, shrugged and lost interest in the idea of his old friend, Sasha, as a poet rather quickly.

"As far as I know", he said, "the boxes got to the library safely. Somewhere I have kept the receipt. Maybe I'll find it. Maybe!" He wandered away again.

Anna was now in her element. It was as though an unknown slender volume of Mandelstam's Gulag verses had resurfaced, or Gogol's draft of *'Dead Souls'* had been found in a kitchen cupboard. Her suggestion was intriguing. She slipped my copy of Dickens into her bag. "I'll need this, please." She would phone in the morning, first thing, and speak to the librarian. Stefan, who knew that part of the North of England well, thought it was a small place, not big like the diaspora libraries in London or Manchester.

"Of course," he said, thoughtfully, "the librarian might have opened your letter, but not yet the boxes." He smiled. "It's possible. Who knows?"

It was raining hard when I arrived home to a dark house. My wife was away at her mother's, and the cat barely stirred in welcome. I took Sasha's Bible from the shelf, and settled by the fire. "Yes!". It was written in. Covers and end papers and leaves were written over, but not poetry, that much I could recognise. These were sentences, and a quite a few dates. The years stood out, and months too, he'd written them in numerals. A Diary? Perhaps? A chronology certainly, all written in that flowing Cyrillic script; his name and patronymic were on the inside cover.

So the poetry was his. "His! Sasha the poet!" The cat was unimpressed by my exclamation, a poor *'Eureka!'* for a wet night, and yawned.

The question was, how much more had he created?

A little before ten o'clock in the morning, Stefan rang.

"The library is closed at weekends. We must wait. Sadly, the only man I knew there died a few years ago. I know no-one now. We all get old, eh?"

I told him about Sasha's Bible, and, that afternoon found the three of us sitting around his dining table.

"Lovely *Shuliki,* Anna. I could eat these little honey cakes by the dozen."

"You are." Stefan reminded me.

Anna was scribbling furiously, and emitting small gasps from time to time. Her transcription and translation of the lengthy passages took quite a while. She hummed and crossed out and rewrote; a term would fly out as she wrote. "Identical? Ah! No, no. Monotonous! Yes!"

Stefan and I drank tea and ate cakes. More than an hour later, she finished her notes, accepted a large drink, and settled to tell us the story.

"It is quite amazing. Sasha had written some poetry when he was very young, before his time in the Gulag, but there in the Urals he had to keep them in his mind."

She tapped her forehead. "All of them, here. Here!" She was impressed, carried away in the stream of thought.

"He composed, he remembered, he learned his own verses, a line, then a stanza at a time, assembling a poem over months, keeping each one in his head for a time when he would be free to read and to write again. If that time came."

Anna was crying softly as she told the tale.

"Sometime in 1940, aged around twenty, Sasha was released, he didn't know why." The journey back to Ukraine took most of that Autumn and Winter, and he was barely back in his own town when the Germans came. With no relatives left to speak of, they were far behind him, wasting to death in the work camps, he 'took the Reich's bread' as they used to say. He went to work near Hausruck, voluntarily, not as a slave, taking his head full of poems with him. Some he wrote down in a notebook, only to lose the paper words when he left the ruin where he was working at the war's bitter end."

"Many poets lose poems, eh?" Stefan pitched in. "I read this somewhere."

Anna ignored him. "Sasha didn't settle, not properly, that is, until the mid- fifties," and that she thought must be when he started to trust in actually writing down his poems, but the commentary wasn't clear. Anna was, I thought, visibly moved by what she was telling us. Her hand lay on the old bible, fingers slowly caressing it.

There were tears. Maybe, I didn't say it, maybe she'd lost someone in the Gulag. Or lost words along her own road to exile?

"He wrote his poems in other writer's books, not in notebooks, perhaps, he thought, Chekhov and Tolstoy were sure to endure! It wasn't explained."

"He wrote for himself", I suggested, "and not for publication at all, but he must have hoped that his poems would survive.".

“He often mentioned loneliness, and Gogol. “Anna turned the pages of her notes. “It must have been a theme or a path he followed, he wrote again and again of rain, and cold, and of darkness.”

“Gogol burned his books eh?” Stefan chipped in.

Without the books that contained the poems it was hard to follow, but she did realise he wrote his foreword, his opening notes, in his Bible, thinking perhaps that whoever came after him would begin with that.

“But he was wrong.” I said. “The days of faith are long passed over.”

“Maybe this was luck, not faith, eh?” Stefan grinned.

Yet it all made sense.

Anna was frantic with excitement and emotion, and it gripped the usually calm and earthbound Stefan too. Only the three hundred odd mile journey and the fact that she couldn’t actually drive a car stopped her leaving at that instant.

What had we stumbled on?  Anna was certain that we’d discovered, if posthumously, a new poet of worth. If not an Ivan Drach, then maybe, at least, a Narbut, she said, and she knew her poetry, Anna. Stefan’s cooler counsel prevailed. “Tomorrow, I will ring the library again. Speak to the librarian, make arrangements.” We were satisfied.

“People,” he wasn’t specific, “people,” he repeated, “would need to know what has been hidden for so long in Sasha’s flat.”

Perhaps, I thought to myself, for literary purposes, we could call it an apartment after all?

My finger hadn’t touched the doorbell, before Anna opened the door.

“Terrible! Disaster!” she wailed like the lead in a Greek tragedy, arm flailing. I thought she’d been crying. Stefan, serious and quiet, beckoned me in to sit at the table on which lay Sasha’s Bible and the little *‘Mudfog’* like paper monuments, which is what they were.

“The librarian died.” Stefan said, polishing his glasses thoughtfully, pausing to look at his wife. Anna sighed. “He was I think quite ill, and old of course. We all are getting old.” He smiled to himself, and shrugged, a helpless gesture in the face of time.

“I spoke to the Secretary, he is himself not at all well, and has just returned, but is still ill. He was in hospital for an operation before Christmas. Another of the old exiled men was looking after the place. Young people have no interest as you know. He just had the keys, opened and closed, dusted maybe, and made sure no-one stole the coffee, eh?”

He replaced his glasses and looked through me.

“Oh, yes. Yes. The boxes arrived. Did you know there were forty seven of them?”

I hadn’t counted. It seemed a hell of a lot.

Yuri had sent along a less than helpful note of his own. In a language the custodian, let’s call him that, could read far easier than my formal English. I was writing to a scholar of course, and Yuri wasn’t.

Forty seven boxes took up a lot of space. The little library already had plenty of Dostoevsky, of Chekhov, of Grossman too. Why would they need a dozen more copies of *‘Fathers and Sons’*?

Stefan had been assured that the boxes were opened, but that was all.

“Something had to be done.” the Secretary told Stefan. And it was. The Ukrainian and Polish books, the Russian, and the German, even I suppose the Esperanto, no-one wanted. The custodian had asked a few of the others at the club one night.

“I didn’t know of course.” the Secretary had excused himself from the words to come. “If I had, well….”

“So,” said Stefan, “the old fool burned them. All of them, well, almost. In the old stove which heated half the place. You see, he didn’t want to waste them. That’s what I was told. Those words, precisely. He didn’t want to waste them.”

Anna wailed like Hecuba in ‘*The Trojan Women*’

“He burned the books. It must have taken weeks.”. Stefan was crestfallen. “Not only the poems, mind you, but the words of Gogol and Akhmatova. He burned them. Burned them! Like the Nazis did!”.

We looked at each other, then at the unhappy Anna, who was, by now, half way through a box of tissues.

“One thing!” Stefan exclaimed. “He didn’t burn the English language books. No! Those he gave to a local Charity Shop. So, maybe?”

It took most of the day to make arrangements. By now Stefan was immersed in this small quest, and Anna took a back seat. Sadly, the Secretary would not be able to meet us, and the library was closed that week, but I wasn’t surprised at all to hear it.

It was a long drive.

This place turned out to be one of those small very local, one-off charities. In an old butcher's shop. Set up in memory of someone now barely remembered by the name, and struggling, always struggling to survive. It was just down the dismal street from the drab Diaspora Club and its deprived library. Anna and I both wondered if Sasha had ever visited the place. Probably not.

Inside it smelled like Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*. I suspected something had died in there and couldn't be found. There was little of business success or of charity about it. Lots of malfragrant third hand clothes, lots more of what the desperate might call bric-a-brac; piles of old CDs and tapes; odd lumps of furniture. Sasha's aged chesterfield would have been at home. Here and there a row of tattered books. Paperbacks mostly.

There was a Manager, of sorts. A Mrs. Cooper, gaunt and unpleasant. She'd been there ever since the shop opened. Anna didn't like her, I could tell from the way she said "Good Morning."

So, I jumped in before the chemistry could ruin everything at the final hurdle. Of course, I laid it on as thickly as I could, telling her half the tale, the rest she wouldn't understand at all.

"Oh. Yes.", she beamed in a self-important way. "Yes, the old Polish man from their Club brought us eight big boxes of books. English books you know, not foreign ones, though around here, well….".

Stefan and I nodded. Anna looked around.

Mrs. Cooper was in full flow. "He had to borrow this trolley thing and a cover to put over them. It was very cold and wet, as you know, in January and February.".

Yes, I thought to myself, ideal weather for book burning.

"They were no use at all!", her voice raised half an octave and startled Stefan.

"Do you know," she glanced at the other two, but spoke only to me, "inside they were nearly all written on, in biro and scribbled pencil. Inside the covers, and at the back, even on the title pages in some cases. You couldn't read what was written. Everywhere! Who, I ask you would buy a book in that condition. Even the Shakespeare and Charles Dickens were written in, and all the Thomas Hardy."

Mrs. Cooper tried to look appalled, as though she'd actually read some of them.

"The few that were in a decent state", and how she stressed that word 'decent' -- she meant the ones that weren't written in of course, as though Sasha's words were nothing more than putrid or pornographic. "Those we kept. I don't think there are any left now, but I'll check of course."

That's a full two minutes work, I thought but kept it there.

Stefan looked at me, and we both looked at the silent Anna.

She came back shaking her head.

“All gone. So sorry”

Mrs. Cooper was angling for me to ask. So, I did.

The ‘unsuitable’, the ‘uneconomic’ she stressed the first but meant the second word, were disposed of, naturally.

“The waste skip,”, she told me, pointing to the back door, “emptied by the Council every second Tuesday. We do, unfortunately, get some poor-quality donations from time to time, and so ...” She spread her hands apologetically, and smiled vacantly.

# RETURN

**MOTHERLAND**

Galicia. Summer 1994.

"*There is no freedom outside Ukraina."*
Borderlands Proverb

It was a typical and, to be perfectly honest, nondescript grave with a poorly carved headstone in a sprawling cemetery, lost on a roadside, some ten kilometres from the old town of Dubno and the medieval fortress. We walked slowly, he and I. There were far more imposing monuments within a stone's throw of the simple grave of Anna Filimonova Charschuk. As might be expected many of those marked the grim tombs of middle and low-ranking Party functionaries from the old Oblast Central Committee, or dismantled organisations long sustained by the now vanished Soviet state. One or two of the great marble slabs surmounted with medals, stars and sickles, had suffered damage from hammers or thrown paint. One, unreadable beyond a harsh and complex Georgian patronymic, had been singled out for particularly vindictive abuse and leaned as if drunk, heavily pockmarked with the spray of a shotgun's angry pellets.

A single prominent grave, with its tall cross, stood in the grass, like a Slavonic Calvary. The stone gleamed, burnished with love and tears, and strewn with golden poppies and blue cornflowers. These the resurrected nation's colours, *'the blue of the sky over the gold of the corn.'* This was the empty sepulchre of an *'Afghantsi'*-a Ukrainian boy of just nineteen, killed by a tribesman's bullet in that far off war which brought so much work to monumental masons in villages from the Black Sea to the Baltic. I looked long at the memorial slab, uncomprehending, and glanced toward my companion. He sighed, lifted his walking stick and slowly traced the lines of poetry.

"Lead the child to me. My little one. I hand you to the light."

"Akhmatova?" I asked.

"No.", the old man shook his head. "Olena Teliha. You know of her?"

"Only of her death at Babi Yar." I replied.

"Far away, eh? And a long time ago."

With a magician's care his stick swept a brittle, fallen birch leaf from the marble, slowly he glanced back towards his mother's resting place. Then, audibly settling himself into his vast coat, he turned towards the path.

"Do you know where you come from? Your home?", he asked me.

"Of course", the reply, as I side-stepped carefully over a shimmering puddle. He glanced at me, perhaps envying the assurance of a younger man who had never seen war.

It had rained much of the night, and the continuous downpour had brought out every scent a graveyard can possess. Fresh earth, from the black rich *'Chernozem'* of the western steppe, sweet meadow grasses, mingled with cut flowers - almost every grave was surmounted by a marble urn crammed with fragrant blooms. These, with the deep ferns, the plethora of mushrooms and mosses, laid a heavy, moist perfume over dead and living alike.

The path took us toward the road. A cat, surprised in her solitary progress, darted into the undergrowth and stared in silence as we passed by. Away to the left, a small funeral cortege, led by a tall bareheaded priest, moved into the heart of the cemetery. His voice incanting through the misty early morning air, deep and monotonous. The words of the old Psalm – "And forget not all his benefits! Who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases." The shambling mourners, mostly elderly women dressed in shabby dark clothes, the few young people in cheap, copied New York sportswear, mumbled behind the open coffin with as much dignity as they could gather, now they were no longer forced to forget God. The young seemed embarrassed, the elderly apprehensive, as they coiled among the endless graves. I was reminded of the opening of Pasternak's *'Doctor Zhivago'. "On they went, singing 'Eternal Memory";* but, whenever this inadequate group halted, there were no Siberian gusts of wind to carry heavenward their singing. Only the tall golden-robed priest droned miserably on as they ambled towards the grave.

The old man paused, the brass ferrule of his walking stick toying with a broken pine cone.

"My mother was widowed during the War", he said quietly. "My father was killed fighting the Russians in 1952."

I looked at him. There are many nations, lands and countries in this tormented continent of ours where wars and revolutions do not begin and end with the bland dates written in the turgid history books of winners, or alleged in the heroic memoirs of dead generals.

Ukraine is one of these places.

It was time to listen.

"This little village of ours had four names, like most places in this Oblast of Ukraine, the last stretch of western steppe sandwiched between the great Dniestr river and the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains."

He spoke slowly, and with the pace of a thoughtful teacher.

"One name of course was Russian, one Ukrainian and one Polish. Even a German name from the old days when it lay in Franz Josef's frontier province. But if the departed Jews ever had a name for the place no-one had asked them, because no-one remembered the Jews and no-one cared."

He chewed the word 'departed' carefully before he said it, as though it suggested an Exodus, a march towards freedom and not the bitter slaughter it was called beyond that village.

I knew that all of the known names were still used by people with different and often conflicting cultural agendas from their neighbours. People who owned much half-remembered history, often a half-spoken language, but little enough happiness in their still wretched village existence.

"Now for my old friend's father to have been killed in 'the war' in 1952, when the eyes of the world blinked over Korea and Africa, and 'peace' was a lauded even if not generally accepted state of affairs, that did not surprise me at all. The war that father Charschuk died in was far from 'Cold'. It ranged across most of Ukraine, and even beyond. Few in the wider world recall, though it was often repeated to me, that the last major engagement which could be called a battle of World War Two started not far from this quiet village cemetery at a quiet place named Brody. From there three thousand men, women and children of UPA, the

Ukrainian Nationalist Army, accompanied by the tattered remnants of the Galician 14th '*Waffen SS'* Division, fought their way across the snow-covered mountain passes, through Soviet army lines, across a hostile Czechoslovakia and into safety in the American Zone of Occupied Germany. That was in the bitter Winter of 1947 when birds froze in the trees, and tears became ice on the cheeks of men."

The old man paused, leaning heavily on his stick.

"My mother was born here. In this village, she lived for all of her life. Married and bore her children, four sons and three daughters. Now she is buried here. Alone. Only I am left to live." He let out a barely audible sound, perhaps a subdued whimper from childhood memories; or of despair from far flung manhood, held hard down inside his overcoat. The tales of his family, some little part of which I had heard as we sat on the stuttering bus from the city, ran chattering like Chaucer's pilgrims down through the decades of the twentieth century. A sister long dead in Bavaria. Another living in Canada, unseen since she was twenty. He had come to Britain, then to Wales, through military service with the Poles. It was a fortunate escape. Such men, who turned up like jetsam on every shore when the 'Thousand Year Reich' collapsed in 1945, were known as RAMP, Recovered Allied Military Personnel. Many were owed a blood debt. Yaroslav was, he told me so again and again, "Much more fortunate than my three brothers and my father."

"I left the village in the last week of August in 1939, a nineteen year old conscript to the Polish eagle." Called to the colours to bear arms for a country that would barely deem to call him its citizen. "I was the oldest of the sons, and my mother wept. As mothers always do when sons go off to war. The oldest and the luckiest of the Charschuks." he always said that.

Even when the shells fell around him as they fled through Silesia, or at the end, when the NKVD came to the camps to ferret out the Russian-born and the Red Army deserters, he was lucky.

"Lucky! Other boys were herded at bayonet point onto the trains going eastwards, to the *Gulag* far beyond the Urals. Or hanged themselves because they could not hope to pass as anything but Muscovites, or could not erase the tattooed symbol of service in the Penal Battalions."

Yaroslav Charschuk was always a lucky man.

Many mothers and sons parted as they had. Parents crying and praying, sons waving vigorously with the other village boys from the windows of a train decked in white and red streamers; leaving under the watchful eyes of Polish Sergeants who distrusted these young recruits, who spoke another language amongst themselves, and had little loyalty to Warsaw. Their loyalty was never to be tested. Within a month, Warsaw would be in flames, the proud, ill-equipped army of Poland broken and destroyed by attacks from East and West. Yaroslav did not fight. "I didn't even get as far as having a proper uniform. Only boots. Good boots. They lasted me for over a year."

We walked slowly along the path, and he indicated with a wave of his stick the turning we would take.

The Poles were overwhelmed by *Blitzkrieg* and betrayal, all the history books say so, so it must be true. Poland simply ceased to exist on the late September day when Yaroslav and his comrades were bringing in the harvest on a farm somewhere south of the city they called L'viv, but the old reservist Corporal in charge of the youngsters called it L'wow in his thick

Baltic accent. The Corporal, whose name was Lukas, was the only one with a Polish uniform, and the only one with a rifle. A very old rifle, which bore the date 1898 above the breech. His uniform was the old style too, drab khaki brown, left over from the war with Russia twenty years before. And he wore long puttees which seemed to take hours to wind around his calves and ankles.

"He was a kindly man, who fished and worked his small farm on the coast far, far away." Lukas missed the sea, which Yaroslav and his companions had never seen, and could not imagine. "Sometimes the old Corporal would stand facing the wind, head thrown back trying to smell the far off Baltic in the air. He wept bitterly when the news came on the farmer's radio that Gdynia and Gdansk had fallen to the enemy." His farm and family swept away like Autumn chaff on the salt sea winds. It was the first time Yaroslav had seen a grown man cry, but not the last. "No. Not by far."

The Red Army attacked, drowning towns and villages under the red banners, ending all hope, cutting down such opposition as was left, just as Yaroslav scythed the ripe gold corn under the cloudless blue skies. The long scythes swooped and whistled as the boys worked. Lukas, in his shirtsleeves and braces, had stopped to look skywards towards the north again. "Far away beyond L'viv the deep rumble of heavy artillery, like a distant Summer thunderstorm, drifted to our ears across the still air." The noise was suddenly broken, though almost imperceptibly at first, by a closer, rougher sound.

Along the road an ancient Ursus truck, painted army drab, was bumping and swaying towards them. It moved as if drunk on its own fuel. The handful of dusty soldiers in the back clutched the cab roof for dear life as it lurched along. The truck stopped, a hundred metres away, the engine ticking over like an excited clock. The boys stopped work, and waved aching arms to the soldiers. The Corporal moved towards the tree where his shabby woollen tunic hung over the barrel of his ancient, useless Mauser rifle. The young officer, who stepped from the cab of the truck, shouted an order to Lukas. He shambled across the corn stubble towards the road as best he could, pulling on his field cap as he went. The boys sat down, or leaned on their scythes, as they watched Lukas and the officer in agitated conversation. Yaroslav lay down his own heavy scythe and walked across to the tree, where the big wooden water bucket stood in the shade. As he drank from the ladle, the Corporal ran back, cursing in his thick tongue.

"It's finished!" he told Yaroslav, struggling into his tunic. He slung his empty bread bag over his shoulder and picked up the gun, nodding towards the soldiers and the truck. "I must go with them. I don't know where."

By this time the remaining boys, perhaps a dozen of them, had gathered around the tree.

"What shall we do?" one asked. "Where shall we go?"

"Go home!" he said.

Home. Through a country which no longer existed. Through the ecstatic, victorious German armies, and the cold, cruel Russians. Across a new Soviet border, to an old village with a new 'glorious' Stalinist name and a bleak future stretching ahead.

"Home?" I said.

"Well. Yes. Home!", said Yaroslav. "It seems I've made it at last."

He lifted his head and sniffed the air, just as the Corporal mourning Gdynia must have done a lifetime before. Across the graveyard from the huddled group around the newly excavated grave, the booming sound of the Priest's chant drifted over the graveyard.

"From the rising to the setting of the sun. Give praise."

The old man slowly, tenderly, settled himself into his deep overcoat once more, and he drifted away.

I watched him for a while, then hurried to follow.

**NEIGHBOUR**

L'viv. Spring 1995.

*"Good deeds travel far; bad ones further."*
Borderlands Proverb

Mickola was unusual, but only in one respect. He alone of all the members of the Borderlands Diaspora in our town, and some thirty in all survived back then, drank brandy. He despised vodka. Even in the purer, more refined form of *Horilka,* which was the national drink of the borderlands. If some well meaning soul assumed, being Ukrainian-born, he would drink the stuff with pleasure and bought him a glass in error, he would simply nudge it to one side in subtle contempt, and leave it untouched.

He and I met up in a larger company for a drink and what the Russians call *Zakushki* one warm afternoon in a late Galician Spring, some years ago. Not quite by chance, each of us being on separate visits to the city of L'viv. I to a conference at the Mayor's office, he to spend a holiday with cousins he'd never met in adult life. No escape was possible, that afternoon's version of a '5-Year Plan' was set out plain before me. Mickola's sturdy clutch of nieces, nephews, cousins and second cousins, had assembled for that most eastern European version of family gatherings - the homecoming. The return of a son, if somewhat less than prodigal at least in terms of wastefulness. He was a cultured man, almost literary, and a competent musician, but hopefully for them as lavish as any returning exile might be. As an unusual foreigner, and someone who knew Mickola far better than they did, for, in truth, most of the assembly had never even seen him before that week, I was invited.

In numbers this congregation would have made an Italian village envious, even without considering the volume and fervour of its Cossack-descended display of enthusiasm. Of course, the assumption made by the detachment of distant relatives was that Mickola was a rich man. Only the well-off, surely, would sip brandy rather than quaff the potent *horilka*. Others, sagely inclining aged heads, believed that, perhaps, he suffered from some unspecified digestive ailment. Something for which brandy was the obvious, and most palatable of cures.

The café in which we assembled displayed some decayed dignity. It was a remarkable survivor of a vanished age. Stanislav from the Mayor's cabinet told me it dated back to the 1890's, a time when L'viv was Lemberg, a fashionable place. An Imperial city surrounded by spas where the jaded palates and sensitive skins of Vienna came to take the air and waters. Dark, and long and mirrored, the café was lost somewhere down a narrow, cobbled street not far from the looming Gothic cathedral. Rather like Ebenezer Scrooge's house, the café seemed to have run into this shadowy corner when the medieval city was livelier and much younger, and forgotten how to leave.

It was easy to visualise self-important Austrian officers, in immaculate pike grey uniforms, spurred and sworded, strutting noisily over the marbled floors. Elegant ladies, in vast hats, gossiping as they sipped *the anglaise,* and plump bankers earnestly thumbing through the broadsheet newspapers from Berlin and Budapest. Now, after fifty years of soviet indulgence, the long room looked rather knocked about. But its atmosphere retained the elegant diffidence of a Viennese waiter down on his luck. I liked the place, even though the potted pelargoniums were a vile off-pink plastic that matched the tablecloths.

Stansislav and I drank the local dark beer, which was very good indeed. Mickola sipped his brandy, and everyone else drowned themselves in vodka. They devoured plates filled with rounds of blood-red salami, and cucumbers and peppers, ripping huge loaves of rye bread, displaying all the focussed energy of a counter-reformation communion. A large woman sitting opposite me, her name shouted in her direction from the far end of the table was, I think, Taisa, kept pressing a plate of those disgusting small fish from the Baltic called *Sprottes* under my nose. Even in the hard times of the soviet fifties these must have been what Irishmen call 'famine food'. Inedible. Completely smothered in a film of what might be compared to light diesel oil. I declined as politely as I could, my gaze consistently drawn to her mouth, which was a perpetually open orifice filled with an array of immense gold teeth, like a pirate's cave; and so perhaps she thought I was merely being polite.

Or coy.

Of course, it isn't merely the French who linger long at table. In its many forms the extended family lunch is almost a pan-European phenomenon, except in Britain that is. The people of the Borderlands are no dissenters from the general rule of eating and drinking for hours on end, interspersed with agitated conversation, and the telling of tales. Nor are the Poles, Russians or Balts. The opportunities for open and boisterous communal gatherings were frequently curtailed during the Soviet years, and they learned to keep discussions close to home and the kitchen table. So, nowadays, with the wall gone, they party, and they do party well. This afternoon in old L'viv was turning into a classic of its kind. Several of the older male cousins of the returning Mickola were pretty drunk, their wives were not far behind in the vodka stakes. The 'healthy options' among the *Zakushki*, the salads of beetroot and onion and the bright peppers, had been long abandoned for the bottle. Suddenly the serious sport of toasting everyone and everything possible had begun. Now this truly represents the height of old-style Soviet hospitality. I've heard it said that even the mighty Winston Churchill, no mean imbiber of fine old 'five-star' brandy in his day, failed miserably to keep up with Stalin and Molotov in the endless toasts at the Yalta Conference. This Ukrainian afternoon 'toasting' was no place for a flabby middle-aged foreigner to be found, or found wanting for that matter! Stanislav, nicknamed Stas for short, like all men who bore the ancient saint's name, recognised, and I suspect, shared, my reluctance to be thrown into a sea of seventy-two percent alcohol of dubious post-soviet manufacture.

We departed.

"Stay! Stay!" they shouted. "Oh, well come back soon. Tomorrow! Yes! Come back. Good health! Good Journey!" Taisa almost crushed me.

As we walked through the café towards the light, Mickola firmly pressed an American fifty dollar bill into the unctuous hand of the suddenly very attentive manager.

"This I think will cover your bill, my friend?" It did. The man shook the honoured guest's hand with such vigour that I thought he was trying to dislodge Mickola's magnificent gold signet ring. We all laughed.

Stas left us at the sunny corner, with a warm handshake, intended, I supposed, to signify municipal dignity. "Until tomorrow." He waved us off, and we two visitors sauntered along through the quiet afternoon streets. A dignified stroll, measured by the pace of his arthritis, turned into a guided tour of sorts. Mickola was taking an exile's walk down his own memory lane; I was heading for an appointment with an historian. We passed along Drukarska, the 'printer's street', under the old iron balconies, and past shaded Renaissance archways. He

suggested to me archaic features which might once have existed, and recalled youthful hopes and memories, somewhat faded with the passage of half a century.

He and I sat for a moment -- “I must rest these old legs” -- on a bright yellow bench in the small square next to a fountain held up by four unhappy dolphins. My destination was the tall onion-domed Kornyakts Tower close by, and the quarter hour chimed to remind me of it.

Mickola had been a teenage student at the Classical Gymnasium here in the days of Poland, when the city was L’wow on the maps. He knew all of the beautiful city as it was then, and it might justly be said of him, as of any man, that he remembered it well. Sometimes remembered it with accuracy. He leaned an ancient shoulder towards me and pointed out a lane he used to take each morning, past a fragrant baker’s shop and its enticing breads, on his way to the great buff Gymnasium, running in a sea of youngsters.

It is a fact, well known to those who move from time to time in the company of old men, that there are gestures which indicate that the conversation is about to move from the uncertain present into the crystal clarity of the long past. In the case of this old man it was a sort of nod, almost a chuckle, and a settling of the head on the chest which made me realise that he was about to remember old L‘wow. He breathed deeply.

“In the bright, cloudless, September of 1939, when the Soviets came, splitting me and many others among my classmates from home and parents, I was sixteen years old. A new year of academic work had begun even as the German bombers wheeled like eagles above Warsaw, but L’wow saw almost nothing of those deadly birds, though the air raid sirens sounded often enough in the first week of the war.”

He looped a hand around his head, mockingly.

“I remember standing in late afternoon with some friends at the edge of a tearful crowd”, he tossed a hand in some general direction to his left, “as a long column of elite Polish Horse Artillery rode sullenly out of the city on grey horses, the men looking straight ahead towards death or destiny.”.

When they had gone, the crowd drifted silently away, to wait for its barbarians.

Within hours they came.

“The Soviets changed little. Everyone knew they were not ‘liberators’. Who would believe the lie?”, he shrugged. “So, the Poles and the Ukrainians trembled with apprehension. “Many a man who had fought and beaten the Red Army at the Vistula twenty years before, or served with the Hetman’s army in the Carpathians, feared his name would appear on an NKVD list. Or that a military aspect long cultivated in a victorious state, that state being now broken, might give him away. Or that for some small reward, some little preferment from the new Soviet masters, a hungry neighbour might betray him.

“The Jews”, Mickola said, “did well for themselves. Long ill-treated by the Catholic Poles”, and he grudgingly admitted, “equally detested by the Orthodox Ukrainians, they settled well into the life of a border province of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Jews always prospered, my father had said so.” They learned quickly to live with the Soviet economic system. At least the poorer Jews prospered, the artisans, the cobblers, the little shopkeepers. For that brief time, they no longer feared the slap or spittle of the angry Pole, the boot or fist of the envious Ukrainian. “The Russians stopped all that.” He seemed disappointed.

“After all”, the old man prodded me with a stubby finger, “hadn’t the great Ukrainian nationalist thinker Yaroslav Stets’ko written in all the newspapers before the war that ‘Marxism was a product of the Jewish mind’.” He smiled.

He described to me his L’wow in the Autumn of 1939. It was only faintly Ukrainian, but to him it was vibrant, youthful, yet isolated and utterly confused. “The Gymnasium remained open, and lessons continued but now under the watchful presence of massive portraits of Comrade Stalin, ’liberator of the oppressed’ in every classroom. A huge red banner drooped listlessly over the front of the building.” Even Mickola, or so he said at fifty years distance, soon realised that his teachers no longer taught the subjects he loved. Now they threw undeniable facts and questions and accusations at the boys. My mind formed a vision of a host of Thomas Gradgrinds, ’inflexible, dry and dictatorial’ all moustachioed, scornful and sly-eyed in Stalin’s stamp.

He wandered on and on in memory. “Music lessons were popular with all the young students, and had long been conducted from the piano by an elegant elderly teacher. He once played Chopin for the Emperor Karl Josef and his English cousin, and sported a ring presented to him as a reward. Lieder gave way to preposterous, and seemingly endless rants about collectives and quotas and struggles.”

As the weeks passed into months the old musician seemed to fade from his delicate fingertips to pale, frowning brow with every sullen rendering of repetitious revolutionary songs.

“He was forbidden to play Mozart as he had in the past, when in late afternoons the notes of the *Rondo in D* would echo through the corridors and along the staircases, through open doors to raise spirits at the close the day. You know this music?” I nodded.

By New Year - for in 1939, as in 1940 there was to be no Christmas, neither Orthodox nor Latin in Soviet L’vov -- the old man had gone from the Gymnasium. “No one, pupil or teacher, spoke of him again, nor of the lost melodies of Mozart he played; but then he was,” as Mickola recalled with a wry smile, “a Jew.”

“I saw the music teacher die.” he told me.

Across the square a troop of small children, pursued by mothers, screamed by, and he settled into silence for a while, watching the new generation as it raced energetically onwards in the afternoon sunshine.

Eventually he spoke. “The afternoon of June 30th 1941 was sunny too”, he remembered, and warm. “Only a few days before, the Germans had invaded the USSR in the vast ’Operation Barbarossa’ which stunned Stalin, and took the whole country by surprise. The Poles claimed they had known it was coming. The Ukrainians, deeply distrusted by the Soviets, prayed for Hitler to come. The Jews above all were terrified, for the invaders hated only one thing more than a Communist, and that was a Jew.”

His friend, the impoverished baker, now the baker of dark, gritty breads whose shop stirred neither eye nor nostril to delight, was an elderly Ukrainian from up near the Pripyet marshes. As the boys lingered around his shop he told them “There would be a great ‘stirring’ that a new country would be born and soon!”

Mickola shrugged, and uttered the term *‘Selbstrienigungsaktionen’*.

He said it twice over.

I raised an eyebrow, not understanding.

It is, or was, a German term, born of the hatred that grew throughout the 1930's, and it means 'self-cleansing'. For, as the last hurried shots of the NKVD execution squads rang out in the old prison on Zamarstynivs'ka street, Soviet L'vov shed itself of the trappings of Stalin and his brief reign, and cleaned itself for the new arrivals. "Some," Mickola laughed, "thought Stalin had gone forever!".

Streams of *Luftwaffe* bombers hurried eastwards over the city, on their way to harry the broken Red Army divisions as they fled towards the old border. Distant artillery fire shook the elegant baroque window frames of the Gymnasium, and the portraits of Stalin were carried into the yard without delay and burned along with the great red banner. Across the city, thousands of Ukrainians came into the streets to greet the dusty troop carriers of General Stulpnagel's 17th Army as they swept in. Mickola and his friends joined them, there were even some jubilant, uniformed Ukrainian exiles among the soldiers. He pointed around him. "The well-prepared Germans pasted orders and decrees on every lamp-post, tree and wall across the city within an hour. Forbidding this, demanding that, ordering everything imaginable, and much that was unimaginable."

The following morning the heart of the old town was slightly 'cleaner' than the day before. As they entered the gates of the Gymnasium, just a few metres to the right at the entrance to the little alley which led along the medieval town wall, under the broken lamp, there lay a body. "We boys, as boys always would be, were curious. We pushed forward to look cautiously between the forms of the handful of men and women who stood looking at the corpse lying, knees drawn up, the soles of old broken work boots displayed, in a position which made it seem as though he had dropped from heaven and broken his neck."

"There were flies, but though some of the women held handkerchiefs to their faces there was", he remembered precisely, "no smell of death. I had expected a smell, as when my old great-grandfather had died. A smell of sweat and sickness.".

There was none at all.

Once the surprise of encountering a dead man wore off, and Mickola said it wore off very fast, they recognised the corpse. "Eyes open, mouth gaping, unshaven, and with a fly-blown hole where the right ear should be, it was Israel. Israel the *'Luftmentsch'*, the 'air-man', who had no calling in life, no job or steady occupation. He lived 'on air', as many Jews did, hanging around the gates of the Gymnasium with a piece of straw in his teeth and prepared, for a few small coins, to undertake any odd job. Fetching and carrying, taking letters to the post office, painting a door, or delivering a message, Israel was always around."

No longer. "All of the male Jews in L'wow were called 'Israel' by their neighbours," Mickola told me, "no-one was interested in their real names, or what happened to them in life or death."

"One of the dwindling group of watchers spat on the lifeless Jew, and walked away. The body lay in the alleyway all day long, and through the night, but, when they arrived the next morning, his boots had gone, and sometime during the course of that morning, it was the third day of the occupation, Israel's body was taken away - I remember it left only the smallest of dark stains."

Stains to fade in that dark time, under the broken unlit lamp.

“As the days passed into July, the Gymnasium closed, not just for the Summer and a holiday, but forever. When Autumn came again, though no-one knew it yet, there would be no higher education, no schools operating beyond the basic requirements to provide the Reich with its demands, and teach us to obey without question or hesitation!” Pole, Ukrainian and Jew would achieve equality in that alone. “In L’wow, I had lived since I arrived with an aunt and uncle, not far from the Gymnasium, and so there I stayed. It was impossible to attempt the eighty kilometer journey home, though a few did try, none were heard of again.”

In the heat, the German administration moved in, and, in the heat, the pogroms began. Almost as one, the Poles, Belarussians and Ukrainians began to exact revenge on the Jews just for being Jews, not content to allow the Reich its own explicit process of elimination.

Israel the *Luftsmentsch* was not the first to die. There were other bodies in other alleyways, and within the coming days thousands more were slaughtered. “I was given tobacco for stripping Jewish houses of their little ritual *Mezuzah* boxes, containing protective biblical texts, Deuteronomy 6: 9, and Isaiah 10:3, which were secured to the door lintels.” He drew the shape with his hands, and I thought there was a note of regret in his voice, when he said that he had seen few dead in the streets. “I remember one old Jew strung from a tree, and one or two half-glimpsed corpses protruding from the tailgates of lorries. In old Rynok, the market, early one morning, my uncle had been among the dozens of men and women who stoned a hungry Jewish child to death as she searched for food.” He told me that in a plain matter-of-fact voice, as though speaking of nothing more than killing a foraging wasp.

But the old Jewish music teacher was something he’d never forget.

The musician had left the Gymnasium during the previous Winter, and had spent his days giving music lessons to a few unbroken spirits who loved the beauty of the grand piano. He was poorer than before, but alive. A cultured, and well-travelled man, he lived in a well-furnished apartment far from the ghetto. He was denounced by a former pupil, who knew one of the Ukrainians who had formed a small like-minded group of killers to go about the city despatching their enemies.

“Yes, of course, it was as enemies we saw the Jews. The men arrived at the apartment as the teacher was playing Mozart’s Minuet in F, it could be heard from the street below, notes trickling into the warm evening air.”

It seemed almost a welcome. As though he knew they would come.

Heavy boots despatched the door. Although armed with a pistol or two, one after all was a policeman, and with a host of other weapons, axes, crowbars and hammers, the Ukrainians, eight of them in all, decided to torment the old man. An elderly body can resist little, but the frame of an old man is used to suffering and the pain of age, so, as they beat him around the room, he neither cried nor begged for mercy.

“He only wept.” said Mickola. There was little mercy in L’wow, or the hearts of men on that Summer evening, and tears were common currency, and a currency utterly debased.

“The old music teacher was still alive.” he continued, so matter of fact.

“His grey suit was torn and bloodied, one shoe lost, his little finger cut from his trembling hand, for that gold signet ring.”

Mickola told me that the men decided to force the musician to perform at the piano for their amusement. “But as most of his fingers were already broken, they could not make him play, even if they had known what music was.” The lid of the keyboard was slammed down over his wrists, and, with a hammer, the men closed it firmly, eventually severing both slender hands from his body with axe blows.

It was not enough.

“Still the musician lived.” Mickola shook his head.

“He wept, but he lived on.”

As so often with the killings in pogroms, those who carry out the deeds loudly blame the victim for Christ’s fate, and call on Christ to sustain them in their revenge; and this they did again and again, as though it mattered to them or to Christ. Bloodstained hands dragged the broken teacher up onto the piano, and then they smashed the lid down onto him with hammer and axe and boots, finally jumping onto the great instrument, and crushing the pianist’s bloody corpse.

He died with barely a murmur, there was too little of his mouth and face left to utter even a word.

It was enough. The gallant patriots – for, as such, they were lavishly praised in the city’s Ukrainian language newspaper, which was itself to be suppressed within days - left the dead musician’s apartment. The murderous band went their way untroubled by any hand of authority.

“They moved on”, Mickola gave a wry half smile, “to the next Jew.”

Stunned, I leaned back on the bench and waited until the Kornyats Tower had chimed the hour and the bell droned away to silence.

Then I asked Mickola the obvious question. “Did you betray the old music teacher?”.

He shrugged the mundane lie, his hand waving the thought away with a flash of his gold signet ring.

**MEDAL**

Rivne. Summer 1997.

*"Do not ask me whose son I am, but who I am."*
Borderlands Proverb

What I took to be the elder daughter led her frail, forgetful mother gently from the room, and I sat down alongside the bed. A weary head popped back around the door and offered tea, which was refused as politely as I could manage.

"I was discharged." he chuckled drily.

I nodded.

"Discharged." he muttered again. "And not with honour, eh? Just machines!" He chuckled like a broken tap.

Discharged.

The word they always use when they send old men home to die, unrecorded in the statistics, required by 'quality control targets'. I glanced around the room, a small front parlour hung now with decidedly un-festive tubes and saturated with those inexplicable scents and smells which herald the hopeless passing of a life. A vast oxygen bottle stood alongside the bed, as though it were an unexploded bomb newly dropped to earth and stopped in surprise at being there unexpectedly. He lay calmly, pillowed high, with the bedclothes tucked tight up under his once muscular arms, which lay outside on the counterpane, the sleeves of his pyjamas rolled back a little to permit the entry of a tube or two, the rough skin blackened beneath with the blood of broken veins.

Deathful yet deathless, he turned to me and motioned me closer.

"Come sit near me, I can't speak loudly any more, you know." I shifted the inconsistent dining chair towards him, and rested my arm on the bedclothes.

Something ticked or gurgled away in the background.

"You wanted to talk to me, your daughter said."

He lay a great paw upon my hand, and with the other, tubed and restrained though it was, he gestured to the big oak bureau in the corner of the room.

"It was too big to move, when they put my bed in here." He spoke softly. "Look in the drawer. No, the second one. Smaller, yes?"

His muted voice followed my actions and led to a drawer which contained a swathe of aged papers and a cigar box secured with a clutch of red rubber bands, the sort the postmen use. "That's it!"

I brought the box to him, and, instructed, opened it. An old man's box. A Silver Jubilee Crown, a pair of gold cufflinks, and a few other items of no substantial value. "Pass it here." He fumbled for a small scrap of cloth wrapped around something little larger than a match-box, and lifting the packet out carefully, he lay the trinket upon his chest.

I replaced the box in its drawer, as he instructed, and returned to the bedside, where he lay covering the material with his vast engineer's hands, as though he was hiding a Christmas gift from a small child.

"Maybe I will tell you a story, eh? I tell you it because I want you to help me. A matter, as some men might say, of honour." He shrugged like a dozing bear. Still, though near death, he was a bulky man, and must have been powerful as a youngster; when I met him first twenty years before, the local youths treated him with the respect afforded only to the strong. In an unemphatic voice, little more than a whisper, he began to talk, and I to listen. The message had been simple and to the point. His daughter told me that there was little hope beyond a few days, and that he wanted to see me before I travelled to the borderlands in the coming week. Two hours later I was sitting alongside him, listening intently as his voice ebbed and flowed, untroubled by the ticking clock.

"They listen to see if I have died yet!" He gestured to the bedside table, where, lying among a plethora of plastic jars and bottles and medical stuff, was a baby alarm. "You can work this, make it stop listening?"

I turned it down to the lowest possible register without turning it off, leaned closer and listened to his tale.

Pavlo Nemets was born in a village in Volhynia, the oft-disputed province between Russia and Austria, in that year when Poland was thrown mewing into the world. He was eighty eight years old now, and eighty nine seemed impossible to reach. Like so many from his province, he had seen much. Though, unlike so many of the other members of the diaspora, he rarely claimed that crown of martyrdom for his homeland that others did. The reason for this, I knew without being told, was because he was, as they pompously used to call it in the days of the Third Reich,*'Volksdeutch'*. An 'Ethnic German', speaking no German at all, and with a culture long subsumed into the history of Imperial Russia, bar for a few Lutheran thoughts and mementos kept by mothers and old women. Perhaps, the matter was long forgotten, one of his forefathers had arrived to service the growing industry of Peter the Great, or Catherine. In the days of the Tsars 'foreigners' who built and ran the ironworks, the powder mills, the glassworks, all received special privileges. Stalin well remembered it when, during the Great Patriotic War, he rewarded them with a Siberian journey for possessing a name which hinted at German descent.

Stalin remembered, and so did Hitler.

The Fuhrer imperiously regarded these 'folk' as racially acceptable fodder for his ambitions. After all, what man of ethnic German origin, even at two centuries distance, would not look homewards with deep affection to the new Reich? Pavlo for one. He was a machine engineer and had few ambitions to serve in the *Wehrmacht*, but, when in the early Summer of 1943, an appeal to enlist in the newly formed 14th Waffen-Grenadier Galician Division of the SS appeared in the streets of all towns and villages in Galicia and Volhynia, he changed his

mind. At least this unit spoke the same language, and some thought they might even stay posted close to home.

Everyone knew about Stalingrad, everyone feared what was coming.

His hands lay tranquil over the small packet, as though resting on a crucifix. He looked far beyond me, and far beyond the small parlour, as he talked about the end.

“We just wanted to live. To escape.” I nodded, yes, to escape the end of the war, the collapse of the Thousand Year Reich, and, like so many others, to hasten his departure from its service.

In the last few weeks of the war he was serving as a *Scharfuhrer*, the equivalent of an army sergeant, commanding one of the few artillery pieces the rump of the ‘14th Galician’ possessed after being crucified by the Red Army in August 1944. “Anything that could fight and fire a shell was pressed into the line”. That particular dawn, cold and misty, he and his crew believed they and their elderly, battered 15cm howitzer were well out of harm’s way in the Stiermarke. “The field telephones rang with the shrill sound of panic. We gunners could always tell bad news from the way the caller shrieked without waiting for the answering code, and Pavlo Nemets”-he tapped his vast chest with a huge finger- “was back in the war again.” This he told me was as far from Volhynia as he’d ever been.

Some had fallen back, or run away again, in the face of those awesome Soviets with their countless growling tanks, and with few heavy weapons to oppose them, many fled.

“Those who ran and fell into the hands of the SS Field Pigs adorned the telegraph poles, hanged as a warning to others, but still so many men ran.”

“The battle”, he explained softly, “was short and bloody. Many died. Some Red Army unit, pushing ahead, had taken a German armoured train by surprise. It was one of those old, worn out Polish engines with a collection of flak guns on flat trucks and ancient field pieces in boiler-plate casings”. “Rubbish!” his engineer’s opinion clearly. Accompanied by some of their cavalry, the captured train swept along through the quiet village where Pavlo’s unit was billeted. The rattle of heavy machine guns stirred the young soldiers into action. The howitzer was loaded with one of the few shells to hand, and, in what the universal training manual of gunners throughout the world calls ’over open sights’, the gun was fired at the looming grey mass of armour as it chugged its way sedately through the mist towards them, attended by scores of milling horses.

“Amazingly, and like in slow motion, we fired four of the five shells we had, and with a great cloud of steam, the Polish engine gave up its ghost and the train stopped on the tracks, a cheerful blaze rippled along the trucks each side of it.” Inevitably, one of the flak guns found them, and the air around hummed with sound. Two of the gunners fell, torn apart, and Pavlo - he made little of it in his murmured monologue - was wounded, along with another man.

“So much blood, but not much pain. No.”

It was time to leave, and, taking the gun sight with them, they slipped over a fence into thick woodland before the horsemen came along to seek revenge for their destroyed dinosaur.

“Our own lads”, he told me, “were positioned the other side of the wood, and after giving the report to the officer, me and my dying comrade were sent off to the field hospital by horse drawn cart. Luxury transport, eh?”

“I was lying there, in a long room which stank of death, when I was told I had been given a medal. This medal.” He tapped his little packet. It was presented to him as he lay at attention in the field hospital bed, probably to encourage the desperate weary men around him to rise like Lazarus and fight on to the end, amid speeches and salutes from neatly dressed officers. But within a matter of days, the *Fuhrer* the officers saluted was dead, and the rag-tag mob that was left surrendered to the British at Radstadt with as much dignity as they could muster, and suddenly became fortunate prisoners indeed.

His story was over.

He lifted his hands and motioned me to pick up the small packet. “Look. Look at it.” Unfolding the cloth, old camouflaged canvas material, green and brown and sandy coloured, there lay before me an Iron Cross 1st Class.

Now, to a man born not long after World War Two ended, if it ever did, with my father wounded at Dunkirk, an uncle killed at Alamein, another captured in Normandy, yet another vanished for eternity on a convoy to Murmansk, this particular medal retains a remarkable significance; a fearful potency, a malignant malevolence, evoking hardships, horrors, holocaust. Iron Cross 1st Class.

I laid the cloth aside, and sat holding in my hand the highest award any enlisted man in the ranks of Nazi Germany’s military could hope to achieve. I turned it over, and there was the long clasp pin by which it was pinned to the uniform. A patina of sorts covered the curiously light metal. I folded the emblem back into its cloth and placed it carefully on his chest, where he folded his arms over it again, like a bear covering a wound.

“Well, well!” seemed the only comment I could make.

My role in the future of this singular decoration, and there had to be one-only a fool would think otherwise, was about to be explained to me, and in great detail. From the drawer of the bedside cabinet, he asked me to take a small group of envelopes, indicating the one he wanted.

“That one, with the number in the corner. Yes!”

I replaced the others. He read the contents to me very slowly. “This is what I want you to do.” I was, and this seemed beyond contradiction to him, and incredibly also to me, to deliver it safely to an address in Ukraine. The regional museum at Rivne, a town I knew well, and where I had many friends. The medal was to be handed over to Dr. Alexei Kuratyuk, the Curator.

“No-one else, just Alexei Kuratyuk. Remember.”

I had once met this man, and said so. I described him. “Maybe fifty five or sixty. Very thin, looks like an Undertaker.” Bad joke, we both realized, but he went on talking. Pavlo knew I’d met him, and ‘the paperwork’ had all been sent by earlier letter, when he could still deal with such matters. All I had to do was deliver the reward for the destruction of an armoured train, and give my word that I would do it. I wondered what the ‘paperwork’ was, exactly.

“Dr. Kuratyuk will explain to you”, he murmured, “I’m too tired for such a story.”.

Now, since the fall of the USSR on entering the Republic of Ukraine, there are still certain old-style 'soviet formalities' which the border police require to be observed. The traveller has to complete a ludicrous form indicating in the positive or negative whether he or she is importing any contraband, gold, jewels, weapons or pornography, even incredibly for the country that gave the world Chernobyl, radioactive materials. It doesn't actually ask if you have any WWII Nazi decorations in your luggage.

So, I agreed.

Pavlo Nemets, once a *Scharfuhrer* in the Waffen SS, and holder of the Iron Cross 1st Class, smiled and motioned me to take the little packet. "Please." As I did so, he took my hand and the re-wrapped medal between his massive fists and closed them firmly in farewell to us both, man and medal.

"Thank you! Thank you!" He was crying, and I was trying not to.

Two weeks after his funeral, I landed in Borispol Airport; but it was not until four days later that I met up with the museum Curator. The museum at Rivne, incidentally, is a disquieting place, not because it's a piece of grotesque Stalinist architecture as so many others are, not at all. It is, in fact, a handsome nineteenth century Russian townhouse, umber and gold, and set back from the street in a small park. The sort of place you'd imagine in that Chekhov short story *'New Villa'*, with pigeons in the trees around, neat brushed paths and ornate railings. Yet, it was unlikely to have been the building's Chekhovian aspect which attracted the museum's occupants during the period 1941 to 1943. For, during those years, this was the Headquarters of the *Reichskomissariat Ukraine* and its odious, even among Nazis, *Reichskomissar* Erich Koch.

Koch sat often in an ornate room at the top of the stairs with a fine view of the old town, signing edicts and death warrants, venturing down into the cellars from time to time to take a hand in the torments of those who opposed him, or whom he thought might be inclined to opposition if they had the strength on 20 grams of bread a day.

Here, in Koch's spider's parlour, I sat, with the Iron Cross 1st Class still wrapped in the camouflage cloth in my pocket. Across the desk from me were Dr. Kuratyuk and his historian colleague Serhei Muzychuk. We were sipping vodka and eating honey cakes, and generally talking around the reason for my visit. "It is more than a year since you were in the town, I know?" We chatted about the medal. "Not something I've encountered that often outside the history books." I told them. Possession of this lump of metal still slightly unsettled me.

Serhei, who in later years became a close and valued friend, asked if I had examined the decoration. I had. Well, it's not every day that such an emblem comes into my hands, and I'd looked at it carefully, even consulting my expert colleague, Andrew, in the question of authenticity.

"Oh,Yes!" he enthused. "This is a real 100% genuine Iron Cross." He went into great detail.

"As a matter of fact, an Iron Cross is made of two pieces of metal, black enamelled over silver pressed together, and it measures 43mm from flat edge to edge. On the back of the genuine article, which this one undoubtedly was, and remains, the number 1813 appears,

signifying the year of the inception of the original Prussian award during the Napoleonic Wars; and on the front, below the central black enamel swastika is the date 1939, the start of the conflict in which the medal was awarded. The 1st Class award always has a long pin running top to bottom at the back, for attachment to the uniform, sometimes with a tiny engraved number." I wrote it all down so that I wouldn't forget. I knew that would be useful when I handed it over!

Along the pin Pavlo's didn't have a number, but it passed the final test, which is, as Andrew took delight in showing me, that all Iron Crosses, all genuine Iron Crosses are magnetic.

I had to make sure. It was genuine.

"This German medal", said Andrew, "doesn't ever have the recipient's name and date of the award engraved on the back or edge, it's the paperwork that gives the provenance." I remembered that; and that's what Serhei Muzychuk had in his hand. It had arrived a few months before, as Dr. Kuratyuk explained, and they had checked it out too. Waving his glass, he indicated a small pile of letters and papers on the desk. "The date and the place and the man all tallied, and so we are able to welcome home what surely is to be an unusual addition to our collection."

The passage of over sixty years of complex history might have helped, I mused.

Serhei explained the action, far too small to be a battle, which had taken place on the morning that the medal was won.

"The destruction of an armoured train being a rare event, as was the appearance of one at the front in 1945, of course." He continued the tale: "The Soviets had also recorded its destruction, though in far more glorious and arguably less factually accurate terms." He spoke like a true Historian. "They awarded medals too, but a lot more of them!" Dr Kuratyuk added. "Over a hundred medals!"

Indeed, the historians had been thorough. They also managed to find one of *Scharfuhrer* Pavlo Nemet's young gun crew on that day, and he had written a note about it from his memory, which was remarkably clear and detailed, filling out much of what Pavlo had murmured to me as he lay on his deathbed. This had been painstakingly written out by one of the museum staff who visited the old man in his distant village, and Serhei translated it, and paraphrased for my benefit. It was a long account, more deathbed confession than living history, and since I knew the bones of it anyway, it didn't add much to my understanding.

Pausing before the end of the note, Serhei sighed, shaking his head. "You know, given the seriousness of Pavlo Nemet's wounds, it seems somehow incredible that he had survived the encounter at all!" The extent of his wounds, I remembered, hadn't featured at all in the dying man's tale to me. "Perhaps he was reluctant to speak of them, even after all that time?" I suggested.

Both men shook their heads. "No. It was even more incredible that he'd lived long enough to be presented with the Iron Cross in those dying days of the Reich." Said Dr. Kuratyuk.

I must have looked bemused.

Serhei explained slowly, carefully and at length. Its the Borderlands way.

“The paperwork indicates without any doubt, and the account provided by the surviving artilleryman confirms it, that during the short action for which Pavlo was awarded the highest honour the Nazi state could give, *Scharfuhrer* Nemets had lost the sight in his right eye, and so severe were his wounds that the surgeons had amputated what remained of his right arm above the elbow.”

I sipped my vodka quietly and looked out over the park, recalling how Pavlo Nemets, soldier of the Third Reich, had held my hand and his medal firmly in two old, once strong, hands, bidding us both farewell.

I said nothing.

Not one word.

From time to time, I find myself bidden to funerals at the vast steep cemetery next to the crematorium. On those occasions, inevitably my footsteps take me to the grave with the simple white headstone marked Pavlo Emilevich Nemets 1919-2006, under which is written the text of the First Epistle of Saint Peter, which is perhaps an unusual choice for an epitaph.

> ’Honour all men.
> Love the brotherhood.
> Fear God.’

That odd line of Bulgakov’s in *‘The Master & Margarita’*, it’s the one which became a political catch phrase in the USSR, and identifying those who had read a *samizdat* copy, might have suited instead, given what I knew.

What was the book’s phrase again: ‘No ID. No person.’

I always wonder when I stand there on the hill who actually lies in that piece of ground?

Who could I ask?

Who could I tell? I ducked the chance at the Museum.

The dead man’s wife of fifty years lies with him.

The two daughters both married, both mothers, both bearing other men’s names now.

Who would believe me?

After almost seventy years, who would care?

**HILL**

Berestechko. Summer 1997.

*"To murder a Jew is to remove forty sins from off one's soul."*
Borderlands Proverb

"Watch where you walk, be careful." said Yulya. "This place is filthy!"

For the first few paces, just to thrust through the undergrowth, the smell of urine, of dog faeces and rotten, discarded shashlic meat, filled the nostrils; but in a few strides, the path became clearer, the upward way easily found. "Few come here now," Yulya told me, "but once not long ago, it was a place much visited."

It was steady climb, not spectacularly steep, until suddenly, at a small unexpected turn in the half-forgotten path, the open summit appeared.

"We are here." she said.

"It's a lonely place." I smiled at her.

In happier, more prosperous times this might be a good picnic spot.

Here on this small Ukrainian hilltop, the omens collide.

Here they brought her.

Here men of the *Narodne Sily Zbrojne*, the 'Cursed Army', themselves inevitably to become victims of a far stronger, more enduring tyranny, brought her to her death. Ecstatic punishment for daring to return, for believing in anything that could in this hard world, in this hard time, in this hard, rocky place, be called humanity.

Perhaps, knowing their own looming destiny, hearing the distant crackle of Siberian frosts, spurred these men on.

To no avail, for all of them are dead now.

All bar one.

The boy.

Yulya found a decent size rock to lean her ample frame on. Composing herself, as one of the faithful might before a prayer. She began. Softly.

"Guri was ten, he thought so, though maybe he was eleven. In war time it mattered little to him, and there was still war, here and there. He was alone in the world. Almost alone."

"Guri", she explained, "was the errand boy, the messenger, the 'runner', as the self-styled Captain of the miserable band liked to call him.". The Captain favoured military terms,

having served to the war's official end in a lowly rank, despatching Jews and burning evidence.

"The Captain would call him when he was needed; they paid him sometimes, in cigarettes and food. On this night, bright, cold, lit by a full moon which floated high, filling the eastern sky, the runner had summoned the Galician fighters from farm and hamlet." Yulya stressed the full moon as though it was an omen. His job done, the boy trod silently in the footsteps of the last two men, for maybe half an hour. At the meeting place, close under the nameless hill, and a little way off from its tiny group of buildings, Guri hung around, curious as any boy would be.

"He'd seen a lot since war began, his mother taken, his father slain, and dead men in any number.", Yulya went on, "So Guri waited."

After hushed orders were quickly issued, the men moved silently towards the hovels and ruins strung along the roadside. Pale light illuminated the waving, warning trees, and seemed to reflect back the breeze which rippled the frightened branches. The night was chill and clear enough to throw the men's shadows as though they were promenading giants. Or heroes.

A rough rush forwards. An axe flashed like a blade of ice. A man's cry, silenced under a rain of blows at a broken door, and a woman, a young woman, ran screaming past, and straight into the arms of the Captain.

"Guri stood a little way off. Silent. Watching. To his left the building was burning. They had brought petrol. The woman screamed, sobbed and begged, but Guri didn't see or hear a baby." Yulya had told this tale before, I guessed, but to someone who knew more about this place than I ever would.

The Captain, being used to such histrionics, silenced the woman with a fist across the head. He shouted to two of the men, who in moonlit slow-motion shouldered their rifles and picked the woman up, half dragging her between them. The band of men collected, and drifted after the shabby trio, urged on by their leader. One after another their dark silhouettes becoming vague, ill-lit shadows, merging with the trees.

As she spoke, her hands encompassing the hill, Yulya was waving, drawing the long-vanished fighters inwards. Someone towards the front of this doomed procession had a lamp, and upwards they went; ascending with an empty laugh here, a stumbling curse there, upwards, onwards to the hill top. The two men who had dragged and driven the young woman up the hill, flung her onto a large stone and tore her skirts from her. She lay there, quiet. In the moonlight she looked crucified, ivory and pure. The close-drawn lamplight flushed her, as though her thighs, her belly, her legs were embarrassed to be seen.

Guri came up the slope a little behind the ragged cortege; just before him two men held back a little as they came to a rocky outcrop below the summit, perhaps remembering that what happened to this woman, this home, could happen elsewhere.

The Captain did not go first. He knew well, for he had seen it himself, that women in fear of rape could arm themselves with a hidden knife, and slice their intruder; even, and he had seen this too, secretly conceal a blade within the gaping slit to cripple a man at the first thrust. He was content to take second place, laughing as he destroyed her, tearing her womanhood into a bloody gash. He grunted, rose from his knees and spat on her, cursing her race and sex. Five, six, eight entered her, ruining her backside too; though not one of them ventured near the open, panting mouth with its broken teeth snarling back at the moon's innocent face.

The boy stood, forgotten, silent and looking into the hollow at the illuminated body, half-darksome, half gleaming, bloody and indistinct. The man with the lamp moved away, from a woman barely alive, crab-cramped hands outstretched, legs wide, unmoving.

"It was time for her to die." Yulya shrugged.

The Captain took a knife from his belt, and he gestured to a tall man who stepped forward and slit her throat; it was as easy as killing a pig, but much, much quieter. The pumping fountain of blood subsided, and, with a simple sigh, her soul had gone beyond their reach. Another, far quicker than his comrades, reached down and opened the petrol can. Plenty left. The small dwelling and its inhabitants had burned very economically. As though circling a shrine, he moved around the stone sprinkling the body with its contents, the moonbeams giving the corpse a strangely rainbow hue. Two or three of the men threw lighted cigarettes and the dead woman erupted into flame. A crown of blue-gold flame engulfed the body, encouraging her heavenwards in its corona.

"Guri watched this, and the smell drifted on the stiff breeze towards him, like the breath of a mother's cooking cakes." Yulya's voice had dropped as though it took all her strength to continue the story. The captain and his men, laughing, one singing to himself, left the hollow and the hill.

"Guri, the runner, stood there for a long time. He didn't remember how long, but the moon had begun to sink, lengthening the unreal shadows." The fire was almost burned out.

The boy walked to the outcrop above the path, and as he turned the corner, laid his hand on the lichen. He stooped, grasped what he felt, and lifted it close to his face. He looked at it, thin gold shone in the dwindling moonlight. He tucked it into his pocket.

"Carefully, Guri slithered and scurried down from the hill top. At the bottom of the slope he parted the whispering trees. Far off away to the left, the armed band was a dwindling series of slow-moving outlines far down the road."

He stopped and watched them go, then turned to the right and walked away westwards." She lifted her face, moist eyed to the afternoon sun and waited.

An old man might not have made the climb at all. Yulya and I had been there what seemed like an eternity, when leaning on his walking stick, Guri came into sight. He was strong for his age, for he'd worked underground for many years; hard work in hard times. He rested

long, leaning on the stick and the rock outcrop, getting his breath. He spoke not a word, but lifted a hand to signal his arrival, and waved to dismiss our offers of help.

We waited in vain for him to speak, looking from him to the flat stone in the hollow. Eventually, he stepped carefully forward to the edge of the great slab, gazing at it, as though it was a gravestone, as though he was trying to read an invisible epitaph, rain-robbed from its rough surface.

Transferring his support, he grunted, reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded handkerchief. From within emerged a long thin gold chain, old now, very old; hanging from it the six-pointed Star of David. The old man slowly wiped his eyes with the cloth, and alone in all the world, he bent forward and dropped the star into a narrow cleft in the rock surface. A thin coil of chain escaped and he chased it down the deep cleft with his finger.

For a while, a long, long while, he simply stood and looked at the stone. He bowed, his lips moved, but I couldn't make out what he was saying; the wind was rising above his low mumble, and the grass whispering a louder tune in my ears. We two were simply not there any longer.

Yulya pulled my sleeve and pointed to the path downwards. "Come, come, away." she turned to me as we descended, leaving the old man alone.

"He's saying Kaddish.", she said gently, "for the soul of the murdered woman.".

I looked back, upwards to the hill top, surprised.

"Guri is a Jew too." Yulya smiled, and shook her head with some surprise.

"Didn't you know?" She took my arm.

"No, Yulya, I didn't, but now perhaps I understand." Perhaps.

**MUSHROOM**

Carpathian Mountains. Summer 1998.

*"You cannot kill a beast without a wound."*
Borderlands Proverb

Somewhere behind her, far off to the left, Ludmila could hear the shrill voices of some of the other village women and girls, laughing as they sang an old country song. She placed the deep basket on the ground alongside her feet and slowly, very slowly, stood upright for a moment, easing her arthritic back, smelling the soft, moist, woodland which surrounded her. The night's rain had cleared the air, and it was a little cooler today that it had been since harvest. She hummed a few notes, echoing the distant tune, slipped the basket into the crook of her arm, and moved on, further into the forest. Above her the autumnal branches trembled in the wind, shedding a late leaf or two as the breeze snuffled its way across the tree tops. There was still a mist, little more now than a sheen of dampness here and there.

She heard someone call a name stridently. It was not her name. So, she continued slowly on her way, bending to move the tumbling stalks of a bush, moving from tree to tree in her silent quest. Ludmila started at the martial piping of a bullfinch close by, dropping the short cropping knife into the damp grass. As she stooped to retrieve it, she noticed the prize she sought. Half hidden by the fronds of a fading fern, a dozen or so of them in a small ring, glistening with dew and as fresh as any living thing on God's earth could be. The bun like shapes of a score of birch tree boletes: 'sun-drops' they called them in the villages, orange and warm, some small as pebbles, a few as big as her hand. She knelt with care, so as not to miss a fragment of the tastiest fungi of all. Her fingers plucked at the moist grass, and the little knife cut through the short white stems, the few black scales staining her fingers like droplets of soot. She lifted the largest mushroom to her face, and breathed deeply, to drink in the deep dark humours of the forest. There was nothing to lean on, and so it took her some moments to rise to her feet. Hands set on her aching knees, she looked down at the basket, then, resting it in the crook of her arm, she moved onwards.

There would be no sunlight today, the sky, just a bland slow-moving blanket of colourless cloud. A few small birds darted between the trees, which grew thicker as she strayed towards the deeper forest. There were no paths where she walked, and as the breeze dropped away, then rose again, the birch twigs rustled and sang softly. As she searched, Ludmila passed enough firewood for a good Winter blaze, but she couldn't carry it. She was looking for food, as she had in the long times of 'silent hunting' throughout the bitter war, when the Germans fled, and, again, in the years of want and retribution after the Russians came back.

A morning like this, towards the war's end, she was barely more than a child then, her father taken and dead somewhere far away, her mother broken in mind and heart, and four smaller children hungrier than her to feed. Ludmila's basket had been almost full with berries and mushrooms; she was hunting alone in the whispering forest, looking under the spider webbed bushes for just a few more, before she went home. There were other girls and women out, searching far off among the trees, for this was, Praise God, a good Autumn for forest food. A

frond brushed her face as she bent to pick a few small blood-dark berries, and she heard a shot. Then a louder burst of gunfire, five, six shots. Women's screams over to the left; birds flew out of the undergrowth, and he was upon her. A calloused, dirty hand covered her mouth, and she was thrown to the ground. He was quick, ruining her with a great urgent smile on a young hard face bearing a great crescent scar, bold white around the orbit of his blind left eye. She lay, stunned and crying, watching him as he stole her harvest, stuffing the mushrooms into his bread bag.

Then he was gone.

The older women found her. Eventually. She had lain sobbing softly, almost inwardly for a long, long time. The soldiers, *'Schuma'* men they said, Ukrainians serving the Nazis, fleeing westwards behind their masters before the Russians returned to settle the score. At least she was still alive. The creature who took Arina slit her throat when he'd finished with her, and Akulya who fought, and would fight, had been punched and beaten into submission, her face pulped and bloody. The women picked Ludmilla up, gently, and carried her home. As they went they whispered, wondering what harvest the soldiers had left behind them. Spring would tell.

As befitted an up and coming Ukrainian 'businessman', Ivan drove his big imported four by four along the narrow track of a road as aggressively as he could, singing along to a tuneless rock song on the radio. Thumping the horn as hard as possible, Ivan pulled up outside the shabby single storey house. "Shit! Shut up! Shut up Buka! Zhigan!"

He picked up his Filofax from the seat alongside him, lit a cigar, and jumped out, slamming the car door behind him. On the back seat his two great dogs barked and snarled at their confinement, rocking the car on its axles.

Ivan shouted, "Old woman! Where are you?", and the door creaked open; Ludmilla emerged wiping her hands on her frayed apron. She smiled and nodded to the young man, pleased to see him. "Ivan Fedorovich. Welcome." She had heard his reckless noise a kilometre down the track.

"Here he comes, Olena, dear. Playing Tsar as always. Idiot of a man, but …". She smiled and touched Olena's hair. The girl gurgled a happy sound, and whispered a little rhyme.

"This will mean a little work cooking and cleaning for us at the dacha, maybe some good meat, yes? Olena chuckled, her mouth bubbling with phlegm. "And maybe even a few dollars?" A few real dollars to eke out the worthless *Karbovanets* which bought less and less at the village market. His call answered, Ivan sauntered back to the four by four, and the dogs fell silent. He leaned against the bonnet, spat, and issued his instructions to the attentive woman, who inclined her head, pushing a stray lock of hair back under her headscarf, smiling

as though she faced a suitor. “I’ll take a look before I go. This must be perfect. See it is. They pay well.”

“Foreigners?” The question was implied as much as said.

“Yes, three are coming, to stay in the old peasant style.” He shook his head, laughing at the thought of men paying, actually paying, paying hundreds of dollars for a week or so spent in a dump like this. “A week-understand? Before they go back to Kyiv. Two of them elderly men, returning for the first time since they left in 1944, sentimental fools eh, Old woman?”. “The other?” she asked. “Oh, A son.” He pretended to consult his Filofax as though it contained essential information on the matter.

“From Volhynia originally,” he said. “Now living in England, and quite prosperous I think!” He pursed his lips and grinned.

Ludmila knew him by now, after almost three years of the ‘new’ republic after the Soviets fell. Here was a man destined to be rich, not just ‘prosperous’. He had left the village and his grandfather’s dacha far behind him, except when it came to making some dollars out of it. Her duties were to clean the place out, make beds and wash while they were staying.

She would also cook, and Ludmila was a very good cook. The old men would want to taste the cooking they remembered from their youth. Of course, she nodded as he named them. “Borsch! Bitky! Varenikiy!”

“Yes, Pan Ivan.”

“They will bring guns and hunt and fish, as old men do.” he said. So, much of their food would be cooked on the big iron grill which Ivan had brought from Warsaw and installed behind the building.

“Perhaps,” he laughed like a clown,” if these old men can shoot straight and the rabbits are slow, eh?” The conversation petered out. Ludmila knew what was required, and she and her daughter, Olena, would see it was done.

“Make sure” said Ivan firmly, jabbing a finger at the house “that half-wit girl of yours doesn’t make a mess up there. Keep her out of the way of the visitors.” Olena, now almost fifty, was slow and slow-witted, and Ludmila said nothing.

Some money exchanged hands, not dollars of course, but pathetic new national currency notes. Ivan mounted his four by four and left the woman standing in the bright Autumn sunshine as he roared off down the track to the high road, singing at the dogs and sounding his horn.

They came early in the evening four days later. Their big station wagon following Ivan’s great truck along the track, past Ludmila’s tiny cottage, along into the woods, to the dacha, passing the two women as they walked slowly back home carrying bundles. Ivan waved at Ludmilla, the other men didn’t even look. At the dacha, amid much inevitable display of homesickness and delight at being robbed by this entrepreneur for staying in the middle of

nowhere, they emptied the cars. Vodka and brandy and the essentials of modern living, even in the wooded hills of Ukraine, all went into the dacha, along with two rifles and a shotgun provided, at a cost naturally, by Ivan.

“The best in the whole country, eh?” he encouraged them. “No Soviet rubbish here, all imported, good quality. From Warsaw, yes and from Bratislava.” The four rooms had been cleaned, the earth floors swept, and the beds made up in traditional Borderland fashion. The stove had been lit, for the Autumn nights had turned a little colder, and the lamps filled. Some of Ivan’s visitors preferred to sit drinking by lamplight, reminiscing as they drank themselves into oblivion, but there was electricity of sorts, for he had bought a generator, a small generator, from a friend in the Army, and the lights, not all of them at once mind you, could be used after dark for a couple of hours at least.

There was no refrigerator, but an ancient Soviet era cold box, “I have one on order. The best. German, eh? Maybe next time you come?” There was, however, a decent gas stove on which a big pot of Borsch stood warm and rich scented for their evening meal.

The visitors were enthusiastic about that at least.

The rest of the facilities were fairly basic; running water of course, and a sort of shower, an outside chemical toilet too. No television, no phone, a big Bakelite radio, battery powered which might work, Ivan waved at it but made no attempt to switch it on. The two older men stood in the living room, transported back fifty years or more. “Just like that, the same style as ours. Remember?” They enthused over much, far more than Ivan the robber baron as his friends called him, had expected. “The air too, eh?” one of them sniffed deeply. “The trees, ah, such wood piles for Winter, and look, remember big saws like these?” The younger was, Ivan could tell, less impressed. More so as he knew the price his father and his father’s comrade-in-arms were paying for the privilege.

Ivan left as quickly as he always did on these occasions, wishing them a great stay, and expressing envy at their fortune. He had to go off to Kyiv next morning, but he would return in exactly one week.

When Ludmila walked up along the track to the dacha next morning, the men were already gone with the guns. She cleaned away the mess from the night before, bottles and plates, the detritus of men alone. “Such mess, Olena. What would their wives say, eh?” All was left for a woman to deal with, as women inevitably do. Olena swept the floor, and took the rubbish outside, humming softly as she always did when she was busy and happy. Ludmila listened, and wondered, as she did almost every day now, what would happen to her daughter after her own time. The day was warm, and she sat outside preparing the vegetables for the evening when the men came back. Olena had carried the big soup pot home for the next day’s meal, and Ludmila was alone.

No-one ever looks at servants, and the two older men passed her by in noisy chatter, the younger however stopped briefly, smiled and said ‘good day’ in awful Ukrainian, maybe it was supposed to be Polish. She looked up from her peeling and returned the first smile she

had seen in a very long time. “Good afternoon to you sir.” she replied. They had shot two big rabbits, and threw the carcasses onto the table, fur and blood stained the shabby oilcloth like a still life.

One of the men, the taller, spoke.

She looked at him.

“Dinner!” he said, gesturing to the dead creatures. His shorter, portly companion reminded him that they should be skinned and hung for a day or two, “for better flavour.” So, “not tomorrow, eh?”

“Tak.” Yes, she replied and looked again. Around the closed left eye, a vivid old scar, deep and fearsome; a great crescent moon rose in her soul. Ludmila looked away quickly, almost shyly, then lifted the carcasses and placed them in her basket. She fetched a cloth, redolent with the stink of old bleach, and wiped the table, and listened, and half-looked.

The young man had gone outside to walk around their forest prison, and the two old men were talking of the last time they moved through these hills. The excitement: “We barely made it that day!” The lost comrades: “No, he died at the river crossing. It was the other man who was caught by the Reds.” They made much of the good fortune of their escape.

But they didn’t mention rape.

As she walked homewards, a sudden breeze shook the birch trees behind her, teasing the first falling leaves, like a peal of tinkling bells.

Ludmila stopped, sat down, and spoke to the trees, as they do in those great forests.

“How has this come about? The man who destroyed her, left her with a *‘hnyda’* an idiot child, a fatherless, useless feeble-minded girl, has come here?”

Here with his perfect son. “What will I do? What can I do?” Ludmila being a woman of faith, but no great inspiration, knew what revenge was. At her door she set down her burden, and smoothed her grimy apron.

She would test it.

Olena, well fed with *‘kasha’* and good sausage from Ivan’s store at the dacha, went off to bed, leaving her mother sewing by the light of the moth-circled oil lamp. The old woman listened to her daughter’s prayers beyond the door, and soon to the sound of shallow snoring. “Good dreams my love. Angels guard you.”

She crossed herself, lay aside her needle, and fetched the Epiphany candle from the icon corner. Lighting it, she blew out the oil lamp. As the soft guttering glow of the holy candle laid a pool of soft light over the table, unsteady, shadow-ridden but sacred light, blessed by the church. Behind and around her, the darkness kept its distance.

From the table drawer she drew out her Bible, for she possessed no Psalter, and laid it on the table next to the candle and her broad bladed *'babouti'* knife, the one she used for gathering in the forest.

Ludmila unwrapped the Word of God, touched it to her lips, and rotated it in her thin hands close to her head three times, before beginning. With the Scripture in her left hand, eyes closed, she slid the knife into the pages. Laying it open she read the verse on which the knife tip lay.

"1 Kings 21 Verse 20." Old eyes strained at the words in the dim candle light.

*"Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?"*

She crossed herself. "Yes."

She closed her Bible, rotated it a second time, closed her eyes and once more inserted the knife.

"Genesis. 9. Verse 5. Ah, such words." She murmured.

*"And surely your blood of your lives will I require."*

"Yes. Yes."

The third time, for three times it must be, three for the Trinity, three for truth, it was the The Book of Psalms, most powerful of all.

"Psalm 54. Verse 6." This above all Psalms.

*"I will freely sacrifice unto thee."* It was so.

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

Ludmila, a single bitter tear on her cheek, kissed the book, wrapped it and put it away. She carried the warm candle back to the icon, crossed herself, three times, and blew out the light, leaving the darkness to God and the buzzing moth.

Next morning, as the first thin thread of light touched the far forest, Ludmila left her little home. Silent hunting. Olena would sleep, and sleep, until her mother woke her. She walked as quickly as she could, and was lucky. That Autumn was a good one for mushrooms and for berries across the Oblast. With her blessed knife she cut and lifted a small clump here, a lone mushroom there, and steadily her basket filled with the domed smooth *Boletus*, the tawny, the brown, and even one or two of the rare red mushrooms. She bent to the ground to pick another, here or there brushing off an insect or a late caterpillar, and the smell of the rich 'black earth' of soft warm moss, and pungent leaf mould filled her mouth.

There was more to be found. In the hard times, the famine times, they took almost everything from the forest floor, almost everything. Now, for the first time, she hunted the shiny white angels.

Ludmila passed through a patch of thin mist, her warmth parting it like a curtain. Here where the Spruce trees grew in the poorer soil, they might be found.

“Yes.” She crossed herself and laughed. “There they are!”

With slow determination, she lowered herself alongside the bole of a tree, and bent to cut, to castrate the shaft from the volva, again and again from a spatter of Destroying Angels, eight or nine of them, lifted from their prayers, the heavy sweet smell of the perfect, deadly mushrooms contrasted bitterly with the others. She rose slowly, leaving only one *Amanita* behind, slug damaged and fallen. A second group, taller older growths, caught her eye; and another solitary campanula, curved and rising from its bag like volva, half as broad as her hand. Soon, Ludmila had gathered enough. “More than enough, my angels. Much more than a kilo in weight.” She was pleased. Ludmila examined them carefully a second time. The angels hidden beneath their purer brethren, perhaps thirty of them in all, pure gleaming white. Carefully placed, like death awaiting.

She woke Olena for a breakfast of butter-fried mushrooms, big thick sliced *Boletus,* with black bread, then sent the slow girl out to gather berries. “Only berries, child. The ripe warm ones. Take care.”

The recipe was old, her grandmother’s, from Imperial times. She chopped carrots and potatoes, and sliced some strong onions, why else would she weep at the task?

Then her harvest, all of them cleansed in running water. “First some good tasty milk mushrooms.” Each chopped into small pieces, like sugar cubes. The beautiful sun-drop shapes she used more sparingly, cutting the straw-coloured flesh as if it were her own.

Then the angels. Patiently wielding her knife, she cut into each pure orb, each umbrella. Their stems she sliced as thin as salami; sickly sweet. Into the cauldron of her soup pot, stirred by a great spoon, she dropped them all. “Well salted, for men old and young, love salt.” Ludmila had cooked this soup a thousand times, ten thousand perhaps, for her fragile old mother, for her brothers and sisters, for Olena, for the whole world it seemed. But now, this single bubbling pot, from which the angel’s breath of scented steam arose, was cooking soup just for her own purpose. Within an hour it was done. The kitchen filled with exquisite dark and earthy flavours. She lifted the pot, and stirred through the contents, smelling carefully to make sure it was perfect, but of course she didn’t taste. Olena, who could resist nothing, was warned off when she returned with her half basket of berries. “No! No soup Olena! It’s not for us!”

When the pot was a little cooler, the two women carried it up to the dacha. The three visitors were still out in the hills. They placed it on the edge of the lit stove, lid slightly lifted to allow the smell to entice. A huge rye loaf, filled with caraway seeds, and a long pork salami, potatoes and pickles in the cold box, completed the meal. She even left some small honey

cakes. “Yes, very well,” She beamed at her burbling daughter. “You can have a cake. Two! Yes, two then.”

Ludmila stood at the door, looking back at the death cell she had prepared. Nothing missed. “No! She laughed aloud. They can make their own last coffee.”

The old woman didn’t see or hear the men return. The next day she and Olena went walking around the lake. Olena picked flowers, useless, half dead flowers, the relics of Summer. No car had passed, no sound of men’s feet or curses heard. When they came home again, Ludmila prepared a feast for them both. Steak, real meat, and hot red cabbage and good bread. Olena ate noisily. They had real coffee too. And the last of the honey cakes. Long into evening the old woman waited, watching the bats chase moonbeams as the twilight deepened. She sat, and sewed by the light of the lamp with only the silken fluttering moth for company.

She wiped her eyes, and went out. Olena snored softly behind her.

The dacha was silent. The door open.

Ludmila walked quietly, darkness was falling fast, and there was no sign of the men. She carried the huge torch that Ivan had given her in case she needed to attend visitors after dark. No light showed, but the stench was awful. The bedroom door was ajar, and jammed against it lay the fat short man, eyes half closed, and his shirt covered in vomit and pus, a thin vein of dried blood from nose and mouth. The dacha stank, of human shit. There was vomit spluttered everywhere, spewed over the sink, spattered on the floor and table, where stood two glasses, half filled, with vodka bottle and a packet of salt.

“Well, well.” she said to herself. “The old men remembered the old witches remedy for poison.” But it hadn’t worked.

Ludmila lifted the lid of the soup pot, there were only a few dregs left, clearly the men had enjoyed their last meal. She smiled, dipped into the pocket of her apron and strewed a handful of the deadly mushrooms, and some good tasty ones, onto the torch-lit window-sill. The back door to the dacha was wide open, and she walked outside without hesitation.

She flashed the torch.

There he was.

The door to the outhouse, where the chemical toilet stood, was almost off its hinges, as though torn desperately aside. In the gloom she could see his corpse, naked from the waist down, erect in death, covered in retch and shit, his hands open, braced tight against the wooden frame of the walls. From his mouth, his nostrils, and his eyes, the mucosal haemorrhage flowed, the inflamed brain had disgorged thin-traced rivers of blood, and the rapist’s white scar stood like a pale rising moon above a sea of darkness. Even as night began to fall the flies still fed. She could hear rats scrabbling. The young man was nowhere to be seen, and it was getting darker, as clouds covered the stars.

She heard a noise, a noise surely not made by an animal. Walking back through the small dacha, and out to the front, torch ready, Ludmila listened and followed the sound. The station wagon was parked on rough grass alongside the wall, out of sight of the road. Its door was wide open, the keys in the lock. Half out he lay, delirious, bathed in the dim glow of the interior light, vomit gently bubbling from his moaning mouth, eyes closed in agony, plainly he could neither see nor hear her.

He was not dead yet.

Not quite.

She crossed herself, turned out the light, and walked away into the night.

It was late on in the afternoon when the three Militia arrived. She had sent Olena into the village with a message. Their noisy Zil pulled up outside her cottage and she spoke to the officer. In a little while she followed them up to the dacha on foot. She could hear the radio as the grey-faced Militiaman spoke into it. The boot was open, and a second policeman was carefully placing Ivan's rifles alongside an unopened case of Ivan's vodka. He asked her very few questions, and she answered as a simple old lady would. "Yes, usually I cooked, but they brought things back, and sometimes made their food themselves. It made them feel they were home again."

"It happens all the time.", he told her, "Visitors, stupid tourists, who think they knew about life in the woods and forests. Collecting mushrooms, not knowing what they were." His busy colleague stopped a moment and added a few of his own comments.

"Up near Dubno", he said, "a whole family perished last Autumn, and this year half a dozen died here in this Oblast alone."

He laid his hand on her shoulder and told her to go home with her daughter. The two elderly men were dead. "Nothing to do."

"The young man?" she asked him gently, as a mother might ask of another woman's son. Olena stood silently by her side.

"Tak! Yes, he is strong and still alive, barely." He shrugged.

Ludmila raised a gnarled hand to cover her mouth. They had radioed down for an ambulance and a Doctor, but it might take two hours, maybe more to come this distance. The young man would probably be dead by then, or very soon after. He could not live.

Slowly, hand in hand, the two women walked back down along the track, the afternoon sun was warm on their backs, the soft breeze encouraging the birches to shed their Autumn leaves beneath their feet.

Olena hummed quietly, a child’s play song. Ludmila smiled at her.

It was a pity about the boy.

**SOLSTICE**

‘Lost House’. Winter 2002.

*“Light a candle, even for the Devil’s sake.”*
Borderlands Proverb

The end came, not suddenly, as a curtain might fall before a stunned theatre audience, but in a drawn-out way. The lights failed, all power failed, across three counties, at a little after a quarter to four in the comfortless midwinter afternoon. It was already dark, night in all but name, and the lane, the street beyond, and all the half-hidden nearby houses were almost bible black. Here and there the prospect of a fresh-lit seasonal candle, or of a child’s flickering torch, threatened the encroaching night, but then subsided to the merest pin-prick as its fortunate owner settled down to make the best of it in the heavy rain and slate ripping wind.

The windows of the small cottage rattled. The Postman, who rarely called, knew this as the ‘Lost House’, standing at the end of a footpath, behind a row of allotment gardens, under a high wall, unnoticed by any who didn’t seek it out. The old exile had lived here a long time.

Standing with difficulty, he moved from the armchair, leaning on the polished table to reach the window. He stared hard and in silence, into the nothingness of the wild night. The electric fire had died, softening from gold to red to dull grey as what heat and comfort it gave took its leave and vanished, with only the clock’s stern tick, half-muffled, to represent life and time’s passage.

He was suddenly frightened as he made his way back to the chair. He didn’t draw the curtains, as he usually did. Perhaps they remained open in hope of the day’s swift return. He sat thinking for a while, trembling with the creeping cold, and the fear, trying to remember.

He knew there was a candle. Familiar though it was, the little house offered countless dangers as he groped with shambling steps to the cramped kitchen. He grunted angrily to himself, swearing under his breath, as he realised he was shuffling to avoid the cat’s place, but the cat was long gone. It took him, unsighted, several desperate minutes to find the right drawer. Then, eventually, his fingers found the candle. Just one half used candle. There were matches too, and he lit it with slow, arthritic hands. No candlestick of course, a saucer would have to do, and he carried the halo of light back into the living room, breathing heavily. The fireplace and the door jamb threw brisk draughts in on a fragile, flickering flame, so he carried his glint of hope to the table, placed it carefully where it seemed less threatened. He carefully drew the curtains closed on the unseen storm driven world beyond, and sat down heavily. He retched Isiah’s bitter words into the blackness - “He will come with vengeance, with retribution.”

It always returned to him when it was pitch dark. Night, the true silent shade of night, subdued him. Drove him into that one small corner of his mind where he could not live, forced him back into his own black mass of memory. Around the flame of the candle, older flames glowed, painfully returning. “Retribution”, he whispered.

He could see the borderland village at dusk, a few lights, the odd plume of smoke drifting towards the early stars like prayers. He could feel the damp earth under his feet, hear the steady breathing of the armed men around him. What came to him next never truly developed as an event recalled, as a rolling image. It simply appeared in darkness. Returning like a hunting owl in silent flight.

Around him, a hair's breadth beyond the candle's trembling aura, they pressed inwards. Scores of pale faces, surprised, open mouthed, innocent faces. Men, women, children, babies crowded in on him. Dead faces. Dead by the heavy hands which lay before him on the table cloth, the right hand index finger trembling, rotating with a tiny tremor as he cowered from the sightless eyes and soundless mouths, never daring to look beyond the thin halo of light. "Retribution." The clock ticked like a leaden heartbeat.

The old man muttered, mouthing inadequately again and again that verse from Isiah 35, to an unlistening god, whose only answer was a fresh squall strong enough to shake the window sashes and suck the candle flame into a long flickering tongue, almost snuffing it out. He held what breath he had, and in the darkness around him, he felt the faces smothering him again. "Retribution." He sobbed. The candle burned lower. With a thumb length left, the circle of light began to draw inwards, leaving the darkness beyond to the tormented faces, more and more of them, filling the icon-less room like pale ghostly caricatures of a thousand hideous killings, pressing, pressing in on him.

Storms, even the angriest of them, pass away. The morning of the shortest day of the year was cold and bright and still, almost as if nothing had happened in all recorded time.

"There's a cottage somewhere down this alley, according to the worksheets." The foreman from the Electricity Company, stepping over fallen branches, and ankle deep in leaves and the wreckage of the rough night, paused and looked up at the battered trees. "No-one comes down here much, by the look of it," said his young mate looking up. "This must have been a boundary wall for the old school." He kicked away broken slates. "There it is, behind those big fir trees." The secret lane was a stream of wet leaves and splintered wood, like the work of a violent gardener disturbed in his frenzy. They could see the chimney first, and steadily waded towards it.

"What a place to live" the Foreman said. He was sweating now. "Remember that little house on the old estate?"

"Yeah! Customer relations!" the younger man scoffed. "What if this place is empty?" He tilted his safety helmet back on his head.

"No. It's occupied." The machine in his hand clicked. "Meter reading less than a fortnight ago." On they went.

"Huh! They should have sent the meter bloke then! You can barely see any of the other houses from here. A bit creepy, too." On they trudged.

“You might as well be living in a forest.” The tall fir trees hung to the remnants of night’s damp air.

A few minutes later, crunching through the blocked gate into the tiny garden, they came noisily to the old man’s door. By now it was late in the morning. Cold too. “Power would not be restored for a while to this small corner of town. This is purely a courtesy call, to ensure your safety. Please do not, etc, etc, etc.” The Foreman chanted his oft repeated mantra out loud, and his mate laughed. His heavy knock went unanswered. There was no bell, and, inquisitively, he bent to the letterbox, calling out, and then moved to the window, peering through a chink.

“There’s someone in there, Jeff! Look!”

“Yeah! Is he dead?”

“Get on the phone!”

Just as in the television crime dramas, they really do break down doors, as they say ‘to gain entry’, and so there they found him, sitting in the gloom, hands spread out either side of a small saucer of grease on a bare table top, the right index finger trembling, old, far flung eyes wide open. Lips moving, though not in prayer.

“What’s he muttering?” the Foreman asked the Police Sergeant. “I can’t make it out. Somebody’s name?

“No. That’s foreign, that is. Russian? Polish? I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s his wife? Or one of his kids?” Jeff offered. Still the old man spoke the single word, time and time again. Every few seconds, barely discernible, but it had to be a name, something like that. “No wife here, nor any kids,” the Policeman replied. “No. No sign of anything to do with a family here, upstairs or down. No photos, no ornaments, not even a calendar.”

He took a long glance around his. “This bloke’s a real loner.”

The Police Sergeant stood aside for the paramedics to move him. The small room was becoming cramped. It smelled rank. Just that burned out candle on the table.

“Let’s adjourn.” the Sergeant said, and he was glad to get outside into the sharp air. There was something which grated on him in the little cottage, made him feel uneasy. He shivered. It came to him as he looked over the front windows and the forced door. It was just like in that in house far up on the hillside, after the three kids were murdered. Something malignant, something hanging around in there. Lingering, threatening the living just for being alive.

Not much of a statement from the two men; the time, what they saw through the window. That was about it. Well, he wasn’t dead, and there was no crime either. Then they brought him out, still speaking his single word, on one of those chairs, strapped in so he didn’t fall out. The four Ambulance crewmen were labouring heavily, as they carried high their burden,

wading through waves of debris, a sea of greenery, up to the distant road, to the low regular drone of that word.

“Rather them than me!” said Jeff. “He looks a heavy one.” The Sergeant’s radio crackled, and he told one of his men to wait for the carpenter to secure the door. He thought about going back inside, but baulked at the prospect, and he didn’t know why.

“Damn remote, isolated.” he said to the Electricity men. “I’ve worked in this town fifteen years, and I couldn’t find it, took ages. Mind you, some people like to hide away from life.” Or maybe from death? He kept that thought to himself.

They were not to know, the Policemen and Ambulance crew, as they lifted the old man from the chair onto the stretcher, that the word he was muttering over and over, in that unknown tongue, was the name of a place long ago ravaged and forgotten.

They are very good to him in the home. He’s no trouble. He eats, he takes his medication, he watches the television quietly, uncomprehending. He has no family, and no-one else has ever visited him. Only at nightfall, when the darkness folds in, is he restless. He doesn’t sleep, his bedroom light stays on all night, always, Summer and Winter; and, when it’s quiet, the staff on their rounds can hear him whispering, over and over again that single word, sweeping the room with fearful eyes. Haunted, they say he is, but they don’t understand what he’s saying.

The Matron asked the Doctor who shook his head. The Doctor’s a hearty New Zealander, so how would he recognise a Yiddish village name long ago burned and salted from the map of Polish Galicia?

I don’t visit anymore. What’s the point?

**TRACTORS**

Rose Terrace. Summer 2004.

*"Only cheese in a mouse trap can be free."*
Borderlands Proverb

"No!"

Refusal was something I never anticipated, having learned that to listen, to wait and be patient until a thread unravelled, or a memory floated to the surface of the vodka glass. No-one among the old men refused to sit with me and let me listen. Well, if they didn't want to tell me something, it wouldn't be said. Some were half-hearted, the poorest of recollections in time and place; these were allowed to slip back into the mist of time. One single memory, a 'national memory', if anything could be called that, the fate of the Dynamo Kiev football team after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, cropped up in almost every old man's thoughts, but that's far too well known to serve any purpose in this small matter.

"No!"

It was the publication of that singular book which caused me the problem. There are very few biographies, or memoirs, written by or about the members of the Ukrainian Diaspora across the whole world. Very little fiction either. So, when Maryna Lewycka published *"A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian"* in 2005, to some acclaim in book prize circles, especially those awarded for comedy, wit or humour, it was widely read and discussed. Not among the ageing Ukrainian Diaspora in these parts, for few of them could be considered great readers in any language. Many of their sons and daughters, many of their grandchildren, read, or at least dipped into, the book. Or pretended to.

Ludmilla knew the book. Oh, yes. I realised that immediately.

In the year that *'Tractors'* was published, Dmitri - his compatriots knew him as Dima - celebrated his eighty-fifth birthday. He was an old widower, no children, barely mobile, but affable, and, in his declining years, still sharp and lively in a jocular sort of way. His English was good too. He had served on several local charities, and frequently slipped Welsh dialect terms, even swear-words, into his chat. I was looking forward to his tales, but for the moment concentrated on those old men who seemed far more likely to slip away beyond the Styx than him. It was obvious that there would be something of value in his conversations when they eventually took place. A couple of tantalising short comments, briefly noted, promised much. He had been active in the Ukrainian nationalist resistance against Polish rule in the late thirties; he was a bodyguard to one of the underground leaders at one stage, and continued on this dangerous path under Stalin's occupation. If the Nazi's hadn't turned up in the Summer of 1941, he'd probably have died in the camps of the *Gulag.* He liked the Germans, a lot, and spoke the language relatively fluently. He and my wife, who once lived in Dusseldorf, would exchange gossip in it.

Dima would be a milestone. More than a fragment or a thin memory, a real tale, perhaps, would come from his lips.

Now, the gap between the celebration of Ukrainian Independence in late August, and the New Year gatherings, the Orthodox Christmas being our Epiphany, is a long one. I hadn't seen Dima in all that time, nor many of the others, but as December unfolded, I found myself sipping a beer in the lounge bar of the 'Red Lion', listening to Stefan complain about his newly-surfaced 'cousin' in Ternopil who, believing him to be a millionaire, consistently begged for dollars for all sorts of purposes, education, medicine, law, none of which Stefan believed for a minute. This, I felt, was not to be an evening when a tale turned. In a lull, having exhausted his cousin's demands, Stefan tapped the table with a strident finger.

"Dima got married!"

I raised the necessary eyebrow, and said, "Oh?".

"Tak! Tak! Yes! Woman from Odessa. Probably Russian. Maybe prostitute. Young." He laughed, then pursed his lips disapprovingly. Now, three insults in a single sentence is some going, even for a hard-nosed Galician like Stefan. In his mind, like many others from the land of the black earth, Odessa was the Sodom; and the Gomorrah of the modern era, valued only by the Tsars, the Jews and the Freemasons. "No decent Ukrainian would want to go there," so he said. If she was Russian, a 'Moskali', one of the 'people of the balalaika and the spoons', as the men of the Diaspora called them, that might just explain her presence in that city. And, as for the prostitute bit: "Well," said he, "what else would a Russian woman be doing in Odessa to make a living but selling herself?" I began to think his logic was a little flawed, but, then, from his point of view 'young' could indicate a matron, a grandmother possibly? Someone of advancing years, lured into marrying an aged former Ukrainian with a British passport, merely for the free bus pass and eye tests.

Naturally, I asked the obvious questions, well, two out of three of the obvious questions. "When and where did he get married?" I didn't ask the third, why? After all it was hard enough to visualise the bride from what Stefan had suggested so far. "Dima," and Stefan knew this for sure, "had married the woman a month before in the Town Hall Registry Office."

"In Secret" I was assured, which turned out to mean that none of the Diaspora had been invited, or even told beforehand. The conversation lapsed. I finished my beer.

It took a long, long, time for this unpromising tale to unfold. I could, I suppose, have dropped in, or dropped a line to Dima, but I didn't. My Christmas card went unanswered, and it was one of the good ones with a Cossack on the front, I bought it in L'viv.

Almost ten months later, barely a handful of details had surfaced. Most of them knew nothing at all, but Stefan was known to ferret things out. There were problems with visas beforehand, of course, there would be; questions of 'refugee' status, and of this being a genuine marriage between a man now nearer ninety than eighty, and a woman of, according to Stefan, only forty-two, or thereabouts. I actually came upon another of the Ukrainians who had met her. Shopping in Tesco, with Dima, him in one of those lethal little electric wheelchair things they

provide. His opinion of her was unprintable, and it seemed as though every syllable of Stefan's comments were written in tablets of stone.

Another Christmas loomed. It was almost eighteen months since I'd seen Dima, and the thought of his tales lurked in a fairly substantial corner of my mind. I chanced a card, one of my best ones, with Grandfather Frost and the Archangel Michael on it, and enclosed a note offering to meet. Stefan disapproved. He would. The response was an e-mail. An e-mail! Now that was a rarity from anyone in or around the Diaspora; in fact, it was one of only half a dozen I'd had in well over two years - the others were from children and grandchildren asking for assistance in some way or another. Now, Dima hadn't written it, though it bore his name. He would never have invited me for 'tea', that being a non-alcoholic form of beverage, and as for referring to my 'good lady wife', and not to her by name, well. The English wasn't that bad I thought, and replied, suggesting a mid-afternoon visit the following week. That brought a gushing response, stopping just short of suggesting that I ring the front door bell in Morse code, wearing a red rose, and carrying a rolled copy of *'The Times'* for positive identification. I wondered if she'd been doing something in the Mata Hari line down in old Odessa! At this point my 'good lady wife' ducked all possibility of involvement. I was on my own.

Dima and his own, now confirmed, 'good lady wife' lived in a town about ten miles from where I lived, and in a pleasant old-fashioned street of biggish houses. His first wife, it was always said by the old men, had had a bit of money.

The door opened before I'd touched the bell, and there she stood, stout, peroxide, and in a haze of sickly perfume. Under the pancake make-up, and vast crimson lips, I'd have guessed at more like fifty five than forty two, maybe even sixty. When my wife asked me for a description (why is it women always do that? She could have come to see for herself) 'sturdy' was the term which sprang to mind. She was certainly of Russian stock,

"Ludmilla." she introduced herself immediately, and had brought herself up to a fairly respectable Welsh height – yes, she was that short -- by a pair of enormous high heels which were clearly ruining Dima's block flooring. You could practically hear the wood groan beneath her feet and roots.

Ludmilla beckoned me in, and for one awful moment I thought she was going to embrace me with kisses in the good old Soviet style. They like that the Russians, and that's why the lipstick was on by the bucketful. I pre-empted any contact by presenting her ample frontage with the smallish bouquet I'd picked up for three quid at Lidl's on my way over from the station.

"For the House", I smiled.

She took them and ushered me in, throwing the flowers onto the sideboard as she passed. I suspect she shopped at Lidl's and recognised the price of my token.

Now this house had changed. A lot. You could have been in a Moscow apartment. The deep rugs, the heavy throws, the ikons, and the dark wall hangings. Everything. Everything bar a

personally signed photo of Boris Yeltsin; there were photos scattered about, of children mostly, and yet no wedding photo to be seen. "Lovely." I smiled at Ludmilla encouragingly. "So warm, and so comfortable." She liked that, I could tell. Dima half sat, half lay, in a vast armchair covered by an ochre throw which made him look even more jaundiced than when we'd last met. He shook my hand quite firmly, greeting me warmly, to Ludmilla's palpable surprise. He was frail, a much-diminished man from the year before; but seemed sharp enough, and all I had to do was settle down and wait for my chance to start him on the road back to Poland in the thirties. Ludmilla would obviously leave us and go about the obvious domestic duties, dusting, polishing, consigning my flowers to the bin, that sort of thing. He and I began to settle.

Ludmilla interrupted. A forceful hostess. Very forceful.

"Tea!" she exclaimed.

"No tea, Horilka. Horilka!" said Dima, looking at me for approval. He liked a glass.

"Well, er," I was stopped, not even in mid-sentence.

"Tea!" she repeated and strutted off. Tea it was. I barely had time to exchange a few pleasantries with the old man, before she bustled back in bearing a tray with two glasses of dark tea. I bet she had a samovar in that kitchen; no waiting for a kettle to boil, this was as instant as a Minsk Bistro. Oh, the northern Russian tradition of tea and a couple of spoonsful of sweet fruit jam is not one I've ever enjoyed, but Dima didn't argue, and nor could I.

Ludmilla sat, lifted a bone china mug of milky coffee to her enormous lips, and smiled at me. She wasn't going to move. This could be difficult. Crossing her legs with all the grace and elegance of a basking seal, she said, "You are right?"

"Fine!" I replied, sipping my hot tea. The jam looked like prune. I wasn't having any of that. "No thanks. Not for me. On a diet!" I patted my midriff bulge.

"No! You are right?"

She looked strangely at me. Suddenly I realised. Shit! She'd asked me if I was a writer.

"Oh, I see. Yes. Yes. A writer." I sort of apologized, but she wasn't having any.

"This man writes about us." Dima said. I knew what he meant.

"Us?" The vast scarlet mouth pursed. War it seemed had been declared. The first shots about to be fired across the border. I felt like a small Baltic state being eyed up by Stalin. Here it came.

"You write about.?" She got it wrong. Big time. "Us?" Up the voice went fifty decibels at least!

Dima was chuckling quietly. "Maybe he writes love story. About how we meet, how we get together, how we get married eh?" he winked at me.

No. Dmitri. No. No. No. No. No.

“Well, as a matter of fact, Ludmilla,” I tried to intervene on my own behalf.

“Like that book!” The red mouth quivered and spat out the words. “I know this book. Lies! All lies!” The coffee mug was slammed onto the tray. She was out of the trap, tight in on the rail, heading for the home straight.

“It will not happen! I forbid!” She waved a painted fingernail at Dima, and, then at me. The old man chuckled helplessly. We both knew which book Ludmilla meant, *“Tractors”*. She probably hadn’t read it, but seen it. Someone had told her the plot, and at once Dima’s new wife had become, as the old Russian proverb says, ’like a woman dug into the ground’. Nothing I could say, attempt to say, mattered at all in the face of a tirade which was now being delivered in bad Ukrainian, and bits of Russian to Dima, and in far worse English to me.

I tried. I failed. Dima didn’t help. He plainly thought the mistake hilarious.

“A writer, yes, yes!” he chuckled. Mind you I don’t suppose he got too many laughs with her. No horilka either, just tea and that lousy jam.

I left as quickly as I could. You could hear this woman three valleys away, and Welsh neighbours are, well, nosey when it’s noisy.

My carefully written e-mail, worded not to sound like an apology for collaborating in the wrongs recorded in *“Tractors”*, went unanswered. Deleted by the scarlet talon of ‘The Odessa Woman’ as my wife and Stefan both now called her, stabbing at my words on her lap top, especially the ones she could read.

“See. I told you so!” Stefan repeated endlessly. Every time I met him.

Dmitri Fadchuk’s story, his tales, won’t be written. Not by me. Nor anyone else, I suppose. Not one of the Diaspora has seen him, nor heard from him. He wasn’t at Guri’s funeral, nor was he seen at Vadim’s. The wives and daughters waited, massed, but in vain, at the Christmas gathering for sight of her, rather than of him. Stefan, who heard most things, heard that “Her children have come over from Odessa and now they are all living in Dima’s house. After his money maybe?”. Stefan rubbed his hands together, with glee.

No-one else heard anything at all. In *“Tractors”*, the written relationship ends unheroically, perhaps unrealistically, and the old Borderlands man is restored ungraciously to his family; the family Dima didn’t have. He isn’t dead, and I don’t think he’s in a hospital, or a home. The old men of the Diaspora would know.

On a miserable, cold, wet night a few months later, five of them sat in the ‘Red Lion’ arguing over football, and, when I sat down, sipping my beer, Stefan told me “Dima’s house is for sale. My nephew, working on satellite dishes in the street this week, has seen the sign, he was sure it was the house. Maybe they go to Odessa?” he laughed. I said I’d try to find out. It

wasn’t difficult, there are only three or four Estate Agents in the place, and the fact the property was empty was easy to establish.

“The people have moved away”, I was told. “A quick sale. And a good price. Did I want to view the property?” That was all they would tell me.

Odessa? I don’t think so. He’s somewhere in a deep chair, fading away, gazing into his tea. His story wasted, locked inside him, simply waiting for the end.

“Odessa? No, I don’t think so, Stefan.” I shook my head. He just laughed.

**SEAL**

Cartref. Spring 2009

*"Where three are Cossacks, two become judges of the third."*
Borderlands Proverb

It sits in front of me now. On the heavy, stained and careworn table I use as a desk, laid on a pile of fairly clean notepaper, the sort of stuff I use for scribbling odd messages and the multitude of pathetic *aides-memoire*, mnemonics, and reminders and references, which any writer long past his prime must resort to. In this particular case it rests, neatly, about half-way down the emergency mid-week shopping list, sitting between item four, cat food, and item five, a packet of crumble mix.

If I pick this thing up, it will sit in the palm of my hand, smaller than a sovereign, lighter than a signet ring, not that I possess either of those. I know its weight and its dimensions exactly. I know the marks carved on the face of it. I even know the metal from which it's made, but for that singular purpose I slipped it into my pocket and took it to the Egyptian. He runs the antique shop, he calls it that, not me, and is an amazing source of information: sometimes good for an obscure technical term which eludes me, or an unfamiliar word worth nudging into a story or review to impress the erudite among the readers who might dip, casually or accidentally, into my work.

"Unusual, eh?", first he grunted, then weighed it in his hand, and slowly examined it under his eye-glass, though for what I have no idea, for, truthfully, it is a bland, plain sort of artefact when all's said and done. Its provenance is everything. He dropped it onto his jeweller's scales with a dull ring, pushed his glasses to the back of his bald head, and provided me with what little technical information he could glean from the curious object. Of course, he didn't know where it was from, and, naturally, I didn't tell him. Two or three vague suggestions emerged, a slim suspicion possibly; but then, a boyhood spent in Alexandria, where he claimed his father knew Cavafy, and a pass degree in American Studies, does not, arguably, provide the best preparation for an encounter of this sort.

According to the Egyptian's ancient scales it weighs "Exactly 34.5 grammes, or 1.21 ounces should you wish to be old fashioned and 'Imperial', my boy!". He chuckled. "Across the face it's fourteen millimetres in diameter, let's stay modern and European shall we, and it has a 10 mm projecting spur with a small hole you could slip a sliver of macaroni through." He tossed it in his hand. "It's made of brass, good brass too, the kind they made cartridge cases from in the old wars." He told me, and that's surely where it began life, as a spent cartridge case, melted for another equally decisive purpose.

I am no sigillarist, but then this is no ordinary seal. "Where did you find this?" the Egyptian asked, me. "It just dropped into my hand!" I laughed, and so it did.

Now to be married for over sixty years is some feat, and the old exile, Teo, and his wife Polina, had achieved that. They arrived in the town together, married at some place along their journey. No children, no family anywhere it seemed, but comfortable, settled, happy for all that. Secure within their small terraced home, they were to slip away from life within weeks of each other. I'd visited them for quite a long time, three years or more. The old couple had been people to chat with about their homeland; the idyllic landscape of their youth in the Borderlands, long vanished worlds to fill my background thoughts. I knew nothing about their war, and, oddly enough, I didn't really ask. It was almost like a visit to far-placed grandparents, and there was always a smell of onions, I remember that. Onion soup I'd guess, not *'Pokhlebka'*, the gentle dill-thinned broth they eat in the cities, but deeper, earthier onions, boiled long, as dark as the chernozem soils, the soup they eat in the villages.

This wintry afternoon, with the season coming on hard, they had talked about honey of all things. Teo's uncles had kept bees, and, when a name was lost, a day misplaced, Polina would remind him gently. Tea and biscuits, and a little before five o'clock, I took my leave.

"You will come again, and soon?" Teo shook my hand standing uncertainly on his walking frame. I held Polina's tiny, frail arm as she led me to the front door; leaning unsteadily against the frame, she delved into the handbag she carried everywhere, and into my hand she placed the seal, wrapped in a tissue.

"One day, after we have gone, this may interest you. It's from our Borderlands." She smiled a paper-thin smile. "Look after it. A keepsake from me." I touched her arm, thanked her, and slipped through the door into a damp evening. "Maybe it will be lucky for you?"

You know how it is. If I'd known, even been able to guess at, what had just passed into my possession, it would have been different. Very different. I didn't know, though, sitting at home, I toyed with the thing, and examined its simple hand carved face. The Trident of Vlodymyr, with two numbers above it, nine crude indentations around the rim, the old emblem of the borderlands, what else? Maybe military, or partisan, or an old political emblem from the days of the Polish occupation? To me, the seal meant nothing at all, it's secrets safe. I showed it to the Egyptian out of mere curiosity, though, in my mind, tales began to spin without certainty or knowledge. I threaded a length of thin plastic-coated wire through the hole, and took to carrying the seal with me, for no reason at all.

In the depths of Winter Polina fell, broke her hip and femur. It was the anaesthetic which killed that small body, only a day after the operation. Teo, distraught, turned his face to the wall. I went to see him a couple of times after the funeral, but his life was slipping from him, visibly, ebbing like an afternoon tide. The carers came in, of course, twice a day, but he was alone, not sleeping, barely eating, simply waiting for the moment he would pass from the world. On that last occasion I visited he talked to me in snatches as though I was part of his childhood.

"You remember the bandura player?" Then he'd fall into silence for a moment. "Who did that horse belong to?" he'd laugh. His mind had left the terraced house and the old industrial town far behind; Teo was a boy again, recalling friends long dead, and places he'd never see again.

Much he forgot, without Polina's quiet prompts, her gentle correction, the completion of drifting half sentences. He wept, just momentarily, as though a word recalled, a phrase, hurt his eyes. I made him coffee, and he swore me to secrecy, though why I have no idea, over a tot of rum in it. The onions had gone.

By the time his camellias were in bloom, Teo was gone.

It was a fortnight after the rather quiet cremation, that Ray rang me. That wasn't his real name, it was Yilak, but he'd lost that somewhere along the way. I didn't like him, second-generation, self-obsessed, and arrogant.

"I'm at Teo's place this afternoon, and tomorrow. Call in if you're passing. I'm clearing up stuff."

It turned out he was a nephew, or, at least, a relative of some sort. He wasn't at either funeral, and I had my doubts. Anyway, his van 'Property Maintenance - No Job 2 Small' was parked outside when I got there. The door was open and in I walked. He'd been through the place with a fine toothcomb, I could see that. More black bags than a Council tip, some, I guessed more valuable, items were stacked in the parlour.

"Keeping busy?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, yeah, you could say that." He led the way into the kitchen, where his teenage son was making tea. Didn't offer me a cup.

"That's it." He pointed to a small decorated wooden box on the worktop. I'd seen so many like it, but this was far smaller, the size of a toy compared to the other memory boxes I'd come across. It had been roughly prised open, the aged oak splintered.

"No money in it, but a load of papers." I lifted the lid and saw an oilskin packet. "You being interested in the history and all that, might be something in there. No good to me, can't read a word of it, can't even sing the bloody songs!"

I slipped the box into my briefcase, it was that small, and left them to it. Ray carried on dismantling Teo's life and Polina's, and looking for the quick quid along the way. I wondered if he'd have the floorboards up?

The box was lovely, ornate, ruined of course. The packet contained a small dark blue notebook and half a dozen sheets of paper, not much bigger than A5. Most were handwritten I could read one date, 1954, and only two showed signs of a Cyrillic typewriter. No envelopes, but each had a distinguishing feature I recognised.

"Must have been rare over here in those days, that kind of typewriter keyboard." I said to my wife. "The writing's small too. It'll keep it all to show Vadim in L'viv."

Vadim, since he retired from the Institute, made a small living by translating. We were in his flat, overlooking the river. I'd left the memory box in Wales, just bringing the packet along, wrapped with rubber bands. He sipped the scotch I'd brought him and looked pensively at the small bundle of documents. He sorted them without a word. Flicking through the notebook he laid it carefully aside. "Much work there, I think. Yes, much." He turned to the papers.

"Interesting?" I asked. "Hm. Hm" he nodded. Silently he began to read. The river was high with the Spring rains. I watched it as he worked. Slowly. A very thorough man indeed, Vadim.

"You have some surprising, how shall I describe it, historical material here- Not ordinary letters. Commands, instructions, money, I think. There was perhaps a good deal of money, American dollars, with these papers?"

"If there was any left, it's in the hands of a sort of nephew now!" I laughed.

"The owner of these papers kept some letters but not all, perhaps there are gaps. One is an order, very official order. A matter of the utmost seriousness. There are details of arrivals. Many numbers, perhaps a code? I'm not sure. The typed notes did not originate in your country, but in Germany I think. The rest in Great Britain certainly." He was squinting at the papers as though they might release their secrets with a flash of light.

As he pointed out the sign of a small wax blob on most of the sheets, I dropped the seal into his hand. "There, I'm one step ahead of you, at least." He handled the metal with care, and passed it back to me. "Then you may know who wrote these things." He beamed. "Can I ask if my son-in-law may see these papers? You remember Oleg, he's still at the Institute Museum, and will also be interested. Very much."

"No problem." It wasn't. I'd intended to leave them behind when I flew home. His telephone call brought a surprising response. The half hour it took for Oleg to get to us, we spent discussing Europa League football and Real Madrid's chances. L'viv is a long way from Madrid, but Vadim was a keen supporter.

Long after the USSR collapsed the old 'formalities' of the former life still linger. On meeting, greetings are lengthy, there are interminable exchanges, a drink, some tea perhaps, something to eat. Only then does real business commence. Vadim and his son in law ran true to form, but, eventually, the packet of papers was re-opened, and Oleg gave a brief commentary on each. This was very much an opening move. The papers, there were fourteen sheets, counted and laid out on the table top in date order. The seal caused great interest; the notebook was in a form of code. It would, Oleg assured me, require some serious consideration by those who knew more. "What about the loose papers?" I asked.

Vadim began to translate, slowly, carefully, for my benefit. The first four letters, indeed were in a form of code, Oleg knew some of it.

“Yes, we have dealt with material such as this, and often. Most from the UPA records, hidden from the KGB and found much later. Like the Yavoriv archive?”.

“Yes!” I knew this archive. The 67th Company of UPA, harried and doomed, buried two hundred photographs in a farm in the Carpathians in the early fifties. The cache was found fifty years later, and many called it a national treasure. Outside, the sun was setting, Vadim switched on a reluctant light, and the low glow spread across the room.

“This one,” Oleg flourished a sheet to which the seal still clung, “is unusual.”

“How?”

“Listen.” He began to read. There was a date, 1958, a respondent, KRUK, a code name, yes? He laughed. “The Raven. Black, eh? Maybe a senior 14th commander?” Vadim leaned close to him, adding a suggestion here and there, correcting a word as he read. “Neatly written, a careful hand.”

*“By your command, the task set, the execution, was carried out at 19.30 on the fifth of this month.”* My mouth became dry. “Say that again.” Oleg repeated the words. Very much an opening greeting from the Third Reich, but years after it fell. “I will continue.” He looked at me, shrugged and went on.

*“However, I must bring to your attention that there were certain difficulties in”* here he consulted with Vadim, they agreed the word, *“disposing of the matter.”* There was a coldness in the words. Frozen in formality. *“The premises, cellar and adjoining chamber were suitable. The comrade sent from Munich efficient in his work.”* Oleg shook his head, muttering to Vadim. “This next part is not easy, we don’t understand.”

*“The choice of night and timing was perfect, given the celebrations, noise and minor explosions in surrounding areas.”* “There was no war then?” he said. I recited to them, wryly. “Remember, remember, the Fifth of November. Gunpowder, Treason and Plot.” My turn to explain. The executioners had chosen a night when a shot, a scream, a cry, might go totally unnoticed. Blank expressions, but Oleg continued urged by Vadim’s occasional interpretation. The victim, clearly a man, had been given the opportunity to end his own life, but refused. The letter writer considered this a betrayal, cowardice - you could taste the venom in the words. It seemed the man was a ‘missing person’ as far as the Police were concerned. The people, the group, the organisation, who arranged the execution knew what they were doing, Oleg said as much. “His wallet, watch, certain papers, had been despatched to the border with Czechoslovakia, to be found, and the authorities would believe he fled Eastwards. To his masters.” He laughed. Vadim took the faded paper from his hand, and read on.

*“He asked to see his wife and children. Impossible. It was refused”* Vadim squinted over the words. *“He asked for a Priest. This was not anticipated. It was also refused*” I’d handled this letter, unknowing. I could sense the clock tick towards death for this unnamed man. Vadim read slowly on. *“He asked for vodka, and was given fifty grams; no more.”*

It's coming. Death. Coming. Surprisingly, the writer became critical. *"The pistol provided for the task was inappropriate, of unusual calibre and inefficient…"* Of course, one of the big Makarov's would have covered that cellar in blood and bone and brains. They must have used a head shot? *"….and required three shots to end it."* The comrade sent from Munich wasn't that efficient! I must have spoken the words aloud, and Vadim sighed. "Yes, my friend there was some difficulty, it seems."

Oleg continued, checking a word here and there. The letter complained about *"The space selected for the disposal of the corpse."* - from the description, it was a coal chute, disused. I explained to them - *"it was too narrow, and the legs had to be broken to enable it to be placed securely."* The writer continued to complain that only four men had been allocated to the whole task, and sealing the chute took some time. The wall had to be washed down and much time wasted. Oleg waved the sheet. "Time wasted! These people were not NKVD eh?"

The tale of secret death, somewhere in an ordinary street, in an ordinary town, came to an end with bitter rhetoric, before finally, *"The matter is now entirely concluded."*

Oleg slid the sheet across the table. I picked it up, more reluctantly this time. I looked at it, sensing the blood between each line. The dark red wax still lingered at the bottom, chipped, but intact enough to know it was the seal I had in my pocket. It was hard to take in. The seal, the packet, the letters, and whatever the hell the notebook contained, hard. I spread my hands. "It's, no, no impossible to believe. I knew Teo well enough. Placid, I'd say even gentle, very old man by then, of course, but….".

Oleg jabbed a finger at the seal, saying the number out loud, "Fifty three", and alongside was it a signature, another code name. *'Slava'*. "You see?"

"Well yes. I know it's Russian and it means 'Glory', didn't the Tsar have a battleship with that name?" Vadim nodded, but Oleg went on firmly. Teo, an executioner? A mistake?

"This seal is one we knew of. When the struggle was lost in the Borderlands, it continued in other countries. Like yours. We know who 'Slava' was as well."

"He died not long ago. Teo, or 'Slava' as you call him" I said, shaking my head, again and again, in disbelief. I could have wept.

"No. No, my friend. You, you are mistaken. 'Slava', and we are certain of this, was a woman. We even have a photograph of her in our collection, from 1943, I have seen it often. There are other photographs than the ones found in Yavoriv! Short, very small, not much bigger than a child, Slava was a torturer for Koch. Extremely skilled I believe."

The seal lay in my hand, cold, like a stone.

**LATE**

Ty Bach. Spring 2009.

*"Dread silent dogs."*
Borderlands Proverb

"He does not go out. Not beyond the front door. Not anymore." Mikhail spoke almost in disbelief, as he steered me towards the quiet corner bar away from the crowd.

"Not even around to the small gathering at the pub?" I asked. He shook his head. That's where the old men assemble, raggedly, just once a month nowadays, coming together to talk about the inexplicable news, and the Byzantine politics, of home. "He doesn't go to the Post Office, not even to the corner shop for his tobacco, as he always did." Mikhail shook his head.

The man doesn't dress, he told me, but pyjama clad, deep in his shabby dressing gown, shuffles around the little house. He is sometimes seen, standing behind the net curtains at the side of the front parlour window.

"I have seen him there. Silent. Watching.", Mikhail shrugged. "Maybe waiting, eh?"

The Nurse from the surgery comes to visit him, twice each week. She cleans and treats his ulcerated leg, and takes his blood pressure; sometimes even the Doctor comes. The Pharmacy delivers his medication. But the shaking is not from sickness, "Parkinson's no", not illness, Mikhail told me, but because he's frightened.

They say he dreads the Postman's tread upon the step.

"Any visitor must phone, arrangements must be followed." Mikhail said firmly.

I couldn't go there. Not yet? "No." I was told.

"A letter came," said Mikhail. "From Germany, he has no-one there of course. But perhaps he is remembered?" The conversation drifted around from football to my opinion of beautiful Habsburg L'viv, a city he'd not visited since 1943; but eventually, as I thought it would, talk drifted back to that solitary old man.

"Do you know," Mikhail said rather dismissively, "he was not in the 14th?"

"No, I didn't." But then, how would I have known? He was one of the more reluctant, no that's not the best way to describe him, one of the most isolated of the diaspora. Standing alone, remote rather than aloof from the others and their families, when they had gathered busily for Christmas feast or Easter festival.

"Perhaps he has an enemy, even now." Mikhail offered the suggestion, with a thin smile. "Maybe he has many enemies."

“Yes” I nodded, “maybe”.

“The past, Mikhail” as I told him, “is not another country, not another war, it’s a long, long road you still travel along, forever, and the fast traveller can always catch you up.” It sounded like a quote from ‘Reader’s Digest’, but I meant it.

Mikhail shrugged his old rheumatic shoulders, “Maybe if they catch you, they can take you back, eh?” They? I wondered, who’s ‘they’? We’d moved a fair way, Mikhail and I, from the story he was going to tell me, about the cold Winter of 1945. “How much in pounds is twenty five thousand €uros?” he asked out of the blue.

“A lot of money.” I replied, thinking in rough numbers. “I suppose around twenty one or twenty two thousand pounds. Maybe a few pounds more. A lot anyway.”

“Ah! Is he worth that much? Do you think so?” I was lost on this one. Again, as they so often did, this old man from the Borderlands was playing with me. For some reason the vision of the ninety year old recluse as a Lottery winner floated across my inner vision, but it didn’t seem realistic.

None the wiser, I pulled on my coat, said goodbye, and went home.

Time passed. But not a great deal of time. Maybe two months, no more than that.

“It’s a funny thing.” said Mikhail, handing me another large vodka, neat naturally, and one which I did not particularly want. I could have downed a pint though.

It was a small funeral, twenty or thirty people at most. No relatives, not one, and hardly any friends to speak of, a neighbour or two, but still, the old Diaspora Club always put on a few sandwiches and a couple of drinks when anyone found under their umbrella passed on. On this occasion the sandwiches were awful paste and processed cheese things, but Mikhail, a widower for over a decade tucked in with gusto. Jaws busy, he said “I know what happened.” He munched in a conspiratorial way, so I gave him one of my half-interested looks, hoping he’d give me something of a tale. It generally worked.

“He died.” Stating the obvious first, Mikhail as always, the philosopher, reflected on his acquired knowledge before sharing it.

“Collapsed. Heart. Quick. Very quick. Very”. He threw back his vodka. Well, I knew that, even the Priest had mentioned it, there wasn’t much else for him to say about the dead man really. Very little was known. Where he worked, where he lived, and broadly speaking, where he had come from long ago. No more.

“You know how?” I didn’t. He waved his sandwich at me. “He was on the floor behind his front door. In his hand, brown official letter. Not opened you understand.” He nodded knowingly, and trotted off for another free drink.

All that I’d heard was that the solitary old man had died in his house. He was found three maybe four days later by the Nurse. With no response and knowing she was expected, she pressed the bell again, and bent to call through the letter box, only to see his tartan dressing gown stretched out beneath a shower of take away leaflets, free newspapers and junk mail. Gone.

Mikhail waddled back with his third round of sandwiches.

“The letter?” I asked him. “What was it?” He was clearly relishing the moment, and the sandwiches too.

“Ah!”, he whispered, “from the Council. Official, yes. But Special, no! About trees near the house!” He laughed, his whole body shook, as though at a joke I hadn’t been told. Yet.

It’s true to say that ninety year old men with chronic and life threatening illnesses who die, relatively peacefully, in their own homes, behind locked doors, don’t trouble the authorities for long.

“There was no search of the house!” Mikhail told me. “Why would they search? They open the letter in his hand, that’s all. They look around. He was very secure. Locks and bolts all over the place.” Though not much left of the locks on the front door, he said. They broke it open. “Very secure place.” he nodded sagely.

The neighbour, not the Police, phoned to tell him. So, Mikhail, sniffing gossip, ambled the two streets to the dead man’s house and introduced himself to a bored Policeman. The Nurse had gone. He arrived just as the body was being removed by the undertaker’s men.

“No corpse in the Ambulance!” He seemed rather surprised at that. “So, they wait for the Doctor, then some undertakers, and zip! The body goes away forever.” It seemed that the telephone in the house didn’t work. Cut off was Mikhail’s first thought, but the Policeman found that it was simply unplugged at the socket. “Why, eh?” Mikhail nudged my elbow. He’d have made a good spy that one.

“I phoned for the carpenter. Sirko’s youngest boy, Paul. Good carpenter, and good locksmith. His father came too.” I knew the elder Sirko well, stone deaf, but nosey. I could never collect a tale from old Sirko. He knew and understood very little English, could barely speak at all, and communicated with his family and the other Diaspora members, when he was bothered, by odd gestures and utterances. Sirko was destined to carry his stories with him to an exile’s grave, but he was just the right companion for Mikhail as they took a careful look around the little house. Carefully. Very, very, carefully indeed. The Policeman had been happy to leave them to sort out the front door, and went on his way.

They found some money. Enough to pay the younger Sirko for his work, and enough to pay for the funeral, and, probably, a bit more. Mikhail was very cagey, but I knew all too well the habit of old men who'd lived in harsh times to keep a decent sum of cash where they could get at it easily, probably with the help of the young man's carpentry skills. I didn't want to know about the 'funeral arrangements' and I said so.

Mikhail was warming up. "The house was plain. No nice things. No photographs, not even from the early days here when we were young." He seemed sad about it.

We were closing in on something. I could sense it. "No not much in the house", he reiterated. "No woman there, never a woman there." I sipped my vodka, he munched his sandwich. "Nothing much even for the charity shop." He didn't mention money again. Mikhail, as an example of mankind, was built rather like a bear. Admittedly, like one of the smaller species, say a *Sun Bear* rather than a big *Kamchatka Brown*, but a bear nevertheless. He had an ursine habit of rotating himself, just the top half, a few degrees to lef, and, then, to right, a bit like an old-fashioned washing machine. I knew this sign, he was about to divulge a secret. Or at the very least say something to ambush me.

"Sirko and me found two letters."

You did, I thought to myself, you found them Mikhail; the silent Sirko was probably too busy polishing off the deceased's vodka to be bothered with his unanswered mail. "Yes, two letters. On the bedroom mantelpiece behind the clock. One only a bill, but….".

I nodded as inquisitively as I could. His agitation slowly subsided.

"The other one from Germany. Posted in Lubeck, you know Lubeck?"

"I don't know Lubeck. No." The old man finished his sandwich, then his drink. Rotating once more, he took a big handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped his mouth, then his hands. The rotation increased to 'pre-wash' speed.

"I kept it." he said. From the depths of his ancient suit, he drew a rather grimy envelope. Carefully he removed the contents and slid it back under cover. There were two sheets of paper. The first was an A4 poster, black and grey over red. In German it read

**SPAT, ABER NICHT ZU SPAT.**

He handed it to me, and ran his finger along it, translating. 'Late, but not too Late.' At the top of the poster, which showed the gates of a Concentration Camp, and those long railway lines running away to death, there was an English caption. OPERATION LAST CHANCE.

"Nazi Hunters?" I asked. He nodded.

"Read the other one." He handed it to me, retrieving the poster with a reduction in speed of rotation. Printed boldly in Rockwell Extra Bold font was the dead man's full name, and what, I think, must have been a nickname below it…. **KHYT**, short, just one syllable and with a malevolent sound, even when I read silently. I spoke it twice, "KHYT? ..... KHYT." Whip?

The gently gyrating Mikhail shrugged when I asked. Who knows where a nickname comes from? There was a date of birth, 1920, and a place, oblast or town, which I didn't know at all.

Then five names, and in brackets what I guessed were ages, from four years to fifty two. All one family. Then a cross and single date:

**+ 4-2-1945**

"Spat! Yes, right! Late, late!" And he smiled, stubbing the greying paper once more. There was no signature. Instead at the bottom of the page was printed…

**R11956**

I read it aloud, and shook my head; it meant nothing to me.

Mikhail stabbed the paper with his ursine digit. "Treblinka number. R for Russian, not a Jew." He folded the paper carefully and slipped it away from sight.

"Pokhorovka." he whispered.

"Yes." I knew what that meant. This was a letter of death like in the war. Just like Blind Pew's black spot. Certain and final. He was to pay.

"Maybe at Treblinka he was only a cook, eh?" he laughed, and waddled through the thinning group of mourners towards the sandwiches.

"You want some? Very good ham." he called. I shook my head.

## VALLEY

Cwm. Autumn 2009.

*"Heaven made us, earth will take us."*
Borderlands Proverb

The single-carriage train shuddered around the curve towards the last but one station in the thin valley. The rain had stopped, briefly, but on the far hillside, a few sharp squalls climbed opaquely, pursuing the grey sheep. The train screeched to a halt alongside the platform, as though it had almost forgotten it was supposed to stop there. I stepped down to what in former days, when railways were real, might have been called a Halt. But this was no Adlestrop. No-one collected my ticket, behind me the train hissed shut upon itself and trundled off, leaving the place to one man and a few uninterested, puddle-dipping pigeons.

I walked down steep steps into the half-light of a short tunnel, through an adolescent sprayed art gallery, which clearly doubled as the Saturday night town urinal, into the street beyond. Station Road was bleak. The Station Arms, boarded up and plastered with posters, sported a clock with only one hand. My watch said ten to twelve. Shuttered burger bars and empty shops 'To Let' suggested the way to the town centre. Before I could make my mind up, as a fresh shower started to drift over me, a dirty white Skoda cab pulled up alongside. The driver looked hopeful of a fare, pleading might be a better word, and I got in.

"Got off at the wrong stop did you!", she laughed. "What the hell did you come up here for? I'd have got off down in Cardiff!" Unfolding my written directions, kindly provided by Dmitri, I told her the address. I'd only met this man a few times, and had never visited the town, but Dmitri assured me it was a short way from the train.

I'd never have found the place.

"Fair trek up the hill that is." she told me. "Be about eight quid. OK? 'Bout ten minutes away."

"Great" I answered.

"I wouldn't want to live up there", she told me. "Tidy once, but now…"

The car turned right past the derelict pub and along the empty street. Up we went. And up. It wasn't that far from the station, but up, and up again, up a switch-backed hill that might once have been a vast tip, and then into a half-drowned Council estate. As we turned the corner, a black windowed van splashed past us on the wet road. 'Private Ambulance' written in gold letters along the side.

"Another one gone" she said, pointing to the hearse, "I hope it's one of the bloody dealers this time.".

A minute later we pulled up outside what still had pretensions at being a tidy two bedroomed Council property, set lonely among a row of don't care, won't care houses, with broken gates, gardens filled with toys and abandoned bikes, and piles of black bags.

"Number 38." she said. "I think they're from Poland." Taking my tenner and forgetting to give me the one pound fifty change, she handed me a card instead. The landline number had been heavily crossed out, and that of a mobile scribbled above it. "Andy's Cabs" were obviously down-sizing. Her name, Bev, was scrawled in green biro.

"Some sod torched the office after a fight." she explained. "So, we're on the road now. It's not bad though." I nodded sympathetically. Bev was alright.

"You ring me when you want to go back, you'll get washed off the hill before you make it back to town otherwise!"

I thanked her and got out, waving my hand as she gunned the Skoda in reverse the hundred yards to the street corner, and she didn't look back.

The neat wooden gate, not long painted, was closed, probably the only one in the street which could close. I walked up to the front door, through sparse, threatening rain drops. The bell made a cheery sound, but the door was opened by a tall man, perhaps thirty five, not as much as forty, who'd been crying. My face must have shown surprise at his, and he, grief-stained suddenly realised who I was.

"You've come to see Dad!", he exclaimed. "He… I…", the man let out a great sob of a sigh.

"Come in. Please." he said, and showed me into the tiny front room, a sort of parlour, immaculate, unused, it smelled of furniture polish. As he closed the door, from just along the short corridor, I could hear women's voices, thin and interspersed with sobbing. Standing there, I waited for him to tell me that the old borderlands man I'd come to visit was dead. He indicated a deep armchair, and we both sat down.

"In the night.", he told me, "Quietly. My Mam didn't notice until this morning. She'd been sleeping there alongside Dad for hours, but he was…. Gone." The ache of loss seemed to fill the little house. Andriy Prymak had passed away. The Ambulance, the Doctor, the Police Community Support Officer, had been and gone, and the undertakers had just taken Andriy away. He was unable to say 'body', searching for another word less final, less painful.

This was not a good time.

He and his sisters had rushed to the house, he didn't say from where; the two daughters were with her now, the muted sound of tears carried through the wall. Despair, exasperation, hopelessness, crushed down on him; my regrets, my condolences, seemed worthless as I uttered them.

"No. No tea, nothing. Thank you." I said what I thought I should about not disturbing the family, about coming to the funeral, and about letting the other old men know. He seemed as

anxious for me to go as I was to be gone. With me, the intruder, on the other side of the door, grief could open its wound once more.

I telephoned the mobile on the card. Thankfully it worked, and Bev answered.

“Five minutes” she told me. Five minutes it was.

We stood together son and stranger, looking through the window at the rain, and waited. Not one word more passed between us. I counted the raindrops, he counted time. The Skoda pulled up outside, we shook hands and he closed the door behind me. The rain began to drum on the cab roof more heavily, and as we pulled away, the little neat gate blew open and swung uselessly in the wind.

“You weren’t long.” Bev said.

“I was too long.” I told her.

A week too long, perhaps a month, a year. Now, the story Andriy Prymak, once of Ivankiv, had to tell me would never be heard. The tale, or some small part of it, of a young man who had been there, present, active, when Olena Teliha, the great poet of Ukraine, had been put to death. Some heart stored detail of the life of a man who knew Babi Yar, not as an open chasm of terror, nor remembered as a poem by Yevtushenko, but as a daily place of work for his German masters. Death had claimed the man, and the untold tale died with him.

As she turned the Skoda through the bouncing raindrops down the hill, below us a small blue caterpillar made its way down the valley, in and out of the belts of rain and mist.

“Oh. Look!” said Bev.

I’d missed the train.

*“For it is close, the day of their ruin, their doom come at speed.”* (Deuteronomy 32: 35).

## Crtical Essay: The Tyrrany of the Conventional Essay

"Few students, it seems, ever attempt to make their 'academic' pieces creative or evocative in the same way they do their poems or stories; in fact, they usually 'play dead' when it comes to formal writing. Such is the tyranny of the conventional essay on artistic thinking and creative practice." (Andrew Miller) (1)

'Form is a slippery word', writes Philip Gerard (2), and this essay is intended to be far from traditional in its approach. Though, within it, elements of the historical, the descriptive and the expositional forms can be found, it is not intended to be argumentative. Its reflection is certainly meant to be powerful. The arguments and affirmations in the work of Oksana Zabuzhko (3) and particularly of W.G. Sebald (4), who is used as a central comparator, form a crucial context for this collection and for future writing

### The Personal and Biographical Origins and Development of the Project

In *Crimes of Writing*, Susan Stewart describes writing as 'a form of travel'. (5) All writers follow a path from inspiration to presentation whatever the genre, but it is difficult to select any precise moment when the creative work presented here, what might be regarded in many senses as a Borderlands pilgrimage, began: a human journey written as a triptych, along an eight-decade time line, from the height of Stalin's power in the 1930's, through World War, Holocaust and Cold War, the fall of the USSR and beyond. The key date might be April 26th 1986 when in the early hours, an explosion in Number 4 reactor at Chernobyl on the edge of the Borderlands changed the world forever; hastening the demise of the USSR, and rendering possible the unanticipated ending of long years of exile for the individuals who are the subjects of these tales. If the nuclear plant's clock had ticked past 01.23 hours and safely onwards, then this unusual writing project could not have been undertaken. (6) The remembrances of a group of elderly exiles, hopeless of return, would have little value beyond that of the vitriolic nostalgia of those many Cold War 'escape' memoirs written in the forties and fifties. Recognising the fact of travelling, often towards an unreachable Ithaca, firm points must be established, and in this case Chernobyl's cataclysm was not enough. My Grandmother would always sit, calm, silent, before she began a journey, and I found my calm point, my fulcrum maybe, in Virginia Woolf's Diary (7), described in my essay 'Ripples' (Appendix 1). These, Woolf's innocent rain distant in time, Chernobyl's poisoned rain, lingering now and seemingly set to fall, far into the future, are markers, to return to when

required to hold course, and sustain belief in travelling on. A further marker which grew to be important to my writing, is the writing of Sebald. He is a wanderer, his stories significantly chronicle exile, displacement and alienation. He writes:

I would regularly be overcome by such a sense of aimlessness and futility that I would go out purely in order to preserve and illusion of purpose. (8)

My intense personal involvement with the Borderlands and its 'Diaspora' here in Wales, the source of the project, stretches back to the final days of the USSR, when a nation state, barely known, rose like a 'submerged leviathan', as the media called Ukraine. In translation, *Ukraina* means Borderlands. My first encounter with a member of the Diaspora was related for the Council Members Newsletter (Appendix 2), to explain in story form, to a bemused group of politicians, what had unexpectedly begun to grow; a broad series of links between two distant cities. Since this is far from being an internally created work of fiction initiated by a day dream, or long Autumnal walk, but the very personal fictional interpretation of a hundred or more 'Lowry-like' figures in a score of landscapes, my own experience of this being a journey is central to the whole project. Sebald, similarly, makes journeys of his writings. In *The Rings of Saturn* his journey mirrors my own experience of writing several of the Triptych tales, particularly 'Hill' and 'Neighbour'. He writes:

I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom, but also with the paralysing horror that came over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past. (9)

My first encounter rapidly led to involvement with a Ukrainian Club and Cultural Centre, already fading by then. The Polish Club had long ago vanished. My role and interest, for many of them -- to paraphrase Gwyn Thomas, were 'voters of the best kind; they voted for me'. (10) -- drew me inside a dwindling community. But there was a moment of comprehension, on January 6th 1992. The Western Christian Epiphany became mine as I watched on the fringe of a vast crowd of people, three or four generations of them, and at the centre some sixty or more elderly men, the Diaspora. These men and women supported by frequent visits to the Borderlands later, were to become a deep well, not just a simple source, of ideas, material and most importantly of 'out-of-the-blue' inspiration. Intriguingly, there was little or no contact with their families here in exile; the men's memories, their fates, were remarkably internalised, one could say hidden. The Berlin Wall had come down, Soviet power had collapsed, but this was a Christmas celebration at which I, and many of their descendants, stood far outside the warmth and light of the hearth, beyond the influence of the *Domovik* (11). I was bemused, watching, but not understanding those rituals of long exile. A decade before there would have been more than double the number of old men in this vast room. It seemed obvious, each survivor must have a story of war, separation, journey, misery, death, something to tell; something that would interest a writer, an audience, interest their distant countrymen? So, Dominic Behan's (12) words of advice (Appendix 3) on inspiration for the aspiring writer crossed my mind, and, not for the first time, in this ageing company, I drank, I listened, I remembered. This was undoubtedly going to become a Troika; consisting of the Diaspora, their borderlands homeland, and the writer, each with a part to play in what

would become a long running exercise. This shape still exists two decades on, though all of the exiles are now ghosts, living only in memories and a mass of notes and recollections.

My links with the Borderlands grew speedily, remarkably. This was in those last few years before the Internet, mobile phones and intrusive social media, changed human contact forever. The letter brought to the Council produced a dozen, then a score, then another, of names and postal addresses, many academics and professionals 'desperately seeking', contact, materials, links, and help.

An old habit brought me luck. I correspond, I actually write, well nowadays I type letters, daily. More than four decades ago, a comment by P.G. Wodehouse in a BBC production, that 'a writer should begin each day with a letter' (13) to a friend or acquaintance struck a chord within me, and I've done that ever since. In 1991 for the cost of a first class stamp a single A4 page, sometimes with a news or chess or recipe cutting from *The Times*, could be posted to Ukraine, Russia, Belarus or Poland. I wrote six letters a week, every week. In an age of instantaneous exchange of text, voice or image, it is very easy to forget that back then a Fax machine was a rare luxury in the east of Europe, even easier to forget the existence of entire communities, educational, commercial, social, who had never been allowed to receive a letter from abroad, even from someone in another eastern Bloc state (14). Weekly notes to two or three individuals, monthly to others, brought access to information and material of immense value (15). The editor of *'Odnostriy'*, a military history magazine, in exchange for reviews and photographs, provided enough background material to write two articles (Appendices 4 and 5) both published in Britain, in popular journals. Using this material, information from a country few had yet visited since the fall of the USSR, I talked to the assembled Diaspora and a couple of their half-interested sons. It was an epiphany in reverse, if you can have two in one project. They enthused. "Now I remember L'viv in 1941, you wrote about it, you've been there? Ah, maybe we can talk?" Or "I was in that battle, artilleryman. Lost many friends. I'll tell you sometime." So, in two years from that late Summer of 1991 to the Spring of 1993, when I first landed at Kyiv's Borispol Airport, a valuable conduit had been created between them and their borderlands 'home'.

My address book, within six months, contained more than fifty English speaking contacts, all sprung from that first request. Many were ready translators and interpreters, fluent, even if they sounded a little 'mid-Atlantic'. They were keen and interested. Due to them my article on Shakespeare's Sonnet 81 (Appendix 6) became an English translation text in Rivne Oblast's schools. Five contacts were full-blown Professors. These men were 'door-openers' of exceptional agility, Butko, Burchak, Gorbik, Patsula and Rogala, all survivors of Stalin's reign; dabbling in history, sport, especially football, borderlands culture, and of course politics. It was possible to ask endless questions about poets or writers, about memories, and especially aspects of everyday life in education: "What festivals do you celebrate in school-time?"; "Is Gogol widely read?". Without having been born to write letters like essays none of what appears here would have emerged.

Twenty five years ago there was serious interest in the newly freed East of Europe, not only from an economic and political perspective, but a humanitarian one. Cities needed help,

contacts, access to knowledge, and to best practice. The City Council found money and in April 1993, together with the Chief Executive and Chief Whip, I flew to Kyiv, and drove westwards to Rivne for a conference. These early experiences form the basis of my MA Creative Writing Dissertation, hardly one formally researched, more of a total immersion in surprise disclosures and in disbelief. Within days we had established a Friendship Society, links between schools and colleges, based around Swansea Institute of Higher Education, then playing a central role in development and funding (16). News reports, and articles, radio and television appearances deepened my contact with the Diaspora, which became far deeper than was imagined would be the case. I became a regular attender at small gatherings, often chance encounters, one or two, talking over a pint of beer-like the early encounters between Sebald's narrator and Jacques Austerlitz. (17) Dominic Behan loomed again and again, becoming a benevolent, personal *Domovik*. Small snippets, phrases, recollections were cast, and began to be gathered, haphazardly at first, but soon recognised as likely to become a substantial amount of information from and about these elderly exiles; stateless once, now with a real homeland to shore up memories, a 'place' in the world, and in time. My writer's notebooks, kept since 1970, began to fill with these riches. As things steadily gathered in, and were recorded for the future, I didn't feel 'humbled' or 'privileged'. I was absolutely astonished, and very lucky, and began to frame what I was going to do, eventually.

It was in the apartment of Professor Josef Patsula, Chair of the University English Faculty at Ostafova in Rivne, ten years later on, that the road became certain. Three of us, Josef, myself and Dr. Vadim Kossalapov, Philologist and Chess Master, were discussing future prospects for co-operation. My Council seat had vanished in reorganisation, any role in economic links was clearly at an end; while education has its own way of ticking over in terms of contact, once the classroom door is opened. Josef and Vadim, both over seventy by then and avoiding retirement, were fascinated by the 'survival' (their term) of this group of men, and a few women from the Borderlands in distant Wales, and not for the first time they urged me to describe them, collectively and as individuals, and how they fitted in here. A dribble of the exiles had arrived home, but though largely welcomed, had not stayed. They became, perhaps, an enigma.

Patsula was adamant: write their stories, how, why, they left the Borderlands and ended up in Britain. Some, he thought, would be interesting, some very interesting indeed. Within days of the resurfacing of the Republic, cheap copies of memoirs by escapees from Stalin in the post war years had reappeared in Kyiv's bookshops, sponsored by Canadian and US *émigré* groups; books vitriolic, contrived, often worthless diatribes. (18) This story would be different. They anticipated a small flurry of articles, perhaps something in the form of a Reader for interested students. We had already collaborated on several projects. (19) Both recognised that unlike Ukraine, or Poland, in Britain, I had open access, not only to sources of inspiration, but also to the vast array of historical, biographical and literary works (20) which could provide a base-line for this work.

It was agreed from the outset that the results would, as with the earlier projects, remain in English, primarily for the support of English language students since English has almost entirely replaced Russian as the language of research and outreach. English was also the

language through which the exiles lived their lives. Whatever emerged, it would be the contents of my thickening notebooks which would furnish the basic material. These were filled with the exiles' responses, to such simple things as relating a journey made from Kosiv to Stryi, the first sight of a monument, or a regional delicacy. Long before, the old men had begun to talk, individually, about youth, beginnings, homes; delivered almost like snippets from Gogol's *Village Evenings Near Dikanka* Gogol (21) was Ukrainian born, and not Russian, that point was always emphasised to me: but these were merely opening gambits, nostalgia for a country which hadn't existed beyond the idea of 'Borderlands': the violent 'Bloodlands' which came to figure so frequently in the tales hidden beneath waving golden corn and blue skies. It was on that pivotal evening that Patsula frequently used that term 'Bloodlands', an old way of describing the steppes and fates of people from Kyiv to the Vistula, so often fought over, so often victims.

The problem underlying the project could be recognised at that stage: the passage of years. The elderly Diaspora were in their late seventies or eighties, the motivated Borderlands academics were approaching retirement. This was going to be a closed project. One-off, time and health conditions coloured its development. The tale 'Valley' was, for example. suddenly altered, rendered incomplete, silenced by an unexpected death and turned instead into a story of unfulfillment. It is an example of the difficulties which were bound to occur; funerals became, as the collection of ideas and thoughts continued, a major focus of research, and inspiration. The exile's grave is an interesting space, sacred, yet remarkably standard, as are the brief religious rites; but the people, not all are mourners, are a theatre more than an audience: stern faces, latter-day mutes, weeping families, sometimes no-one but a few exiles. Old veterans would stand close together, hatless, waiting patiently for God in the drizzle; Slavs separated from indigenous neighbours by a sea of memory and secrecy. It took me by surprise at the first burial when one man threw a small object into the grave. It landed with a metallic tap on the coffin, as others just dropped a handful of sand. This was the black and silver lapel badge of a 'former combatant', one of the eight thousand *Schutz* volunteers of the *14$^{th}$Galician Waffen SS Grenadier Division* recruited in Galicia, who found their way to Britain from a Prisoner-of-War Camp at Rimini in Italy in the late 1940's. (22) Since then I've seen many worn in public and more of these emblems thrown into open graves. Over time, I've handled three, and each is individually numbered; the final tribute of secret men, like the closing of a secret book, the most significant, evocative fragment of history encountered.

'Death is nothing at all' goes the popular funeral reading written by Canon Scott Holland in the First World War (23), but in terms of this journey into the Borderland tales and fragments, death has become if not everything, then at least a significant and regular occurrence over the past two decades. My role, quiet and watching at these final ceremonies, has been to look, record and remember, almost as a camera would, gathering images, words and gestures from which to build my tales. 'Solstice' is a typical example. The Winter of 2001 was stormy and resulted in several nights of power cuts. The morning after one of these, I stood behind a group in the town cemetery, listening quietly. One bemoaned not being able to get to the pub; others the lack of television or radio. None of them liked the long dark

hours. One or two had sat in a chair all night, with a candle to light them. All had been cold. I thought fearful. Yuri said "Like the night at Busk, eh?". There was a ripple of repetition of the name Busk. I knew of that village. It had lain in the 'security zone' which the *14th SS* had systematically 'policed' during the Autumn of 1944. Several of them had mentioned a *Haus Walderlust* – a field brothel based there. Few villagers survived the 'policing'. "Don't worry." said Yuri. "They won't come to get you; they're all dead." In those few words lay the beginning of my tale. In 'Solstice', the storm and darkness provide the framework, the memories, solitude, and the long-held fear of retribution led to emotional and psychological destruction.

I was a collector of 'second hand' material, not infrequently tainted by links to the wartime past, interpreting and reworking its memories, its potential, as Sebald does in his visit to Terezin. (24) The project developed through this observation, and eavesdropping, which led on to questions or comment. Without the fascinating material gathered at funerals, and in particular at the 'wakes' afterwards, several of these tales would never have emerged. 'Money', 'Photograph', and the last completed of all the tales in the Tryptich, 'Seal' are examples of graveside gathering of useful material. For Sebald too the graveyard is a frequent image, in text and photograph:

I studied the faces of those solitary people who visited the graveyard now and then, or I observed the slow wing beats of an owl in its curving flight over the tombstones at nightfall. (25)

There are cemeteries where neighbours, attending out of politeness and 'form', have heard snatches of what they might have thought an old folk song from Poland sung over the grave, but this was in fact the remarkable, melancholy worded 14th Division's SS hymn. The conclusion of 'Late' came to me as I stood at the graveside of a Volhynian whom no one, shaking heads and shrugging shoulders, seemed to have known in life, but everyone toasted in death. A graveside toast of vodka was not uncommon. The denouement of 'Dawn' presented itself during the closing hymn at a dismal crematorium on a bleak Winter's afternoon. I felt the touch of Poe penning the last few dark lines of his story 'The Premature Burial' as the gloom settled in, with the thought that mad Gogol, it has sometimes been claimed, was buried alive. Just how, I often wondered, can death prove to be so creative? Of course, this, and the necessary politics of the stories, means that they are, consistently, dark in tone which, I am fully aware, may challenge many potential readers.

The collection of the germs, ideas, phrases, which gave the tales life was at some stages a two-way enterprise. An interesting response could be gained, a door opened, by my retelling one memory. Patsula had often told me of his father, a junior officer in Poland's doomed army, leaving for war in the Summer of 1939, never to be seen or heard of again (Appendix 7). That recollection combined war, death and uncertainty, well known to the Diaspora They could always add something of their own, and did. Those early years had been straightforward if unfocussed, frequently a chat over a drink, a small gem emerging now and then. The fund of opening lines of 'starts' to tales began to grow. My MA in Creative Writing provided a way of concentrating effort, a steady platform from which to begin the creation of

the larger, exile-focussed, whole. The early tale ‘Exodus’ first appeared in that work, and then ‘Clockmaker’ was published in a University anthology.

The ideas, the sparks of creativity, appear almost anywhere for most writers. They can be a tune, a shower of rain - for Sebald, a diesel train journey.(26) However, for this project -- and it’s been far from straightforward in terms of how it developed -- I have had to pursue these ‘starts’ (the term I prefer to use) once I became aware of their possible existence, by seeking most of them out actively and not always successfully either -- as the sad final tale in the Triptych, ‘Valley’ indicates --one by one, in visits and small gatherings across the coalfield, beyond to hill farms and smallholdings; to enough graveyards and crematoria to fill a decent guide book. I went to pubs and cafes, hospitals, and much further than that in the East; to schools, museums, cemeteries, folklore shrines and heart-breaking Holocaust sites, of which there are so many, across the Borderlands. The ‘starts’ have not simply fallen into my hands. Susan Stewart was right. I have in fact, been my own ‘personal shopper’.

The death of Patsula, attributed to Chernobyl’s enduring venom, just a year after completing my MA degree, gave me time, and a reason to consider. I told Vadim a project existed. It stared back at me, unblinking; my own *Domovik*, my oracle was dancing, happy to lead onwards. Enough material existed to begin in earnest; and access to a much larger source lay beyond that, though the clock of life ticked away. It would, he agreed, take care, time and sensitivity, along with a well thought out timetable and framework, just for me to gather the mass of material, whatever it was going to turn out to be, and wherever it was to be found; but the ‘Borderlands’ project, the title chosen in preference to the other attractive option of Patsula’s ‘Bloodlands’, existed. All that had to be done was to write it.

The project freely uses the process which Tessa Hadley terms ‘stealing from life’ to make a story. (27) The Orthodox Bible in ‘United’, and the breakfast ritual in ‘Dawn’, are examples of this. In a similar way, Sebald discovers a world in the contents of a window of an Antique Bazaar in a former Holocaust Concentration Camp town, Terezin, objects which:

[e]xerted such a power on me that it was a long time before I could tear myself away... their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind. (28)

Often, a simple spark, like a broken child’s doll in ‘Grandfather’, or the haunting Violin Sonata in ‘Bach’, influences the fate of a character, literally reflecting Gutkind’s title: *You Can’t Make this Stuff up.* (29) Though far from being non-fiction, the five universally accepted W’s of Journalism -- who, what, when, where, and why -- certainly proved essential in the approach to this collection. There is within the Triptych, a positive reflection of Gerard’s view of the kind of writing which is not formed simply from within the writer’s own imagination. He uses the term ‘living research’, not unlike Hadley’s, and where this project is concerned, his idea of ‘An informal chat over a drink’ (30) is a frame to be found in several of the Borderland tales such as ‘Exodus’. His comment on the facts of human nature, and on the course of conversation (31), certainly echoes Hadley, and is the origin of the tale ‘Exodus’.

Gerard uses the sub-heading ‘Writing in the Borderlands’, when he describes the writer seeking out the ‘marginal place, the no-man’s land between safety and danger’, and quoting Reiss, he highlights the impotence of ‘human borders, the gray area between where things are established and things are unknown’. (32) Sebald frequently follows this path along the margins. Gerard’s comments are of substantial value in terms of this collection, in the deep, dark, subject matter of many tales, which are dedicated to reflecting the determination of several contemporary Borderland’s writers, discussed below. They imply a determination which clearly supports the need for the resonance and strength of writing adopted in the Borderlands Triptych.

Notes:

1. See ‘Personalising Ethnography: On Memory, Evidence and Subjectivity. The Writing & Learning Journey’ in the *International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 5:2 (2008) p. 89.

2. Philip Gerard, *Creative Non-Fiction* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1996) p. 90.

3. Oksana Zabuzhko (b.1960), Ukrainian writer and poet. Author of *The Fieldbook of Ukrainian Sex*, trans., Nina Shevchuk-Murray (Las Vegas: Amazon Crossing, 2001), regarded across the Borderlands as the most influential novel since the fall of the USSR.

4. W.G. Sebald is a significant influence on my work. His total literary output was only eight volumes across several genres.

5. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing* (Oxford: OUP, 1991) p. 171.

6. ‘Number 4’, was the title I selected for an annual prose competition ‘The Patsula Prize’ awarded to English undergraduate students at Rivne’s Institute of Slavonic Studies between 2006 and 2012. The 2008 title is a nod to Chekhov’s ‘Ward 6’, but the precise subject required no amplification. The students all understood. They knew Reactor Number 4. Previously ‘Patsula Prize’ winning entries had appeared in *Cambrensis* the Wales Short Story Journal.

7. Woolf’s posthumous *A Writer’s Diary* (1953) (London: Triad-Granada, 1993) is among several similar diaries used to inspire rather than support, the creative process. W.S. Maugham *A Writer’s Notebook* (1953) (London: Penguin, 1993) is another example. The inspiration is in the diarist’s skill at collecting material — any material — which might prove useful, and storing it in a retrievable form. Maugham is chronological; barely a day in his life passes without something collected, a note on sunset, the day’s food, a bath.

8. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London: Harvill Press, 1992) p. 156.

9. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Harvill Press, 1995) p. 3.

10. The debt, large or small, owed by every living Welsh writer to Thomas is universally recognised. In this case it comes from my own notebook: comments from a short contribution made by him at a Workers Education Association tutors gathering I attended in Swansea in.1977.

11. The *Domovik* (*Domovoi* in Russian) is a benevolent, protective household spirit which acts as guardian, sometimes the advisor by example, of house and family. Inevitably male, the *Domovik* is also an oracle; he can predict or warn of the future. If there is laughter, if he is heard singing or dancing, then good fortune will come, and come soon. If, however, the household spirit is troublesome then it indicates a problem. If the spirit is heard wailing like a cat, or extinguishes a candle, then a death is foretold, usually that of the head of the household. The *Domovik* is still omnipresent in day to day Borderlands life, the tales reflect this.

12. Dominic Behan, (1928-1989). Irish writer and singer. The most remarkable man I ever met. His presence was immeasurable, and his advice, freely given to me in person, and recorded immediately afterwards, has always been followed by me as a writer.

13. There is, of course, nothing of P.G Wodehouse's work or influence in this entire project beyond this piece of sound advice which has had immense value in the matter, and is taken from my notebooks. The source is a BBC4 programme *Wodehouse in Exile*, originally broadcast in 2013.

14. Several of my Borderland contacts, friends and acquaintances collected these letters, and kept them carefully, the teachers sometimes using them as translation material with their students. When in 2012, Professor Anatoly Mikhailovich Rogala died, his eldest son sought me at my hotel. He brought with him a packet of over a hundred of my letters to his father, and a scrapbook pasted full with cuttings from *The Times* daily Chess column. 'They had been often re-read and kept safely.' He earnestly assured me, 'Did I want them returned?'

15. This regular, sustained correspondence brought me possession of the *Pisanka* decorated egg central to the tale 'Exodus', and the remarkable military 'Seal' from the tale of that title, and sight of several remarkable photographs too. It may bring more.

16. Swansea Institute of Higher Education, and several of its academic and support staff were pivotal to the early stages of this work, visiting the Borderlands and organising a number of visits by Ukrainian academics and teachers. Contact was established in 1993, and exchange visits in both directions took place regularly between then and 1999.

17. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001) pp. 7,41,61.

18. These 'penny-dreadfuls' were often religious recruitment diatribes, based on the descriptions of the evils of the *Gulag* and Soviet repression. They were, inevitably, unmemorable, external, poor replications of the *Samizdat* form. One or two had

slightly more value, and Anatloy Divarov's *In Stalin's Shadow* (New York: Bayda Books, 1991) is an example.

19. One example which is still in frequent use is an English language Reader of articles and essays for students of history: Josef Patsula and Robert Morgan, eds., *Vikings, Varangians and Northmen* (Rivne: Institute of Slavonic Studies, 2000).

20. Most libraries still survived on a morass of old USSR produced books and papers, despite the provision of substantial amounts of educational material from Council of Europe, charities and other sources, especially religious groups. Some was of dubious quality.

21. See *Village Evenings Near Dikanka*, trans., Christopher English, (Oxford: OUP, 1994). This collection of tales and anecdotes is among his earliest work, and the material for it, custom and costume, phrase and superstition, was collected in the Borderlands, and in a rather similar way to the material for this project.

22. The substantial remnants of the *14th (Galician) Waffen-SS Grenadier Division* recruited almost entirely in the Borderlands surrendered to the western Allies in Austria in May 1945. They were taken to a PoW camp at Rimini, where they were guarded by Polish Troops of General Anders Second Corps. These prisoners avoided the fate of the Cossacks who served in the Waffen SS, who were all taken back to the USSR and eliminated; a deportation vividly described in Nikolai Tolstoy's 1977 book 'Victims of Yalta'. The '14th' came to Britain, from where some moved on to Australia, South Africa, Canada and the USA, in 1947. They arrived in the wake of 'Operation Westward Ho!', an official plan by the Atlee Government to bring much needed manpower to British industry and agriculture. Their screening, and the process of immigration and of granting citizenship to a large number of members of the Waffen SS, figures between eight and twelve thousand are frequently used, has never been publicly disclosed. Nor has the fact that along with them were a number of members of groups and units directly involved in Holocaust activities. This remarkable administrative procedure and its underlying processes remain one of the major, as yet, unwritten non-fictional creative writing topics of the post war period. The 14th Waffen SS Division, like most other SS structures created post-war, a 'self-help', highly disciplined organisation in Britain, Canada and the USA to support 'comrades-in-arms' and promote and protect their interests. Frederick Forsyth deals with one such organisation in *The Odessa File* (London: Pan Books, 1972), a novel which is far from being simply a work of fiction. The 14th Waffen SS support organisation in the United Kingdom still exists and is active, named *The Association of Former Combatants*, and based in Holland Park, London.

23. Canon Scott Holland wrote the epitaph poem 'Death is Nothing at All' at the end of the Great War. Intended to be read at memorial services for those who had fallen, but had no known grave.

24. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* pp. 275-276.

25. Ibid p. 325.

26. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* p. 27.

27. Tess Hadley form an interview on Radio Wales, April 2008 on the long-listing of her novel *The Master Bedroom* (London: Vintage, 2007) for 'Wales Book of the Year Award', taken from my notebooks.

28. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* p. 275.

29. Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make this Stuff Up* (Da Capo: Pennsylvania, 2012).

30. Gerard, *Creative Non-Fiction* p. 64.

31. Ibid p.69.

32. Ibid p. 47.

## Considering the Key Historical Background

'The complexity of writing almost anything historically or culturally based about what since 1991 the world knows again as Ukraine, can be simply reminded to us all by referring to place names. Take that most beautiful and elegant Galician city, Stalin's skyscraper housing schemes aside, known in the Ukrainian language as L'viv. The Poles still call it L'wow, and to the Russians, even to those Ukrainians who speak Russian as a first language the city is L'vov. The old Hapsburg German name, Lemberg still appears in the histories, poems and prose, on a few street signs too, a lingering whisper of the past. Older maps and histories bear the name Leopolis, classical and proud. Only one name is never, ever spoken, never, ever written, it's just murmured by the wind across that old city marketplace; yes, where the graveyard of the faithful was once. It's the name used by the Jewish population, and remember over 40% of the population of what we now choose to call L'viv was Jewish in 1939. The city still stands, but where has the name disappeared? Where are those who spoke it?' (Robert Morgan) (1).

It is dry reading in many places, and long-winded, but Hrushevsky's massive ten volume *History of Ukraine-Rus* is inevitably regarded as a national treasure. (2) No Borderlands home is without at least the concise edition, and copies were to be found, usually unread, on dusty shelves in the homes of the exiled Diaspora. Called upon to explain the complexity, the contradictions, even the territory of Ukraine, Hrushevsky's work is a good place to start. If nothing else it forces the reader to recognise that he is staring into a whirlpool. Hrushevsky is regarded as the Borderlands greatest intellectual of modern times (3), and his attempt at writing its history is the reason for this. The period from Prehistory to the Treaty of Haidach in 1658, occupies ten substantial volumes, then in 1934 Hrushevsky died suddenly aged sixty eight, arguably on Stalin's orders, with the bulk of the work unfinished. After 1658, revolt followed revolt, invasions, persecutions, partitions, emigration, harsh control rather than governance by a raft of foreign states --Austria-Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Tsars -- and then came the bloodbath of the twentieth century.

Borderlands history is, perhaps impossible, to write adequately, yet there have been modern readable attempts. In the past twenty years, Anna Reid's competent *Borderlands* is echoed in my own choice of title; Serhy Plokhy's *Gates of Europe*, histories of Ukraine by Anthony Clayton, by Yekelchyk, and Kubicheck (4), bring home the enduring tragedy of Borderlands history. During the Orange Revolution, students sang a folk song entitled 'Pity Ukraine'. This would be a good title for a history book of a bleak century. What it is necessary to outline here in brief, as the background to a Triptych which spans over seventy years of 'interesting times', as the Chinese curse goes, is a rich seam for any writer. Even now, this history is only just beginning to create a canon of Borderland fiction in the Borderland's languages to replace the abandoned morass of Soviet realism. One writer, who the new writing in Ukraine and Poland has revived, is Isaac Babel (5): diarist of the failure to export the revolution, and chronicler of the criminal world of Odessa.

Two chapters in a single volume of history have come to underpin this creative exploration of an incredible part of Europe, and the complex people it has produced. Norman Davies, in *Vanished Kingdoms* writing of what he calls 'Half-Forgotten Europe'(6), remembers the Borderlands of the Triptych in two chapters. In 'Galicia: Kingdom of the Naked and Starving' Davies provides an essential text to bring to any reader of the Borderland Triptych the confusion, the tumbling disorder of the disputed place which lies at the heart of these tales; the deeply etched, enduring folk culture, and the many misfortunes of its inhabitants, at home or in exile -- a diverse people living in a linguistic kaleidoscope. Davies recognises the role that exile, voluntary or forced, has played in the history of these lands. He reflects upon the Borderlands best loved song: *'Oh, Gural are you not weeping/to walk from your native land/from pine trees, mountains and pastures/ from the torrent's silver strand/ Oh, Gural, are you not weeping?/ Oh, Gural come back home.'* (7) This is a song to be found in at least four Borderland languages.

In 'Rusyn: The Republic of One Day (15th March 1939)', Davies describes the failure of the Borderlands people to 'become' (8), to create, a country, a state. They can design a flag, and acquire a national anthem, but not protect their borders from a host of enemies for more than a few hours.

Borderlands history is critical to the tales of this project; not the golden era of history recorded by Hrushevsky, but those bitter brutal decades since 1900. The individuals at the centre of each tale created here were sculpted by events on a scale which an outsider inevitably finds hard to understand and come to terms with. Patsula's use of the old term 'Bloodlands' surfaces in the writer's mind, linked to Babel's powerful descriptions of violence and combat, the first published tales of a borderlands war. Much of the fighting in World War I took place across these Borderlands, between three great Empires, destroying states and nations; in the 1920's at the time of most of the exile's births, an Independent Ukraine was a vivid, inspirational memory, as were the long civil wars, the Soviet invasion and war with Poland, which Babel's *Red Cavalry* tales, anecdotes and sketches record. Partition followed, then the loss of two thirds of the Borderlands to the USSR by conquest. Then, in 1930 when they were children, came the single most appalling event in the destruction of Borderlands culture: the killing of the *Kobzars*, blind musicians (9), carriers of centuries of Borderland Cossack culture. Three years later Stalin's *Holodomor* famine followed; man-made, enforced at the point of the bayonet, one of the most inhuman events of the early thirties, exposed to the western world by Welsh journalist Gareth Jones. (10) No-one knows how many died in the Wars and the estimate for the famine is somewhere between four and six million men, women and children. As adolescents, they lived from 1937 through Stalin's era of purges of intellectuals, of cultures and faiths: deportations, imprisonment, numberless executions, the coming of the *Gulag.* By 1939, rapidly growing up, the exiles witnessed the occupation of the last of the coveted Borderlands, with the collapse of Poland and the *Blitzkrieg.* It is difficult to imagine growing up in such times; and barely two years later, *Operation Barbarossa,* the Axis invasion of the Borderlands, literally turned them once more into Bloodlands, submerged under a Nazi province. In my work the Holocaust is always, inevitably the elephant in the room, omnipresent, but not quite dominating the war

period tales; a deliberate choice, and morally a difficult one. Sebald, as Schwartz suggests, undoubtedly changed his own approach to this subject as his work developed:

The account of the Third Reich's promotion of the silk industry, like so much else in Sebald's work, becomes a metaphor for the unspeakable. Silkworm cultivation, according to the Nazis, will teach "the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to prevent racial degeneration." (11)

He goes on to describe how the cocoons are finally destroyed in rising steam: "When a batch is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed." (12) As Andre Aciman points out in a 1998 essay: "Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else." This was written before the publication of *Austerlitz*; there Sebald spends many pages on a detailed description of the camp at Terezin. (13)

Underneath the Nazi occupation, a dirty civil war continued bubbling, one brought vividly to life by Zabuzhko in *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets.* (14) In 1944, the return of Stalin's armies, was a time of choice for those in the tales: run or stay; live or die. There were more deportations, more executions, more internecine strife, and for the first time, there were Displaced Persons (15), refugees in the true sense -- like Sebald's character Max Ferber:

I took steps, consciously or unconsciously, to keep at bay thoughts of my parents' sufferings and of my own misfortune, and no doubt I succeeded sometimes in maintaining a certain equability by my self-imposed seclusion. (16)

By 1945, those featured in the tales had moved away into isolation, then exile. Strident voices many of them, but far away and fading; some silent, surviving and scared of discovery. They themselves became outsiders, observers of the annexation of their homeland in the terms of post-war peace, and the welding in place of an Iron Curtain. In the 1950's they were distant listeners through Radio Liberty to the extinction of the Borderlands armed resistance to the USSR; they learned from the BBC World Service about Krushchev's poisoned 'gift' of depopulated Crimea to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in the mid fifties. They, now ageing, knew little of the covert resistance to Soviet power across and far beyond the Borderlands in the 1960's and 1970's, nor of the tidal surge of *Samizdat* underground writing which sustained it. Nor did they, nor perhaps any of us, realise the turning point in April 1986 that was Chernobyl, which accelerated *Perestroika* and developed *Glasnost* across a union which was losing its grip on the Borderlands, as much as any other part of its vast territory.

Far from home, they knew only from the world's media of cracks in the wall, of the creation of *Rukh*, the sea-changing political movement led by writers. (17) Their own grasp of history was of that history which stalled, and fell silent in 1945; an old history which they carried into exile with them. The human chain of freedom from L'viv to Kyiv in 1990 appeared live on Television news. They recognised the places, but their significance was limited. It was another historical moment they had only watched from far outside. In August 1991, the Communist *coup d'etat* failed, and the Borderlands nations seceded from the Soviet Union. This brought the astonishing realisation that in one day, from being exiles, a struggling

Diaspora, diminishing in numbers and hope, living on memories, they had a country for the first time, not just a homeland imagined, and hoped for, but a real nation state; one to which they could return. One which would surely remember their part, and treat them accordingly. The reality was to be very different, and would be reflected in the material gathered for tales such as 'Mushroom' in which very old debts would be remembered, and paid in full.

These comments on the historical background are necessarily brief, but can be succinctly concluded by Sloniowska:

As the gravestones fell from the plinth, the bones and skulls of citizens of various ethnicities murdered by the regime came tumbling after; they struck the ground and turned back into living young people, who went off to their homes and their families, while the idol bowed low, fell down and crumbled to dust. (18)

Notes:

1. Obraz No. 9. 2004 p. 20, letter to the Editor. On the subject of the value of writing about Galicia and Volhynia. *OBRAZ* — the word can mean 'image', or even picture — was a journal published in English and Ukrainian by a Leeds based journalist during the period from 2002- 2014. There were roughly forty issues produced. It covered historical, literary, contemporary political, biographical and linguistic issues. It was produced as an alternative, modern publication for second-generation Borderlands readers, countering *Ukrainian Thought* the London based weekly controlled by the organisation of former members of the *14th* Division.

2. Winston Churchill managed to write his *History of the English Speaking Peoples* in a mere four volumes. However, Mikhail Hrushevsky (1866-1934) was undertaking an exercise in bringing the written Ukrainian language, the language of the Medieval Rus, significantly, if not totally, suppressed by the efforts of the Tsars over centuries, to an eager audience of his countrymen. The work is usually found in Ukrainian or Polish in the form of an abridged single volume of selected essays and recorded events, some four or five hundred pages. There is however, a modern full version, ten volumes, published in English: trans., Uliana M. Pasicznyk et. al., *History of Ukraine-Rus* (Edmonton: CIUSP, 1997-2010). Hrushevsky's status is guaranteed by his *magnum opus*, his role in the brief nationalist government post world War I, and his mysterious fate. There are two English language biographies: Tomas Prymak *Mikhail Hrushevsky* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) and Serhiy Plokhy *Unmaking Imperial Russia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Hrushevsky is considered sympathetically in each of the books in (4) below.

3. Anna Reid's *Borderlands* (London: Orion Books, 1997) has been consistently updated in four subsequent editions. Serhiy Plokhy's *Gates of Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), Serhiy Yekelchuk's *Ukraine* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), and Paul

Kubicheck's *The History of Ukraine* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008) are all similar in content.

4. Isaac Babel (1894-1940(?)) Jewish writer born in Ukraine. He served with the Red Army in 1920. His many short pieces on the Soviet campaign against Poland are based on the gathering of small events and fragments he encountered; as are his tales of the Jewish criminal underworld of Odessa.

5. See Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms. The History of Half Forgotten Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

6. Ibid. p. 458. The 'pains of emigration' form the subject of the song according to Davies.

7. Ibid. pp. 627-9.

8. The *Kobzars*, subject of a work in progress, were blind mendicant musicians, who played the Bandura, the Borderlands stringed instrument. They travelled around, singing songs and telling folk tales of the Cossacks. Inevitably accompanied by a small child, and faintly reminiscent of the holy man in Kipling's *Kim.* A Soviet 'conference' of *Kobzari* was called at Kharkiv in 1930. Three hundred of them gathered there and they and their young acolytes were murdered on Stalin's orders. A handful survived in Polish territory, but the mould was broken, and they faded away by the outbreak of the Second World War. George Borrow collected and translated two of these *Kobzar* Cossack poems from the Ukrainian language when he visited Imperial Russia in the 1830's working on the great Imperial Chinese dictionary. This is a feature of 'Ah! Yes! We know him well!'' A story of the classroom and poetry in Rivne to be found in my MA dissertation.

9. Gareth Richard Vaughan Jones (1905-1935), journalist, was a well-known figure in Ukraine, but little known in Wales. A former private Secretary to Lloyd George, he visited Ukraine on a train journey, and released news of *Holodomor* to the world. He was later murdered, aged thirty, in Manchuria, allegedly on Stalin's orders. A plaque in his memory is to be found at Aberystwyth University. Jones, though the subject of two works by a near relative, is yet to receive attention in the sense of assessment in a formal biography.

10. L.S. Schwarz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007) pp. 12-13.

11. Ibid. pp. 12 -13

12. Ibid. pp. 12 -13

13. Oksana Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, trans., Nina Shevchuk-Murray (Las Vegas: Amazon Crossing, 2009). This novel deals with the life and suffering of a young woman in the Insurgent Army, put to death by the NKVD in

1947. It begins with the discovery of a photograph, much in the manner of Sebald's use of photographs.

14. Displaced Persons; the term used after World War II for over eleven million people who were forced to leave their home countries due to war or persecution. Now usually called refugees. A large number of the Borderlands men didn't fall into this category as they had been soldiers fighting for one side or another. They were either Prisoners of War (PoW's) or Recovered Allied Military Personnel (RAMP).

15. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* p.191.

16. *Rukh* — the word means 'Movement' — was set up in 1989, and openly due to the policy of *Glasnost.* Led by the Ukrainian Writers Union, at the outset it had a political and literary basis, but after Independence rapidly became a centre-right political party with little hope of attaining power. The writers drifted away. The promenade which gives the geographical background to the tale 'Neighbour' was provided by an old friend Vasyl' Kuybida, then *Rukh* Mayor of L'viv. As *Rukh* candidate in Ukraine's 2014 Presidential election, Kuybida gained just 0.06% of the vote.

17. Zanna Sloniowska, *The House with the Stained-Glass Window*, trans., Antonia Lloyd Jones, (London: Maclehose Press, 2015) p. 140.

**Key Themes that Emerge in the Project**

This work is a triptych, a triple cycle of tales, rather than short stories; with a little more than an inclination of the writer's head to the idea of a Trinity (though unholy and unshriven). The central themes, intentional -- and there are others which sometimes slip into the tales -- are captured in the one-word titles of each of the parts: Home, Exile and Return. In this choice there is a clear, deliberate link with the work of Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's core chapters are headed Departure, Initiation and Return; headings, only slightly adapted in my project, ideal for the purpose of the Borderlands tales. (1) Although my settings are historically specific, and chronological, based upon research, and realist in nature, Campbell's interest in the archetypal and mythic also resonates with the tales here.

Each central character in these cycles of tales is essentially alone, on a journey, if not specifically a hero, not at least in Campbell's terms. Campbell examines the individual undertaking an adventure, a familiar trope across many cultures, including the Borderlands, over long centuries. His heroes are great figures of religion, history, and myth, sustained and in some cases eternal. My characters are simple individuals, who, if they were not recorded and developed in the writing here, would slip away unnoticed, without even achieving Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. In this sense they are not dissimilar to many of the protagonists of short stories from the nineteenth century onwards. Sebald's emigrant characters are similarly determined, and he reflects on travelling in isolation. They are characterised as:

-as far away from each other as they could be, and so silent, that not a word might have passed their lips in the whole of their lives. (2)

The first part of the Triptych concerns the departure of the Diaspora from their Borderlands homes, following in several instances a 'call to adventure' in the service of war, actively as in 'Ruin' or reluctantly, in 'Snow'. In other tales a refusal to leave the homeland, as in 'Lost' and 'Saviour', owes a debt to Campbell's approach. As does the second part, where loss of homeland in Exile provides its own complex initiation and apotheosis, in several forms, for the exiles who appear in the tales I have written. At this stage in the development of his thesis Campbell uses the entirely appropriate term 'road of trials' (3), which is clearly apparent in 'Beryl', 'Bach' and 'United!'. The content of his third chapter, Return, with its alternative prospect of refusal to return, of rescue from beyond, and also of the crossing of a critical threshold, is again recognised, and recognisable, in the final section of my own tales, especially in 'Motherland', 'Hill' and 'Solstice'. These are not simply stories, any more than those Campbell examines, but tales created for a specific purpose: to bring something of the problematic, unique experiences of, what was once described to me as a 'lost generation' of Borderland exiles, back to those who remained, and who don't know them; or to those who have forgotten. At the heart of Campbell's research is an interest in faithful, culturally important, sometimes actually dangerous symbols, which are needed for completeness in life, and memory. In the case of the Borderlands the 'heroes' in these tales are so often wrought in

the silences of personal despair. Every tale is also a tale of loss in some way, often irrevocable, inexplicable loss; 'Journey', for example, is a tale of a lost family.

Lyosha's wife and child, after so much, borne away forever on the siren's wind. On the window ledge one small thing remained. A little grey cloth mouse, with pink eyes and nose. Ksenia's favoured *'Didus'*. Her tiny, protective guardian from the night's terrors.

A life lost violently at the moment before salvation is explored in 'Lost', and another, taken, as a cold dish of revenge in 'Beryl'; and lost hope for what will never come to pass is examined in 'Saviour'. Many tales are concerned with losses of innocence: the loss of childhood, of virtue, of family, of a future life in 'Tears' and 'Trunk'; these two and the short tale 'Lost' are perhaps echoes of that loss of innocence so memorably reflected in Golding's *Lord of the Flies;* Galynka's loss is total:

I was at the rear, covering the others as they waded across the stream. My brother's cries were pitiful, the others were swearing, breathing heavily, but I heard it. Far off it was, and high, like a vixen's scream, sharp, quick. One scream only, dying in the cold night wind.

In 'Tears' and 'Trunk', linked tales, the loss is total, stillborn, incomplete. In 'Motherland', the cornerstone tale of the Return part of the triptych, loss is implicit, in the shambles of the graveyard, the approaching funeral, and even the memory of impending, inevitable loss in the far-off Summer when the war began. In the few tales which draw in the second generation -- grown up children born in exile, owing little debt or deference to the Borderlands -- such as 'Money' and 'Photograph', there is not only the loss of a parent, but also of belief, of reality, and once more, perhaps part of a childhood. Wood, in his introduction to Sebald's *Austerlitz* talks of victims which "belong to blessed memory, and their murders cry out for public memorial"; but refers rather differently to the counterfeit cover image of the book: " the boy has vanished into the private obscurity and ordinary silence which will befall most of us." (4)

The knowledge unexpectedly gained somehow becomes a life-changing loss too in many of the tales. In 'Medal' the loss is unfathomable: a whole man, an existence, an identity, truth too, has somehow vanished deliberately, inexplicably, and for a reason that can never be known once death intervenes. The passage of the Iron Cross, from the holder to the writer, the latter simply as courier, and then its physical transfer as a gift to a Borderland museum, was written to echo the ancient folklore idea that evil, or 'badness' to use a child's term, has a tangible presence, and so the transfer of that medal from the dying holder to a neutral, passive body which could suffer no harm, somehow would cure all the wrongs that he had committed, whatever and whoever he really was.

In 'Mushroom', one sudden violent loss of purity and of youth becomes, more than a generation later, resolved by three losses imposed in careful, reasoned revenge:

The bedroom door was ajar … and jammed against it lay the fat short msn, eyes half closed, and his shirt covered in vomit and pus, a thin vein of dried blood from nose and mouth. The *Dacha* stank of human shit. There was vomit splattered everywhere, spewed over the sink,

spattered on the floor and table where stood two glasses, half filled, with vodka bottle and a packet of salt.

‘Well, well,’she said to herself. ‘The old men remembered the old witches remedy for poison!’ But it hadn’t worked’.

In ‘Bach’, guilt and fear of discovery brings violent death; while in ‘Solstice’ and ‘Late’, the loss is self-inflicted, coming from deep within; it is soul-destroying, haunting the evils of memory and summoning destruction of the self. All three of these are deliberately written as solitary tales, tales of individuals choosing to become isolates, hiding from the past.

In some of the tales, the exiles don’t return to the Borderlands; the Borderlands, freer than these men can ever be, return to, and destroy, them. As Sebald writes of an exile:

There is neither a past nor a future. At least not for me. The fragmentary scenes that haunt my memories are obsessive in character. (5)

War and conflict, are ever present themes. Violent struggle is a glaring fact of the last century, and long before that, in Ukraine, Poland and in Russia and Belarus. When it comes to violence and brutality, to loss and displacement, any western reader can scarcely have an adequate idea of their role in the life of the Borderlands, and most of Eastern Europe, during the twentieth century. Man is certainly capable of being an impulsive and violent being, but among many groups of people in the East, that impulse has been encouraged, given free license by leaders, reflected in events and causes, bordering on the greatest inhumanity. For the western reader, violence, though extant, for the most part remains on the verges of settled society; but in the east, the knowledge and memory of massacres, deportation, pogroms and betrayal, gratuitous killing far beyond mere combat, are ingrained in culture and history, in truth and lies. In writing this is also true. Bulgakov wrote, watching the withdrawal of the Hetman’s army from Kiev:

The frost-bitten horses of Kozyr-Leshko’s cavalry regiment crossed the bridge at a wolfish lope followed by a rumbling, bouncing field-kitchen. All that remained was the stiffening corpse of a Jew on the approach to the Bridge, some trampled hay and horse-dung. (6)

Babel’s ironic tale of the killer Pavlichenko’s revenge on Jews and Poles is almost a justification of savagery from within:

Shooting’s letting him off. With shooting you’ll never get at the soul, But I don’t spare myself. I’ve more than once trampled an enemy for over an hour. You see, I want to get to know what life really is. (7)

It was such violence which shaped the lives of every one of the men and women who went from home into exile, and of those who were left behind. When they spoke of home, it was of the home lost through war and conflict, never again to exist as it once did. In the tale ‘Snow’ for instance, the loss is of childhood and home, and perhaps something greater than home in ‘Shadow’. For many their minds were set on revenge, the need to right the wrongs they believed that they and their beloved Borderlands had suffered through the tumultuous, bloody

years from 1917 to 1956. Some tales are tales of vengeance, some of inhumanity, for they were born into violence. They suffered through war and brutality; it created them, and it remained present, though often subliminal, throughout the rest of their lives.

Exile is a remarkable state, one of mind as well as body, and as a theme in writing, it stretches back to Ovid's misfortune at the will of the Emperor Augustus. In the case of the exiles in these tales, exile was not legally imposed, but became a choice for survival over certain death if they remained in the Borderlands, or were forcibly returned, as in the tale 'Journey': one escapes and two return to almost certain death. The war's end found most of them far from home, bewildered and hopeless, running for their lives, and truth often fell by the wayside. They were, as the post-war term referred to them, Displaced Persons, whether formerly soldiers or not. Exile, its misery, its uncertainty and failures, particularly its longevity, and, of course, the threat that the past if suddenly unveiled must always contain, as in 'Bach', sat heavy on their minds, and possibly their souls. As Salman Rushdie recognises, exile, like migration, is an endless paradox looking forwards by always looking back:

A new, dark world had opened up for him ... no matter how assiduously he attempted to re-create his old existence, this was, he now saw, a fact that could not be unmade. (8)

Many of the tales of these long years are stories of betrayal of self, and of further loss, of isolation forcing individuals backwards in time as victims, connected but lonely, 'feeding on dreams of hope', as Aeschylus says. (9)

I am aware that the collection often presents tales with bitter endings, and of little joy; as I am equally aware, of course, that these recurring themes, and the bleakness of many of the tales, beyond the conviviality that I have often used as a frame, will mean that they are not to everyone's taste. As Sebald comments in terms of Holocaust survivors, many of the exiles, the subjects of the stories, suffered the symptoms of what modern psychiatrists call the survivor syndrome:

[They] failed to escape the shadows which were cast over their lives by the Shoah and ultimately succumbed to the weight of memory. That tends to happen quite late in these people's lives, when they're in retirement age, as it were, when all of a sudden some kind of void opens up. (10)

Some of the tales produced for this work might, like 'Kulak' (Appendix 8), be termed anecdotes, but, as with Babel's shorter pieces in *Red Cavalry*, any humour is absent or blackened, violence is treated as little more than providing say, a tally of ducks at a country shoot in Turgenev's sketch 'Lgov'.(11) Barely a shred of the material gathered over twenty five years of research could be regarded as humorous or light-hearted, other than some half remembered memories of childhood. If there were moments of joy and contentment then they were rarely revealed in any fragment I acquired.

It often seemed as though survival into exile was a Pyrrhic victory, one with no honour, either for the Borderlands or for the exiles, though they carried the memory of their dead, along with those they had killed, with them.

A journey homeward, a safe return, is one of the best known themes in literature, the eternal 'happy ending' and the best of expectations for a traveller; Rushdie's dream of glorious return. This contrasts with the permanent distance experienced by Sebald's characters, whose displacement is burdened with evocative, inescapable memories; and their own new, dark world consumes them. For one, melancholia leads to insanity, for others to suicide. Sebald's doctor dies, by shooting, as the isolate in 'Bach' dies:

He had sat on the edge of his bed (we learnt on our return from France) with the gun between his legs, placed the muzzle of the rifle at his jaw, and then, for the first time since he bought the gun before departing for India, had fired a shot with intent to kill. (12).

The chance of return for the Borderlands exiles was an unexpected turn of fate delivered by a massively overloaded, overextended systems failure, rather than any kind of imposed moral or military victory. 'Motherland' presents the complex, upturned society found in the post-soviet Borderlands through images of the passage into death and of well-remembered defeat. For more than forty years, the possibility of returning home and remaining alive was just a dream. Hundreds of their compatriots had lived, slipped into old age and died far from the Borderlands, with the hope of return fading gradually year after year, dwindling to nothing. The task set in 'Dust' (Appendix 23) is not an untypical experience. Those still alive and interested when the Soviet state collapsed were elderly, and the chance to return for a visit was where possible, taken quickly, but often with mixed fortunes. They longed for things which were long vanished, and returning, were regarded by those who had inherited the Borderlands as a quaint footnote in a brutal history, as the tale 'Mushroom' shows. Very few if any Borderland exiles went home and stayed there at the end of their lives. They were now citizens of another country, and belonged elsewhere. Some came back to their homes in exile and never spoke of that lost homeland again, others retrenched themselves in bitterness at the ingratitude of generations now free, but not because of their actions or even hopes.

Several themes are intended in this triptych. The first cycle Home is, given the meaning of that word, a cycle of violence and of impending and overwhelming loss: the *Domovik* abandons each one of them to an individual fate. War and brutality are, of course, themes underlying so much of twentieth century writing, if only because there was so much conflict. As a theme, arguably, it carries less weight now than in the past; but this group of people forged itself in the image of its own historical struggles. It is almost impossible to judge Eastern Europe outside of its own, often contradictory, moral parameters. The group remained cohesive throughout its existence. Significantly they termed themselves a 'Diaspora' and meant it in the real sense. War made them and scattered them, cloaked their origins, beliefs and intentions. The relatively small, surviving part of the Borderlands Diaspora enables in the telling of these tales, reference to the three major themes. They all experienced conflict, survived were exiled, and having had the opportunity, if not always taken, of returning.

There are underlying, latent themes and contexts which have required some careful thought. The Holocaust without doubt, hovers at so many points in the writing, and could have become central and overwhelming. It can be said that the tragedy of the Holocaust still

creates a substantial amount of writing on the Borderlands, produced by writers from outside (13). Its enduring evil can dominate; the tales ‘Exodus’ and ‘Neighbour’ are examples of this, and it underpins the fate of the exile in ‘Solstice’ for example:

He sobbed. The candle burned lower, with just a thumb length left, the circle of light began to draw inwards, leaving the darkness beyond to the tormented faces, more and more of them, filling the room like pale, ghostly balloons, caricatures of a thousand hideous killings, pressing, pressing in on him.

The house *‘Domovik’* leaves the cold hearth, blowing out the last candle as a sign of departure, the end of spiritual protection. It abandons the old man to his terrible, haunted fate, hemmed in by his long-dead victims’ faces. Indeed, enough ‘start’ material exists in my notebooks for a ten or twelve tale cycle on the Holocaust alone, but that must be another project. Some of those who gave over a fragment of a tale were certainly involved in personal grudge murders, in the elimination of villages and communities, and in mass killings, and were so for a period of years on end. But across much of Central and Eastern Europe this murderous action, what would now call be called ‘ethnic cleansing’ against neighbours considered no more than valueless outsiders, *‘untermensch’*, sub-humans, was regarded as nothing worthy of approbation (14). I have tried to capture this in the characterisation in ‘Grandfather’:

As we began to talk … an arrogance crept into his voice. An intonation which suggested a sense of identity, a purity of purpose, even a right to a privileged existence, an assertion which the aged body of the being uttering the words denied wholeheartedly.

Although the Holocaust is considered by our society as the most horrific event in modern European history, this view still does not hold across the Borderlands. The Holocaust is now often denied quite openly, but is usually simply regarded as an inevitability. The collection of material, and the writing of it, has certainly affected my own views; though I knew of the numerous Borderland recruited units serving the Third Reich, I had not quite expected what I have found happened at home, continued from time to time in exile, and in the odd instance prevented return. The evening when I listened to the repeat of a ceremony, for what has formed the finally omitted tale ‘Oath’ (Appendix 12) is one that will never leave me. In fact, it seems, as Sebald recounts:

like one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks, with whatever work you have begun- in this case, the remembering, writing and reading. (15)

The encounters with geographical places, like those in the Borderlands, where such evil was done, and the encounters with individuals who clearly were involved in that evil, cause an immense dilemma for any writer. There were moments when it seemed impossible to go on. The notes for the war’s end tale ‘Pot’ (Appendix 22) were collected entirely from a small group of Volhynian exiles, in this case elderly now North American citizens, who were returning to their ‘roots’, and who did nothing to disguise their anti-semitism and nostalgia for the old forms of order, long believed vanished. (16). If two or three of them had not told

me, I would never have known that we were all standing in the open market at L'viv in the midst of a vast Jewish cemetery dating back five centuries, above the graves of generations of Jews, repeatedly defiled, and then concreted over, after the war ended.

Another theme is recognition. 'Hill', 'Photograph', and 'Money' are examples where second generation children appear as characters, discovering as adults that there was more to a parent than they had realised. I have attempted to capture the impact of this on them and me in 'Money', for example:

"My soul is in this box." he told me with a wry smile. "My soul. My secrets. Maybe my history, eh?"

After a while I said some sort of goodbye as best I could, replaced the box on the table, and left her to prod and burn her father's history into eternity…It must have been the smoke from the incinerator, blown up by a gust of Autumn wind which made her cry.

In 'Seal' and 'Medal' it becomes apparent that, as in several of the stories and sketches in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* cycle, men can still try to hide from what they really are, denying themselves. 'Late' and 'Solstice' show that clearly.

Other themes might be teased out, similar to the melancholia of Sebald's stories arguably, but these few recurring motifs are what make these tales of interest. The intended readership is firmly set in one of the legs of this project's Troika, living within the new Borderlands; and the intention to fulfil Patsula's original suggestion remains at the core of the writing. It is important to note that this reflects Sebald's suggestion:

the artistic self engages personally in....a reconstruction, pledging itself....to set up a memorial, and the painful nature of that process could be said to ensure the continuance of memory. (17)

But the tales of loss in war and exile, and the haphazard, often unsatisfactory, long sought-after dream of return, have something for those who can recognise that this, is, or was, a cohort, if not an actual community, which, brought to this part of the world by war and without choice in the matter, survived and retained fragments of the Home and the society which existed in their youth. Yet, at the end of their lives, they faced the realisation that they were relics of an era no longer held in regard, as in the tale "Oxfam" -- written for Taras Tschevchenko University journal (Appendix 10).

The several tales, notes, sketches and essays that are appended to the work are provided to indicate the depth of this Borderlands project, beyond the limitations, in terms of word count, of this dissertation, and the fact that much potential, in terms of themes, and ideas were not included for reasons only of this restriction.

The themes which emerge from the strong historical element in the tales, both in gathering and recording material, and ultimately and far more powerfully in recreating them on the page, have impacted strongly on me as a writer and as a witness. This became clear to me at many stages during the course of the project, and this continues to the most extreme form

when handling the seal from the tale of that name -- knowing it carries the deaths of so many others -- or the *pisanka* the symbol of life eternal which only brought a child's death, I have in some way become what folklorists might recognise as a 'Sin Eater' (18). This recognition has driven and inspired, the undertaking, developing into my tales the simple ritual of accepting what is wrong, by collecting evil, almost as a gift, and analysing its link to those who provided the totem; listening to, or watching, a disturbing event, encountering an act of memory, even an acknowledged crime against humanity from long ago, and reworking this fundamental material into fiction, I strongly believe that preserving the original sin itself strengthens the depth of the tales. That is the base line from which these tales have been created, and it recognises an echo of the well-known Borderlands folk tale 'Death and the Soldier'(19), in which, in return for alms, and for the driving out of a merchant's household devils, an old soldier is enabled to avoid death's grasp.

Tales concerned with the transfer of a tangible item, an artefact connected with Holocaust, war, death and suffering, as in the title of either 'Medal' or 'Seal', or more profoundly the lost child's *pisanka* in 'Exodus', are specific and vivid examples of writing which could be compared to Sebald's reflections upon the unstated, but obvious provenance of:

These ornaments, utensils and momentoes stranded in the Terezin bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction. (20)

These artefacts were much rarer than the passing of a fragment of memory or hearsay in reminiscence, or an overheard snippet of conversation, stolen from life. The passage of the Iron Cross, from dying holder to a writer who is no more than a courier conveying it to a Borderland museum, seems as simple a matter from which to create a piece of writing as the ancient folklore idea that evil, or 'badness' actually has a tangible presence; and so the transfer of that medal before death to a neutral, passive body which could not suffer emotional or psychological harm, somehow would cure all wrongs, all sins committed in relation to it, whoever or whatever the man who gave it was.

Notes:

1. Campbell's work primarily covers comparative religion and mythology. His philosophy covers much of the human experience; the thinly veiled presence of both Nazi and Soviet interpretations of belief and myth in the collection, link with the patterns of Campbell's concepts. Campbell calls the first part of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (London: Fontana Press, 1993) 'The adventure of the hero', and divides it into three sections. There are obvious, and numerous, similarities to the work of Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans., Laurence Scott, (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 2015); but Campbell makes no reference to Propp, who was not translated into English until 1958.

2. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* p. 29.

3. Campbell calls the opening section of his second chapter of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 'Initiation- The road of trials', another similarity to Propp's *Morphology.*

4. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* p. xxii.

5. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* p. 181.

6. Mikhail Bulgakov *The White Guard* (1925) trans., Micheal Glenny (London: Harvill Press, 1993) p. 294-295. Tales such as 'Ruin' and 'Neighbour' are intended to mirror Bulgakov's description of violence in the Borderlands earlier in the twentieth century. Here he describes the murder of a lone Jew by members of an elite Ukrainian military unit.

7. Isaac Babel *Red Cavalry* in *Collected Stories,* trans., Walter Morison (London: Penguin, 1974) p. 92. Here Babel takes us in a few paragraphs from home to exile and return culminating in murder.

8. Salman Rushdie *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988) p. 418. The book's theme is migration rather than exile, and is often described as 'magic-realist'. A comparison with Campbell's structures might be rewarding, but lies beyond this project.

9. Aeschylus *Orestia: Agammemnon* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979) p. 117.

10. L.S. Schwarz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007) p. 38.

11. Ivan Turgenev, *A Sportsman's Notebook* (1852), trans., Charles and Natasha Hepburn, (London: Cresset Press, 1950) p. 82.

12. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* p. 23.

13. The list of Holocaust fiction, and non-fiction, is immense. Two, John Watkins *Cimmerian* (London: John Murray, 2003) and J.S. Froer *Everything is Illuminated* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002) are particularly insightful.

14. Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1963) coined the sub-title phrase, 'the banality of evil' to describe the ordinary, non-psychopathic, nature of this particularly efficient Nazi. The widespread acceptance of the Holocaust in the Borderlands warrants a very similar term, a shrug of the shoulders, no more.

15. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* p. 193.

16. Within a short time, during my third visit in 1994, I became wary of North American accented returning 'exile' tourists. Several groups I met in L'viv and

Brody were happy to voice anti-semetic remarks, and specifically deny the Holocaust.

17. L.S. Schwarz ed., *The Emergence of Memory* p.17.

18. Sin eating, the folk custom of paying an individual, usually an outsider, a recluse or isolate, to stand outside the house of the deceased as the body was brought out for the funeral, to undertake a solitary ritual carefully watched by the mourners, then solemnly agree to take upon himself the sins of the dead person, was common along the borders of Wales, in East Anglia and the Scottish Isles until the Napoleonic Wars. A similar custom, in which bread and salt were exchanged was known in Belarus and the Pripyet Marshes much later.

19. This folk tale, along with others mentioned below appears in many Borderlands collections. For example: Anon., *Ukrainian Folk Tales* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1958), Olga Shartse, ed., *Ukrainian Folk Tales* Kiev (Kiev: Dnipro, 1974), Irina Zheleznova, *Ukrainian Folk Tales* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1981). The tales included in collections can vary. The best contemporary English language edition, though not inclusive by any means, is Christina Oparenko ed. *Ukrainian Folk Tales*. (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

20. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* p. 227.

## The Form of the Tales, and Influences

Across the Borderlands, and indeed throughout the massive territory that was once Imperial Russia and then the USSR, short fiction has always commanded great interest, from Pushkin and Gogol, on to Chekhov (1) and Babel, and down to a host of contemporary short story and novella writers. Solzhenitsyn suddenly emerged as a writer in 1962 during the Kruschev era, with the novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, followed by a burst of short stories which owed less to the concept of the tale, rather more to that other phenomenon of eastern literature, the rapid response to a nod from the controlling power. Shorter fiction has also remained popular in the arena of public readings, for economy of time, and speed of expression and explanation. For the writer, the quicker short fictional hit could mean the survival of an original idea or the exposure of a 'wrong' to a wide audience. Interestingly, Shaw opens her seminal work on short forms of fiction quoting Welty: 'A short-story writer can try anything.' (2) She writes: 'the power and stirring of the mind never rests. It is what this power will try that will most pertinently define the short story. Not rules, not aesthetics, not problems and their solution.' (3) Reid concludes that the form is unique because it has three qualities; it makes a single impression on the reader, it concentrates on a 'crisis' and makes that 'crisis' pivotal. (4).

This Borderlands Triptych is not entirely a collection of fiction, in the inventive sense, nor is it a matter concluded. It is an unrushed voyage, and its 'incompleteness' makes these pieces unique as a collection, particularly for the intended readership within the exiles' homeland, mirroring, as it is intended to, the work of Babel. They reflect and are presented as fragments, anecdotes, passed on in an adopted language, and by elderly exiles almost certainly destined to die with a foreign tongue on their lips. The tales are all set in the twentieth century, largely in Wales and in the lands formerly part of the Soviet bloc; some give glimpses of an instant in Siberia or of the dwindling German Reich, or somewhere between, unstated, almost unrecognisable and undefined.

The tales are written as short pieces of fiction operating along a deeply etched time-line of War, Revolution, Occupation, Terror, Famine, War again, Holocaust, Gulag, Perestroika and remarkably, unexpectedly, independence, which came too late for the subjects, the characters in them. Specifically, the stories are written, as Shaw comments, 'to express a view of life as violent and torn by harsh conflict'; 'deliberate and calculated in aim.' (5) They are not intended to be simply 'stories' created to reflect success, or victory, or any real sense of deliverance, except that they are told as the tales of survivors of tragedy, whatever their ultimate end.

They are written about men and a very few women, born into states which did not recognise or accept their ethnicity, nation or culture while they lived within their borders, yet pursued and denounced them when they lived beyond. It is a simple comparison that all of Sebald's émigré and exile characters are in fact male. These tales are fictions drawn from the small

facts of trauma and of crisis, of loyalty and treachery, fragments of fleeting memory, and even perhaps murmurs of confession.

They are three sets of interlinked tales, chronologically, and they are written as such, not as discrete short stories, though each can stand to be read alone. My sense of an appropriate form developed initially because of a literary interest which began at the time of the first visit to the Borderlands in 1993. The earliest experience and recognition of it was when a bowdlerised English translation of Gogol's *Village Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, was presented as a gift in School 15 in Rivne. (6) I quickly identified elements in that collection which reflected what I was encountering with the exiles: a seemingly endless range of personae, simple events which became complex; above all the strength of feeling for custom, folklore, for song and veneration for a perceived heroic past. Teachers working in Rivne and Chernihiv, inevitably referred to tales like these, along with short stories like those of Chekhov and Babel, and the works of Ivan Korsak (7) as 'the lesser prose forms', but surprisingly, longer works, like Pasternak's *The Last Summer* were placed in the same category.

The writing of each tale is intended to be clear, and refrains from using western idiom (the term *'Anglo-Skaz'* has been coined and used in issues of the journal *OBRAZ* (8) as much as possible -- the taxi driver in 'Valley' is the notable, and unavoidable exception -- to enable ease of translation into what is the written and spoken language of most of Ukraine, *'Surzhyk'* a combination of Ukrainian and Russian. This is similar to *'Tresinka'* the mix of Russian and Belarusian, and the intriguingly named *'West Polesian'* spoken around the Pripyet Marshes, a mixture of Belarusian and Ukrainian. These hybrids, now more apparent in translated works, were often derided as improper, almost sub-languages of the marginalised, by the better educated among the exiles, whose ferociously accurate pert Ukrainian, or Polish, in return brought smiles to the faces of the current generations of Borderland dwellers. It is important to state that the style adopted in writing the tales is one which avoids the influence of the *'Skaz'* forms of dialect and slang, and of the profane and obscene *'Mat'*, and the *'Fenya'* criminal language which is encountered across the Borderlands; all are used extensively in contemporary Borderland writing, but are unknown to the Diaspora. The use of language by Borderland exiles is central to my unpublished essay 'On Language and Memory' (Appendix 9). One important feature, specifically intended for the Borderlands reader, is the inclusion of a Borderlands proverb linked with many of the tales, taken from the seemingly endless collection of such folk maxims in existence. Borderland proverbs are axiomatic, often very different from the aphorisms known in these islands, and they frequently have strong racial or sexual undertones.

What was gathered and considered for creating the tales in the collection was provided almost entirely in English: fragments, inferences, comments, anecdotes by individuals who were part of a group of people, who proved as diverse as any group in modern society when examined as individuals. It has been intended from the outset that the tales, as in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, can be read either individually, or as part of a whole; equally each sequence, each third of the Triptych can be read in that way, bound together, and with a cumulative effect

revealing the theme of each. And, of course, if read as a whole, the recurring subject matter and themes noted above will be all the more apparent.

I decided against producing a 'composite' work, of small notes, vignettes and word-paintings interspersed with larger more created tales, combined and covering the time-line the characters all followed; but as time went on, many of the shorter, minor pieces of prose became subsumed in the tales and others were discarded. These small pieces were for the most part recognisable as what Reid in describes as tributary forms; sketches, yarns, even parables. Reid includes the Russian (and Borderlands) *skaz* form in his note on yarns, but does not develop this to recognise the importance which this form has achieved in Eastern Europe's 'Borderlands'. Of the tale, Reid says:

The term tale has often been applied to almost any kind of narrative, whether of fictitious or actual events, and remains too imprecise to be of much use for discriminative purposes. (9)

That imprecision has definite value for the writer. "Usually," Reid suggests, "it designates a fairly straightforward … account of strange happenings." (10) For strange, read out of the ordinary, or different, unusual. O'Connor suggests "a sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (11) as always present in the short form, occasionally superimposed on "symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo." -- as in 'Saviour' and 'Road'; but these outlaws loom far larger in the Borderlands tale. It is the unsettling presence of *Domovik,* of *Baba Yaga (12),* the culture, violence, uncertainty which created 'Bloodlands', which allows the term tale its place. Reid recognises the role of Gogol writing of ordinary people, and quotes H.E. Bates in *The Modern Short Story* (1972) who argues that Gogol "took the short story some way back to the folk-tale, and in doing so bound it to earth." (13) Both Campbell and, arguably, Propp would have recognised that term, bringing hero and folk culture back to their roots, closer to the original source of narrative. May considers the short story as being "more apt to embody a timeless theme and ... less dependent on a social context." (14) – this is made implicit in the final tale 'Valley.'

Almost all who attempt to define what a short story is, as for example O'Connor does, regard it as a modern form, then go on to trace a history which goes back to the folk-tale and the oral story teller. May suggests it has "revivals and remains of oral, folk and biblical narrative traditions, like the fairy tale, the ghost story." (15) A clear example of this in the Triptych is 'Solstice'. Pasco offers the simplest definition, as "short, literary, prose fiction", and examines the four components in detail, a "particular cluster of traits." (16) Many writers echo Poe's apparently simple definition of the tale, "a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out." (17) These, suggests Shaw are still central terms in determining the genre (18). An adequate working definition is arguably provided by Danto "Stories, to be stories, must leave things out." (19) Pratt supports my approach to structure of each of the triptych tales as "a fragment of a life", often a "moment of truth." (20). In this sense stories like 'United!', and 'Medal' might be seen in relation to the Joycean idea of Epiphany.

Campbell's relevance is discussed above, and O'Connor introduces the suggestion: "In fact, the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group --

that submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation." (21) As with Gogol's officials, and Maupassant's prostitutes, and O'Connor's examples, the exiles in these tales provide exactly that sort of population, and it is similarly used by Sebald. O'Connor also gives us the title 'Little Man' (22), and introduces, among these outlawed fringe figures, the characteristic of "an intense awareness of human loneliness." (23), which resonates in tales such as 'Bach' and 'Late'. This lonely, distanced figure, haunted by past events, by guilt at surviving, is developed for example in the tales 'Hill' and 'Neighbour'. It is also often repeated in Sebald's work, for example in *The Emigrants,* where it is noted that:

but time ... is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it is nothing but a disquiet of the soul. There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me. (24)

He writes of the 'little man's' exile: "The fragmentary scenes that haunt my memories are obsessive in character." His homeland is a "country frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful." (25)

This loneliness is acute, specific, enduring, rather than a general reflection of a life state. Banks recognises the short tale as reflecting: "The disintegration of tribe, nation, family, and church, with the breakdown of all the old assumptions about shared values." (26)

Many of the tales in this collection echo the recognisable state Banks writes of; but some also reflect out-dated adherence to a set of 'values' which most western readers would find unacceptable; 'Grandfather' is a strong example. Shaw states that the short form can "[e]xpress a view of life as violent and torn by harsh conflict; deliberate and calculated in aim." (27) That is precisely my intention in writing this collection.

However, the tales in the Triptych remain firmly yoked to their remarkable time line, and totally dependent on the historical context from which they have sprung. They are "bound to earth". Combined into the larger whole of the cycles, though not closely interlinked, they display features of the *Skazka* folk tale, dealing with brief moments in the everyday life of people Reid calls "apparent nonentities" (28) -- those who have lost something, or everything.

Because the common experiences, especially violence and exile, masked many as individuals, it was tempting to bring all the moments of conversation, the ripples of recollection, and weave them into a single life story, the onward saga of one fictionalised man from the Borderlands: an odd combination of Vladimir Propp's components of hero and helper, donor and despatcher (29); a parody of Campbell's 'hero', or a gallant, in a Rus' epic. This is a path which Sebald reverses, retrieving fragments of a life from an almost total loss in childhood, and the retrieval is incremental (30). It became obvious this wouldn't work drawing from a substantial, dysfunctional group. The seams needed to hold the central character together would be impossible to weave, unfashionably Gothic perhaps, losing the remarkable, useful strengths of fragments and responses, and overlaps.

That the Triptych should eventually be composed of 'Tales' rather than 'short stories' was a choice made for several reasons including the place of birth of the subjects, and where much of the action of the tales takes place, or at least faces towards. This is an acknowledgment of origin, intended to identify with, if not specifically to belong to, a form far older than Gogol's overcoat. These Borderland territories, Ukraine, Belarus, and beyond, 'own' a fabulous wealth of folklore and folktales; the social structures and oral culture traditions surviving today resonate with richly spun tales. Along with Hrushevsky's ten volume history, it would be difficult to imagine a family in L'viv or Kyiv, without a well-read copy of one of the additions of *Ukrainian Folk Tales* on a shelf. The tale 'Mushroom' in this collection is intended to reflect the influence, though inverted, of the old Ukrainian folk tale 'Mother Death and the Thee Cossacks'' in which three drunken Cossacks persuade the female grim reaper that they are so miserable in life that death would be no disadvantage to them. In fact, most of the created writing in the Triptych acknowledges some small part of the folk tale format as, for example, 'Snow' does, involving recognisable early functions from Propp's astonishing and often complex *Morphology*. In the structure of the narrative, Petr leaves the security of the home environment --Propp calls this 'Absence' (31) -- dispatched by Grandfather; his father has already been abducted, a warning, an 'Interdiction', as Propp terms it, not to stray into danger - the folk song of the cockerel a clear message unrecognised by Petr. The long storm with which the tale begins is a forewarning of misfortune; the dog 'Galshi', is the recognisable helper, Grandfather the donor (32) of the somehow 'magical' shovel. Certainly, features of Propp's functions of Dramatis Personae, (33) -- for example, the villain pursuing and taking the hero, as victim, and transporting him -- are to be found here as the truck with his own countrymen serving an enemy appear.

The ritual of the rifle, and of the protective Psalm, very common rituals in Borderland villages even today, and found in 'Forest' are examples of Propp's functions (34); as is the old, Welsh, but recognisably folk-related, breakfast ritual in 'Dawn', and the perverse sexual-musical ritual demanded by the doomed suicide in 'Bach'. I have made sparing use of snatches of folk song in the early tales, 'Shadow' and 'Snow', intended as childhood defences for the vulnerable, the uncertain, against the dark world beyond their circle of light, perhaps summoning the *Domovik's* protection:

*"Where are you going? Oh! Where are you going, the hens cry."*

These few lyrics, all known and understood in the Borderlands to this day, are signals of the folk-tale element of the tales. The exiles were all born in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the folk culture of Galicia and Volhynia was stronger, and had been promoted by access to large numbers of folk tales and folklore recorded by researchers like Maria Hrinchenko and Matviy Nomys (35), and written and told in the numerous Borderland languages. They were brought up with the folk tale, and occasional phrases could be heard from them.

In 'Journey' the Soviet secret policewoman, the *'Griefer'* (36) uses the words of 'The Old Grey Cat' an infant's lullaby which any small child from Russia or Ukraine would know, as a way to capture an escaping family:

*'Don't wake the baby now, no*

*The baby will be sleeping.'*

Propp relates and links folk tales to many vanished or vanishing aspects of earlier society (37), and to others which lingered in unexpected ways. So, in tales from this Triptych, with exile, features such as marriage and family, belonging, beyond narrow, ethnic community, appear, though in unusual forms. For example, in 'Photograph':

She gave an orgasmic gasp of joy. "Photographs! He had photographs! Why did he never show them to us? To me!" She spoke as though the rest of her family, mother, sister, dead brother didn't matter. She was the only one to carry his light onwards ... His memories, his keepsakes, all hers.

Sebald's use of photographs is an unusual motif, found throughout his writings, and one which is strongly echoed in this tale and in 'Money'. Sebald's photographs are as much a fiction as any text. The cover photograph of *Austerlitz* is of a small boy from Stockport, not a Jewish child destined for the *'kindertransport'*, but like the burned photograph of the Galician policemen standing over a dead Jew, it makes a statement. Sebald's explanation is clear and accurate:

-we all tend to believe in pictures more than we do in letters. Once you bring up a photograph in proof of something, then people generally tend to accept that, well this must have been so...So the photographs allow the narrator, as it were, to legitimize the story that he tells. (38)

He further establishes the value of photographs:

The other function that I see is possibly that of arresting time...You are taken out of time, and that is in a sense a form of redemption, if you can release yourself from the passage of time. (39)

The folk lore motif is discernible in several tales: the image of a doll transposed for a baby, of the preserved infant cadaver, and the planned execution of a traitor or spy is the sacrifice of human life. Additionally, Propp's interest in early, primitive tribal initiations (40) is made use of in those tales which include direct, or tangential reference to the *14th Galician Waffen SS Grenadier Division's* remarkably fortunate survivors. It is a motif used in other tales such as 'Hill', which recounts the ritualised rape and killing of a Jewish girl. The boy, Guri, rejects the chance of initiation, and he rejects also the culture of the warriors (a reversal of Babel, hiding behind a soldier's mask in *Red Cavalry*) and walks away into a self-imposed exile.

Other tales in this collection have, hopefully, reflected something of very well-known Borderland folk tales, and will resonate with their potential Borderlands readership. A reflection of an old tale, 'The Wolf who wanted to be Village Head' appeared in writing the longer piece 'United!'; and a shade of 'The Bee and the Pigeon' (41) still told in Galician schools, in 'Beryl'.

A significant role in ensuring that the collection retains a link with the concept of folk tales, and the culture and society the exiles knew as young people, was played by a colleague and mentor Vadim Kossalapov (42): in my listening to him telling a seemingly endless repertoire of tales to his small grandson. Though interspersed with remnants of soviet hyperbole, they provided images of people in which I recognised the exiles, and led me to develop some points of character or of action, and useful images of the natural world which I felt echoed the malign fairytale world of Angela Carter. The elaborate, magical description of the folk tales *'The Magic Pumpkins'* and *'Oh!'* (43) reflect the equally magical forest-world of *'The Erl-King'* for example, with bird song and glittering leaves (44).

There were other influences suggesting that the material gathered would best link together as tales. One was the early cycle of Turgenev *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, in which he observes and records the lives of his fellow men as an outsider would, almost an isolate; in his case by aristocratic birth rather than cultural distance as in this collection. Most important for the work is his tale 'Bezhin Lea' (45) in which the narrator, lost at night, comes upon a group of young peasants. He remains at the fire's edge, but listens intently. The conversations Turgenev overhears are diverse, fragmentary, fascinating, omens; tales in fact, which in one or two places resemble some of the inspiration and useful smatterings of dialogue and nostalgia garnered for the Borderland Triptych.

This tale from Turgenev's *Sketches*, written in hybrid *'Surzhyk'*, not Russian (46), stands on similar ground to much of this collection. The exiles at Home and on their journey towards exile in the first sequence of tales, are like Turgenev's peasants (a few exiles, as displayed in the short tale 'Kulak', were rural peasants) far from home, unsure, worried, seeking comfort in flickering firelight and their own brave folk tales; and with darkness, and impending death, surrounding and enclosing their lives. He was, of course, describing a vanishing way of life. The Proppian functions are clear. From the chatter, tales of the primitive past are given away to the civilized outsider, who can understand change is coming. His work is said to have had some influence in abolishing serfdom; while the Borderland tales similarly describe a group of people which can certainly never be replicated in terms of its origins, its inspiration, actions and its misfortunes.

There is a substantial reason for the way in which this project is presented: this is the influence of the writer Isaac Babel and his seminal work *Red Cavalry*. (47) Babel was a real 'borderlands' writer; born at Odessa in Ukraine, a Jew, ironically, he fought under an assumed name for the Russians against the Ukrainians who had allied themselves with the Poles in an attempt for survival. His cycle comprises thirty five tales, stories, and short prose pieces, drawn from experiences, conversations and second hand remarks, all noted in his diary. Every tale of Babel's is infused with irony. Babel, arguably, created the only real and readable, fictionalized account of the failure of the revolutionary Russo-Polish wars 1919-1920, written from the perspective of the side that lost. This singular collection in effect forms a base-line from which so much of what later happened across the Borderlands, and in exile, can be properly considered. It is a physical and emotional odyssey portrayed in a

collection which, after Ukraine's *EuroMaidan* struggles, acquired a new interest, a modern resonance, among readers across the Borderlands and far beyond. Babel has also asserted influence among a generation of new writers; Zabuzhko and Sloniowska among them. Babel's written journey towards a Bolshevik Ithaca was never completed: the Red Army was flung back from its goals, the capture of Warsaw and destruction of Poland; the cavalry was crushed by the Poles outside L'viv. Fleeing, morale broken, it had never actually left Ukraine. His cycle's components record the violence, stupidity and degradation of war, and are strongly echoed in the tales of 'Forest' and 'Ruin', in the first section of the triptych.

Stylistically, Babel is the best guide the Borderlands has ever provided to the chaotic misfortunes of its people, and the debt to him in the tales, is recognised in both the historical approach and the nature of the writing. For example, the nameless hunter in 'Forest' becomes perpetrator and victim, dying as he anticipates, in a dark ambush.

A single deadly hunter among patriotic farmers boys and small town philosophers. He owed it all to what he would never confess was a lucky shot with his beautiful *'kurz'*, silencing an enemy machine gunner behind his chattering gun with what the old men called a 'wolf-shot' between the gunner's eyes. That one and only round was the reason he was here.

"Fool!" he said softly to himself. "If you'd missed that bastard you would be home now, safe and warm."

Babel's Cossack Commander is first of all perpetrator:

He crept along on his belly, holding in his hands a powerful lacquered carbine of Japanese make. From a distance of twenty yards Trunov sent the Polish lad's skull flying, and bits of his brains dripped over my hands.

Then he recognises his own approaching fate:

"Having to die today, I consider it my duty to fire a couple of shots toward the possible bringing down of the enemy." (48)

Both characters are efficient killers. Both tales are of unequal combat which cannot be won; and in both, death is an inevitability recognised by each man from the outset. For both, the weapon becomes an extension of self.

In Babel's cycle, there are many perpetrators, riding alongside Babel, troops of a half-formed state into which the bloody borderlands were to be subsumed. He often uses the term 'Cossacks' (49) to describe them -- while their real victims abound: the Polish and Ukrainian peasants, almost indistinguishable, all too often Jews and women, even the horses, which are ridden to death. Both the fighters in Babel, and in my work, display the historical Borderlands characteristics of xenophobia, personal hatreds and affronts, and an overwhelming sense of doomed nobility; enough in Babel's 'A Letter' to bring father and sons to kill each other, whilst retaining to the end the crucial victim's belief in grievance; the stubborn certainty of ultimate betrayal or failure. The retribution Babel describes in this short correspondence is almost comic; death with a clown's mask, resounding. "I hasten to describe to you about Dad,

that he killed my brother Theodore a year ago ... But Dad caught me with the letter and said: 'You. Your mother's children, you of her root, the slut. I'll wipe out my seed for the sake of justice.'" But in Babel's war the tables are soon turned. "And now, Dad, we're going to finish you off." (50) Perpetrator, as so often in the tales, as in history, becomes victim.

Yet victims created by the violent action, as the two women in 'Mushroom', sometimes respond, and in silent, effective, perfect retribution, undertaking an act of revenge as clearly, as identifiably feminine and memorable as Clytemnestra:

The station wagon was parked on rough grass alongside the wall, out of sight of the road. Its door was wide open, the keys in the lock. Half out he lay, delirious, bathed in the dim glow of the interior light, vomit gently bubbling from his moaning mouth, eyes closed in agony, plainly he could neither see nor hear her.

He was not dead yet.

Not quite.

She crossed herself, turned out the light, and walked away into the night.

Babel's *Red Cavalry* quickly became a crucial influence on the whole project, particularly in terms of structure and often the use of components of the narrative. In his tale 'The Rabbi's Son', Elijah, the soldier son dies among his poems, his emblems of faith. Babel receives and accepts the dead man's legacy, his verse, his relics and memories; they fall on him 'in a mean and depressing rain ... the dreary rain of sunset.' (51) Yet, Babel can only bury the dead man, ironically recognising his debt, and his hidden Jewish faith at the graveside: 'We buried him at some forgotten station. And I, who can scarcely contain the tempests of my imagination within this age-old body of mine, I was there beside my brother when he breathed his last.' (52)

So, in the Triptych, the final sequence tale 'Seal', a remarkable talisman of death, is simply, casually, handed on to its future writer, that in itself an act of faith: "The seal lay in my hand, cold, like a stone." In 'Money' an anticipated legacy, a box of inestimable value to the writer, becomes a broken gift, empty. Yet it still remains a gift, received and accepted, only to be laid aside, buried and forgotten, like the Rabbi's son.

Another influential writer for my work is Angela Carter. She strongly influenced the decision to write a creative piece in the form of tales. Her work is deeply disturbing, profound reflections of folk lore elements, entirely fictionalised, where this Triptych hints at the lingering, or possibly eternal, Proppian folk motif, recognisable in the gathered Borderland pieces. She profoundly believed in writing 'tales'. As she states the tale does not log everyday experience as the short story does' This was my intention in the Borderland tales. She acknowledges Poe and Hoffman, masters of the dark tale, and suggests: 'We live in Gothic times' (53). My collection is not overtly Gothic, but tonal similarities to her writing are clear to me; her 'cruel tales' (54) are echoed in 'Grandfather' and, 'Medal'; 'tales of terror'(55), in 'Beryl'; 'the imagery of the unconscious-mirrors'(56) in 'Solstice', though the mirror for the doomed exile is the soul. She refers to the imagery of the unconscious as being

like ‘haunted forests’ (57) which is exactly where the tale ‘Lost’ is placed; in the tale, the forest is haunted by Russian soldiers. While Carter uses a claustrophobic image in ‘The Erl-King’.

The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up. There is no way through the wood any more…. Once you are inside it you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety. (58)

Carter’s choice is woodland, less threatening, more reactive; it creates a subtle labyrinth. To be lost there is an enchantment. In ‘Lost’ the forest is dark, unyielding, filled with danger, violence and ultimately death, a step further than Carter:

Here in the deep forest … when night fell, the temporal terrors of that long dark passage of unquiet untold time would be unbearable to any but the strongest spirit. This was a place, she knew, where wind and rain and cold would join with undreamed of wild creatures and malevolent tree branches, seeking, touching, tormenting. Encouraging hopeless flight.

She ends her list of motifs in ‘Afterword’ with ‘forbidden sexual objects’ (59) not further defined, which is the revealed, deeply unpleasant motif selected for the tale ‘Tears’.

Her approach to form in writing short narrative, rather than content, has been an influence on this collection. She writes of the “singular moral function” of her form of tales, “that of provoking unease” (60). Given the problematic nature and content of much of the material gathered and used, it has been helpful to me to think in terms of Carter’s ‘system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience’ (61). This was clearly at work in the infant cadaver in ‘Trunk’, the vixen’s cry in ‘Lost’, the cabalistic death in ‘Hill’; and the presence of the *Domovik* throughout.

A folk tale motif, sometimes found in the Borderlands tales is melancholy, through misfortune, misplaced punishment or fact of life such as childlessness. Melancholy is a central motif in Sebald’s work, often expanded by the undated, unexplained photographs:

the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that history of countless places and objects which themselves have no memory is ever heard, never described or passed on. (62)

There are glimpses of melancholy in tales found in the Exile and Return sequences: the modern experience of disappointment, sadness acquired through slow revelation, is more appropriate in ‘Books’ or ‘Fire’. Apprehensively awaiting a certain fate, from which the sufferer is saved but only by death in ‘Late’, is an example of the use of an underlying folk tale device. A melancholic writer, influencing the writing of some tales, particularly ‘Road’, with its own moral epiphany at the last turn of the way, and ‘Toymaker’with an ascending, pilgrim journey towards murder, is Laszlo Krasznahorkai- a Jewish Borderlander born between Hungary and Romania, author of the 1985 cult work *Satantango* (63) and a remarkable sketch of a suicide note in *Isiah has come*.(64) Indeed, so strong an influence was

that piece, that if the obvious, 'mechanical' conclusion of 'Fire' had not been chosen over Isiah's intervention, an alternate 'Krasznahorkai ending' could have been. In *The Last Wolf* (65) his writer is in exile, morally and physically, recording the extinction of his subject, again an inversion, at least in part of the role of writer and subject in these tales. I feel that this finds an echo in the final passage of Sebald's work: "to realize there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other." (66)

There is little humour in the Borderlands triptych, misfortune and cruelty abound. Here I was influenced, as I have said, by the nature of the historical experiences I wished to capture, but also by material such as Krasznahorkai's *Satantango*: bleak, desolate in terms of landscape and of inhabitants, a slow, conspired march towards inescapable death. This is a novel, with a folk tale sense in linked sequences; one possible to relate to in terms of the exiles and their fates. In the opening chapter one of the central characters, Futaki, a Proppian anti-hero, experiences the death knell of a distant bell, he alone can hear. "Is no-one awake? Can't people hear it? Is there nobody else around?". (67) Where in 'Solstice' doom is visible, enclosing, in *Satantango* it is aural, relentless, though just as specific. Futaki ends the text frightened not by the now-stilled bells, "but the threatening silence that followed: anything might happen now." (68)

The book pivots on charismatic Irimias, a shrouded villain, returning home, thought long-dead, though in fact exiled, exerting the influence the Borderlanders in the third sequence, thought would be theirs to offer, or inflict. This inward-looking work based in the forests of Hungary utilises the theme of turbulent return from exile which has the potential to become a central theme of contemporary Borderlands writing. Zhadan's *Voroshilovgrad* (69) is another example.

In the project's sequences, nowhere is invented. The places of exile all exist: smallholdings, terraced houses, villages, the site of the DP camp. Borderlands cities, endless forests, *Dachas*, roads and graveyards are all to be found, and the weight of their influence, psychological and historical, has been felt; even though many have altered with war and long years of soviet control, the physical foundation for the tales is real. There are real maps. Ursula le Guin (70) typically mapped her borderland narratives as she wrote, and named the place Orsinia.: totalitarian, a drab background to a cycle of a dozen *Orsinian Tales*, loosely connected short stories, owing little to a recognisable culture or tradition, centred on a "country where a man could get out of sight only by not moving at all, by keeping voice, body, brain all quiet." (71) She draws from her own internalised interpretation of events; this is a 'Cold War' collection, she hints, but vaguely, at the perceived evils of Central and Eastern Europe; of a miserable damaged country which she was prepared to invent but had not, could not credibly visit.

Her cycle begins with defection, which brings its own regrets, and ends with an 'aristocratic' family leaving the freedom of Summer for an oppressive wintry city. The collection closes back on itself, and submits to the regime's unspoken hold. Her exile is internal, self-imposed, and Orsinia is grey, 'Gomulka-grey' (72). There are distinct similarities between Orsinia's tales and those of the Borderlands, but le Guin wrote in 1976, when for her characters as for

the exiles, there was little hope. Had she written a few years later, Orsinia, like the Borderlands might have become, in a moment of surprise, a turbulent place; its histories recovered, reinvented, restated; its defectors then able to return, or at least revisit. Its 'aristocrats' resurface, and in all make possible a second sequence of tales. It may, arguably, be significant, that Sebald's first published writings (in German, then afterwards in translation) coincided with the collapse of all that 'Orsinia' represented, and with the re-unification of Germany permitting a return to his own structures of history. He states: "If you grew up in the kind of environment I grew up in, you can't put it aside just like that.. I was born into a particular historical context." (73)

Exile is ubiquitous as a theme, well explored, by Marquez in a collection of twelve stories entitled *Strange Pilgrims* (74). His subjects are Latin Americans in Europe; dislocated, confused, isolated, as are the Triptych exiles. Though only two of Marquez' pieces could be regarded as 'tales', undercurrents in several are similar to those in the Triptych: 'Seventeen Poisoned Englishmen' with 'Mushroom' and 'Bon Voyage, Mr. President' with 'Beryl' and 'Motherland'. In this, an elderly, sick man -- 'In the strictest sense, the only consolation was knowing he was alive'--(75) decides to go home to die after decades of exile "It was difficult for him to believe that time could cause so much ruin, not only in his life, but in the world." (76) Marquez' old man, with fading memories and bitter failures to look back on, bears useful similarity to many Borderland exiles, and influences characters like Yaroslav Charschuk in 'Motherland'.

Crucially, some of the new writing in the Borderlands provides an up to date, coherent, almost perfect, point of comparison with this project. This stands in stark contrast to Sebald's criticism of post-war German writers whom he sees as reluctant to mourn or reflect truthfully upon events of wartime cataclysm and their aftermath:

Yes, there are a few relevant texts, but what has been recorded in literature, in terms of both quantity and quality, stands in no relation to the extreme collective experiences of the time. (77)

Sebald is critical of "a self-imposed silence, an absence also typical of other areas of discourse, from family conversations to historical writings." (78)

Zabuzhko, and Forgach (79), are examples of new writers beginning to explore this difficulty. Zabuzhko, particularly, recognises the darker, violent events and experiences of the wartime and post-war borderlands and its combatants. She says this, strongly echoing Sebald, of the period covered in this specific project:

European literature is yet to develop a more or less satisfactory, adequate and coherent narrative from that period; one is hard-pressed to find another time in the history of the twentieth century that has been buried under such veritable Himalayas of mental rubbish, packed over the last sixty years almost into concrete- the layers upon layers of lies, half-lies, innuendo, falsifications and so on. Historical excavations of this period have begun only in the first decades of the new millennium. (80)

Turning fragments of history into literature, however potent and difficult it proves for the reader, is a crucial part of this 'new message' (81), as she describes it. Sebald certainly influences Zhabuzko. His strength is in identifying the few writers who have taken up this challenge since 1945, for example Heck's (82) narrative of the devastation by bombing of Berlin zoo, and the works of Ledig, one of which, Sebald says: "Is a book which attacks the final illusions, and in writing it Ledig was bound to find himself in an offside literary area." (83)

He selects *The Silent Angel* by Boll which took fifty years to achieve publication in Germany, and over sixty to reach an English translation as significant in this regard: "so unremittingly sombre that even today it makes painful reading." (84)

His inclusion of Weiss is essential: "making a pilgrimage over the arid slopes of our cultural and contemporary history in the company of *pavor nocturnis,* the terror of the night." (85) Weiss, Sebald regards as having written in *Aesthetics of Resistance* a ten page passage of unique darkness like nothing else Sebald knows of in literature: "It records an accumulated sense of the fear and pain of death, and must almost have exhausted its author." (86). The passage, Sebald claims, is one in which all of the characters, from young resistance members to Nazi executioners are historical people, though fictionalised. He does not quote from it.

Zhabuzko strongly compares her work with that of others in Europe, writers in different traditions and genres. In this, clearly, she is following a similar path to Reverte and Zafon. (87) There is a clear link with Sebald, who criticises post-war German writers for "individual and collective amnesia", for writing "under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret". (88) It seems incredible that he can record almost fifty years after 1945, that "German *literati* still know little of the fate of the persecuted Jews." (89); and is profoundly echoing Zhabuzko writing "that literature today, left solely to its own devices, is no longer able to discover the truth" (90).

Zabuzhko describes the need for this new writing to address and attempt to clear a log-jam, as crucially "Europe's largest and most difficult- the so-called truth of the Eastern Front."(91) Again, she stresses the importance of spoken history, of Sebald's evocative memories-those fragments preserved by being told, perhaps confessed: "I was a good son, and I am clean before Ukraine; forgive me father, my blood-spilling sins." (92) This is the path which the Borderlands project has followed.

Notes:

1. The wealth of Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish and Polish short story writers is almost unending. To these four, certainly among the best known, Gogol for his *The Overcoat,* Chekhov for *Vanka,* and Pushkin's premonitionary *The Shot,* could be added Gorky, Tolstoy, Forsh, Singer and a score of others.

2. V.Shaw, *The Short Story. A Critical Introduction* (New York: Longman, 1983) p. 1.

3. Ibid. p. 1.
4. Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Routledge, 1977) p. 54.
5. V.Shaw, *The Short Story* p. 8.
6. The Ukrainian SSR produced books for use in schools and colleges which were heavily 'bowdlerised'. It wasn't the indelicate or sensually offensive which was removed from texts, rather it was the rewriting of passages to reflect the objectives of 'Socialist Realism', and the constant addition of extensive explanatory footnotes to lead the student in the only possible direction.
7. Ivan Korsak (1946-2017) essayist, short story writer and poet. Among the best known of modern Ukrainian writers. I met him at Ostroh University in 1995.
8. Like many European languages, several English language terms have come into frequent use in Ukraine and Poland. There were occasional comments in OBRAZ on these; critical from older Diaspora members, and generally accepted by the younger readers.
9. I. Reid, *The Short Story* p. 32.
10. Ibid. p. 32.
11. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (1963) (London: Melville House, 2004) p. 18.
12. *Baba Yaga:* a malevolent female figure present throughout Slavic folklore and literature. The best description appears in Sibelan Forrester 'Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East' in *Russian Magic Tales* ed., Robert Chandler (London: Penguin, 2012) pp 419-433.
13. I. Reid. *The Short Story* p. 24.
14. Charles. E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 259.
15. Ibid. p. 108.
16. Ibid. p. 115.
17. V.Shaw, *The Short Story. A Critical Introduction* p. 9.
18. Ibid. pp. 9-10.
19. I.Reid.*The Short Story* p. 6.
20. C.E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* p. 99.
21. Frank O'Connor. *The Lonely Voice* p. 17.
22. Ibid. p. 15.

23. Ibid. p 19.

24. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* p. 181.

25. Ibid. p. 181.

26. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* p. 9.

27. V.Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* p. 8.

28. I.Reid, *The Short Story* p. 24.

29. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, pp. 107-113.

30. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz.* Jacques Austerlitz begins without knowledge of his beginnings, and retrieves his life in stages, with the help of the narrator who fulfils many of Propp's roles.

31. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, pp. 24-25.

32. Ibid. p. 36-37.

33. Ibid. p. 26-27.

34. Ibid. p. 40.

35. Maria Hrinchenko (1863-1928) with her husband Borys (1863-1910), a leading folklore collector and collator of the Borderlands at the turn of the twentieth century. Her versions of folktales are frequently found, unattributed, in modern collections. Matviy Nomys (1823-1900) edited and collected tales and proverbs. Some of the proverbs used in this collection were originally collected by Matys. Both have entries in the *Encyclopaedia of Ukraine* http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com

36. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, pp. 29 -31.

37. Ibid. pp. 3-17.

38. L.S. Schwarz, *The Emergence of Memory*, p. 41.

39. Ibid. p. 42.

40. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, p. 42.

41. Both tales are to be found in Irana Zheleznova, trans., *Ukrainian Folk Tales* (Kiev: Dinipro, 1986).

42. I learned very early on in my research that Vadim Kossolapov had been a student at Leningrad in the late 50s and early 60s, and had known Propp during his tenure there. Propp clearly influenced Vadim, who had a wealth of folk tales at his fingertips. It was, it seems, required to learn them almost by rote, in order to analyse their structure. In the telling, Vadim's recollected tales were flat repetitions, interspersed

with analysis, and completely lacking the rich oral traditions I anticipated. The images alone sustained them.

43. Both tales appear in Irana Zheleznova, *Ukrainian Folk Tales*.

44. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Gollancz, 1979), p. 96-98.

45. Ivan Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album,* trans., Richard Freeborn, (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 50-55.

46. The languages of the Borderlands are a mixed bag. The commonest of all is *'Surzhyk'* which combines Russian and Ukrainian, both Cyrillic languages in a way which has effectively created a third language. In Turgenev's time this was what might be called a 'folk' language, a country tongue, but with formal state education structures in the Soviet era, the amount of Russian used grew significantly. All Borderlands people know and understand *'Surzhyk'*.

47. Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry* in *Collected Stories:* thirty-five tales of the Red Army's attack on Poland during the Russo-Polish War of 1919-20. The campaign of the First Cavalry Army is fictionalised in the book by Babel who served with it. The war was brutal, a defeat for the Soviets, and laid the foundations for the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939.

48. I. Babel, *Red Cavalry in Collected Stories,* p. 131.

49. The term 'Cossack' is ambiguous almost to the extreme. It's a name which has been used with laxity and often adopted with arrogance, widely across Eastern Europe for centuries down to the present day. Babel uses the name to indicate violent, vengeful and base humanity, full of paradoxes.

50. I.Babel, *Red Cavalry* in *Collected Stories*, p. 45.

51. Ibid. p. 167.

52. Ibid. p. 168.

53. Angela Carter, 'Afterword' in 'Burning your Boats', *Collected Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995) p. 459.

54. Ibid. p. 459.

55. Ibid. p. 459.

56. Ibid. p. 459.

57. Ibid. p. 459.

58. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, p. 96.

59. Angela Carter, 'Afterword' *Collected Stories*, p. 459-460.

60. Ibid. p. 459-460.

61. Ibid. p. 459-460.

62. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* p. 30.

63. Laszlo Krasnahorkai, *Satantango* (1985), (London: Atlantic Books, 2013). The novel is an account of the return of an exile at the fall of Hungary's communist regime. It echoes elements of the tales 'Hill' and 'Mushroom'.

64. Laszlo Krasnahorkai, *War & War* (1998), (London: New Directions, 2005) This is the epilogue to Krasnahorkai's notoriously complex novel. In it the writer threatens and commits suicide.

65. Laszlo Krasnahorkai, *The Last Wolf* (2009) (London: New Directions, 2016) The isolation and futility of life presented in this work is mirrored in 'Late'.

66. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* p. 414.

67. Laszlo.Krasnahorkai, *Satantango*, p. 4.

68. Ibid. p. 274.

69. Serhiy Zhadan, *Voroshilovgrad* (2012), trans., I.S. Wheeler and R.C. Hughes, (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2016). This has become a cult novel in the Borderlands, due in part to its violence and images of the now Russian-occupied east of Ukraine.

70. Orsinia is a ruritanian invention, but shows many features of the Borderlands in Soviet times.

71. Ursula K. le Guin, *Orsinian Tales* (New York: Harper & Row, New York, 1976) p. 19.

72. An old term now, but very appropriate where le Guin's tales are concerned. Wladyslaw Gomulka was the Communist President of Poland between 1956 and 1970. In the early sixties one of the few paint colours available in state shops across the USSR was a gloomy grey manufactured in Gdansk, hence the connection. Professor Patsula believed it was originally intended to paint warships. Vadim Kossolapov thought it may have been for tanks.

73. L.S. Schwarz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory* p. 69.

74. His collection *Strange Pilgrims*, trans., Edith Grossman (London: Penguin Books, 1992) is linked by themes of displacement and exile, as well as loneliness and death.

75. Marquez, *Strange Pilgrims*, p. 32.

76. Ibid. p. 3.

77. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London Random House, 1999) p. 70.

78. Ibid. p. 70.

79. Andras Forgach (b.1952), author of *No Live Files Remain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015) recounting his mother's role in Hungary's secret police as an informer — on her own son.

80. Oksana Zabuzhko, *Museum of Abandoned Secrets,* p. 709.

81. Ibid. p. 709.

82. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Mass Destruction*, p. 9

83. Ibid. p. 94.

84. Ibid. p. 10.

85. Ibid. p. 190.

86. Ibid. p. 191.

87. Arturo Perez-Reverte (b.1951) Spanish war correspondent and author. His *Painter of Battles*, trans., Margaret Sayers Peden, (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 2008) creates a profoundly affective story based on the cruelties he witnessed and images he photographed in the Balkan wars of the 1990's. Carlos Ruiz Zafon (b.1964) Spanish novelist. In his four book series *Cemetery of Forgotten Books* (London: Orion, 2004-2016), his narrator uncovers the deceptions and morality of Franco's Spain post Civil War. He records in detail the network of crimes and injustices against humanity by the Fascist regime.

88. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Mass destruction*, p. 9-10.

89. W.G. Sebald. *Campo* Santo, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003) p. 113.

90. Ibid. p. 114.

91. Oksana Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets,* p. 710.

92. Ibid. p. 135.

## How the Tales Developed

This project will certainly run onwards far beyond the PhD, simply because there are so many fragments, sketches and anecdotes remaining to weave into tales. Just as Isaac Babel added to his Russo-Polish War cycle into the 1930's, so more tales could be added to create a further Triptych, and some of the shorter tales here could well be further developed, using material already collected. More than one version of several tales already exists. The choice for completing and including individual tales was led by the emerging themes, and influenced by my developing interest in the vagaries of marginalisation, the caprice of identity, and the perspective of the outsider, rather than access to or availability of suitable material.

Some tales emerged in a single draft, with little later amendment – 'Medal' for example -- while others tales like 'Neighbour' and 'Dawn' emerged in their final forms after much redrafting. Two of the stories are linked consecutively, 'Tears' and 'Trunk', and are intended to be read this way. The first was completed, set aside, but I kept returning to it; there seemed obvious, unfinished business: the baby's fate. Sebald provides the fragment which gave me the answer:

a cardboard suitcase falls on the platform, bursts open and spills its contents. Toys, a manicure case, singed underwear. And last of all, the roasted corpse of a child, shrunk like a mummy, which its half-deranged mother has been carrying about with her, the relic of a past which was still intact a few days ago. (1)

Since the submitted project is written as three cycles, examining a tale from each of the three will provide an insight into the development of the whole.

'Snow', written in the first cycle, is very much a Winter's tale. It had its genesis in a remark made to me. Petr was laughing at the complaints which circled the lounge bar, reminding me that I'd never seen a 'real snowfall', but as a Volhynian of German stock, he'd seen many hard winters as a boy (2). As Babel did, I made a quick jotting of the remark as soon afterwards as possible. For Babel facts were an invaluable creative tool; for me, the comment, the impression of its giver at the time, provided the starting point. Petr's memories included the abduction of most of the village teenage boys for snow clearing by the Reich's Todt Organisation; lifted literally from the streets by troops. Few returned. Those lost childhoods, vanished lives, turned over in my mind: the potential horror of children abducted, set against the purity of a background of blinding snow and light, lost innocence, lost life.

'Snow'is set in 1942, the second Winter of war in the East, introducing images of conflict, as 'Exodus' introduces the image of Holocaust. It is also concerned with invasion, and the violent loss of a parent; Petr alone with vulnerable Grandparents, all of them helpless, even the house, which "seemed resigned to vanishing from the world" against the snow, and what coming evil it hides. My early thoughts were simple: snowfall, snow clearing and abduction, loss of childhood and freedom. Snow, youth and activity combined easily enough. The setting came from a hamlet near Dubno. As for Babel, it was necessary to provide some historical

detail in the tale, where it easily fitted, detail which informs, supports other tales in the sequence.

Building ‘place’ was straightforward: the house image, the time-piece, Petr’s meal, the lamp and tobacco all reminiscent of Borderlands life encountered over twenty years of visits. There is more than a hint of the household *Domovik,* in the great difficulty with which the snowboarded door is opened -- “it needed a few sharp blows of a mallet to open it” -- a warning from the protective spirit not to leave the safety of the house.

Though this tale deliberately does not fully display the linear elements of Propp’s folktales -- there is after all no ultimate deliverance possible -- the hero’s misfortune is sustained from boyhood to old age. I wanted to introduce at least one or two functions. The great snowstorm is certainly a prophetic warning of trouble to come, isolating, enclosing the family: “Night passed, and morning barely arrived for the snowstorm continued for two days more until at dawn on the third day, the light came.” Prophetic too, the taking of Petr’s father, in a way which mirrors his own departure. Dividing the family, is an example taken from Propp (3), as is the spade, Petr’s weapon against the snow. For Grandfather this is a link to ‘better times’ long vanished. It becomes arguably a magical agent, which Petr carefully cleans to a “final, gleaming result”, like a sword. Grandfather sets the boy his task, with ‘an engineer’s tool’, -- engineers were the magicians of the Soviet world -- then goes away, his role ended. The boy’s mother isn’t mentioned at all in the final tale; but in the original draft she dies before the war, hinted at as a victim of the famine. But two parental losses overwhelmed the historical detail of the tale, a second death became unnecessary; the death of his mother would signal grief and create a different Petr. He is content, still a child, when the tale begins, and remains so until he is taken.

Folk song is an intrinsic part of Borderlands life, as I have noted above. Any traveller outside the cities encounters it widely even today. One old children’s song, ‘The Duckling Swims’, has become a national lament for the woes of Ukraine at the hands of Russian separatists since independence, and is sung everywhere. Most of the older songs exist in several Borderland languages; all of the exiles encountered could sing these songs, and as an accompaniment to work, song is ubiquitous, even if played on an electronic device nowadays. It would, with little effort, have been possible to include folk song lyrics in almost every tale, or possibly as the title of each tale; but I decided to restrict folk song to those few tales where a protective, or prophetic voice seemed necessary. This particular song, ‘The Cockerel is Riding a Horse’, was added at the last stage of writing the tale. It is a children’s song, but one with clear martial overtones: the brave cockerel, the great horse, the great war, the weeping hens. It is a song which would be sung by children as soldiers left for campaign as long ago as the Napoleonic Wars, perhaps before that. Petr is singing for his own unexpected departure to war, delivering himself with each verse.

The dog, Galshi, is reflective of an omnipresent, essential feature of life in the Borderlands; the exiles, most of whom spoke frequently of childhood, inevitably recalled a dog. No boy seemed without one. In this case, using the example of Propp’s sequence allows the dog to fail his master: he absents himself hunting imaginary rabbits, when a barking dog might have

prevented disaster. Finally, only the mute dog sees Petr's departure, a silent witness. An early draft had Galshi barking and Petr taken while attempting to flee, but the suddenness of the Opel's arrival, as the boy is immersed in his work, the intrusion of the two soldiers, is, I think, a better ending. Another paragraph attempted, removed in early editing, had Grandfather, and Galshi killed in coming to Petr's aid. But, I wanted to emphasise the sense of snow as neutral, pure. In the story, it covers all, its light protects all: "pouring over all things with a strange eerie colour to it, like cows milk trickled into water, opaque but bright." Snow muffles sound, blurs vision with its brightness, enabling the truck to arrive and the soldiers to take Petr by surprise, while dog and Grandfather survive, absent from the scene.

It was necessary to introduce dark elements, the invaders, in a clear way. This darkness took several forms as the tale unfolded: the image of the routing Ukrainian army of 1917, described in the epilogue to Bulgakov's *The White Guard* (4) tramping silently through night into history, leaving death in its wake, appeared in one draft paragraph; but the absence of humanity in the enemy, faceless, just the colour emphasised, opposing that of the pure snow fitted the purpose in the final version:

crawling slowly up the low hill, three grey-black armoured vehicles, half-tracks, 'Hanomags' each covered with tarpaulins threw off the flurry of falling flakes from their black-crossed carapaces as they growled by.

Propp-inspired villains arrive in the text as the half-tracks: the endless convoys, the sounds of violence generated by the vehicles and the storm, marginal, but essential and threatening, and the final fateful truck violating the snow scene's purity. Its occupants speak Petr's language. He understands them. So, these, clearly are presented not as invaders but his own countrymen, serving the enemy -- a final betrayal, a final loss of innocence. I intended this to be seen as a deception in Propp's terms (5): the hero despatched from home, but with a finality no folk tale would allow:

*"I am leaving hens. Goodbye hens goodbye. Leaving for a Great War. A Great War."*

The second cycle contains a number of tales which involve a mystery, as in the fate of the lover in 'Dawn', the failure to kill in 'Beryl', or the second family in 'Photograph'. The tale 'Bach' is very different. It utilises the idea of a simple misunderstanding brought to fatal finality by fear and anticipation of loss of liberty, of exposure to past evils. It has a complex construction, and was developed through many drafts. The spark of the tale came with sight of an old ledger, in which details of the passing of an exile community were recorded. It was never intended that outsiders should see it, but I was fortunate. It cited name, place and date of birth, a few relevant details, and comments. A few exiles had died by their own hands, or 'mysteriously'. Many more than originally thought were unmarried, living in remote places, echoing Sebald's withdrawn artist, Ferber, hidden in a run-down part of the city (6). A character began to form; that character became more compelling and went on, to meet a slightly different fate, in the third cycle tale 'Solstice'.

My suicidal exile was a distant creature, a sociopath, alone in a ruined smallholding; that image was clear. The place unfolded, the man followed, briefly shown in his drab

environment, hiding himself and his truth from the world. His fate was to be helpless, so he often spat into the fire, offending the protective spirit, driving out the *Domovik.* He was no soldier, just a killer, surrounded by ghosts: “This man was neither brother nor friend. He truly was an isolate.”

Like many suicides he died without warning, in this case needlessly. Some of the first draft developed from the starting point of ‘Blade’ (Appendix 11): chance recognition, futile escape, exposure, capture, seemed too like the reality of the Demanjuk trial. (7) The writing returns to isolated, forgotten Neaudd Ddu, then describes the manner of death using information provided by a local Coroner, and by attending Inquests. Judicially, death is treated in a most eloquent manner, the cause of death, be it rope or gun discussed in great detail, human detritus pored over for omens. (8) A complex decision needed to be made: why would the central character kill himself at that time? It could be explained in a suicide note, yet sullen characters like Taras seemed unlikely to produce explanations or confessions, something he was desperate to avoid. Sebald’s treatment of suicide can also be a complete surprise. He writes in *The Emigrants:*

“It was only the manner in which he died, a death so inconceivable to me, that robbed me of my self-control.” (9)

Concentration and ‘work’ camps were established all over the Borderlands, many were, and remain, unremarkable sites. Bitczacz was just that, a building from which forced labour to build roads was drawn; a collection point, run by local volunteers, killing on an *ad hoc* basis; the historical background plain and evil: “Not such a large place, nor were its victims so accomplished as to provide even an ensemble or chamber quartet to enliven death.”

The vanity of Taras, framed by his lies, became central to his characterisation, and to the plot of the developing story. I wanted to show him as a parody of the big camps; with his sole violinist, the power of control, more than just life and death, he could recreate Dante’s hell in his own desires. The way he controlled and killed was rewritten several times. I wanted to show that the man couldn’t afford the luxury of endless amusement like his Nazi masters: he had to be quick about it. Bach’s violin sonata suited as a way of capturing a sense of contrast. Its vivid purity counterpointed the brutality of the man: “I walked carefully across the wreck of a farmyard, and suddenly I could hear the music again. Faint in volume, yet strong in purpose.” More broadly Bach’s music represents German *Kultur* to the Borderlander. He mimicked as best he could. Having the character listen over and again to Menuhin playing Bach’s sonata, was a way to suggest the cruel, somehow sentimental isolate growing in stature. I wanted to be clear that he could no more escape his fate than the Gipsy girl hers. This was a man who despised, used and killed women. In the tale, I wanted to develop the irony that he would learn to fear one.

The rejected suicide note became a letter received, a threat of exposure. His isolation problematised that choice. After just a paragraph it was removed. Yet, his carnality had to remain; the music to haunt him almost to death. Isolated, yet safe until the soviet collapse, his needs met by Dima’s ‘fixer’ skills. In one draft I had him drift towards killing the visiting

prostitutes, taking his own life in remorse; but remorse did not fit consistently with the character of Taras in my mind, and it was edited out. A Borderland student sex worker reflected the chasm between his homeland and the new, echoing, in a loose sense, Angela Carter's approach in 'The Tiger's Bride' (10). I wanted a character who could not escape from himself, whom need destroyed as much as the shotgun shell. Just as in Sebald, the exiled suicide is held by tragic destiny, drawn back: "Paul's return to Germany in 1939 was an aberration.". (11) His fate "already systematically laid out for him." (12)

In this tale, experiences gained across the Borderlands provided as much as the original idea in exile; though the historical background provides a powerful element. It is the changing nature of post-soviet youth distanced from the bitterness of the past, that simple moral act of forgiveness, which finally destroys Taras, ending any possibility of his remaining unnoticed, or indeed of returning from exile. It was essential the letter was written in a language the student knew Taras could read:

"I am my grandmother's memories … I recognise you. I despise you, you are still the man in the black uniform. The black killer at the camp gates."

The young woman clearly identifies with those he brutalised, and is shown as not being able to bring herself to forgive in her own Borderland words. So, she writes them in English, realising he could not read them, denying him that final release from his sins; imposing upon him a sentence he could not understand, a sentence which brought his death:

"Now you must live, knowing that I know who you are. That I know what you are. Every day you will remember me, as you remember my grandmother's playing."

Influenced by Propp's folk tale functions (13), the third cycle tale 'Mushroom' contains several recognisable elements. The heroine Ludmila is absent from home on a quest, and is raped, violated. The 'villain' escapes, but returns unchanged, undisguised. Ludmila and the villain's natural daughter Olena are employed to help him. The magical agent, the mushrooms, links her initial rape and her revenge closely; and there is conflict, though this 'villain' doesn't ever know it, and a victory ending in a not entirely perfect death, involving what modern commentators call 'collateral damage'.

The mushroom is of immense historical, nutritional and cultural importance across the Borderlands. It is sold everywhere, gathered and eaten by almost everyone; there's a popular folk song about the activity:

*"A crowd of girls went hunting mushrooms,*

*As soon as they came to the forest,*

*They all went their separate ways."*

One is meeting her secret lover, when the others shout *"Aiy!"* to keep contact, she stays silent. There was the opening of the tale, initially developed as a short piece leading from rape, loss of innocence, death in childbirth, to an exile's visit to a homeland graveyard, a

chance remark, recognition of loss in both lives. It read in 'Dickensian' fashion and much was discarded at first editing. The tale properly had its beginning with a commonplace report in a Chernihiv newspaper of deaths in a local family from mushroom poisoning, one of them an old exile visiting home. All the exiles remembered gathering mushrooms at home, the scent particularly. The idea developed quickly, the rape, the resulting child 'special', life for Ludmila poor, weary, but her character was soon reduced to her strengths, cooking, caring for Olena. The nature of the exile's return is a typical 'back to old fashioned roots' *Dacha* holiday. This *Dacha* came from Carpathian memories, remote, lacking communication and facilities; writing visitors and host was straightforward -- nostalgia, verging on melancholy, at the heart of it all. By adopting this rustic tourist life, I wanted a story arc in which her assailant places himself in his victim's grasp. She is a faceless drudge, simply there to do his bidding, by cooking his food. She controls his fate. Food and drink appear throughout deliberately, and I was particularly interested in showing Ludmila as a character in whom domestic strength hides deadly power.

The development of this tale suggested alternatives. No exile of advancing years would return alone to isolation, but a party of three provided an unholy trinity. Two old comrades, were both there at Ludmila's rape, both doomed. The character of the son caused some difficulty. He might well have been a similar age to Olena, and early attempts which cast him as a more empathetic character were abandoned, as that would make the tale one of gain in human terms, rather than one based entirely on Ludmila's loss. Olena had to remain 'special', a *'hnyda'* -- an idiot in the Russian and Ukrainian languages. The son had to fall with his father. I wanted to avoid a plot development in which, if absented for that last supper, he might return and efficiently save the old man's life, and even expose Ludmila's act of retribution.

Ludmila's character is shown as having faith. Her method of seeking help by divining the Scriptures is one less common now, but still practised in the villages:

She crossed herself, lay aside her needle and fetched the Epiphany candle from the icon corner ... Ludmilla unwrapped the Word of God, touched it to her lips, and rotated it in her thin hands close to her head three times…She carried the warm candle back to the icon, crossed herself three times, and blew out the light leaving the darkness to God and the buzzing moth.

The procedure described, candle, book and blade, was provided by a Ukrainian Uniate priest: the verses, appropriate to her quest, were taken from the King James Bible, the Priest's suggestion, which surprised me, but is it was explained, that they were in fact very close to the translation from the Uniate Ukrainian Bible. Other Borderland people would use other bibles. For her, this is the decisive moment. She will take their lives, as God wills it. Since the mushroom is the weapon she uses, this part of the tale had to be detailed, precise. Having encountered 'silent hunting' in the Borderlands on several occasions, Ludmila's quest had to reflect the old proverb 'Don't hunt for mushrooms unless you are lucky!'. Her act of gathering is vengeful, and this short section was written, then rewritten, to reflect her decisiveness, her luck, her faith, her intent to kill:

She bent to cut, to castrate the shaft from the volva, again and again from a spattering of Destroying Angels. Eight or nine of them, lifted from their prayers!

That she gathers so many deadly 'angels' establishes the intensity of her hatred, as only a portion of one would be enough to ensure a slow, lingering death. The perfection with which she prepares the pot demonstrates her thorough premeditation: "now this single bubbling pot, from which the angel's breath of scented steam arose, was cooking soup for her own purpose".

The perfection with which she creates the men's final meal, the quality of the preparation, might at a glance be thought to owe a debt to the vile cookery in *Titus Andronicus*, but the following section caused me some difficulty in timing. Poison works slowly, many victims linger for days. Ludmila's vengefulness had dealt with that by her 'overkill' quantity, yet the discovery of the poisoned men offered several alternatives. They came to their murderess in one draft, begging for help; but her reminding a dying man of past events, lacked strength, faith even, and was discarded. Time had to pass, then Ludmila would go and see what she had achieved, leaving Olena safe at home. The detail of the *Dacha* scene was researched from several sources including a pathologist. The passage of time between the men's meal and that late evening walk to the place of death was left deliberately vague; two nights, almost three, as Ludmila waits. What she finds in twilight is testimony to her cookery and killing skills, an almost perfect murder, but just in case she provides a little more evidence. The survival, barely, of the son was a surprise to me as I wrote it, but he is beyond help, even though one draft version worked initially to have Ludmila save him with that folk antidote of vodka and salt. To reinforce the tone of the whole and its thematic resonance with the collection, he was doomed. The Militia are complacent, unsurprised, and Ludmila and Olena simply go home and carry on. In the final version I intended Olena to sing a line of the children's song 'Blow the Wind of the Steppes': "*and the boy was oh so young. Fallen like a dry leaf … forever there will he lay."*

But of course, this poisoned son would have to be middle aged, in his forties, so the lyrics were deleted.

Combined with 'Solstice', and 'Late', 'Mushroom' makes a sub-group of tales in the third part of the Triptych, and can be read separately from the other tales of Return, with its Propp-inspired sub-theme of retribution. (14)

Notes:

1. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Mass Destruction*, p. 29. The image was developed to its final level by visits to the Egypt Centre, University of Swansea, which possesses a mummified infant cadaver, which I was able to sit with.

2. A frequent frame found in the tales is that of sharing a drink, often in a bar. Factually, a common occurrence, this is one shared with Wodehouse. In his 'The Oldest Member' tales collected in his *Golf Club Omnibus London: Penguin,* 1990), no fewer

than twenty five of them are set in a golf club bar. Asimov also uses it in the fifty five tales in his *Union Club Mysteries* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

3. V.I. Propp *Morphology of the Folk* Tale, pp. 24-25.
4. Mikhail Bulgakov, *The White Guard,* p. 295.
5. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, p. 109.
6. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, pp. 159-60.
7. John Demanjuk, who died in 2012 aged 91, was Ukrainian born, and the subject of over thirty years of legal investigation, deportation, trials in Israel the USA and Germany, over allegations of his role as a concentration camp guard.
8. The Crows and Magpies on the corpse of Taras in 'Bach' are powerful omens of ill fortune and death taken from Borderlands folk mythology.
9. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 61.
10. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* pp. 56-75.
11. W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 56.
12. Ibid. p. 62.
13. V.I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, p. 107.
14. Ibid. p. 57.

## The Order of Tales

Italo Calvino, with a serious interest in folk tales, writes:

I'm producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories that I could tell and maybe will tell or who knows may already have told on some other occasion, a space full of stories…in fact, looking in perspective at everything I am leaving out of the main narration, I see something like a forest that extends in all directions and is so thick that it doesn't allow light to pass: a material, in other words, much richer than what I have chosen to put in…so it is not impossible that the person who follows my story may feel himself a bit cheated, seeing that the stream is dispersed into so many trickles… a rule of discretion that consists in maintaining my position slightly below the narrative possibilities at my disposal. (1)

The creation of these tales, and the setting down of many other beginnings, tentative attempts at a first draft, has now passed far beyond my original expectations, and my original intention for this project. I am still happily in the middle of that forest of ideas and possibilities, surrounding me, but as yet it is far from complete.

The Triptych structure, emulating Joseph Campbell, developed through three clear periods in the life of the Diaspora. The shape of the book became clear. Every attempt at a literary work must have a structure, and that structure consists of the relationship between the many parts which go together to create it; in this case, what Virginia Woolf calls "a long ribbon of scenes". (2)

This collection is chronological, in terms of the tales and of each section of the Triptych. The tales follow a time line. Those in Home, from 1941 through the war and purges to 1947 and flight; Exile the long years between arrival in exile in 1948 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; Return, the years after 1991, independence and freedom into the twenty first century.

The intention is that each tale advances in time, but in some instances that may be almost imperceptible: 'Road' and 'Toymaker' could easily have occurred on the same day, as may 'Solstice' and 'Late'. The tales 'Shadow' and 'Valley', however, provide a clear beginning and end: the lights going out, the first loss; to the last journey of an exile, with the loss of a tale long sought. Each section of the Triptych could be far larger in terms of tales begun or completed for inclusion, doubled in size in fact. Every exile left the Borderlands, and had something to tell of the experience. All lived, and most died, in that state of exile. While the possible return to a newly reborn homeland, now a nation state, provided scores of different, often irreconcilable fragments of hope and despair. Intriguingly, Sebald ends *Austerlitz* with the realisation that for so many there was the impossibility of return from that exile:

it was truly terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. (3)

He concludes with the exiles profound image: “of the vanished past of his family and his people which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again.” (4)

One group of tales functions as the core of the finished collection. ‘Exodus’ and ‘Snow’ in the first sequence, ‘Beryl’, ‘Bach’ and ‘Books’ in the second, ‘Hill’, ‘Mushroom’ and ‘Soltice’ in the third. These I recognise are crucial to the development of the larger work’s structure, though they can also be read alone. They are distinct. They deal with an event, an attitude, a problem, a revelation which could be regarded as symptomatic of the Diaspora as exiles; and, they exemplify the key themes, that of loss especially. The selection of tales in each section was otherwise made in order to achieve balance and because of the undercurrents they add; the Eichmann-like banality of the old man in ‘Grandfather’, the almost Homeric pilgrimage of ‘Hill’, the confessional thread of ‘Neighbour’ for example.

Only three, ‘Hill’, ‘Money’ and ‘Photograph’, draw in the second generation, but there was little experience of their involvement with the Borderlands even when return became possible; the tales in the middle section were chosen to demonstrate the passing of the original Diaspora, in terms of beliefs and fortune.

My initial thought was that the first and second sections of the work would far outweigh the third in terms of suitable tales for inclusion, but this proved wrong, and from the final section longer pieces such as ‘Fire’ (Appendix 13) which contained significant folk tale elements, were removed in favour of stories which more clearly evoked loss. This group provided remarkably diverse options: in ‘Medal’ the return of an award but not a man; in ‘Solstice’ the return reversed, the exile haunted. The three sections also generated a significant number of drafts, stories and of essays, strongly linked to the originating concept of the tales which are presented as the finished book, and which became necessary, tangential, writing developments to bolster my own understanding of the work in progress, and enable me to continue my research This writing proved as valuable as the original historical articles had been (Appendices 4 & 5).There were even a few examples of flash fiction created by images at the frequent funerals. (5) These came to mind built on a word or phrase -- a habit gained when I first wrote in this genre for *Linkway* and *Cambrensis* a decade ago -- but do not fit the form of this collection.

The formal academic guidelines imposed externally prevented the inclusion of many of the tales which have been written, and resulted in the need for careful selection. Each of the three sections could have comprised twelve, or fifteen or more tales, but the final collection was made in order to include the strongest and darkest images and to use the most powerful fragments encountered so far. This was done in order to remain faithful in presentation, particularly historically to Babel’s violence, to Sebald’s reflections, and in contemporary terms to new writers reflected in Zabuzhko’s strengths. As she writes:

The more of us who are here, the faster the rubble will be cleared – and the less poison from the bodies of those crushed underneath will seep into new generations. (6)

The inclusion of many pieces, some of which are appended here, would have changed the nature of the completed work, and taken it beyond the model offered by Babel’s *Red*

*Cavalry*.'Goat'(Appendix 14) is a personal exploration of space and belief, 'Friend' (Appendix15), a vignette generated from a description provided by an exile who recalled most early deaths. Arguably, an echo of Sebald's Paul Bereyter in *the Emigrants*.

'Brodsky' (Appendix 16) is an account of a writer's experience in a place of lingering evil, recorded in photographic images the value of which Sebald would have recognised. Other exclusions were made because tales developed in ways which were never anticipated. 'Builders'(Appendix17), now merely provides a humorous sketch, 'Witness' (Appendix 18) offers a brief comment on fate. 'Pot', referred to above, is the first in a series of three short tales dealing with famine and cannibalism in the east. 'Heads' (Appendix 19) was excluded from the finished work, for its anti-semitic content, though again there is a link with Sebald. (7) Nor, though an incredible moment to experience, was 'Oath' (Appendix 12) includable given the nature of my assumed contemporary readership.

Occasionally, writing was generated through my personal, spontaneous response to what one exile termed 'old Borderland ways' of treating outsiders, as with 'Boy' (Appendix 20) and 'Gypsies' (Appendix 21); but these represented my own moral sentience. They were isolated from the main stream; they were rejected from the finished work.

To paraphrase Calvino, the material, the essence of this research, the written, and the incomplete beginnings, are far greater than just a collection of thirty tales in a Triptych of three sections. It is a forest of different shoots, factual, fictional and often fantastic, which as yet have not all been gathered. The trickling outcomes of these are deferred and may well be completely unexpected. Indeed, it can be nothing more than stating the simplest of facts to recognise that in the Borderlands, as elsewhere in the cruel world in that cruellest of centuries, mankind's experience is of a flawed humanity, fallen from all grace. Given that, surely the written word can attempt, with some insight and a deal of imagination, to effectively portray the seemingly endless facets of weakness and of wickedness hidden within the individual. In such individuals, distanced and fictionally portrayed, goodness, innocence perhaps, though it certainly exists, remains tantalisingly elusive, and guilt though hinted at is glimpsed only tangentially, and as through a veil of malevolent and long held silence.

Notes:

1. Calvino folk was a tale collector and collator influenced by Propp. His annotated collection of two hundred Italian tales influenced much of his later writing. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (London: Martin, Secker and Warburg, 1979), Calvino recognises the wealth available to the writer; he writes of lhaving in reserve a virtually unlimited supply of narratable material." (p.109).

2. Virginia Woolf, *A Sketch of the Past* in *Moments of Being* (1955) ed., Schulekind (New York: Harvest, 1995) p. 67.

3. *W.G.* Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 414.

4. Ibid. p. 414.

5. There was a recognisable hierarchy in death among the exiles. Former members of the *14th* always had a wreath, of blue and gold flowers, irises, with a lion emblem- the divisional uniform collar patch, or the Trident of Vlodymyr for those above the rank of *SS-Scharfuhrer*- Section Leader. Those who had followed other wartime paths; including those who had a more direct hand in the process of the 'final solution', large sprays of lilies, but never irises.

6. Oksana Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, p. 710.

7. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 9.

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# APPENDICES

**1.**

Ripples.

It suddenly crossed my mind as I turned the page of Virginia Woolf's *'Writer's Diary'*, that they, the many Borderlands exiles have I met, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Russians and Poles were all of them, every one, alive and young on Thursday October Fourth 1934, and innocent. Long years before my time, but they were youthful, teenagers at most, one or two on the verge of manhood. It was a day unfolded in the book, for her marked as a day of weather.

*"A violent rain storm on the pond. The pond is covered with little white thorns; springing up and down; the pond is bristling with leaping white thorns, like the thorns on a small porcupine; bristles; then black waves; cross it; black shudders; and the little water thorns are white; a helter skelter rain and the elms tossing it up and down; the pond overflowing on one side; lily leaves tugging; the red flower swimming about; one leaf flapping; then completely smooth for a moment; then prickled; thorns like glass; but leaping up and down incessantly, a rapid smirch of shadow. Now light from the sun; green and red; shiny; the pond a sage green; the grass brilliant green; red berries on the hedge; the cows very white; purple over Asheham."*

A remarkable day. Not only for the vivid, overwhelming description of an Autumn downpour, but for its being that rare day in which only the elements beyond the writer exist. Not a day of furious writing, no literary encounters, nothing to disturb. A day which draws a writer to the window to watch; which stimulates and pulls into creation a sort of half-memory of it, to be tucked away for use some time or never.

I can't ask the exiles now; too many, far too many have gone. Those few who are left, were seven or eight years old on Thursday October the fourth 1934, more than eighty years ago, would drift into the warm post-harvest borderland Autumns. Drift away into memories as false as those I often recall of my own boyhood, when Summers were half a year long, and we lived on hot beaches, on sandwiches and lemonade.

The question might draw forth a snapshot of an event; a sibling's birth, a wedding, a holiday, a death perhaps; but little else.

There are still many small ponds and many more villages in those rolling western provinces of what is now called Ukraine. There must have been hundreds more in the days before the war. But on that soft steppe land, north east of the Carpathians, those first days of October are too early for heavy rain. That mercilessly long autumnal deluge begins to fall on the rich black earth only as the month ends, and continues unrelenting until the frost comes hard from the Urals.

Unlike Woolf's stormy unsmoothed pond, any rain falling in the borderlands on Thursday October 4th 1934 will have been no more than a gentle passing shower, a few drops to ruffle a calm surface and send a timeless, a pointless ripple, outwards to die against the yet untroubled banks.

In the provinces of the borderlands the coming storm, that violent storm, awful, deep shadowed and blood dark, was yet to break; the thorns as yet untroubled; the light undimmed.

**2.**

In My Ward

*Abridged from a longer note written for the 'News from Wards' section of the 'Members Newsletter' produced by Swansea City Council- Autumn 1991.*

By now most of us will have realised the world changing events of the Summer, and the recent debate in Council will hopefully advance our understanding and involvement with a large group of now elderly men and their families, who now find themselves not exiled or half-forgotten Displaced Persons from the war, but people who now have a country, a nation. Morriston Ward was the 'spiritual home' for this Ukrainian ( and Polish!) Community for many years, as the Deputy Lord Mayor reminded us. There's plenty for this City, for its people and its politicians to do……

If you remember the August Economic Development Committee meeting, that torrential storm, thunder and lightning, that was the day that Ukraine came to the Council for help. Just one small city, with three names, and a big job to do……

Not much was explained in the letter from Rivne's mayor, but Mephody its bearer told me so much more over a beer. Just in case the Finance Chair's reading this, they don't need money, they need know how, and contact and friends somewhere they can trust. For over forty years, scores of their countrymen have lived here in Wales, many in Swansea, and the people of Rivne and of Western Ukraine know far more about us than we do of them……

In just a few weeks my Ward colleagues and I have learned a great deal, and now it's time for us to think about what we can do. The Chief Exec's pitched his tent, he and the Departmental Chiefs are sending a great deal of information and most of you were there when Andrew told us about the delighted response to the regular mailing of 'The Economist' to them!.....

Just one comment from me, this time with my teacher's hat on. Russian is about to be sidelined as the language of choice in education and in translation. English will replace it…….

The first letter I had from Mrs Shkuratyuk, Rivne's English Language Inspector's now copied and pinned on the board on the Member's Room, but Mephody's just taken out to Rivne the book she asked me for by Fax, 'if it didn't cost too much'…..Bram Stoker's 'DRACULA'. She wanted it to use with higher examination classes. I picked up a cheap Wordsworth edition for about £1.99 in the Uplands Bookshop, and I know it's arrived. …….

I wondered why this book? It's a standard Victorian classic, not everyone's cup of tea, but it is very well written. So can you suggest a reason why this book has been banned, suppressed in the Soviet Union for decades? I've faxed a request for a list of their 'banned' books, but she doesn't have one. Just names of some authors, John le Carre, Len Deighton, Graham Greene and Jeffrey Archer, names she'd heard of but never encountered. Or books known only by name. Others were available only in chopped, badly censored forms, like Thomas Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure', and even most of the works of Charles Dickens!.....

….Now, if there is one thing we can give our new friends in Rivne it's the truth, simply written as generations of Welsh and British writers have seen it. Just for them to make up their own minds, freely…..

At least now, the older English language students in Rivne are able to take that fascinating, troubled train journey with Jonathan Harker to Count Dracula's castle……..

Councillor Rob Morgan.

Morriston Ward.

**3**

On Inspiration…..

Unpublished essay.

Well, back in the early seventies, Swansea College of Education had few pretensions in the field of the creative arts. An annual 'Arts Festival' of sorts, and a student magazine which thrived, not because of the obvious quality of its junior co-editor's work, but because it was produced and distributed free by the Art Department. We also had a grand piano outside the refectory, Nigel from Maths used to play jazz on it sometimes, when it wasn't locked. Most Friday nights ( exams and Teaching Practice permitting) there was a *Twmpath* – a riotous cattle-market of a gathering which these days would be termed a Disco.

The Autumn Term of 1972 brought, on alternative Fridays, culture to the student's Union in the form of a diverse array of performers provided by an agency in Bristol. We had folk singers, mostly unmemorable, comedians who weren't, and one Friday, close to Christmas, Max Boyce. We paid him twenty quid, but this was before his 'Live at Treorchy' album made him famous across the coalfield.

One performer stood out. The agency instructions were that he was to be met from the London train, taken to the venue (venue!), given a meal and overnight accommodation after the show. No problem with that, assuming this artiste would eat what students ate, and there were several empty rooms in the halls of residence. On Saturday morning we were to give him breakfast and get him on the 10.30 back to Paddington. All fairly straightforward, but, on no account was he to be given any payment. No cash at all. Now that was unusual, as was the name of this act.

Dominic Behan.

So, on the wettest Friday afternoon in a very wet November, Malcolm and I parked the minibus outside High Street Station, the train was already in. We couldn't find him anywhere, even after a Tannoy announcement. A quick trawl of the pubs close by unearthed the man, it had to be him, in 'The Shoulder of Mutton'. You couldn't miss him, the voice alone made sure of that. He impressed Malcolm by sinking a pint of Guinness in a single swift swallow, and me with his incredible line in chat. He ate with us, then went to his room, D54, I thought later we should have had a plaque on the wall to commemorate him. At half past eight or thereabouts he stood, a stocky man I thought, on the bar stage, ready to perform. He adjusted the microphone, was loudly cheered and off went Dominic Behan, brother of the late, more famous, Brendan.

For more than four hours, he entertained the packed bar with songs and stories and sedition, pausing only to refresh himself with a drop of Guinness or a small-ish whisky. We weren't supposed to give him cash, he cost fifty pounds, a lot back then, but the bar bill we picked up stunned the Treasurer. By midnight even Tom the night porter was in the bar, which had stretched somehow to cram in the students drifting back from the curry houses. Suddenly, it was about one in the morning, after delivering a Fenian rant of epic venom, he was gone. The room instantly, palpably, deflated.

It was around nine the following morning, I sat in the refectory having a lonely bacon sandwich, breakfast at weekends being a particularly dismal meal to all but the lovers of fried spam. Across the car park, Dominic drifted into view, so I collected him and he sat there with a mug of coffee, chatting happily away. A real writer, here, talking to me. Me!

Now this was destined to be a fairly one-sided conversation, into which an aspiring youngster like myself, two short stories published and a column in the student mag, could hardly slip much value at all. As I was faced with a First Class Honours Graduate of the Dublin School of Seriously Hard Knocks. I did manage to ask him about his writing. He was affable, but it makes me cringe even at this distance in time, that I asked him for a few tips on my own potential as a writer. At least thank heaven, I didn't have a copy of my latest, useless essay in my pocket. These days I probably would!

Dominic, yes I called him Dominic, told me about some of the favoured Basement clubs around Grafton Street and Wicklow Street, where Dublin's literary minds could drink all day and night as long as they were 'consuming a meal'. To meet this strict gastronomic requirement, along with the first drink the 'diner' was provided with a finger bread roll which was inserted into the top pocket of the jacket, where it stayed, unconsumed. The Garda, he told me, dropped in from time to time, but seemed happy with the arrangement, even, occasionally, staying for a quick glass themselves.

In retrospect I should, like Apollinaire, have jotted a few notes of what he said on the tablecloth, or maybe as Flaubert did, on a napkin. But, sadly, Swansea College of Education as it was then, lacked the necessary range of quality table linen. To me Dominic appeared a sort of curly, shabby, amazingly intellectual man, whose body seemed only there to surround and keep up a remarkable loudspeaker of a mouth and a pair of well-deep eyes. He talked about Ireland and his brother, and Brendan was not long dead.

Brendan he told me had gone to Paris after Second World War, which the Irish still called 'The Emergency' as though it was a domestic row in Blackrock, and not an ambulance call for the whole world. His brother was keen but unpublished, and went to Paris probably because Joyce and Beckett had gone there before him. At the fabled *Café des Intellectuels*, young Behan saw Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir seated at a table piled deep in books and newspapers. So, said Dominic, your man went over and introduced himself casually, as Irishmen do, to the two doyens of European post-war culture. Sartre, bemused, shook Brendan's hand, but Simone lifted her eyebrows and said firmly, "Fuck Off!"

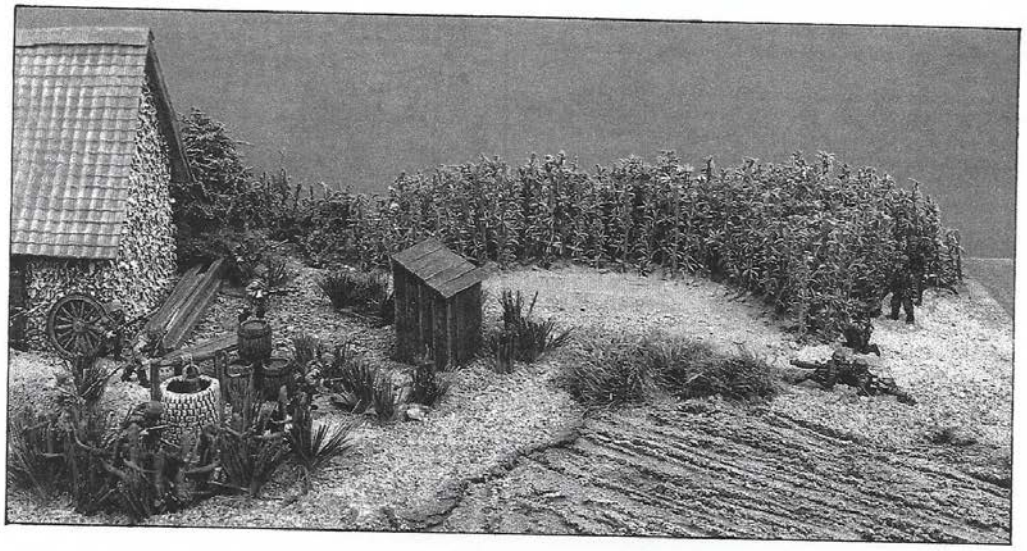
Then Malcolm drove the minibus up to the main door, and sounded the horn. It was starting to rain again. In we climbed this remarkable Dubliner and I. We made it to the train with minutes to spare, exchanging handshakes and farewells as though we would meet again, but not before he touched me for a fiver to buy a paper and some refreshments on the train back to London. It was worth it.

Back in the minibus I wrote down the simple advice he gave me on how to glean to write, not on how to be a writer. In the Dublin clubs he told me, stories and tales 'unfolded before your glass'; a casual remark dropped in conversation, a barman's insult, the events of an arrest, anything.

"So, son", he said to me " I drink, I listen, and I remember.".

**4.**





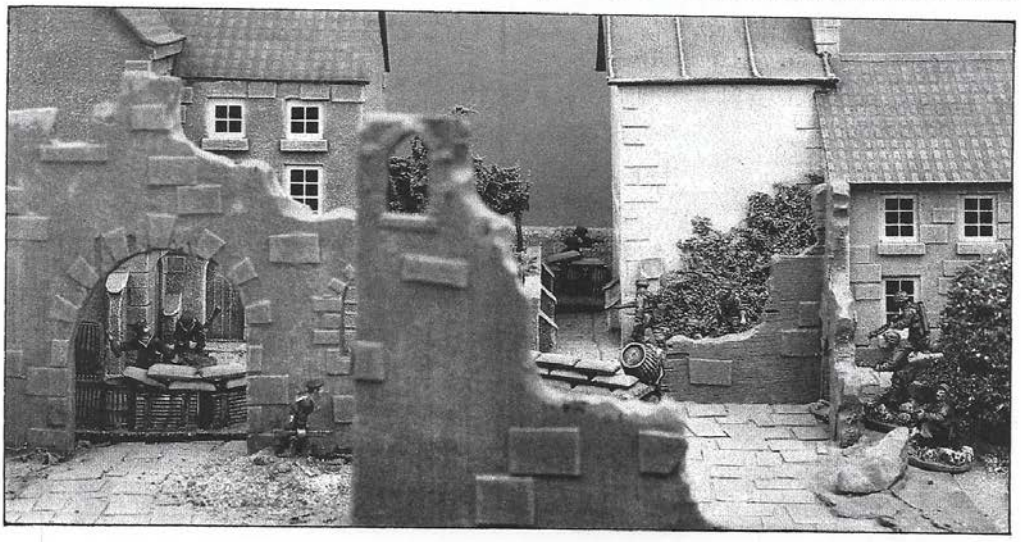
# THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

## 1940 TO 1950

*By Robert Morgan*

The demise and break up of the USSR will undoubtedly have a significant effect on military historians and, ultimately, on wargamers. The collapse of the Red Army will mean that the previously dominant view of the history of what were called the Russian Civil Wars, the drive to collectivisation, the Great Patriotic War, and its subsequent lingering partisan conflicts, is likely to be called into question by a new generation of writers who take and develop a Georgian, Latvian or Ukrainian nationalist standpoint on these wars.

The newly born, or reborn, republic of Ukraine is one of the largest countries in Europe. It began the 20th Century split between the Austrian and Russian empires, and in the upheavals following the collapse of both at the end of the First World War a short-lived independent Ukrainian Republic was proclaimed. This republic was swallowed up in the war between Poland and Soviet Russia, and the Ukrainian lands were divided up between these two and Czechoslovakia after the treaty of Riga was signed in March 1921. During the 1920's and 1930's



Ukraine was effectively suppressed by Soviet troops in the East, enforcing the collectivisation of agriculture and in the West by strong military presence on the part of the army of Poland. An attempt in 1939 to establish an independent Ukrainian enclave in the previously Czech territory of the Carpathians was rapidly stamped out by the Hungarian army.

## BARBAROSSA

The destruction and division of Poland, and the launching of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, revived the hopes of the Ukrainian nation. They hoped to benefit from the conflict between their huge neighbours by gaining their own independence. The Germans and their allies marched steadily Eastwards, occupying all of Ukraine, which became a German colony of sorts – the *ReichsKomissariat*; though the Western, Galician part of the country was attached to the Polish *GeneralGouvernment*. To the German economy, this wealthy land was a source of food supplies, and a region ripe for promoting *Lebensraum*. Here, as in so many cases, the Germans made a serious error. The driving out of the Red Army, the Communist party, and government by the commissars was welcomed by the population as eagerly as by other Eastern Europeans. They had no preconceived hatred for the Germans or their army (which had in fact provided some support for the brief-lived 1918 republic) and the first front line units to enter Ukraine were indeed welcomed with genuine delight as liberators! However, the Nazi party structure failed to harness anti-Soviet feelings, and by directing grain and food supplies to the Reich, by deporting Ukrainians as labourers, by stifling nationalist activities, including education and culture, the Nazis brought about a general ambivalence amongst the populace.

## UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES

In such a climate of conflict and suppression, a whole range of Ukrainian armed forces developed rapidly. Some were pro-Russian, some pro-German, some joined the SS, others formed into "Home Guard" or anti-Partisan units, whilst yet others became nationalist guerrillas and fought against both sides. When the Wehrmacht crossed the border in June 1941, there were a number of small Ukrainian units in action, wearing German uniform with Ukrainian insignia, organised from amongst exiles living in the Reich, or Ukrainians living in what had been Poland. In a number of cases these troops were used as "Brandenburgers", wearing Red Army uniforms for specific commando raids on Soviet targets.

Of course Ukrainians made up a sizeable proportion of the Soviet army in the Summer of 1941, though the retreats, encirclement and destruction of many Red Army units led to the capture of enormous numbers. Others took the opportunity to desert as the battle neared home.

At this stage in the war, with Ukraine overrun by Nazi Germany, yet neither independent nor liberated, the military situation became very complex indeed. The small Ukrainian units which had arrived with the Wehrmacht were disbanded in the Autumn of 1941, in the face of opposition by the German High Command to any expression of autonomy.

Despite these mistakes, and the suppression, many Ukrainians, former Soviet citizens, collaborated or came forward to fight for Germany in late 1941 and 1942. Few if any were pro-German, most were passionate nationalists with a serious mistrust of communism and all its works, seeing the probable German victory as the only way of regaining an element of independence for their country.

## ANTI-PARTISAN FORCES

A significant number of those who came forward volunteered for the security and anti-partisan militia units which Germany raised throughout the East. Initially formed in late 1941, by the Summer of 1942 some sources give as many as 50,000 or 60,000 Ukrainians serving in the auxiliary units of the German police – *Schutzmannschaft der OrdnungsPolizei*, the "Schuma" for short. Almost seventy battalions of Ukrainian Schuma were recruited, some acting as normal police, others as guard, frontline, fire brigade, engineer or construction battalions. Each of these was given a number somewhere between 50 and 170 to identify it, and had a German commander, adjutant and a cadre of German specialists in control of its staff functions and operations. The Ukrainian Schuma is believed to have contained a small number of cavalry units, some designated as élite 'cossacks', and a number of artillery units equipped for the most part with captured Polish or older Russian guns. Photographs show the Schuma carrying captured Russian rifles without the fixed bayonet, section leaders carrying the PPsh SMG. The unit machine-gun would be the Russian DP 'record player' type, with a sprinkling of the Maxim .08 on wheeled carriages.

Soviet partisans were always active in Ukraine, particularly to the north of Kiev and Zhitomir where the huge Pripyat marshes lie. The coalfields and the wheatcrops of the country which had become vital to the German war effort were guarded from Red partisan incursions by a Ukrainian National Self Defence force, a sort of "Home Guard", called the UNS. This force, probably of limited value even in combat with partisans, may have been as large as 150,000 men at one stage in 1943. They were for the most part without uniform, and were rifle armed.

A substantial number of Ukrainians actually enlisted in the German Army (some also in the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine) rather than in the "militia" type forces. These volunteers included not only anti-Soviet inhabitants of the country and former Red Army conscripts, but also came from those who had fled abroad during and after the Bolshevik revolution and were taking the opportunity offered by "Barbarossa" to return to their homeland and fight against Stalin.

From these men were created the *Osttruppen* battalions raised throughout the *ReichsKommissariat* for front line service. There may have been as many as 200 of these units during the course of the war, each "nationally" raised in Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia and so on; no definitive list existed even at the time. Unfortunately for these Ukrainians OKW harboured a very serious mistrust of the Eastern peoples of Europe, and feared mass desertion or betrayal by a trained and relatively well-armed force. So by 1944, a substantial number of these Ost battalions were transferred to duties in the West, as garrisons on the Atlantic wall, or acting against partisans in France, Holland and Italy. Two of these battalions, one composed of men from Ukraine were included in the garrison of the Channel Islands, and the cemetery at Torteval on Guernsey contains memories of some who died there far away from the enemy they enlisted to fight, facing opponents for whom they bore no hatred. Little wonder that these troops did not enter

Opposite: *Two photos of Figures, Armour, Artillery 20mm World War II Russians and Germans (obviously battling somewhere in the Ukraine!). Buildings scratch-built by Phil Robinson, Martin Wenn of P.M.C., & Dennis-from-Chester-in-the-cowboy-hat. See the F.A.A. ad on p.13.*

battle enthusiastically, and that one or two units actually mutinied.

## THE WAFFEN SS

The SS also actively recruited Ukrainians into their ranks, initially as auxiliaries, drivers, and so on, and eventually three Waffen SS divisions were built around volunteers from this nation.

The 14th Waffen Grenadier Division der SS known as the Galician/Ukrainian No.1, under SS BrigadeFuhrer Schimana was recruited from April 1943 onwards, with an initial massive response to a request for volunteers. The 30th Waffen Grenadier Division der SS, known as the Russische No 2, under SS Oberst Seigling was a largely police and Schuma-based formation created in July 1944, by which time Ukrainian was already largely overrun by the Red Army.

One other Waffen SS formation drew on Ukrainian volunteers. From late 1943 the 29th Waffen Grenadier Division der SS, the Russische No 1, led by Bratislaw Kaminski, made up of 6 or 7,000 renegades, cut-throats and other dregs of largely Ukrainian origin, was used in security and anti-partisan operations behind the lines of Army Group Centre. Whilst in 'action' Kaminski's men committed appalling atrocities against the civilian population. Retreating into Poland with other units of the German forces, they were used in August 1944 against the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw rising. Some accounts indicate that on one day alone, this band of brigands exterminated 10,000 Polish men, women, and children. The vile activities of Kaminski and his troops led to their withdrawal after the unanimous call of SS and Army commanders in the area. Bratislaw Kaminski was later shot 'in mysterious circumstances' and the division was disbanded. Many references to this formation, incidentally, talk of the "Kaminski Brigade", rather than the 29th Division of the SS.

A number of these men found their way into the 30th SS mentioned earlier, which was transferred to the West in late 1944. There it conducted a number of operations against the French resistance, and after some action against Allied ground forces, the survivors crossed back into Germany. At the end of the war the remnants of the 30th, and a few of Kaminski's 29th were subsumed into Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army, despite their origins. Probably for this reason the survivors for the most part were handed back to Stalin by the Western allies, and subsequently eliminated.

The 14th SS Division was somewhat luckier and better handled. During 1944 it saw extensive action in Russia, and in July of that year much of the formation was destroyed in the Tarnow-Brody pocket. The survivors were split into two large groups. One reached the retreating German lines, and was moved into Slovakia to reform; the other group took up with Ukrainian nationalist partisans and hid out in the Carpathian mountains until the winter of 1946/47 when, along with a number of the partisans, they fought their way through the Russian lines to reach the western Allied Zone of Germany, quite a feat of arms! The element of the division which was put to reform in Slovakia saw little fighting in the last months of the war, though they were involved in a futile attempt to create a Ukrainian National Army, the UVV, along the lines of Vlasov's force, before going into British captivity. Their greatest piece of good fortune was that they avoided repatriation to the USSR.

## UKRAINIAN PARTISANS

Some Ukrainians were loyal to the USSR, and fought as partisans on their own territory. A substantially larger underground partisan force was created from nationalists who fought both the Soviets and the Germans. The most famous group of these, led by General Taras Bulba-Borovets existed in the region of Volhynia for much of the war, and scored many successes against both armies, including the ambush and elimination of the Reich-Kommissariat's SA commander.

Inevitably the complexity of relationships within the Ukrainian nation led to links between these fiercely independent partisans and their brethren serving in the ranks of the Schuma and the UNS (Home Guards). It is probable that a number of partisans were actually paper members of UNS, and it is certain that the Schuma and Ostbattalion Ukrainians supplied the nationalist partisans with intelligence, weapons and supplies! From time to time covert operations were carried out by the German-controlled Ukrainians and the independent Ukrainians to eliminate Soviet partisans on their nation's soil.

In early 1944, the partisan groups were formed into the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (the UPA) under the military leadership of General Taras Chuprynka-Schukhevych, and with a political leadership based on the pre-1921 republic. Probably around 30,000 men and women were involved as active partisans, though support was far wider, and the UPA controlled territory between the Carpathian mountains and the River Dneipr. The Germans at one stage even accused the Hungarian army of co-operation and collaboration with UPA forces, but were powerless to prevent it.

Originally the UPA contained several cavalry, and even artillery units. When the Red Army advanced westwards and the Germans pulled out, the battle to defend Ukraine was organised into a number of commands or fronts: North, West, South and East. At this point the ranks of the UPA grew to include not only some of the more committed UNS home guards, but also German equipped Schuma who did not want to leave the country, together with Ost battalions and SS deserters and stragglers, by no means all Ukrainian in origin.

## THE FINAL BATTLE

From May 1945, the whole of Ukraine from the Carpathians to the Don was back under Stalin's control, and the final phase of the battle began. As the Red Army consolidated its grip on the western boundaries of the USSR, and the political buffer states from Poland to Jugoslavia were being mapped out, the NKVD and its internal security troops moved into Ukraine. The NKVD was charged with hunting down the partisans, and carrying out punitive actions against any village, town or ethnic group suspected of aiding the Germans or supporting the independence movement. The NKVD also conducted the mass deportation of whole populations in the region. Despite the fact that these NKVD special formations were lightly armed, without armour or artillery, their attentions were enough to wear down both the partisans and the population of Ukraine. The Carpathian breakout in 1946/47 which involved UPA and former 14th SS groups was the final high point of a long campaign. The NKVD brought in enormous forces, including armoured units, additional aircraft and cavalry to intensify the campaign against the UPA. By 1950 or 1951 the last of the Ukrainian partisan groups had been destroyed up in the Pripyat marshes. For the Ukrainians the Second World War was over.

## WARGAMING UKRAINIAN FORCES

**Availability of figures in 20/25mm Scale**

The **Platoon 20** range includes half a dozen figures which represent the 'Schuma' in the early police uniform of 1942-43; and figures from the **Wargames Foundry** German Infantry series (pre-1943 in field cap to represent the kit more accurately), as well as a number from the **Raventhorpe** list, can be used to portray the Schuma in the later war period. It seems

to be more accurate to stick to the *feldmutze* or sidecap with Schuma rather than the steel helmet.

SS figures for the 14th, 29th and 30th Waffen SS divisions are easily found in the splendid **Figures, Armour, Artillery, Wargames Foundry** and **Raventhorpe** lists. Ostbattalion troops can be got from these sources too, though in some Ost Battalions a distinctive, almost Russian uniform was worn, with strictly non-German insignia.

Partisan and home guard figures came from the Resistance ranges of **Wargames Foundry**, **Raventhorpe** and **Platoon 20**. I added a few of the Spanish Civil War **F.A.A.** models for variety. The UNS 'Home Guards' I gave German steel helmet heads, mainly the **Raventhorpe** WWI pattern helmet, over civilian dress. Most Ukrainians wore headgear with a V-shaped indentation at the front of the band, a traditional feature of national dress, and amongst the UPA old Polish uniforms, German field grey, Russian breeches, Italian and Hungarian items seem to have been commonly worn together.

As opponents I used the **Platoon 20** and **Wargames Foundry** greatcoated Russian figures, though the latter range need new heads. The **Wargames Foundry** officer makes a good NKVD commissar as he stands.

**Raventhorpe** also make a small range of WWII Hungarians with whom the UPA co-existed and co-operated. It would also have been possible for Italian and Romanian, even Slovak forces to have been in action against the partisans at some stage in the war. **Raventhorpe**'s comprehensive range will provide these, and **Wargames Foundry** and **F.A.A.** have Italian figures. Soviet partisans, key opponents of just about everyone else can be represented using the ranges mentioned earlier, padded out with selected **Platoon 20** Red Army men with field cap heads; they would never be seen in 'hard hats'.

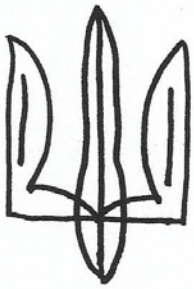
For heavy weapons, **Wargames Foundry** and **Raventhorpe** produce MG34's and Maxim .08's, which will serve effectively; both firms make suitable mortars and if the odd artillery piece needs to appear on the table, a light weapon such as the **Hinchliffe** Russian M1927, or German 7.5 Infantry gun, or even the little **Raventhorpe** Italian 65mm gun would be suitable. There are an enormous number of trucks, softskins and AFVs suitable for the campaigns in and around Ukraine available from **Cromwell**, **Hinchliffe**, **Raventhorpe**, and **Mike Papworth**. One note of caution to remember is that armour used against partisans would generally be old, second rate, even second-hand stuff, and trucks used far from the front would be ancient rather than modern. Kaminski's troops were allegedly equipped with captured Red Army AFV's and artillery. In terms of partisan equipment, 1944/45 would have been the best period with all manner of German and Axis items falling into UPA hands, thereafter as conditions became more difficult, fewer heavy and automatic weapons would be encountered, and much would be captured, Soviet in origin.

I tend to operate my UPA partisans in groups of around 10; with German Schuma and SS units slightly smaller, around 8 figures. NKVD units of 15 figures seems about right, and where cavalry is used a patrol will be three figures usually, but no more than five. Soviet partisans operate in less wieldy formations, around 18 to 20 men, but with far more SMG's.

## GUIDE TO PAINTING

Schuma pre-1943, wore a semi-police uniform of black with a very dark green sheen, achieved by dry brushing, the deep cuffs and collars of this uniform being Humbrol 88, rank chevrons and bars in white on the left forearm. Post 1943 Schuma wore the German field grey, though some earlier items persisted. A large black and silver Schuma "swastika" badge was worn on the left upper arm in this uniform, with epaulettes and collar patches black, edged in silver and green.





**Trident of Vlodimir**

SS uniforms as worn by the 14th, 29th and 30th Waffen SS are detailed in numerous sources, and varied considerably as the war went on. The collar patch of the 30th was a Russian orthodox cross, horizontally white on black. Kaminski's men allegedly wore a Maltese cross, with crossed swords behind; and the 14th wore a rampant lion, facing left, on their collars. Ostbattalion troops wore a stupefying variety of uniform items and styles, and there are superb illustrations of these in Osprey 147, *Foreign Volunteers of the Wehrmacht* by Jurado. Ukrainians in this type of formation would have worn the blue over yellow armshield, particularly towards the end of the war when there were attempts to establish the Ukrainian National Army, the U.V.V. Ukrainian Ostruppen also wore the blue and yellow cockade, sometimes with the trident of Vlodimir.

For UPA partisans any uniform colour will do, black and khaki, khaki and field grey, Polish drab. All UPA partisans would have worn the Trident of Vlodimir however, and possibly, on rare occasions, armbands, blue over yellow. UNS home guards would be in civilian dress, possibly with an identifying white armband on duty.

Russian partisans, khaki with a strong sprinkling of black or brown leather jackets, as favoured by commissars, red star on headgear. The NKVD Internal Security troops would wear standard khaki, but with pale blue shoulder boards, and for officers pale blue topped caps with a red band. There would be more officers in an NKVD unit than in a normal Red Army formation. The Ukrainian flag incidentally is halved pale blue over yellow, and the trident of Vlodimir is illustrated.

The wide range of "pro", "anti" and "independent" Ukrainian forces involved in the struggle for that country between 1940 and 1950 makes for a very different kind of wargame scenario. In particular the breakout of a very substantial number of 14th SS, UPA, ex-Schuma and Osttruppen through the Red Army and NKVD, across international borders and the Iron Curtain to reach the American Zone in 1947 would make a superb short campaign with plenty of action, and the opportunity to include everything from JSIII's to jets.

5



the participation of "Roland" in all further action ".
At dawn on 14th August, the Battalion was surrounded by German machine guns and disarmed en masse, forced to entrain, the officers and men of 'Roland' were sent back to Austria, where by mid-September most of its officers and OUN members were arrested by the Gestapo and eliminated. On 21st October the survivors of Battalion 'Roland' arrived to join the men of 'Nightingale' at Frankfurt-on-Oder.

**Schuma battalion 201**

Whilst many of the officers and political activists of the two Ukrainian battalions had proved to be either unreliable, or frankly opportunist, the same could not be said for the majority of the 600 rank and file Ukrainian volunteers; especially the students of 'Roland' Battalion which had acquitted itself well in the fighting with Army Group South. Nor was "Roland's" senior officer, Major Pobihustchy implicated in the events at L'viv.
It was decided to amalgamate "Nightingale" and "Roland" into a single Security Battalion, the 201st under Pobihustchy`s command with 400 men divided into four companies under Ukrainian officers, stiffened with German NCO's. Somehow, Captain Shukhevitch had survived and led 1st Company of the 201st.
In all Ukrainian sources Battalion 201 is frequently referred to as the 'E.konovaletz Battalion' an Ukrainian military hero of 1919, killed by the NKVD, and in March of 1942 the 201st was moved to the Belarus border, replacing a Latvian Battalion which moved southwards into Ukraine Its main duty was to secure communications and act against Soviet partisans in the area around Vitebsk and Lepel.
Now the relationship between Ukrainians serving in the "Schuma" and other German auxiliary forces, and their countrymen in the very active Ukrainian Insurgent Army (known as UPA) was to say the least complex! Red partisans and UPA irregulars fought each other consistently in the forests and marshes, while UPA groups frequently accompanied the Schuma on anti- soviet patrols. To the Wehrmacht and the ReichMinistry, UPA were as much a target as the Red and indeed they were frequently supplied with food, intelligence, weapons and ammunition by the Ukrainian Security Police.
By the end of December 1942, the men of the 201st had caused great offence to the High command and were rounded up and sent under armed guard of a German infantry company to L`viv. During the train journey almost half of them escaped to join UPA, including Captain Shukhevitch who by Autumn 1943 had become UPA`s overall commander! Several Ukrainian accounts mention Shukhevitch as organising the anti-soviet work of both the 1st Company of the 201st Battalion and of the local UPA groups at the same time! Certainly both he and Lt. Sidor of the 3rd company were awarded the Iron Cross at one stage.
The remnants of the 201st, on arrival in L'viv were screened and told to report to Lublin where another Ukrainian Security battalion was to be formed, but none made the journey and the majority took their military skills into the UPA force which was destined to fight against the Red Army and NKDV on Ukrainian soil until 1956.
Uniforms and weapons The "Nightingale" Battalion was issued with standard Wehrmacht uniform the feldgrau pre-war pattern blouse, 1937 pattern field cap and M1935 steel helmet. Officers wore breeches and knee length boots, other ranks wore trousers and ankle boots. No markings whatsoever were worn in the Battalion. No waffenfarbe and no officers' ranks were displayed, only a narrow strip of blue over yellow cloth on each plain shoulder strap. This represented the colours of the Ukrainian flag... "The blue of the sky over the gold of the corn". They were armed with Mauser Gewehr 98 rifles, and MG34s, they were also issued with 5cm mortars, but had no other support or heavy weapons. Although as Specialist infantry unit, with the capture of L`viv the battalion acquired some Soviet transport vehicles. As for the 'Roland' Battalion, their uniform was very different, They, were issued with khaki uniforms obtained from the Czech Army, though wearing long German boots, rather than the puttees worn by the Czechs. NCO's were identified by silver sleeve stripes as in the Czech army, while officers wore a silver cord on the right shoulder. (As a guide, figure D3 in Osprey 131, "Germanys Eastern Front Allies", shows roughly the style of uniform worn by the battalion). On their collars each man wore the dark-red wolf's teeth patch of the Ukrainian, Galician Army c 1919. The Battalion commander alone had this emblem on a white background lozenge.
All of the members of this unit wore on their left upper arm, a blue over yellow brassard (Ukrainian colours again) bearing the 2cm high inscription - "Im Dienst der Deutschen Wehrmacht" in black. On their Czech style field caps, a rosette with the trident of Vlodymyr on blue and gold. (The wolfs teeth and trident badge worn were identical to those shown on page 37 of Osprey 305 Russian Civil War (2)).

The officers and men of "Roland' were issued with 1917 pattern Austrian helmets painted khaki. Their weapons were a combination of elderly, Russian Moisin-Nagant rifles in the form of its shortened Polish variant Karabin wz 25, while its LMGs were the very widely, used and well known Czech ZB vz.30s along with German 5cm mortars. No heavy weapons were issued to the battalion. The unit also acquired a significant amount of Red army transport during its campaign.
As for the 201st Schuma Battalion, Osprey 142 "Partisan Warfare" has one of these men at plate B2; no distinguishing Ukrainian markings were worn.
I must acknowledge the help of my colleagues Dr Serhiy Muzychuk and the late Professor Josef Patsula of Rivne, Ukraine with this article and Mr. T. Tymkiv, formerly of L'viv, for assistance with technical translation and interpretation.

## Contributors needed!

**We are constantly on the lookout for new articles and ideas from members. Anything from reviews of your latest purchases (all scales and sizes needed, esp. 12mm and below), scenarios, modelling ideas, home grown rules and adaptations, to all sizes of articles. We need your help to keep the content of the Journal varied and fresh.**

6.

# Number 81: An Encounter with Shakespeare in Ukraine

by Robert Morgan, *Educational Consultant, Swansea*

*Morgan describes the experiences and impressions he gained on his first visit to Rivne, Ukraine. The adventure commenced because post 1945 a number of Ukrainians made their home in Swansea and some began to return to the Ukraine in 1991. Morgan made his first trip in 1993 and describes his contacts with English teachers and students in Rivne.*

*Morgan beschreibt die Erfahrungen und Eindrücke seines ersten Besuches in Rivne in der Ukraine. Dieses Abenteuer begann, weil sich in der Nachkriegszeit eine Reihe von Einwohnern der Ukraine in Swansea niederliessen und einige im Jahr 1991 ihre Rückkehr in die Ukraine starteten. Morgan unternahm 1993 seine erste Reise und schreibt über seine Kontakte mit Englischlehrern und Studenten in Rivne.*

*Morgan describe las experiencias y las impresiones que se ganó en su primera visita a Rivne de Ucrania. La aventura se empezó por que después de 1945 varios Ucranios se insalaron en Swansea (País de Gales) y algunos volvieron a Ucrania en 1991. Morgan hizo su primer viaje en 1993 y describe sus contactos con los profesores y estudiantes ingleses en Rivne.*

*Morgan raconte ses expériences et les impressions qui lui furent faites pendant sa première visite à Rivne en Ukraine. Son aventure commença parce que, après 1945, plusieurs Ukrainiens s'installèrent à Swansea (au Pays de Galles) et quelques-uns d'entre eux commencèrent à repartir pour l'Ukraine en 1991. Morgan fit son premier voyage en 1993 et il décrit ses contacts avec les professeurs et les étudiants d'anglais à Rivne.*

The events I describe here began in the winter of 1991, after the fall of the iron curtain, at a time when scores of exiles from Poland, the Baltic republics, and Ukraine were going home from my own city to their native countries for the first time since 1945. Simply because I am a geographer and was sitting as a member of a council committee here I became involved with a small but fascinating community which I did not know existed, and began a chapter in my life which has now come to dominate and form my career.

An elderly Ukrainian appeared at that committee bearing a letter, part plea, part invitation from the mayor of his home city, Rivne, or Rovno in Russian, in Western Ukraine. Unlike my colleagues I knew where it was, and suggested to the chairman that we should encourage contact. The matter was firmly placed in my hands. Thank you chairman.

Within days I had met and become close friends with a huge number of Ukrainians who had come here at the end of the war as displaced persons, 'DPs'. A history, a culture, a society began to unfold before me. I had not even known of its existence. Within weeks my family and I had started to celebrate, as we still do, Christmas on two dates, ours and the Orthodox Christmas, 6 January, which I quickly realised is far more of a festival and a feast than ours has become.

Over the next years the regular visits of Ukrainians to their families and a monthly freight service organised from Manchester enabled me to develop contacts between the schools of Swansea and of Rivne, between individual teachers and the local inspectorate.

New forms of organisation were starting to emerge in Ukraine. Rotary, the Scouts and youth clubs all began in Rivne and found ready friendships in Swansea. By the time we celebrated our second Orthodox Christmas a dozen letters a week were arriving from Ukraine.

In February of 1993, a fax arrived. There was to be a conference of local authorities from all over the CIS in Rivne in early April. Would Swansea be represented? Yes, of course, and so together with the Chief Executive and the chairman of estates committee, I found myself on my way to the East.

### By Minibus Across Ukraine

Kiev's Borispol airport felt, and still does feel a frontier place, much as the American West must have felt a century ago — vibrant, urgent, threatening, full of hope and opportunity. The old 'Soviet' style welcome had not entirely disappeared, and it took a long time before we emerged to meet the welcoming party. Kiev is a beautiful city. It carries its thousand years of history very well, I observed, as the minibus sped over the wide Dniepr bridge and through the cobbled streets of the old town and off into the west of what is now Europe's largest country. The minibus journey took seven long hours. Traffic regulations, a maximum speed of 50 Kmph through the many villages and massive reconstruction work all played a part. It was well after midnight when we reached Rivne, exhausted.

I woke at seven, dragged into the day by an alarm call I had not asked for! It had snowed during the night and the typical Ukrainian breakfast, huge bowls of kasha, a steaming buckwheat porridge, was very welcome. Nine o'clock saw us at the conference, and it was enormous! Teachers, politicians and administrators from everywhere imaginable in the CIS. Poles, Germans, Spaniards, Finns, lots of them, and an ocean of Czechs, a sprinkling of Belgians and us.

I should of course like to be able to provide an outline of the definitive educational paper I submitted to the conference, and mention its appreciative reception, but I cannot do that. All I saw of the Rivne conference was the opening ceremony, and my role was limited to presenting a gift, a Welsh slate plaque, to the Deputy Minister of something or other. He sends me a Christmas card every year, and I'm still not sure who or what he is!

### Abducted

Yes, I was abducted. The mayor of Rivne arranged it. Svitlana, the inspector of English, and an ever-rotating team of exceptionally competent teachers of the language; Mickola, Galyna, Pavlo, Oelena and Lida, all helped in the matter. Each of them was well read and knowledgeable in what Kenneth Baker used to call the canon of English literature almost to bursting point, and all of them wanted to try their skills on me. At this point in the narrative let me reiterate the fact that I am a geographer!

'Robert! What are your impressions of our city?' The questions began as we trudged through the April snow, away from the conference. I warmed to Svitlana and Oelena, the 'little sisters', and they began to explain Ukrainian education to me. Rivne has 27 schools. Really? Yes, and first we must visit school no. 7. I wondered why, recalling the schools of my career, Bishop Vaughan, Queens High, Maytree, St. Michaels, no-one had thought to call the school nestling next to the cathedral after its patron saint, or the school on the edge of the forest brushing the birch trees after its woodland? On we crunched. Towards school no. 7.

'Robert! Which languages do you speak?' Svitlana asked. Now after years of that question being asked of me, on courses, abroad, even in my own classroom, it still embarrasses me. A bit of French, a smattering of Welsh, and a few words and phrases of Russian make up a totally inadequate offering for an ardent European. I winced at the mounting tally of my two colleagues. Ukrainian, and Russian. Of course. German. Really? Spanish too! Only some Italian! I see. Perfect English too, I added. They laughed. The looming gates of school no. 7 ended my embarrassed silence.

Oelena turned to me.

'Robert! Do you realise that you are the first native English speaking, English teacher to visit, freely, the schools of Rivne since 1919?'

That remark was clearly rehearsed, and it hit home. I'm not an Englishman of course, nor for that matter am I a teacher of English, as I might have mentioned a little earlier. Yet to be the first since 1919!

We marched up the steps and into school no.7. The singing girls in their national costumes brought forward the ancient Ukrainian welcoming gift of bread and salt, and I wondered who on earth was here in 1919? A British officer serving with Denikin's white armies perhaps? Or one of Commander Locker-Sampson's

meandering amoured car columns, parking their Lanchesters in the playground! School succeeded school. After number 7 came number 25, then number 8. The same eager open welcome. Always a host of questions.

'Robert! What are your impressions . . .?' Our weather, our trolleybuses, our football, our hotel, our pupils? Then too the making of strong friendships and professional acquaintances which still crop up in my postbag.

'Robert. You met me in school no. 10. Do you remember? I am Gulam, the teacher of English.' Yes, Gulam. I remember. In Gulam's class a boy asked me, 'Please. In your country how do you celebrate the birthday of the great James Aldridge?' Now, as I have mentioned, I'm a geographer by trade, and a maritime historian by inclination, so the giants of English literary tradition are in one or two cases completely unknown to me, except in passing. Of course as the 'first native English speaking, etc' I didn't want to cause an incident, however small, by revealing shortcomings in the teacher training system back home.

Perhaps James Aldridge was a Restoration dramatist? Or a collaborator of Addison and Steele? Did he found some literary journal or other? Or were his score of Victorian social novels condemning the evils of child labour, or his 'ballads of the Crimean War' widely read and enjoyed on the Eastern borders of Europe to such an extent that his birthday was a public holiday? Surely not? Even the immortal bard falls short of that supreme accolade. I racked my brains for an answer. 'Well, I'm sorry to say Alexei, that I don't know the works of James Aldridge at all. The only literary birthdays which spring to mind are those of Burns and Shakespeare.'

Gulam, wisely, had moved to my side; textbook, English grade 8, open in hand. I scanned the page quickly. Well, well. Since this is not intended to be a literary quiz, and before anyone reaches for the 'Oxford Companion', the answer is this. The great James Aldridge was an Australian journalist, a communist, and a close personal friend of Stalin. He wrote endless volumes of propaganda for the soviets during the Great Patriotic War, most of it unreadable, as I later discovered. Remarkably, James survived Uncle Joe's friendship and frequent purges without a bullet in the cranium, or a sojourn in the gulag.

## Another Day, Another Numbered School

At seven o'clock the following morning Svitlana and Mickola were fretting like sheepdogs in the hotel lobby, waiting to take me to school no. 12. It's a long day in Rivne. As we entered the lobby, costumed children danced forward with bread and salt in welcome, and a camera crew leapt from the shadows and thrust a microphone towards me.

'What are your impressions ...?' I was asked. Well, I gave them my impressions of Ukrainian hospitality, and of their superb cuisine. 'Eating is obviously the national sport of your country,' I said, reducing the entire school to shrieks of laughter.

School no. 12 felt right. Within the art and mystery of teaching, a practitioner can sense it, just a few steps inside the door. So, within half an hour, the principal asked me if I would teach a lesson to his examination class. How old? Fifteen years. I agreed.

The whole class, 20 or so pupils, stood as I entered the room, escorted by my guides. I introduced myself, took off my jacket and adopted the pose which in the far-off days when my generation of teachers trained, would mean a rebuke at least, on teaching practice. I sat on the desk. Towards the back of the room, half a dozen adults crept in. No doubt the staff of the English department, eager to see their pupils respond to the real article, or at least as near that as Rivne had seen since 1919.

I began the lesson. I read a little. I told them of my home city, explained the way of life. The class responded well. Not surprisingly their English was competent and well practised. At the back of the room the teachers beamed, and so they should.

Then I made a mistake. Twenty-five years in classrooms in Wales and England has installed a tiny mechanism within me, geared to the 40-minute lesson. In school no 12, lessons were an hour long. Nothing else to be done. I raised my head over the parapet.

'Ask me any question you wish, in English and I'll reply.'

The first was a typical teenage throwaway remark.

'Do you like Michael Jackson?' she asked.

'No.'

So far so good. On we went, the questions were better than I expected. Many 'What are your impressions . . .' of course, but I fielded them as humorously and fairly as I could. Many on sport, on children, a few on chess.

Then Olga stood up.

'What is your favourite Shakespeare sonnet? Will you recite it for us?'

Oh. Deep inside me a long forgotten door

slipped open, and a dark lady peeked out. At home I knew there was a copy of the 'sonnets', but when had I last opened it? Fifteen, 20 years ago? Old ROSLA strategy, rule 2 was called for. Attack is the best form of defence.

'Which is your own favourite, Olga?' I asked her.

'Number 81' she declared, and began to recite it in beautiful measured English. This little 15 year old Ukrainian girl sent me reeling back to my own youth, opening cupboards of memory and disturbing thoughts long forgotten.

> Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
> which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read.

Suddenly she finished, and there was silence. I smiled.

'Thank you Olga, sit down', her teacher said. I turned, a little surprised, to him.

'Olga knows so many of the sonnets', he said, 'it's very hard to stop her.'

The bell rang, loud and shrill, and my examination class filed chattering away, spilling goodbyes and thankyous over their shoulders. Young Olga passed out of the classroom, having taught me something I would never forget.

Svitlana was at my side.

'Robert! What are your impressions?'

Wonderful, Svitlana, wonderful.

* * *

A week later, back in a very wet and windy Wales, I turned off the television news, and picked up my old copy of the sonnets, open at number 81. As the rain rattled the windows, I turned to my wife.

'Which is your favourite Shakespeare sonnet?'

Raising her head over piles of primary school marking, she replied, 'He's not in Key Stage 2 yet, is he?'

Perhaps not.

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**ROBERT MORGAN** is a geographer with 10 years' experience in Special Education. He also works as an educational consultant and writes for journals in Ukraine and Lithuania. He would be delighted to hear from any reader who is interested in contacts there.

7.

MEMORY

Poland 1939.

….The start of some research in progress.

Early in the morning on Friday of the third week in August 1939, just a few days after his son's fourth birthday, a young Ukrainian born, Polish Army Reserve officer named Josef Patsula kissed his heavily pregnant wife, Larissa, and hugged his two year old daughter and little Josef. Then, gathering up his meagre reservist's kit, he marched out of the gate, a little self consciously, since he was after all a thoughtful, even scholarly lawyer in civilian life. He strode away towards the infantry depot next to the railway station. His small son stood at the fence and waved as hard as any small boy could at the departing khaki figure, lopsided with the weight of his valise, the old French steel helmet bumping at his hip. At the far corner of the long sunlit street, Lieutenant Josef Patsula stopped, rested for a moment in the hot sunshine, then adjusted his *'Rogatywka'* cap, changed hands to bear the weight of his gear and saluted the boy as he passed reluctantly into military life.

He never returned.

The murder of the Polish officer corps by the NKVD began on Christmas Eve 1939. That night all two hundred catholic priests serving with the Polish armed forces were collected from the Prisoner of War camps, driven away and shot in the back of the head, then buried in secret. Somewhere. The next wave of killings began in April 1940, in groups of fifty, always fifty. They were taken by train to Gniezdovo, and marched three or four kilometres to the killing ground, shot with a single bullet and buried in the mass graves deep in Katyn forest, west of the great Dniepr river. They were found quite by chance by Poles, slave labourers working nearby, in the harsh Winter of 1942, when the Germans were dying on the Volga. Night hides much, but not the sound of shots, and local villagers showed the Poles where their countrymen were buried. When the Red Army returned they were deported to the *Gulag* as a reward for their actions.

But Lieutenant Josef Patsula, of the 35th Infantry Division was not killed at Katyn. He died far from there, and long, long, afterwards……

*Lieutenant Patsula's name appeared in a list of those 'slave labourers' killed and buried in a Parish Graveyard in the Occupied Channel Islands. Many years after the war ended they were disinterred and placed in the German Charnel-House at Mont des Huines, Brittany. Discovered in my research for another, totally unrelated, matter, this suddenly ceased to be a potential tale, or story, and has became a project to be undertaken when time and funding permits.*

**8.**

KULAK

'The Silent Fool is Counted Wise'...Borderlands Proverb.

The Dolphin Inn. 2003.

Sasha waved his hand in the general direction of the man in the distant wheelchair. I didn't know him even by sight, doll-like, silent, a mere trace of a man who must have been very small in his prime, even by the standards of the years after Stalin's famine.

‘The seizure took everything away’ Said the matter-of-fact Sasha. ‘Doesn’t speak, or walk, bit blind too I think. Maybe ninety five or six years now.’

I nodded, and asked where he was from.

‘Village near Berestechko, I know. The Soviets called his people *Kulaks* , rich, cruel to poorer peasants. They say.’ He scoffed and sipped his drink. ‘Maybe his father had a cow, eh? Two cows!’

So, this husk was a *Kulak*, one of the earliest of victims of the Bolsheviks. I wondered how he’d survived the especially harsh treatment; escaped the camps. ‘His father was taken.’ He shrugged, ‘Dead somewhere. His mother, him and the others left with nothing. *Kulaks* got no medical treatment, no factory jobs, no electric power, the children were not allowed school. ‘

I nodded.

‘Shteyngart still can’t read or write.’ Said Sasha with a hint of sympathy, being himself a seriously literate man.’ He was lucky though. When the Germans came, he had the right name, eh?’ ‘Obviously,’ I agreed, ‘*Volksdeutsch*. Once a German, always a German’ He nudged my arm. ’So, the little man was very happy to join the Germans as they hunted down the Reds, the partisans and the Jews too, naturally. He served right from the start in *‘Schuma’*, the auxiliary police squads. They say he killed almost all the men and boys of his own village, personally. Maybe ninety, maybe a hundred of them. Some of the women too.’

I stared across the room, at the wax figure in the wheelchair who stared somewhere with unseeing eyes.

‘Yes he was lucky.’ He read my expression. ‘Yes! It didn’t matter he couldn’t read or write. Not a bit of it. He could kill, and of course, eh……’ He leaned towards me confidentially, ‘ ….killing partisans, Jews, especially killing Jews required no ‘paperwork’ at all.’

**9.**

**On Language and Memory.**

When I was a young WEA tutor, the literature of the South Wales Coalfield, its labour movement and culture would always seep, then suddenly flood, into the discussions and debates which followed my lectures. There is a fairly decent, quote-laden piece on Hardy’s ‘Jude’ and his bitter rejection by Christminster’s academics, I’d tend to use as a rallying cry for Extra Mural education as it was forty odd years ago. That wouldn’t happen these days of course, Jude would be on an external BA before the ink was dry on his application form!

Now my audience, which rarely varied in its composition over several years, having some slight knowledge of Christminster, let’s call it Oxford anyway, through the writings of such valley luminaries as Gwyn Thomas, always flew home like a flock of Idris Davies’ homing pigeons. Dickie, a steel worker who had a more than slight tremulous stutter, though you won’t detect that on the written page, detested Richard Llewellyn, and especially ‘How Green Was My Valley’; given half the chance or no chance at all, he’d parody it with cruel, multi-consonanted, and entirely fabricated quotes…

“Look you, Mam, here’s our Blodwen, coming home from the pit in the next valley, bare- breasted and singing ‘Calon Lan’; and all the boys of the AberCwm Blaen Male Voice with her. See their lamps burning in the twilight as they tramp past Calfaria, carrying their dead after a twelve hour shift.”

It had to be heard to be believed, and of course sounded far more ludicrous when Mam became a machine gun of ‘m’s’ and ‘bare-breasted’ turned into the sound of a particularly vocal flock of lambs.

It rarely convinces outside the societal borders, that transposition of individuals racial, or cultural speech pattern and style, onto the page as it occurs, or is perceived by the writer. Rachel Trezise achieves something of it in

modern post-industrial Welsh terms. Elsewhere in Written English Emma Donoghue's 'Last Supper at Brown's' is a typical case. No doubt the slave owning culture of the Southern States of America in the 1860's was lived through such speech patterns, but it loses the reader far too quickly, even in short story format of under two thousand words.

"So! Mr Bond!" becomes a one-liner, a throw away joke rather than a Teutonic threat; which was how Fleming originally intended Blofeld to sound. It's just so with Slavs. There is a method to their speech. In Russian, and Belarussian as in Ukrainian the much older of the three rather similar, or at least not dissimilar tongues, there is no definite or indefinite article. The lesser 'combination' languages, West Polesian, and *Surzhyk* are just as problematic. So it becomes difficult to be specific, 'a man', or 'the man'? They really do say, in English "She is teacher", and "He is Jew", and 'Where is car?' You will find this from reading the best known work, arguably the first and only work, of imaginative fiction about Ukrainian exiles published in the United Kingdom. Marina Lewycka's " A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian". Though, when read from the heart and from the sentiment of experience, Conrad's much earlier *"Amy Foster"* is certainly a tale with its beginning in the Borderlands. Conrad's Yanko, his protagonist doesn't speak at all, he's interpreted by the narrator, Conrad, transformed into an 'English gentleman writer of nautical inclination' doesn't risk the potential failure of slipping into the dangerous ground of losing his readers in the rough dialect or idiom he must have known well as a young man near Kyiv.

Lewycka's unusual novel was shortlisted for the Orange Prize, and won the SAGA award for Wit in 2005, and her style of narrative was, again arguably, the main reason. The book in fact is less than half fiction, telling a tale which is in reality widespread throughout many a post-soviet Diaspora around the world. Man 84 years old. Second wife 36 years old. His children only a few years older than her, and angry. Both man and second wife were born in what is now Ukraine, but born four or more decades apart and importantly leaving the homeland for the same basic reason-survival.

Marina Lewycka writes her dialogue this way…

"Good. Good. I am soon coming to most interesting part. Development of caterpillar track. Significant moment in history of mankind."

In the book, the second generation diaspora, they don't call themselves that, speak their English inclusively, and to be fair old Nikolai Mayevsij, the father and 'fictional' writer of the 'Short History.' is a better Anglophone than most of the diaspora encountered on my literary travels across Britain, and less frequently at home in their borderlands. Like all conversation, beyond the judicial perhaps, from a mother speaking with a young child, to a teacher with a speech impaired pupil, understanding is far different from interpreting for others.

Yet interpretation in these cycles of borderland tales, is hopefully simply delivered and achieved. No attempt is made to assert that the original fragments of telling were long monologues in received pronunciation, the old 'BBC English', nor given in some way which could, like Lewycka's novel be comically delivered. They speak, or spoke, in short bursts of recollection. Pauses were frequent, often lengthy, clock-stopping silences, silences in which the listener held his breath, and just as silently willed the teller on. Sometimes it worked.

Ukrainian, Belarussian and Russian languages have a word for this way of telling, *'Skaz'*.Spontaneous, oral and vivid, with gestures too. A form favoured in recent decades by Platonov and Zamyatin, but with roots as far back as Gogol's *'The Overcoat'*. Sometimes the exiled tale givers would slip for a moment into dialect, or military slang, then arms waved and old orders given and countermanded. What Conrad avoided, Isaac Babel, that unique borderlands writer used in many of his short stories and sketches. Several of those in his *'Red Cavalry'* cycle written in *'Skaz'* are vulgar, seemingly crude and idiomatic, the gestures and violence of the troubled 'tellings' almost leaping from the page at the reader, thrown as in a brawl of tongues.

Only a few of the tales in these three cycles, 'Home',' Exile' and 'Return' could, arguably, have been delivered in the *'Skaz'* narrative form, *'Ruin'* possibly, it was a tale given in greater detail than most others, and far more emotionally. *'Shadow'* too, another significantly complete tale in its giving; though not delivered with Babel's

rough spontaneity, bore in it a confession veiled in subtle dialect. Like the efforts of the eternally re-writing, redrafting Babel, several attempts at *'Pot'* might have dipped into the idiom of *'Skaz'* but somehow couldn't, though *'Oath'* a face-slapping deliverance ranged across language barriers, spontaneously thrown, kept tight; control, possibly a relic of the old days of service in the ranks was often apparent in the encounters. Only the barest of details would emerge sometimes, singular and frayed by the years. In the latter tales like *'Fire'* the post-soviet opportunity to encounter dialect, or slang in telling simply doesn't exist. The speech and usage picked up from exposure to Radio Free Europe and BBC World Service, and satellite television has won the day in Eastern Europe.

The fear that the old Borderlands exiles fragments converted entirely to reported speech might become a worthless parody, or present as an externalized creation of little value; a distant, half way to the Urals, half-cousin of Estuary English, the common parlance, with humorous, no, with preposterous constructions, heavily stressed vowel endings and ill-determined verb usage combined, and quickly, to sideline that traditional form of writing, *'Skaz'* .

Instead it became the hard-given, sometimes only half-told heart of each of the tale fragments which found its way to the page. Though, sometimes there was immense detail, slowly, even passionately or painfully, explained, about a place, a village or an individual, something long secreted in memory; even thoughts about a meal, a family dog or a cherished gun. It seemed then, as now, essential to be true to the memories. The line of an old song comes to mind….

"It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it!"

In this case, however, exactly the opposite applies.

**10**

**OXFAM.**

High Street. 2006

Olga was twenty seven. She lived with her husband Petr, a Post-graduate at the Business School, in one of the long high terraces overlooking the sea. The sea troubled Olga. Its colours, its changes, its endlessness worried her. Tarnopil her home town was far from the sea, close to the Carpathian Mountains. She was a graduate of the new Economic University, she met Petr there.

Olga worked, several days a week, as an unpaid volunteer in the Oxfam bookshop, which alone half-thrived, surviving in an old street of run-down and shabby shops and shuttered take-aways. Cathy the manager told me about her, and eventually our paths crossed as I stood examining a pile of old Penguin Classics. I was introduced in the usual vague terms, research, writing and Ukraine all came out in the same sentence, with no coherence, then Cathy drifted off .

Her English was good, very good. Not quite perfect, occasionally a little too carefully structured, but delightfully it lacked the annoying 'Half-way-to-L.A.' twang and inane insertions of so many young Ukrainians with some talent in the language. I liked Olga. We chatted for a while in the empty shop, and after explaining my work in Rivne, and Ostroh, and Chernihiv, and telling her of my many visits since independence, she warmed to the conversation. It seemed to dawn on her as we spoke, that Cathy's introduction was not entirely accurate or inclusive, and she was talking to someone who liked Ukraine, and was involved a little more than just turning up on the Black Sea coast as an 'Intourist' sun worshipper.

Ukrainians, young and old, tell you exactly as much as they want to, no more, no less. A cautionary custom from the old Soviet days, and one inherited by most youngsters. Not this one. Olga told me her father, retired, and probably about my age, had graduated from the Water Institute in Rivne, and met her mother there, she was

working in the general hospital. I knew both places well. Tarnopil on the other hand I'd visited, but long ago, in 1993, when it was a dismal place; it had reminded me of Merthyr in Winter rain. The price of books being what it is, the Oxfam bookshop has long been a regular port of call, so I had many brief chats with Olga, and one with her husband Petr, who, I think, turned up to cast an eye over this ageing foreigner who might just be trying to seduce his young, and admittedly very charming wife. Petr's English was slow, determined, with a regular low hum, rather like a burst of tinnitus, inserted before most of his sentences. I bought them both a drink.

The sea still troubled Olga, but it isn't easy to avoid the sea in Wales, not when if you face the right direction there's nothing between you and the Americas. But neither Olga nor her husband liked living in this 'ugly, lovely town'; it had no real ending, just a long ribbon edge which ebbed away and flowed back towards them disturbingly. Olga missed the mountains, the snow-closeness, the beauty, but neither of them mentioned the incredible thunderstorms of *"Gotterdammerung"* intensity. They call this old town of ours 'the graveyard of ambition', I've heard that often enough, and know many who came and never went away; but for Olga, the end of the academic year and Petr's final submissions would see them leave for a visit to Tarnopil, just in time for the thunderstorms. After that? Canada of course.

For the most part my, by now quite regular, conversations with Olga tended to be educational, slightly, I admit it, nostalgic on my part. Schools, Institutes and Universities I'd visited and worked at, places I'd visited. The amazing number of castles, the incredible old districts of Kyiv and L'viv, and the food of course. Although conducted at a much higher level these were, I felt sure, an English conversation class with a single student, and subject matter near to home. As if Olga needed that! I did tell her some of the stories I'd written about my visits to Ukraine; the one about my becoming a Karbonovets millionaire in the space of ten minutes at Bogdan's bank went down particularly well. But she countered my tale about a cabbage queue on the way to the airport; she'd completed some work as a translator after graduating, and had been paid in cabbages. Fifty of them.

Inevitably the 'Diaspora' crept in along the way. Olga was a transient soul, as were most of the few dozen young Ukrainians at the University or colleges, en route for the wider world. Each one a Dick Whittington with dreams and hopes wrapped up in a spotted handkerchief. The old men and women of the 'Diaspora', who left Ukrainian lands before I was born, exiles, now naturalised, metamorphosed into a British or rather a Welsh cocoon, were and are very different beings. Unique, a bunch which had flourished, bloomed and now sixty years on, were withering and dying visibly, quickly, like sunflowers in the cold breeze of a darkening garden. Having heard me tell of Olga and Petr, and her presence in the bookshop, eventually one Friday on their way to the market, two of the more active of them called in to examine the new arrival. By now of course it was early Summer, and she and Petr were probably packing for Tarnopil and planning for Canada. They, Ivan and Stas, thought Olga 'clever' and 'young', but couldn't understand why she was not going back to Ukraine to build, to help the country. Perhaps she didn't mention the payment in cabbages, or the fact that there were University departments at Tarnopil which grew potatoes and sold them to finance the buying of books. The elderly pair thought her disloyal, and that she had forgotten the sacrifices of their generation. I listened in silence.

Only a week or two before the young couple turned their backs on the troublesome sea, and left the city forever, I met Olga for the last time, to hand over a small gift from my wife. Olga was pregnant. We sat over a mug of awful coffee, and having wished her and Petr all that mattered for their future, I mentioned Ivan and Stas, who had I assured her been impressed by her capability.

"Yes" said she, slowly. "They asked me why I didn't go back to live in Ukraine, to work and 'fight', fight for the country!" They could be a little direct, these old men. "I asked them why their own children, and their grandchildren didn't go back 'home'. Why they hadn't retired there with their wives and their families. I asked them why they had British passports and not Ukrainian ones!"

She sipped her coffee, and I raised both eyebrows. Impressive, Olga. Impressive.

"You see", she said, turning her old head on her young shoulders. "I am Ukrainian with a *real* country, poor but real. But I am a realist too, so is Petr, and a survivor, like they were after the war ended. That's why they are here and not dead in the villages of Bukovina. Ukraine isn't their country now, Britain is. When they speak, they

speak with the old dialects, some of their words are even Polish. When they left their homes, Ukraine did not even exist. It was a dream, a maybe for the future."

She laid her hand on my arm, then waved it gesturing away from her.

"They are very old, these men who call themselves Ukrainian. When they die, their children and grandchildren will forget Ukraine completely. Oh, maybe they will say 'One day I'd like to visit the village where he was born', but they won't do it. When they are gone, all that will be left is their memories, written down in the stories they tell you. Like drops of water they fall into the well, and are forgotten. They no longer own Ukraine, they never did own it, that belongs to me and to my family. To the future."

Olga went to wash the mugs. I kissed her on the cheek then walked out into the afternoon sunshine.

We had a Christmas card. From Stuttgart. They called the baby Anna.

**11.**

BLADE.

'Words kill before the knife'....Borderlands Proverb.

Weston-Super-Mare 1981.

The beginning of a tale……

For long years after he was quietly granted citizenship, along with the others of the 14th Division, Stanislav didn't travel far from his new home in the drab valley town. He bought a motorbike and side-car, and settled into working with metal, as he loved to do, in the workshops at the colliery. A big man, and with strength beyond his weight, as time progressed he learned the language, good and foul from his workmates, though he kept his distance in many ways. A passport, a new home, and a decent job didn't always make for a safe life, for safety from the old life, as others had learned after the last war, when the short lived Republic vanished from the world's face and they had to flee.

After his shift he would, like the other workmen, drift into the Club. Everyone was a member, even if they didn't go there often. Two pints, maybe, of the dark beer, and then he went quietly home. He didn't understand the football game they loved, and few of them followed soccer, it wasn't the valley game. In the late fifties a television set was still an uncommon household feature, but the Club had one, and he'd go and watch the football results, he always did a coupon, he never won a penny, but as time passed a few younger men with an interest in soccer noisily entered the life of the bar, and he would exchange a few words with them.

The Annual Club Outing, men only, was for donkey's years a simple half hour Saturday coach trip to a friendly Club with a similar membership in another valley, until the old Hon.Sec. passed away, aged seventy eight, down in the Miner's Hospital. New brooms sweep clean, and his successor decided that a bank balance in four figures could stand the charge of a serious day out. It was early Summer, and the prospect of stop weeks loomed on the horizon.

So it was that Stanislav, by now known simply, in that old fashioned Welsh way as 'Stan Spanner', found himself in a coach on his way to the sea-side, to the sea for the first time in his life, in the company of around fifty other men of similar trade, but rather different disposition and upbringing. He couldn't sing the songs, sacred or profane, but he ate the sandwiches and drank the warm beer readily enough. He could pick Bingo up too, he'd seen and heard it at the Club, and numbers were easy, if not the odd words thrown in!

It was a lovely day, as distant Summer days must always be, and clad in his old jacket and best pullover, but wearing no tie, Stan felt the warm sun on his face as the members piled off the bus, and strolled across to the

promenade. He had never, ever seen a promenade before, it stretched or so it seemed, for miles away on either side, and beneath him a busy sea pushed in against the rocks. To left and right, others began to argue and point, certain of the best bar to quench their thirst in, before 'taking in the sights'.

Stan stood listening to the slow, steady waves splash inwards, when behind him a shrill voice spoke. It was a woman's voice.

'I know you, don't I!'

Stanislav turned slowly around.

**12**

OATH.

'Black souls wear white shirts.'....Borderlands Proverb.

Epiphany. 2002.

It was in the year that Sokil died. A late Spring, cold, and he complained of his arthritis, of his failing eyesight, and especially of his 'old wound'.

"Look! See, it goes blue at five degrees, and purple at zero! My own weather forecast, eh?"

He was proud of that wound. A long, faint white scar from eyebrow to mid-cheek, and a story he loved to tell of skirmish and shrapnel, even longer. I had come to know old Sokil quite well over twenty years, and heard his reminiscences of the D.P.Camps, of Rimini and reprieve, and of the football team and the steel works. I'd worked there as a youngster, and he'd assume I knew as much of the place as he did.

"You remember Joe, maybe? Worked on the big crane?" He'd ask me. An answer was necessary, I shrugged, 'No. not really'.

"He died." The old man muttered, touching a bear's paw of a fist to his scar.

Apart from his wound, I still knew little of this man's war.

It was early evening, and still light. We were sitting, chatting, on either side of a huge gas fire, which he clearly felt the need of, it was fully lit, and the warm glow filled the small sitting room. I'd accepted a small glass of vodka, the one with plums in it, the old men use the stuff as a 'cure' for real and imagined ills, just like Falstaff's Sack.

"You like?" He asked as he lifted his glass. "Yes, I drank it in Ternopil, and in Uman, often."

"Good stuff. Yes. Better with Carpathian plums. Best. Best!" He drank deep.

In these final months, as though he realised he wouldn't make it to his ninetieth year, Sokil became a little more expansive, telling me snippets of stories about other young Ukrainians in the war. Of Wowk, who fell to his death in training, and Beniuk and Stadnyk, who deserted, but not for long.

"German Field Police find them in the forest, kill them like dogs. Beniuk they nail to a tree. Big Russian bayonets. Long like this." He spread his hands wide. "Stadnyk they throw in the river, tied up. He floated for a bit. Then….!" Sokil laughed, and gave a thumbs down. He hadn't liked either man.

The old man sipped his vodka and with that low deep, preambling growl of his, began to speak again. Slowly and carefully.

It was in the afternoon, sunny and warm, with barely the faintest breath of air to stir the flags that he swore the *Waffen SS* oath of allegiance at Heidelager Training Camp. Sunday, 29th August 1943; the Regiment paraded in open square, the Guard immaculate, helmets gleaming and bayonets fixed. The band played patriotic tunes.

"German patriotic tunes, of course." he chuckled. The choir sang. Sokil remembered the Uniate Priest, Levenetz who later killed himself with a grenade, droning an endless prayer, and some portly Minister from a worthless puppet state shouting a rousing speech which no-one understood.

The order barked out. Boots stamped, rifles slapped. A bugle called stridently to the field of field grey men. All was still. Sokil was back fifty years.

The *SS Obergruppenfuhrer*, immaculate, swaggered onto the podium set above the machine guns and mortars. 'Hard faced', Sokil murmured, 'began to speak; like shouting a prayer maybe.'

'Listen! Listen!'

Suddenly, the old man rose from the depths of his chair, lumbering to his feet a little unsteadily. He stood erect. Stock still. Taller than I thought he could stand. Slowly, he raised his right hand with palm open to head height. There was the low growl as if that old body was assembling the sounds within, and then the deep voice emerged.

He spoke, no he firmly stated, stated a few short sentences in German, which I couldn't understand, apart from a couple of the words he uttered. He stiffened again, and in rich, rolling Ukrainian, he recited once more. A few more words picked out here, there, but I couldn't make real sense of it. A prayer? A promise?

An oath!

I suppose I looked bemused, surprised perhaps. Still standing. Still. He raised his hand a third time. Moist eyes stared forwards, far into his past. The growl again. Then he spoke in his slow pedestrian English.

*"I swear before God this Holy Oath. I swear that I will give absolute obedience to the Fuhrer and Chancellor of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler. And as a brave soldier I will be prepared to lay down my life for this Oath. Obedience unto death. So help me God."*

Word perfect after sixty years had passed. The oath of the Ukrainian *Waffen SS.*

He grunted, and sat down slowly, diminished again, deep into his old armchair. His weak eyes now bright and distant, Sokil sipped his vodka.

"Good stuff." He muttered.

I didn't know this man at all.

**13**

FIRE.

*Matthew 25:41.*

Carpathian Mountains 1996.

She wrote to me. In fact, she wrote to everyone she could think of. Blue ballpoint pen on thin blue lined paper, the sort you get in the pound shop. The sort of paper people who hardly ever write letters buy when the need to correspond crops up. My letter arrived because of course, I was her Ward Councillor, and because I'd known her late father, if not all that well. She wrote to the local Member of Parliament, his letter was almost identical to

mine, and she wrote to the Member of the European Parliament. She wrote, in those pre-devolution days, to the Prime Minister, and to the Secretary of State who both ignored her pleas. She wrote to his Doctor, and to the Health Authority. She wrote to the Coroner. Now that letter drew a reply, a simple statement of the law. Since Fedor had died abroad, in Volhynia, and his remains were interred there, there could be no death certificate issued in the UK, and no inquest could be held. The usual paperwork existed, naturally, in Ukrainian and Russian. A Militia certificate, another from the Doctor who examined the body, and a third from the Undertaker. There were poor photocopies of the flimsy copies she'd received from his sister in the village stapled to all of the letters she sent .I wondered about a suitably short and vaguely supportive response, but not for long. The MP pulled rank, and 'suggested' that I drop in to see her, and make appropriate sympathetic comments. After all, what else could be done?

I didn't expect the wheelchair.

My gaze dropped to meet hers, and she registered my surprise with a little displeasure, then ushered me into the flat. It was clear to both of us that this was to be her only 'official' visit in relation to her father's death. Well, Coroners don't do house calls, and MP's only manage them in the desperate run-up to elections. I couldn't guess, though I tried hard. Polio? A car crash? I certainly couldn't ask outright, and it crossed my mind at the outset that my only plausible suggestion was dead in the water. There was absolutely no way that his only daughter could fly to the borderlands, travel across the steppes and visit his village to see for herself where he died.

A first hour faded away into a second, as Nadia showed me photographs, told me how her parents had met, and of her 'second-hand' Volhynian childhood, but didn't mention the war at all.

I offered, it seemed right at the time.

"Look," I said. "In late September, only a month away, I'll be flying to Kyiv to make the trip over to the Technical University, and that's, well, only an hour or so away from his village, same Oblast."

She beamed at me. "Look, perhaps, something can be arranged, at least then you'd find out what the place was like, and something about your distant relatives?" Her face signalled it all.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" She exclaimed. Maybe I was promising too much?

"I'll try to bring back a photograph of the grave." She already knew how he had died of course. Well, sort of knew.

Now in the weeks before I left, my wife became increasingly annoyed with the frequent phone calls from Nadia who had provided me with a neatly typed letter in English, and one in Polish, Ukrainian and Russian hand written by Stanislas at the club. These were for her father's sister, and frankly, even more pleading than the letter to the Coroner! Stapled to them was a sepia photo of Fedor, vague, but looking young, strong and powerful, a faint memory rather than a useful image. She had given it to me on my last visit. " she gulped, "Handsome man when he was young, wasn't he, My father?" It could have been any man, any time around the war, blurred and cracked.

It all seemed so easy. I worked in the mornings of course, lecturing, and in the late afternoons was provided with a car of dubious reliability, it was as I told the bemused Rector, " Something of the Heinz 57!"

The car came along with Yuri the driver, who had trained as a tank man in his younger days, and it showed, and escorting me, for translation and generally 'keep the foreigner out of trouble' duties were two postgraduates, Nina and Tim. Explaining which village I wanted to visit and why was easy enough. Yuri wasn't bothered, he could find it, and the youngsters were always up for a trip. One thing we couldn't do was phone to say we were coming. "No phones in the village, eh!" Laughed Yuri. This would be a cold call. Much colder than I expected. Fedor's sister had died some weeks back, so the flowers I'd bought en route remained in the car, and withered in the heat of late Summer.

Still there was hospitality. “You know this custom?” Nina asked me, “Yes, I know it, from a score of villages, a hundred schools.” Earnestly, she handed me forward to the villager family, and she was actually clapping! A slice of black rye bread, sprinkled with salt, was held out to me. I chewed a piece and swallowed the thimbleful of *Horilka* which came with it. I was in.

“There are no other brothers or sisters of the, ah, well, dead man, left in the village,” Nina translated the deep, ripe dialect which filled the air. ”Now, a younger brother survives, but, she shrugged, ”in poor health, living with his daughter far away from here, in Uman. Do you know Uman?” I ignored the question, an hour long side stepping reminiscence to the east of the borderlands was something I didn’t need.

Only three nieces and a nephew lived here now, and he was working in Germany these days. I handed over Nadia’s Ukrainian letter, Nina translated for me, there was animated chatter among the women, to say the least. Yuri clapped his hands and leaned on the car laughing. “Women! Women!” He had a weird sense of humour Yuri, but that’s Afghanistan for you.

The nieces seemed pleased to see one of their husbands arrive in a battered pick up, clad in greasy overalls. He seemed to get on with Yuri, but I regretted shaking hands, the oil he was covered in stank. The new man took the decision that I should be taken to the little Dacha at the edge of the village, where Fedor died. Nina translated. “Thank you.” I didn’t shake hands again. “And the grave?” I asked? He shrugged, turned away and began an animated conversation with our bold tank driver, who opened the bonnet of the car and indicated the engine, in case his fellow driver had never seen one. These two would take no further part in the proceedings.

Dachas are odd places. Some are little better than a garden shed with a bit of ground thrown in. Others are like palatial pre-fabs with fences and flowers. This was of the shed sort, bigger, but still a shed to me. Big enough to have a bedroom, a living room and a lean to kitchen; there must have been a lavatory somewhere, but this place sought no airs or graces in the world rankings of accommodation. I took very careful note of what I saw, and en route through the outskirts of the little village, took half a dozen photos of the nieces, and the dacha too, all in the guided tour style of things. But the Dacha itself surprised me. It was, and a brief description would not go amiss, Spartan. That went without saying. Wooden, with a heavy wood floor, a wide stone hearth and a small stove in the middle. The roof too was planked, and as was the custom years ago, turfed and grassed. A thick low door, three small curtained windows, and no obvious sign of an electricity supply. Home from home, I thought. The large square of ancient, threadbare carpet looked untroubled by a broom. The furniture consisted of two large old armchairs, deep and very scruffy, a rectangular, much scrubbed table, and three bentwood chairs next to the window, but in the gloom stood the most beautiful carved oak cupboard I’d ever seen, outside a museum that is. The guided tour, interpreted by Tim, continued into the bedroom. The bed was vast. With a lucky sheaf of wheat carved into the head board. “This,” the eldest said, “ was the grandparents wedding bed, too big to move. “

“So, this must have been the family home once?”

“Yes, for many years, almost a hundred years.” I was told. That’s why they put Fedor here. No mattress to be seen, that was probably brought up for guests. There were a few plates hanging on the walls of the Dacha, and an icon near the door. The rich smell of earth and wood filled the nostrils, and I nodded appreciatively as I looked around the family ancestral home. There was a soft hint of *kvass* somewhere.

I looked thoughtfully at Tim and Nina. My eyes, despite the gloom, were not deceived.

“Fedor died here? Here”

“Yes, yes!” They wept a little and pointed to the hearth. “There he died.” It needed no translation. “During the night, alone in the darkness, he died. There he was found. There!” I stood at the hearth, and rested my hand on the top of the dusty cold stove, looking down at the heavy uneven planks of the wooden floor. I took in the scene, not only so that I could describe everything in detail to Nadia, she’d expect that, but because I couldn’t understand. It had crossed my mind, back home, that I’d be shown a derelict, still smouldering ruin; like the homesteads in the Westerns after the Apaches ride through. Not this.

According to Nadia, according to his late sister's letter, according to the Militia report, and the Doctor, and the Undertaker, Fedor had died not of natural causes, succumbing to the passing of his years, but in a terrible accident.

He had burned to death. Entirely consumed by flames. Here. In this old room, alongside this ancient stove. Safe at home, I'd made assumptions, that he'd fallen and died after drinking, burning himself on the stove. Not unusual, accidental death when drunk is hardly a surprise event anywhere in Eastern Europe. But there was no sign of any damage to this room, not even a scorch mark. No singed carpet, and that relic must have been laid on the floor of the same room for decades. Everything was made of wood, everything in this little building would burn. Yet it was intact.

Between the rough, tattered edge of the old carpet and the stove hearth, the wood seemed just a shade darker, greasier perhaps? Not quite a stain, but a richer shadow. Ingrained, as though a big old dog had lain there for a hundred Winters, without ever moving from the warmth. I bent forward, and looked more closely. My face clearly had turned to a look of sheer disbelief; I think I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. " I don't understand at all!" Nina didn't need to translate that either.

The women's voices were adamant, and they crossed themselves repeatedly. They were disturbed, and not by my remarks. The eldest went to the door, and called her oily handed husband, his name was Olek, and he sauntered over, with Yuri ambling alongside him, still loudly discussing the merits of engines. The nieces spoke rapidly to him, they thought I didn't believe them; Olek must explain how Fedor died. " Olek, tell him, Olek!"

The grease-covered engineer ushered them out, with a few instructions, leaned a huge hand on the stove and spoke. Tim translated as calmly as Olek spoke.

'Ili'a took him.' Said he. 'That's what the women think.' His grim smile hinted disbelief

'Ili'a?' I exclaimed.

Nina explained. "The Holy Prophet, Elijah. From the Bible, we say Ili'a. You know? Yes, he went up to heaven in a great fire. You know? The Book of Kings?"

It didn't really sink in, but then I'm more of a Psalms man myself.

'Here Fedor died. 'Olek pointed sharply to the faintly discoloured floorboards. Not to be denied. I looked in his eyes, here was no dreamer, no 'old believer'.

"I see. Please, tell us." I tried to be reverential. He spoke carefully, and with utter seriousness, I could tell, and that was how Tim translated. Nina fell silent, we had moved into the realm of men's fears.

"Fedor," he told us, "died during the night. A Friday. He had eaten supper with two of his nieces and the children, a big family. Good food, plenty." and for a moment I thought he was going to describe the meal from beginning to end. "Some Horilka, well, naturally. But he wasn't drunk," he shook his head. "Good Horilka, not filthy *'Samogan'*!" And afterwards? " The boys, good lads, walked him back to the Dacha, they lit his lamp and then went home to their beds. He was singing to himself," they remembered afterwards, and had told people this, "but they didn't know the song."

That night was dull, but warm. Somewhere far off in the Carpathians a storm muttered itself to sleep in the darkness. Olek had told this tale before, I could tell. I could tell that Yuri believed him too.

"Next morning, not early you understand, but after the men had started work, Katya the youngest niece carried breakfast up to him." Olek described a dish of *kasha* with pork meat. "Very good!" Yuri nodded in agreement. "Some apple compote, real coffee, and good rye bread." Like all the returning exiles, Fedor had sent dollars ahead to smooth his stay. He got the best.

Katya knocked and shouted at the door, then walked in. She must have screamed before she fainted. Neighbours came running, they carried her out and crowded at the doorway.

“This I saw.” Olek raised his hand, an unspoken oath. Tim translated in a low voice, and I felt the room begin to fill with a tension, a palpable anticipation. “There was a smell. Not burning, but sharp. Like a match burned out. Or a candle maybe? No smoke. Not hot. Nothing else.”

“He was lying here?” I asked, pointing.

Olek kneeled alongside the stove. He nodded. “Like a bear maybe, curled up. So.” He made an enveloping gesture with his great arm, and I thought for a moment he’d drop to the floor and show us, but he baulked at that.

“Was he badly burned?” I looked to Tim.

Olek stood, threw wide his arms and shook his head. “He was gone! Gone!”

From this point on the description was basic, and plain. The shape of Fedor had been there, but only a layer of ash, of thick detritus. The dross of a man’s body. Nothing remained that was recognisable. “His shoes,” Olek indicated “were by the stove, his coat over the chair back. His watch and spectacles on the table next to a glass and a bottle.”

‘A nightcap.’ I muttered, but Tim didn’t translate.

“The Militia came.” Olek continued. “Some long time after.” They nosed about a bit, but were content that this was another drunken foreigner burned. Worse than usual, but who cared. Olek shrugged. The two Militiamen finished off the bottle on the table, while they waited for the Doctor. In two hours all was done. A small *‘pod’* was handed over, naturally. “A Bribe,” Tim told me ‘Customary as you know, to ease matters officially.”

I knew.

“The Undertakers collected the remains of Uncle Fedor late in the day.” Olek had moved into the realms of the familiar, after all Fedor had died with his family. Clearly this hadn’t been a corpse in any true sense of the word. I didn’t ask how they ‘collected’ the debris that was once Fedor, but I could guess. More money had changed hands. “There was no priest in the village and no church, not since Stalin came.” Said Olek. But they buried what was left of him in the old grave of one of Fedor’s family, a grandfather long dead. “ Only half a bucketful,” he said,” No more than that.”

“Would I like to see where Uncle Fedor lies?” I nodded, and we marched in file out of the Dacha. It was a lot further than I anticipated. There must once have been a church there at the edge of the woods, maybe there would be again one day. The grave had a rough cross, wooden, and sure enough Fedor’s name and the date of his death had been added below two others of his name, long dead. It was touching, if that’s the right word. The photographs I took seemed stupid, badly posed, artificial, but she’d need them for a memory. The forgotten flowers for the dead sister found a home; but I had no body, no real answers, and half a tale I couldn’t believe.

As we walked back to the Dacha, a ragged procession of thoughtful creatures, the afternoon sun was hot on our backs. Nina was talking to two youngsters. “Look,” She waved her hand. ”They have a suitcase and a dark travelling holdall.” This was Fedor’s luggage. First the suitcase was lifted to the big table, Yuri opened it. A towel, neatly folded on top. His clothes beneath, shirts ironed, trousers pressed, shoes polished, all lifted out one by one by the eldest sister, tearful, and who never got a name; she smoothed each item carefully. I asked her to put them back, and closed the case. Tim explained I couldn’t carry the suitcase back; perhaps the clothes might be of use?

They understood.

The small dark blue bag was half filled with a travellers rubbish. Of all things an Ukrainian-Polish phrase book! Some packets of cigarettes, unopened, *'pods'* and gifts. He didn't smoke. A hip flask engraved, from his late wife. A scarf, a few handkerchiefs, his washing bag, camera and a tiny portable radio. That was it, besides his wallet which contained, I guessed, about five hundred dollars, some sterling and a bundle of worthless *'Hrivna'* bills. Obviously the holdall had not been shown to the Militia! My instructions from Nadia were explicit; she probably knew how much money he'd taken with him.

"It was for the family. His daughter has asked it." Tim translated. The three sisters cried, clearly there was little money in this place, they all looked at each other, totally overwhelmed. I explained I'd take back the wallet, his cards were still in it, the camera, there might be some last photographs in it, and the hip flask, the personal things only. Olek nodded sagely. "Yes! Yes!"

"There is," here he spoke to Tim, almost a conspiratorial tone, "something else we have." One of the boys handed him a small opaque plastic bag. His watch, his wedding ring, the undertakers had found that when they moved the ashes, and yes there was something else.

Olek lifted out of the bag an object which looked like a miniature gearstick, twirling it in his oily fingers. Yuri strained to look. A round heavy knob, mushroom shaped, and a gleaming shaft, maybe six or seven inches long. I'd never seen one before, but I knew what it was, but Olek didn't nor did the undertakers men in that remote place.

It was an artificial hip joint.

"Nadia" I muttered under my breath, "You didn't mention this."

Nadia wept as I laid the few items, like a sad, deathly 'Kim's Game' before her on the table. She already had his passport, she smoothed it again and again. My photographs, of the village, the dacha, the family, the grave with his name, these comforted her, or at least I hoped they did. The tokens examined, she asked the question I expected would come.

"How exactly did my father die?" She sipped her tea and looked straight into my face.

I'm not a superstitious man, and the idea of Ili'a the Prophet and the heavenly fire sits uneasily in my belief system. Dickens believed of course, and he was no fool, the devious Krook met his end that way in *'Bleak House'*, and Gogol and Balzac, and hard nosed Zola all used this incomprehensible death by all-consuming fire in their work. Mostly their victims were suggested as drunks.

But this wasn't a novel. It was a simple holiday trip back home, a last journey homewards by an ordinary old man. I'd had a long journey across the steppes in front of me, and a long flight homewards to think about it.

The Council's Crematorium Officer spared me an hour. "Heard of it," he said, "but I don't believe it!" He explained the cremation process to me, before I met Nadia. "About twelve hundred degrees Celsius for ninety minutes, and a thousand Celsius for three hours more." More like a recipe than a final act, the way he put it. "Mind you, even then they have to use a crusher on the big bones." I made a mental note. It seemed a lot more effort than that inexplicable death in the Dacha. Il'ia seemed much less complicated.

"Nadia," I asked her quietly. "Did your father have a hip replacement?" She laid down her cup. "Well, yes. Four, five years ago." She said unguarded. "It often played him up. He could be a bit unsteady on his feet sometimes."

She stared at me, her small mouth fell open. A tear fell, then another.

"He fell into the fire! A stupid accident!" She exclaimed. She held her face in both hands, weeping softly.

Nadia had her answer. Her own answer. It would have to do. I had nothing else to offer her.

**14.**

GOAT.

The Shtetl 1994.

“So, it must have taken you hours to find what you were looking for?” My wife said, “ and I suppose you couldn’t really ask anyone else?”

“No. True enough.” The exiles, though they well remembered the medieval town from before the war, were unsympathetic, no help at all. Old Taras had sneered “The Jews! Why Jews?”

I shrugged, she nodded in silent response.

“I had a rough guide, from Danilo, his brother, ‘behind the market, I think’, and ‘maybe not far from the river’, it didn’t help much. But I found the place eventually.”

“Unusual? Or more than that?” She asked.

I sighed. Oh, Yes! Yes it was! She poured more coffee, and picking up my sheaf of notes I began, reading a sentence here or there, adding to my thoughts as the sad place came back to fill my mind.

“What little noise there was from the distant street receded to a dim murmur as I turned the last corner and walked through the remnants of what must once have been a substantial, even an elegant gateway leading from one world to the next.

I looked around to establish the boundaries.”.

She smiled, no more than that, and I went on.

“The whole plot, once a crowded terminus of the departed, was smaller, much smaller, than a tennis court. Beside the broken gateway the only remaining wall struggled to stay upright for a few metres before collapsing into a jumble of untidy stones. At the far end of what even an optimist would find hard to call an open space, rough wooden fencing had been erected, high enough to screen the graveyard from the new buildings behind.”

I spread my hands, trying to rebuild the ruined sight.

“One vast, unbroken tombstone leaned against the fence, wearily, as though resting a while on a journey to immortality. It’s elaborate face hidden from the world’s view in unread shame. Its neighbour had given up the ghost, collapsed, and lay with elaborately engraved face lifted up to heaven, half covered in scrubby grass and dreary moss.”

“Go on.”

I shuffled through the papers.

“Yes. I trod warily, the stench of urine and a few mounds of excrement close to the wall showed the purpose of the little cemetery now; some value at least remained to the town drunks and those caught short as they passed by.”

There are always drunks, like in former times.

“Along one side, away to the right ran a great grey block wall, fortress-like, looming, and beneath the small open flap of a window, I guessed it was a kitchen, a pile of empty *‘Slavutysh’* beer bottles lay, overstrewn with a mound of rancid garbage which grew only to feed the rats.”

“Even that word ‘rat’ makes me flinch!” She said. A pity, I thought, it would turn up again. I turned to my notes.

“Just a bare handful of grey, granite memorials stood intact, and remarkably next to one slanting slab, a cheap basket of dried flowers lay, tipped over by the eddying wind which swirled in along the lane looking for mischief. The paper note tied to it, bleached white and wordless by rain. The weeds grew almost as high as these few remaining stones, one beautifully carved in high relief bore an immense seven branched candelabra held within an elaborate ring, on another chipped and broken hands spread wide in unspoken blessing. They stood as mirror images of lives spent, as stone pages in the chronicles of life and suffering, recording the passage of humanity in one little corner of mankind’s history. From where I stood it seemed that the weeds and the heavy gravestones moved in unison, swaying with a magical, grotesque air. It was as though they were at prayer together, with the bearded ears of the tall grasses brushing, almost reading the intricate inscriptions like fingertips running over a psalm.”

“Stone pages. I like that.” She smiled. “Sounds almost something from Moses.”

“Then there were many more ruined stones, soundless stumps, useless as broken teeth, some barely risen above the rough ground, others at knee height, completely overgrown, swamped in a sea of green filth.”

“More rats, I suppose?” Nodding, I continued.

“Then I moved inwards, along a half hearted path trodden among the hammer broken plinths, to where a fire had been lit, and lit often; where the blackened ashes and detritus of a party of lost souls slopped around one great flattened stone rashed with bird lime and dried phlegm.

Standing here, for a minute or two, alone amid the sculptured fabric, the ritual story of a world now vanished. I found myself, illiterate, among eloquent tombstones I could neither read nor understand; yet feeling that the blood of those vanished from life was somehow transfigured into a vast almost impenetrable growth of weeds and stunted bushes protecting the memory of accidents, of wars and epidemics which afflicted them.”

For a moment I closed my eyes, and for a moment the stench and faithful beauty returned.

“A shallow, ethereal gust breath of wind blew into the space, drawing the moist smell of overcooked cabbage from the kitchen flap. Slowly I traced my steps back towards the rusted gate, stepping with care over names I could not know, stamped the wetness from my feet, and turned to the graveyard for a brief final glance.

The town did not, would not, remember this place.

Its obliteration, abandoned, subsumed in a pit of neglect, echoed the end of an entire community, a way of life which the Ukrainians, the Russians and the Poles of the Borderlands had despised. It had been wiped clean from the collective memory, and existed only in the dim recollection of a handful of aged, far-flung survivors and their half-interested offspring. There was virtually nothing left in the town to suggest that Jews had lived, prospered and suffered there for centuries, and just this one mysterious, stagnant enclave to show that Jews had died there.

As I walked quietly back to the street and the world, the warm wind gently increased its measure in my face.”

I lay down my papers.

She saw that I was moved, somehow changed by that simple graveyard. Then she asked.

“Who, I wonder, had placed that basket of flowers?”

The original short essay from which the tale was developed. Never published.

GOAT.

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I looked around.

The whole plot, once a crowded terminus of the departed, was smaller, much smaller than a tennis court. Beside the broken gateway the only remaining wall struggled to stay upright for a few metres before collapsing into a jumble of untidy stones. At the far end of what even an optimist would find hard to call an open space, rough wooden fencing had been erected, high enough to screen the graveyard from the new buildings behind. One vast, unbroken tombstone leaned against it, wearily, as though resting a while on a journey to immortality. It's elaborate face hidden from the world's view in unread shame. Its neighbour had given up the ghost, collapsed, and lay with elaborately engraved face lifted up to heaven, half covered in scrubby grass and dreary moss.

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Here I stood for a minute or two, alone amid the sculptured fabric, the ritual story of a world now vanished. I found myself, illiterate, among eloquent tombstones I could not read or understand; yet feeling that the blood of those vanished from life was somehow transfigured into a vast almost impenetrable growth of weeds and stunted bushes protecting the memory of accidents, of wars and epidemics which afflicted them.

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As I walked quietly back to the street and the world, the wind gently increased its measure in my face. Who, I wondered, had placed the flowers?

**15.**

FRIEND.

London 1958

He was, in all truth, a tall man for the Province of Galicia, and a man who held himself rigid, as though he feared that he might break apart somewhere about the middle of his lean frame. Nervous, very nervous, and always moving if not as a whole living entity, then partially as an over-attentive head or a long trembling leg. He was polite, always polite, silent at times and for long periods, but none who met him could call him morose. One might however refer to the man as courteous, inevitably trying to be helpful and all the while smiling a thin, unknowing smile. His large deep-set grey eyes blinked behind enormous thick-lensed spectacles, which at first sight might have been taken for the redundant optical devices of an enormous pair of military binoculars.

He spoke with an impeccable, if unplaceable, perhaps implausible accent; a jest outside his hearing once referred to it as 'BBC Other-World Service'; but his speech was marred, though infrequently, by a significant stutter when he was confronted or simply became annoyed. The man had a withered left arm, just like old Kaiser Wilhelm, which he disguised from comment, if not notice, by always using it to carry a vast sheaf of broadsheet newspapers and literary publications.

The small publishing house and cramped bookshop, which he briefly maintained fooled no-one. The few thin titles in his it's list were throwback ventures into Dada-ist poetry, or petty prose, too dark even to be called 'Gothic'. His writers, his poets, even his exiled friends, were of course, nothing of the sort. He longed for beauty, for self-expression. It eluded him in a world in which his compatriots had suffered all colour, all pigment to be bled out of them. It was said, and it was true, that arriving in his new country of residence, being, or having been considered affluent in the old, he literally gave away all of his recovered money. Thrown to what were referred to as 'good causes' among the Diaspora, to impoverished new arrivals with a poetic turn of phrase, indeed to acquaintances of the slightest literary kind.

When he became broke, completely broke, the grim reality of genteel poverty became too much for him to bear a second time. He was old now, he was ill, and he was unwanted. One miserable day he walked to the local library, where he had become accustomed to venture and find warmth in the Winter months. Here he wrote three letters on the cheapest lined notepaper with a faltering pen; one in impeccable German, another in fluent if old-fashioned English, and the last in the old tongue of the Borderlands. These he posted with borrowed stamps to the three people in the whole of Europe who still, perhaps, cared for him, or remembered what he once was.

He walked slowly home through the late November drizzle to the drab hostel, locked himself in his barren room, and took an overdose of barbiturates.

Soon, in the grimmest of human spaces, surrounded by, and yet isolated from the incessant mumbling of traffic outside the walls, and the murmuring of voices within, he was dead.

Dead.

After a lifetime, one couldn't call any part of it a career in any meaningful sense, of almost unnatural reticence. For he did not marry, he did not eat or drink in public, and had no photograph taken of his image after childhood. All of his correspondence, and some youthful writings, everything in fact bar those three last letters, he destroyed before he died by his own hand.

The man left nothing more than a handful of small change, mingled with some old nickel coins bearing the Polish eagle, and a blue ten mark occupation banknote tucked as a bookmark inside a tattered copy of Mayakovsky's *'Satires'.*

**16.**

BRODSKY.

Volhynia. 1993

In his autobiographical work *'Watermark'* the Nobel Prizewinner, poet and exile Josef Brodsky describes a wartime photograph. An image of an execution somewhere in the East, Brodsky surmised it could be Lithuania, or Belarus perhaps; three pale victims, men in jackets and caps standing at the edge of a ditch. Behind each man, hovering hunched in the wintry cold, waiting silently for deathfall, stands his executioner, a German soldier.

Each, Brodsky tells us, holding a pistol to the nape of his victim's neck the moment before firing, when the photographer snapped his button. The prisoners squint and hunch their shoulders, anticipating the shot that will finish them. Their bodies, expecting the deafening shot, the shock of being hurt, could not distinguish between pain and death, the poet says, 'because the human repertoire of responses is so limited.'

He may be right. The photographs, and the film footage of atrocities, of butchered executions and of simple routine murders in the lands of Eastern Europe during the war, before it started and after it 'officially' ended are too great in number to catalogue or even guess at. The Germans, and their all too willing allies loved to photograph such events, and inevitably gathered a small crowd of military on-lookers to encourage the killers and boost their morale as they pulled the trigger or wielded the club. Brodsky's victims could be Poles or Russians; their executioners Ukrainians or Balts eagerly wearing the uniform of the Reich. Probably the three men in Brodsky's snapshot were not Jews, the matter in the photograph being too ordinary, because the killing of Jews was far more elaborate, ritualised and brutal, a crowd puller. Then these less-than-men would be bloody, Christ- naked, and kneeling subservient before their masters. A bullet might not be wasted on them, a string of barbed wire to hold their arms like a slipped crown of thorns, and the heavy blow of a trench spade or rifle butt suffice. What did it matter if they still clung to life when the ditch was filled in?

There is, in the small upstairs library, at least that was what the room was called in the late Tsar's day, at the Museum of Rivne in Volhynia, a desk. It was there long before Reich Gauleiter Eric Koch ruled Ukraine for Hitler from this attractive house, and he kept it for his own use. A bowed, pretty desk, of pale golden wood, inlaid with darker rims and rings. It has a drawer, which Guri the Curator can unlock if he wishes to impress a visitor, but somehow I felt less than honoured. My three returning exile companions, once loosely connected with the Oblast, decided against a viewing of the contents of Guri's desk, excusing themselves, and heading for the park outside. Perhaps they feared a one-in-a-million chance of discovering a tiny, undeniable fragment of their past? The drawer contains a shallow box, which once held chocolates or sweets, containing one hundred and seventy four, his expression of the number is exact, black and white photographs, some dog-eared and stained, some old and greying, faded and faintly redolent of gun-oil. They are not kept in any order, but simply heaped into the cardboard, on top of a wide grey note book with a swastika and eagle on the cover. A visitor's book perhaps? These are photographs of sin, and death, death far more bitter and expressive than the deaths Josef Brodsky recalls. Remnants, or so Guri believes, of a much larger collection of vile images of evil. The elaborate, ritualised deaths of men and women and many, many children, reaped and gathered from across Galicia; from the Province of Volhynia, from Kyiv the old capital and from ancient L'viv, from Bukovina, all of the far borderlands. The deaths of Jews, and Gypsies and of Poles, of Russians and Ukrainians are here in this drawer, but mostly of Jews. Spread out on the desk top, the collection takes the breath away, it is far more than just a spectacle of the 'Holocaust'.

This is the pornography of power.

The personal collection of Eric Koch. Guri told me he thought Koch had taken a few of them himself as memories of a good days sport. He would apparently, from time to time, when in enforced rural residence at Rivne, rather than the opulence of his preferred Konigsberg on the Baltic, examine them with a magnifying glass. Naked and broken bodies of men and women, especially young women, and of children and infants meeting their inevitable fate, tortured and killed before an invited audience of eager watchers, destroyed at the hands and boots of active vigorous killers. Here the repertoire of frozen responses is unbelievable, from the sobbing and begging of mothers, which almost cries out from the images, and the copulation of the gypsies, to the mechanical rape of the youngest Jewish girls, and bloody dismemberment of babies. The taking of the little Jewesses seemed to have delighted the small crowds- they, unlike the Gypsies, were always virgins. Holding the prints between my fingertips, I want to brush away the flood of tears from the little girls face, wipe the blood from the baby's twisted death-mask. But it's seventy years too late to expunge those sins.

The repertoire of responses to the imposition of pain and death on both sides, nakedly, visibly human on one, not so the other, is unbelievable. The killers and enthusiastic bystanders would make the offerings at Calligula's circus seem bland and unimaginative. It is a party, a series of parties, since time is indicated by the change of uniforms, remarkably, Guri points this out, every one of the killers and party-goers wears gloves. No simple rank-and-file soldiers these men, and in several photographs a few smiling women, many in the mouse-grey uniforms of the *SD*. No, these are competent enthusiasts, the elite amongst the Reich's butchers. Proudly posing, happy to be photographed in the midst of their carnage, and happy to be busy at their deadly work. Names, *Hauptscharfuhrer Weber, Leutnant Kail*, occasionally places, or SS units, are clearly written in hard, bold ink across the margin of many of the snapshots.

Like Brodsky's pervading suggestion of cold in his photograph, one small image stays strangely clear amongst the debris of dying, and the unheard celluloid screams, as the business-like Curator straightens the chocolate box, slides the desk drawer shut and turns the key with a crisp snap. In this last curled print a smiling German officer stands pouring a glass of champagne for another from a Jeroboam. The fading caption shows it to be Krug, the year 1932.

1932, it was an indifferent vintage. I looked it up.

## 17.

BUILDERS.

New Road 1995.

Fedchuk was adamant. "You must speak to Myron. He remembers much more about the time we spent at Heidelager. His stories will surprise you!" Myckola nodded in agreement. It was settled. "Heidelager, you know, was the old Polish Cavalry school between Krakow and L'viv, where the Ukrainian volunteers of the 14th Waffen SS Division were trained in 1943." He started to lecture me again. "Yes, I know." That's where they learned to fight, and to kill without pity; where the oath to the Fuhrer was administered.

"After the war it was a Red Army training ground, then a Young Pioneer camp. Now, who knows?" Fedchuk added with a shrug. Obviously, I thought, it was waste not want not in the old USSR.

"Naturally", said Myckola, sagely adding a caveat, "You should speak to his boys first. He is pretty deaf nowadays, you know, so they will have to explain things to him before you meet."

I would find the two sons working for a local builder, not that far from where I was living. They 'helped out' with some labouring apparently, though both were 'on the sick' at present. He'd mention my name when he saw them next, told me the precise address, and Fedchuk helpfully added " Yes, number 214. It's the house with a lot of scaffolding."

“I’ll manage to find them!” I smiled.

King Edward Road is a long old road, one of those oddities made up from terrace after terrace, and row after row, each group built quite independently, and strung together somehow as an afterthought. Since the road is near to the University, there’s always work being done on several ‘student’ houses. In this case the four storey building was covered in dodgy scaffolding and plastic sheets flapped everywhere in the damp breeze. I’d been in Court that morning, and walking home, thought I’d take the opportunity to meet Mik and Jamie, Myron Stadnyk’s two sons.

There were a couple of healthy looking young men of Slavic appearance working on the lower platform, and a teenage lad laboriously mixing cement by hand in the front garden. A heavy, middle-aged man in a baseball cap and dungarees came out of the open front door, carrying a bucket.

“Hello!” I said. “I’m looking for Mik Stadnyk and his brother Jamie.”

With incredible speed and the agility of circus performers, the two men on the staging dropped down the ladders, and fled through the garden. Leaping over the wall, one behind the other, they were gone. The man simply glanced over his shoulder at the departing Stadnyk’s and spoke quietly but firmly at me.

“You from the bloody Social?”

He looked me over, head to foot, as I stood there in my suit, my Ospreys tie, and clutching my briefcase. Clearly, neither Fedchuk nor Myckola had run into Myron’s boys yet.

“No. I’m actually a family friend.” I replied, rather pointlessly. He didn’t look impressed, not at all.

**18.**

<u>WITNESS.</u>

Coroner’s Court 1999.

‘I’m late again’, she mumbled to herself as she walked out of the bus station. Her sister liked to have lunch on the table by one o’clock on Thursdays. The big clock said twenty to, “Oh! No!” and it would take a while to get there. She had to go to the Post Office first.

The Pelican crossing was on the long red, and she set her shopping trolley next to her to wait. “Twenty minutes to, that queue gets worse every week.” She muttered. A couple of boys, no more than ten or twelve, sensing a gap, darted across in a fanfare of angry horns. A man stood on the other side, elderly, not poor or shabby, but foreign she thought. The man looked vacantly across at her. He was waiting.

Away to her left, down the hill from the by-pass a noisy column of the big lorries from the works was racing along, dust-covered and bullying their way through the traffic. She took a step backwards to avoid the fumes, and looked over at the man.

Something was wrong? What was it? Yes! He was crying, tears flooding down his crumpled face. Then he stepped out.

“No! No!”

She screamed.

The court subdued itself into silence, then the Coroner spoke, gently. He was wearing a tie like her son’s.

‘Please, tell us in your own words what happened.’

**19.**

HEADS.

‘No family has no ugly member.’.....Borderlands Proverb.

Galicia 2004.

A drab borderland town, small, forgotten by the distant cities. Timofy, frailest of all the exiles, was going home at last and his brash nephew dropped me at the gates, and drove away at speed. This was my third visit to the Institute, and there was some, as yet unpublished, news.

‘You see, there are precisely forty three skulls in total. Human, yes. They are, shall we say it, different.’ Kravchuk the Director, impatient as always, interrupting, sat back in his seat and drew on his cigarette.

‘Skulls? Different?’ I asked. ’How?’ He’d lost me.

Sasha, sitting alongside me squirmed in his seat. I could feel it. He sipped his tea and interested himself in his shoes. Svitlana sitting across the great oak table looked at the Director for approval. A hint of a nod and she spoke.

‘We have, in the holy catacombs, what you call perhaps a Golgotha? A place of skulls.’

‘An Ossuary’ I said quietly, nodding, and wrote the word in English for Sasha to examine. I’d heard something of it on my last visit. Lots of these hidden, sometimes long forgotten sites existed across the borderlands, huge, deep catacombs at places like Chernihiv, endless half explored caverns at Odessa. The Director clearly saw some tourist value for his run down establishment, a source of dollars and €uros, no doubt of that.

Svitlana continued with her briefing. There were some five or six thousand skulls in the deep tombs and recesses. Monks and nuns from the earliest days. Some in the lowest levels well over a thousand years old perhaps. A remarkable religious site. ‘You will see it shortly, of course.’ She said, adding, ’The catacombs are cold and dry; the bones have not perished in any way.’

‘Of course. I would be most interested.’ I said, wondering about Kravchuk’s forty three *‘different’* skulls. The Director, from within his haze of smoke, urged her on with the tale. Few, it seemed, had entered the place of skulls during the last century. The handful of remaining monks were, as she delicately put it, ‘taken away’ during the Civil Wars which followed the October Revolution; so these old sites became nothing more than worthless religious history to the Soviets. The little monastery and church was demolished and the stones carted off. Only a rare scholar, the odd scientific historian came to see the holy catacombs.

With *‘perestroika’* and the collapse of the Union in 1991, things changed. The old people, bidden by faith and memory, came almost immediately, and soon small kitsch shrines flourished by the heavy outer door. The chains had been cut from the iron gates, and they lay opened permanently. We would see it all in a few minutes.

‘I can understand,’ I told them ‘why the survival of such a religious place is important.’ I focussed on the Director. He liked that. We would see.

The four of us, accompanied by a young and very morose guardian, a crumbly youth lifted straight from the pages of a Poe short story, strolled solemnly across the grounds, it was far from any chance of being called a campus, to the clump of ancient trees where the entrance to the tombs lay in deep shade. The gates stood open, but the heavy fence from ‘former times’ still encircled it all, built to deter the lingering few faithful I presumed.

‘You are correct.’ Said the Director as we stepped into the outer circle of this labyrinth. This must indeed be an important place, since he’d stopped smoking. On the fence were tied small papers, prayers for intercession, for mercy. Memories, curses and denunciations in abundance. To each side of the narrow stone path stood a mass of improvised Orthodox crosses, jam jars with burned out candles, scores of tiny straw dolls, interspersed with

strange painted pebbles. A pervading stench of incense rose up. The youth stood ready, crossing himself repeatedly, dangling a long ornate iron key in his hand, eager to unveil the treasures of the tomb.

'Of course', said Sasha, responding to a prompting nod from Kravchuk, 'we have the problem of the forty three skulls.' I knew we'd return to this little matter sooner or later. 'They were found when the tunnels and alcoves were being examined properly by our scientific staff.'

I nodded with interest, but was told they had been removed from their resting place for closer scientific examination. I wondered why? I also wondered, emerging two hours later from the chilled depths, why I hadn't brought a coat. The skulls stacked in tens and dozens in the lower alcoves were as always a reminder of mortality, and any attempt at commentary from Svitlana or sage interjection from Kravchuk seemed entirely superfluous. These 'forty three different skulls' had been found much nearer the surface, tucked behind a low stone ledge. I was shown the place, but it meant little, and disclosed less.

Out in the daylight, as the young custodian silently locked the door behind us, I began to warm up again. We walked back towards the Director's office, and stopped in a moment of sunlight. 'Twenty five skulls are men's and eighteen are women's. None are those of children.' Svitlana explained. I interrupted her as she began to explain how the sex of each skull was determined, my work at Chernihiv had done that long before; it's the noticeable difference in size between the thickness of the brow, the shape of the orbits and the mandible joint, in this case almost all of the forty three had their jaws intact, I was told. The Director smiled at my acquired knowledge and lit another cigarette.

'Were these skulls from the War?' There were vague shrugs.

'Or the troubled times of Stalin's purges?' I asked.

'Well we think so.' Said Sasha, finding his voice, 'Probably. Possibly' He smiled awkwardly.' Many have the damage of a heavy pistol bullet at the top or above the eye sockets. Others have the mark of a sharp pick at the temple.'

Standard NKVD method of finishing someone off, I knew that too.

'It is a strange matter.' Svitlana pitched in. The heads were removed from the bodies, all flesh gone of course, eaten away, or even boiled maybe? Perhaps it was a ritual?' She said. The use of that single word troubled me.

"Ritual?" I asked.

'In any case, a mystery.' Said Kravchuk ,gruffly ignoring the word.

I laughed. 'A real Sherlock Holmes mystery!'

Something was certainly troubling them. I asked the question, what exactly was it? They wanted to open the catacombs, promote research and attract investment and visitors and all this required careful handling as I must know. I did. The forty three new skulls could be a difficulty. 'Why?' I asked again.

Sasha pawed the ground with his foot. Svitlana looked straight at the Director, who took a deep breath, exhaled a stream of smoke, and said in his best 'scientific' voice.

'There is some concern. We think that, well, they may have been, oh, Jews.'

In the coming years my visits took me to other places, and it was more than four years on before I returned to the Institute and its catacombs. I hitched a lift with ailing Timofy's nephew, only cost me twenty dollars. The old Director had died, and Sasha his deputy had replaced him. Svitlana, I guessed right away from the body language, had become his mistress. This was a fleeting two day visit, and I was interested to see the changes. We three strolled across to the enclosure, now neat and formal, and fenced, young Poe had gone, in his place a modern gate like a football turnstile. I asked the question Sasha knew I must.

‘The forty three skulls?

The pair stopped and Sasha said. ‘There was doubt. Too much doubt. They were, well, they were destroyed.’ He shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t try to blame the dead Kravchuk, this was purely a modern management decision. I looked at them both, and the two modern managers avoided my glance. It was a careful if not a clever lie, public and structured so that no obvious mourner, no-one linked to the skulls, no-one who had cleaned them and hidden them away, and faithfully said *Kaddish* over the dead men and women could come forward and deny it.

‘In our catacombs’, Sasha read to me what he had announced to the half-interested newspapers,’ the remains of forty three Soviet NKVD killers, heroically ambushed by UPA fighters late in the war and rightly executed for their crimes against the world, had been discovered. These were identified by their ebony identification tags, and had been buried without ceremony.’

He folded his note and slipped it into his pocket.

‘The holy catacombs are clean again.’ He spoke the last line with a shrug.

I haven’t been back.

**20.**

<u>BOY.</u>

‘Better fed than taught.’....Borderlands Proverb.

The Red Lion. 2010.

Three sat at the window table, drinks before them, heads moving, nodding in that slow, economical way that old men always seem to move. It was a rare gathering, and one I stumbled on by chance. Since the smoking ban, they all seemed unable to know what non-smoking hands should do, and their large old hands moved as if in patterns, weaving unseen crop circles on the table top, now and then darting inwards to where an ashtray should have been. I glanced in through the window of the ‘Red Lion’ and saw the three Volhynians sitting like characters in an Amis novel. Outside the early wind-blown Autumn rain was unrelenting, great puddles filled the gutters and spilled on to the pavements, swift, short-lived rivers ran past as I stepped from deepening dusk into the light and warmth. It’s true to say that there were times I would have walked by, possibly with a wave, or a knock at the window to announce my passing. Some of the men would have rejected intrusion, but not these three, Pavel and the two Andriy’s, Andriy from Kalush, and Andriy ‘The Turk’, named after a youthful and vigorous moustache he once had they told me.

“An Ukrainian gifted with a Welsh nickname long before he saw Wales.” I told him.

These men, their individual tales already passed to me, were welcoming. I dripped my way over to them, glass in hand, and dragged myself out of a sodden coat. “Someone had died,” they said, “in Manchester, and we had been talking about it, and if anyone should travel that long distance to the funeral.” For these three to venture out in wind and rain the dead someone must have been important, a community leader, or more likely a former officer in the 14th Galician. They were finished with that business, and waiting for their respective lifts homeward to turn up. I had a little news to pass on, and did so.

The conversation drifted.

Andriy –‘The Turk’ - had been to the cinema with his daughter and the grandchildren. He had not enjoyed it.

“You know this film?” he asked me.

“Yes. It’s a book too, they read it in schools.” I replied. He nodded, this is what he’d been told, “The children had been reading it in the Comprehensive school.” Since they were going on the day he normally turned up for tea, he tagged along.

“You have seen it, this film?” He glanced at the others as he asked the question.

“No, but I have read the book.” This was going to be an interesting conversation. I could tell, as the old man settled himself forward in his worn cardigan, and leant his elbows on the table.

“It is not true. A big lie. You must realise.” He said firmly. I stood up as best as any teacher could, for children’s literature, even if I felt this book a poor ‘fairy-tale’ of a story, and just a little implausible in its text, and probably far more so visually. The others listened intently, the story had been told to them already, it was obvious.

I shrugged, and prepared to listen.

“No German, no-one in the whole Reich would show a shred, not a *Zolotnyk* of compassion, to a Jew!” Said ‘The Turk’ very firmly indeed, he not only emphasised the word Jew, he spat it from his lips.

“Not even a child would. They were taught from babies about the Jews.” Said Pavel nodding sagely.

“A German boy with a *Haftlinger* for a friend!” He snorted.

“How could anyone mistake a well fed Aryan boy for a 20 gramme Camp Jew!” He laughed, actually referring to the bread ration outside the death camps, and laughed a little too loudly, for the pub was beginning to be busy.

“ Andriy from Kalush chipped in, though he hadn’t seen the film. “ You cannot imagine any *Lagerschutz* standing there while a hundred Jew skeletons limped and crawled by to the gas chamber, and then there walked past one fit healthy Aryan child who had eaten and could stand upright!”

“One with teeth! With skin, not open sores!” Pavel added. ”And a boy who was not walking slower than his lice!” They seemed to find this comment especially funny. Somehow it passed over me.

“Even if the thing was possible.” ‘The Turk’ leaned inwards, conspiratorially towards me. “When the time was up…”

“Maybe thirty minutes for them all to die.” Said his namesake.

“When the time was up, the scum from the *Sonderkommando* would search through each and every corpse, watched over by the *Schutz*. Some of the Jews were crafty, hiding gold and jewellery anywhere.” He raised his eyebrows. “Anywhere.” He raised a buttock, laughed and farted.

“This young German kid could not have vanished. It was impossible!” I felt these three were beginning to regard this film, and the book it was based on as more than wrong, but almost wicked in its attempts to give a doomed child’s view of something they had real experience of. The writer, I told them, was young, an Irishman who probably didn’t know much about these places at all.

The three old Borderland men were far from impressed. The criticism continued. “Did I know about the wire surrounding the camps? “

No?

“Not a rat could enter.”

“There actually were guards, and informers, everywhere.”

“Towers, many dogs too.” They laughed again. “All the camps were the same.” They agreed. They knew. They really knew.

Their criticism of the film was far from concluded, I could tell, but at the window a tap heralded Pavel’s eldest son, and the lift home. They began to struggle into coats and caps, draining their glasses.

“You realise, no-one, man, woman or child, would raise a finger to help, not even think to recognise a Jew as a living being.” The point had been made.

“No.” Said ‘The Turk’ “We never did.”

“No!”

The door opened, and the conversation changed.

Home and drying out from another soaking on the way, I borrowed my wife’s school copy of *‘The Boy in Striped Pyjamas’*. The literary critics, I ‘googled’ them, were a harsh as the old men in the pub window. ‘Not just a lie….but a profanation’ wrote an American Rabbi. ‘Lobotomised’, and ‘confusing innocence with ignorance’ wrote another critic.

John Byrne’s novel won prizes, though of course in Ireland’s republic there was no World War Two, only an ‘Emergency’; so perhaps the soft narrative, where Auschwitz goes unnamed, and the killings unstated, unlisted, unchallenged, can be forgiven by the young readers for whom it’s intended, if not by the old men who know and remember, and still accept what happened there and in so many other camps across the Reich’s lands.

“I wonder,” I said to my wife, “which of the camps they remembered?”

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Notes:

*Zolotnyk.*…The tiniest measure possible, 1/96$^{th}$ of an ounce in old Tsarist times.

*Haftlinger.*…The Nazi term for a prisoner in the camps. Those who wore the striped pyjamas.

*Lagerschutz.*…Armed and uniformed camp guard. More often than not, Ukrainian, Latvian or Polish.

*Sonderkommando.*…An impressive name for those gangs of Jewish prisoners who were chosen for ‘special duties’ searching and clearing up the bodies after gassing, and serving the crematoria, they were also killed from time to time, and new, fitter, ones employed.

**21.**

GYPSIES?

‘My bread is not for you.’....Borderlands proverb.

The ‘Lamb & Flag’ 2000.

A draft tale.

It was late Saturday afternoon, the day the clocks went back. I was with Dima and Petro in the back room of the ‘Lamb & Flag’; their sons had dropped them off for an hour, and I turned up by chance, on my way home. Petro’s in a wheelchair now, with one of those little oxygen bottles strapped at the back if he needs it, looking at his beer more than drinking it. They were far off in the Winter of 1948, a hard one, and they had just arrived at the hostel. I wasn’t born then, and so I just sat there, doing what I do. Drink, listen, and above all, remember.

Three brash young men, Irishmen by complexion and speech, sauntered in from the lane door and up to the bar. ‘Out!’ said Tony, the landlord, ‘Or I’ll phone the Rangers.’ We don’t see policemen around in the town these days, we now have black-clad Rangers, paid by the Council, who swoop to areas of trouble like angry jackdaws. Anyway, after some foul-mouthed protests and muffled threats, they made their exit. These were travellers, probably living on the rough temporary site behind the carbon works.

We were the only people in, far too early for the serious evening drinkers, and Tony table-mopped his way over to us, apologetically.

“Bloody Gypsies!” He said. ”Always out to cause trouble. I hate them coming in. They won’t drink here!” He mopped off towards the door.

‘No. No.’ chuckled Petro, lifting his glass to me in a mock salute. Dima responded, and smiled. ’They,’ he trembled a thick arthritic finger in a stab towards the door,’ were not Gypsies. We know Gypsies. We know them from old times!’

Petro nodded, and both laughed a quiet, old, far off laugh. They were back at Babi Yar, I knew that well enough. Two willing young volunteers, busy, serving in the new Galician Police of the *Reichskommisariat.* They must have killed scores of Gypsies. Seen hundreds, thousands, of them die. I picked up my beer, it was cold. A drop of condensation, then another, ran down the glass like tears.

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**22.**

POT.

OstFront 1944.

The Siberians had moved quickly out of the ruins of the village; sent forward to support the tanks and crush one of the Nazi rearguards running for the Pripyat river a little to the north. They left nothing alive behind.

“Not a dog, not a woman, not a pig’s squeal.” Fedor was now telling a new tale.

They did however, leave a *‘Gulaschkanone’*, a great wheeled double cauldron stoked and fired in the remains of an overrun German field kitchen. Snow was still falling, slowly covering the mutilated bodies of the previous cooks disposed of by the Siberian soldiers. The Captain set his guards, and examined one of the huge pots. Not poisoned. It smelled good, to a worn out infantryman in that freezing Winter hot food always smelled good. They had bread, loaves of hard rye just made to soak up hot soup. Even thin watery cabbage or turnip soup for that matter, just as long as it was hot enough.

“At Stalingrad,” Said Fedor, laughing, “they ate stone soup!”

The Siberians had left enough for everyone of they weren’t greedy, though one pot was half empty, a long ladle sat in it, and the lid, partly raised was seeping sweet warmth into a gloomy, dying day. Both pots bubbled softly, underscoring the distant muffled guns. Those Siberians had obviously caught up with some poor bastards.

The first pot was emptied. Dmytro and the Sergeant ladled it out, stirring and giving each man at least the chance of some meat, but there wasn’t any; or maybe the chance of a potato or two. It was mostly cabbage though. But hot. You could hear the noise of the men devouring it over the sound of far off gunfire. Dmytro, a big man, called one of them, and they lifted the almost empty pot, tipping the dribble of soup that remained into the other.

He stirred again with the great ladle.

There was definitely meat in this one

But he said nothing.

The men who had already eaten were dispersing to their posts, and the guards were coming in for what was left. Older hands didn't rush. The bottom of the pot was always thicker, tastier than what floated at the top. Anyone who'd been in the camps knew that. The Captain, who'd eaten with the first group urged the Sergeant to speed up. The sound of the guns was more persistent now, and if they were summoned forward with half the company fed and the rest hungry there'd be trouble again.

The Sergeant ladled enthusiastically, he didn't even look into the pot as he stirred and sniffed.

"Not a horse. Maybe a dog, or two dogs, eh?" He chuckled to himself. There was nothing alive in this place. "Rats? Cats? Maybe even crows, or a wild pig?" He thought out loud.

"Who cares?" Said Dmytro. "I'm starving!"

A sliver of pale meat flopped from the ladle into a tightly held mess tin. Pig then, Dmytro reckoned. The last of the sentries, sly Razov was mumbling, sniffing his mess tin as he stood aside to eat. There was still a good third part of the soup left, maybe almost half. Dmytro had filled his own tin and ate standing near the warm field oven, licking his spoon with every mouthful.

He had barely finished his meal, and was picking the dark rye crumbs from the empty tin, like lice from a dead man's blanket, when the Captain's whistle blew.

"Shit!" Said the Sergeant. Over the darkening steppe, a green flare rose lazily and fell, then another, and a third. They were ordered out to plug a gap, or more likely kill a party of half frozen stragglers with some fight left in them.

The unhappy Sergeant gathered his men, and gave an order. Dmytro saluted after a fashion, and called to Razov to help him. The Company was vanishing into the distance and as soon as they'd destroyed the *'Gulaschkanone'* , the two were to follow. So Dmytro filled Razov's tin again, and his own. They ate quickly, Razov picking a big potato out with his filthy fingers and devouring it with a toothless laugh.

The two soldiers finished their soup, and reluctantly set about their task. A grenade or tow dropped down the short chimney would destroy the big oven, but sadly they would have to pour away the soup, many litres of it.

"Come on, lift! Lift!" said Razov. He slid the lid on and they carefully lugged the hot urn out of its place and to the side of the cart.

The contents flowed onto the frozen ground. A great sucking sound as the meat in the soup emerged from the bottom f the big pot. One, two, no three, infants. Very small babies indeed, a month or two old maybe, dropped, disjointed almost fleshless, white boned, to lie on the whiter snow.

The two men looked at each other. Dmytro spat. Too late now. They dropped to the ground, shouldered their rifles, and with a skilful lob, Razov threw a grenade into the chimney of the oven. Then they scuttled off to join their comrades.

"Razov told me this when he was wounded." Said Fedor, looking at me as though he expected some gasp of horror, an outburst, or a reprimand for the tale." He told me after Dmytro was killed in Berlin. It happened you know, all the time. Especially in Leningrad during the siege. Yes. All over the Soviet lands, people ate people. Razov used to laugh, and called it 'Leningrad Stew'.

He looked at me again, and raised a finger.

“You,” he said “have never been that hungry.”

“No” I replied.

Thank God.

**23.**

DUST.

Volhynia 2009.

“You’ll have some more tea? Another biscuit?” Her voice was kind, motherly, and lonely too, now that he was gone. “No. No thanks. I’m fine.”

“Yes, well,” she looked around, “I’d better get on then.” Old hands smoothed the crumbless damask tablecloth. Then slowly spread a week old free newspaper across it, then on top of that laid a tea-towel *‘Views of the Norfolk Broads’*, ironed gossamer thin. The cat settled close by as she carried the cardboard box and laid it on the covered table. *‘Etruscan Urn’* the label read; she lifted the black lacquered jar from within and placed it upon the tea-towel, turning it a little, with a caress of her arthritic fingertips.

I watched in silence. So did the cat. The lid of the urn lifted with a soft suck, it wasn’t screwed or secured. I resisted leaning forward to examine the contents, *‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’* came to mind naturally, but the cat and I kept our counsel and watched as she gathered her needs. A long spoon, once silver plated, with a tiny bowl, a clear plastic bag, green hued, the sort you put in the freezer, and a plastic pill box with a red and white label, with a screw top, no bigger than a whisky tumbler. She set these things down next to the urn, and moved the cardboard box carefully.

For a moment the old lady rested her worn hands on the table. I sensed a soul deep sigh, a gentle warmth rise from within her. I thought perhaps she was humming to herself. She didn’t look at me, but at the gaping pot. “I must be very careful. No. No, don’t help me, please. I must do this.”

Lifting the pill box to the edge of the black urn she dipped the spoon, soundlessly drawing it out, then trickling the contents into the smaller container. Twice, then three times, more, her hand moved in slow measured rhythm. She counted out under her breath, “five, six, seven.” There was no other sound, no dust either, beyond the faintest imagined glitter of ghostly spores flickering above the black urn. I watched the ashes tip into the pill box, spoon after spoon, in complete silence. I thought she might have cried. It reminded me, not then but later, of that scene in *‘The Caine Mutiny’* when Humphrey Bogart, mad and ridiculous, scoops sand from an ice-cream tub.

Eleven spoonsful exactly. Eleven careful, gentle spoons had filled the little box. Then she laid the spoon aside, and with two hands faintly agitated the pill box settling the contents. “There.” She whispered. It was with difficulty that her gnarled fingers turned the screw cap, it took a while to turn it as tightly as could be. She didn’t ask my help, and I couldn’t offer. I couldn’t. She’d made that clear.

The box was placed in a plastic freezer bag, and tightly wrapped, like smothering a scarf onto a child on a frosty morning. The cat and I watched her turn to the sideboard drawer, back to us, while she rummaged. She found what she wanted. A red elastic band, just the sort that postmen use. She wrapped it twice, and twice again about the bag and box, then, satisfied set it down before me.

When all was cleared away, she offered me another cup of tea, which I didn’t really want, but I was expected to tell her once more, precisely, what I was to do. Step by step, like a bank robber’s rehearsal, or a wedding. Do

they rehearse funerals? Only for Kings I suspect. “You will take care? Exactly the way he wanted?” She tried not to fuss, but failed miserably. I took my leave of her and the cat, having placed the ashes in my briefcase. How light they were. Not like sugar or sand, but more like a dream of flour. At the door she took my hands in hers, they were cold, thin and fragile, on the verge of turning to dust too, and she said goodbye with a cheerful, tearful wave.

For the entire journey, by plane and spine-jolting minibus ride, six hours across the featureless western steppe, the small package sat in my hold all, untroubled but not forgotten. It was a dismal Autumn in the war-ripped borderlands. Iron grey, damp, the clouds low and lingering, with the promise of another hard Winter to come.

The rusting bridge across the sluggish river was quiet at that hour. The morning rush into the town had faded to nothing, and the few pedestrians were market bound, lost in thought and hopeful of a bargain. Stas was with me, we’d walked down from his apartment, the feather weight ashes tucked deep in my anorak pocket.

“Did you know him?” Stas asked me.

“No, not well enough to be anything but surprised to be asked to do this!” I answered. “I remember he limped, his knees were very bad. His widow’s a very pleasant old lady though. Reminds me of an Aunt of mine.”

“I had an Aunt. She died an alcoholic in the east.” I remembered Stas came from Luhansk. They live short hard lives in Luhansk.

We stood half way across the iron walkway, beneath us the steel grey waters which tumbled onwards for three hundred miles towards the sea, muttering to themselves an old song.

“Bloody hell!” I swore. The pill box was hard to open, my fingers were cold, and the thread took a while to loosen. When I finally managed it, the powdery contents looked gritty, grey and meaningless.

“Powdered soul, Stas.” He laughed, not being a man of any faith, at least any which lingered outside a bottle. I wondered how long he’d last at the Institute with his drinking habits. It wasn’t to be long.

I held the box out over the parapet, and turned it over. A small stream of smoky ash dribbled away over the water, like a faint aura, or a doomed opaque nebula, drifting outwards to melt away in the stiffening breeze. Stas crossed himself, now that took me by surprise, and I muttered something suitably useless for the moment. I recall it now, but “Bon Voyage, Timofey.” Is not the best of unwritten epitaphs. I screwed the pill box tight, and dropped it into the slow current below. We watched it, like small boys with a paper boat, as it bounced away downstream, quite lively at first, only to vanish suddenly in an eddy far off. We stood for a while more, but it didn’t reappear, wish as hard as I might. Like the cloud of the old man’s ashes, it was gone. The wind suddenly became bitter, a gust brought the first rain shower of the day over the bridge.

“Vodka?” Said Stas, nodding towards the bars of the town.

“I wonder,” I said, “Should I have taken a photograph?”