

Excerpt from Brygida Helbig „Niebko“

Eins, zwei, drei

‘Daddy, where did you get such a strange surname?’ Marzena would ask from time to time, and little Ewa would badger him as well. ‘My goodness! Where indeed!’ Waldek would say with a shrug. ‘As you’d expect, from ancestors of mine — goodness only knows when it was — some ancestors were Austrians. How should I know? Stop bothering me and get back to your homework!’

Oh yes, and whose turn is it to take the rubbish out today?’

Nobody’s, of course. It definitely wasn’t Ewa’s turn.

But Marzena continued to probe, asking: ‘Daddy, how did you learn German?’

‘Goodness! How? I learnt it at school.’

‘You know, I shall never,’ Marzena would say, stamping her foot, ‘ever learn the Kraut lingo. I hate it.’

Once when Willi carelessly mentioned emigrating to West Germany, his 13-year old shrieked so loudly that the flimsy walls of the miniscule kitchen in their socialist two-room flat shook. ‘You’ll go without me then! You’ll blooming well go without me! Go on your own! I’m not going anywhere! I hate their jabber! I’m staying here. This is my native country. I won’t go to the Nazis EVER.’

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‘Ah.’

Waldek, who was really called Willi, and was meant to have become a farmer or a joiner like generations of his forefathers, to have wed a woman called Hilda or Susanna with a surname like Bischoff, Börstler or Koch, and named his son Heinrich or Ludwig, had instead got stuck in socialist Poland, married Basia and called his daughters Marzena and Ewa. He had moved quickly up the ladder. He hadn’t been far off becoming a major, perhaps even a general. If only it hadn’t reached the point where his plans were thwarted by his past, if only the things he had pushed aside and forgotten hadn’t one day floated up to the surface and forced him, with a heavy heart, to hand in his Polish People’s Army captain’s uniform with four stars on the epaulettes. Until then carefully kept in the hallway, in the depths of a built-in cupboard, coated with white gloss paint, into which from time to time his little daughter would secretly steal, making the door creak.

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Waldek found it rather painful whenever his daughter shrieked that she’d never go to the Nazis. Because once upon a time Waldek had been something like a German - assuming that there is such a thing as a German.

Now he no longer knew whether he was a German or a Pole. Essentially he could be considered a Pole, were it not for the fact that during football matches between Poland and Germany his heart beat faster for the German side, quite involuntarily, it seemed, and Waldek would start to fidget restlessly in front of the TV. His favourite armchair suffered severe wear and tear as a result of these extended night-time sessions.

During his lifetime he had been very much a German and very much a Pole. He had changed his skin, first to survive, to avoid blows and humiliation, and later in order to get somewhere in life, to achieve recognition and position, to provide for his family.

‘I didn’t change my skin at all,’ Waldek would deny it, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I was always the same.’

He was a child when the war caught up with him, when German aeroplanes circled above the hamlet of S., lighting it up as if it were Judgement Day. He wasn’t even nine then. He had closely watched the

adults and everything happening around him. He was sharp.

Little Marzena stored the stars from her daddy's epaulettes in a matchbox. From time to time she would check they were all there, she would count them once again. One, two, three, four. She didn't know how to count in German — only to three. She picked that up playing outdoors. 'Eins, zwei, drei. Krauts out! Bye-bye!'

She also knew how to say, 'Guten Morgen. Kick your gob in!'

The hamlet of S.

The hamlet of S. near Bandrów!

When a certain Otto Mack, a member of the German National Council, visited this place from Lwów one fine summer afternoon in the 1930s, apparently he cried out in delight: 'This is the most beautiful place in the world: it has water, woods and sunshine — a real spa!'

This point on the globe, a small village, in the Bieszczady region, of which nothing remains today, is where *daddy* comes from. The vestiges of S. lie in no-man's-land, right by the border strip between Poland and Ukraine. Waist-high grass grows there now, or rather weed-choked, wild grass. Willi was born in a land of hobbits, which stretched picturesquely along a fast-flowing brook, the Stebnik, which briskly raced to the river Strwiąż and then eastwards with it, all the way to the Dniester. It was a strange village, in an unusual place, very far from the balcony on which now — with a vigour aimed at warding off her fear of wasting time on foolishness, on superfluous luxuries, on unpaid activities — Marzena was tapping the letters on her overworked keyboard, watching them throng onto the screen and pile up like pillars of fire, columns of figures, a balance sheet of life.

Not far from virgin forest, in a quiet valley with a view of slopes lavishly covered with deciduous and coniferous trees, the streams Nanówka and Królówka burred exuberantly as they flowed into the Stebnik. That's how Marzena pictured it. Like a religious image. That was the way Germans wrote about it in their memoirs. 'A proper idyll,' they said, although they were a bit abashed by the word. A multitude of trout, crayfish and unusual fish frolicked there; sometimes there was even gudgeon.

A colourful chessboard of fields with cereal crops of all kinds. Next door was the Ukrainian village of Stebnik, from where came the heart-tugging songs of Ukrainians working the land. And the Ukrainian women in their wide colourful skirts, under which the whole world might be hidden.

Mother of God, those were the times!

Nowadays it is mainly cows and horses that take the waters there. Though actually, who knows what is there now. Marzena certainly didn't. Up to this point her focus in life had been on totally different things.

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A Little Princess

Marzena is defrosting the refrigerator. She chips off the ice. It clatters into a bowl and gradually melts. What does she remember best of the time after she returned from the town of L., from the home of her grandmother, who had just died, and with whom she spent the first few years of her life?

There was a family story about her mother Basia catching her red-handed in the kitchen. She had been two-and-a-half at the time: she had got herself inside a kitchen cupboard and had guiltily set about drinking rich white cream straight from the bottle. When her mother suddenly opened the door, Marzena went on the attack and cried out fiercely, though hesitantly: 'Who did that? Who licked the cream?' while a broad trickle of cream dribbled down her chin.

Her mother burst out laughing.

The nursery school. She knows she refused to go to there; she had firmly dug her little feet in just outside the building and refused to budge. It was going to be yet another change in her life. To this day

she detests change: she stubbornly resists any changes, even when they might lead to freedom. In the end she went. Resistance was pointless.

She got used to it. She remembers that the red string bags in which vegetables were sold at the greengrocers were in fashion then, and every child at the nursery wanted to have one, as fine and as stretchy as possible. What for? She didn't really know.

Playing outdoors. She would spend hours playing outside with other children: they would hang around the blocks of flats and collect bits of glass from around the kiosks and rubbish bins where the bottles tossed aside by drunkards mostly lay. They would collect the coloured sweet wrappers that littered the area, and small leaves. They would use them to make what was called a little heaven. Nobody knew where this game came from. They would dig a little hollow, make lovely patterns in it using the gold and silver foil and flowers and grasses they had found, cover them with a piece of glass and bury it all. You had to remember the physical features of the spot in detail to know where you had hidden the treasure. Several friends were always in on the secret.

On subsequent days you would go and look for your little heavens. If a little heaven had vanished, it meant someone had given away the secret. Someone had betrayed it, in other words they had dug up your treasure. You were supposed to look after your treasure — not forget about it.

In the evenings their neighbours, drunken men, common, or even vulgar people, would often pickquarrels and stones would fly. The police would have to be called. Marzena's parents were the only ones who had a telephone. Marzena could remember the grim atmosphere of waiting for ensuing events. Pure fear.

Their neighbours were from the countryside, they had a gaggle of ten children and a mountain of dirty linen on the floor. Apparently in the mornings one of their elder daughters, still in her nightdress, with no knickers on, would pilfer milk from their doorstep — Waldek, Marzena's daddy, once caught her at it. Sometimes lads would come to the girls and play the guitar under their balcony. Sometimes the girls would call by the army unit.

Basia and Waldek were the first to buy themselves a black-and-white television set. The neighbours' children would come over to their flat to watch the bedtime story. One time, one of them was so excited it peed on the carpet.

The children would say to Marzena, 'You're so rich!'

She felt like a Little Princess.

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