

I was born in 1973 in Lithuania. More precisely, in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union. We weren't 100 per cent accepted in this empire and were often viewed with suspicion. The Russians repeatedly asked me, "Where were your grandfathers when mine fought against fascism, liberated Europe and took Berlin?" I answered that mine had liberated Rome. It always sounded unconvincing. Even a little unreal. Because there was simply no such episode in the heroic history of the Soviet people.

I should mention here that I am not a pure-blooded Lithuanian. My Belarusian grandparents on my mother's side were deported in 1930 to the Arkhangelsk region, from where they returned only in 1949. The family of my Belarusian grandmother on my father's side was also dispossessed and sent to Central Asia, in 1940. My grandmother was the only one left behind because at that time she was no longer living in the village and was studying in Vilnius.

Meanwhile her entire family – her father (her mother was dead), her brothers and sisters – all ended up in Kazakhstan. And then the Second World War, with all its cruelty, came to the USSR; the country was saved only by the complete dispensability of human life – Nazi tanks and guns were halted by the flesh and bones of Soviet soldiers. Only now are the true losses of the USSR in this war – about 40 million – becoming clear. Unimaginable numbers, an unimaginable tragedy. And those dead soldiers had to be replaced with live ones. Then came the plan to form another army of Poles – an army made up of tens of thousands of prisoners of war held in Soviet camps. But by that time the nucleus of the Polish army had already been murdered in Katyn, their corpses bulldozed into the ground. This new army was therefore made up of those Poles who had been deported to Central Asia. More precisely, Polish-speaking inhabitants of eastern Poland, south-eastern Lithuania, western Ukraine and Belarus, who, before the invasion of Poland by the USSR in



Statue of Wojtek the Bear, Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh

# Beast from the East

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1939, had Polish citizenship. My grandmother's family fell into this category and, thus, got a chance to break free from the prison of exile. Everyone, even Grandma's father, would have escaped, but as he got on the train, he suddenly changed his mind.

"Go," he told his children. "I'll catch up with you."

No one saw him again or heard anything about him. Even the whereabouts of his grave are unclear.

Meanwhile, the train with my grandmother's sisters and brothers on board went to Iran. From there, to Iraq, and then Palestine. They were trained to fight along the way. Under the leadership of the Polish general Władysław Anders, they guarded oil wells near Mosul from the Nazis and carried out other tasks. But this army's main battle took place in Italy, near Monte Cassino. It was a battle for Rome. For four months, the Allies (British, Americans, Canadians and others) tried unsuccessfully to break through the Gustav Line, a network of Nazi fortifications, and force them out of a large fortress set on a high hill in the monastery. Three major battles had already taken place – three unsuccessful attempts to knock the enemy off those hills, thus opening the way to the Eternal City. Anders's army entered the fourth battle and won. After that, the Allied forces entered Rome without interference.

A couple of years ago, family sentiment led me to visit Monte Cassino. It is a place of extraordinary beauty, roughly halfway between Rome and Naples. On a magnificent hill with breathtaking views stands the monastery founded in the sixth century by St Benedict, the patron saint of Europe. His tomb is also there. And just below, the graves of those who died in those battles. The largest of them is where the Poles from Anders's army are buried.

My relatives survived. One of my grandmother's brothers was an infantryman, the other a tankman. His name was Boleslov – Bolek for short. He is now dead, but I still man-

aged to visit him (when he was ninety) in a retirement town between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. His wife, Alexandra – Olia – ten years younger than him, was chattering incessantly while he sat and smiled, looking at me – the fruit of another branch of the same tree. Olia told me about how she visited Rome for the first and only time in her life ten years ago. She went to the Vatican, and there were crowds of tourists and also this nightmare heat. She was so disappointed with Rome. Bolek, listening to her, still smiled. Then he said:

"When I was there, there were no tourists. We drove to Rome on our tank ..."

Then he pulled out an old photo of their squad of young uniformed tankers standing in two rows in front of St Peter's Basilica.

"No tourists", he repeated.

I don't know what Bolek felt about the Soviets or the Nazis – he must have hated both. But I still remember that smirk on his face that said, "It was as it should have been, and could not be otherwise". It was his father who made one decision himself: he resisted destiny and disappeared forever. At that time, Bolek and his brothers were simply carried along by a powerful stream of terror and war, where they had the simple task of staying alive for as long as possible. This force pulled him out of his Belarusian village, took him in a circle across the Asian continent and threw him back into Europe, only this time at the helm of a British tank. He said it had been scary. It was so scary that he was praying in front of a rosary which he had taken from home, hanging at eye level, which the shaking tank threw in different directions, like a pendulum. Then they fought for Ancona and liberated Bologna. After the war they were denied normal veteran status: they were relocated to the UK, placed in barracks deep in the English countryside without the right to move freely. The locals looked on them as enemies, traitors: the war is over and they don't want to go home, apparently can't because they are criminals, Nazi collaborators. They really could not return: 4,000 Anders army veterans did so and ended up in the Irkutsk gulag. That's how inhumanly cruel our country was to its people. And such was the victory for the Anders army soldiers – they became ordinary refugees. They liberated Rome and had a photo as a memory.

And there was a bear with them. I asked Bolek if he remembered the bear.

"No", he said. "I didn't see him. We knew that somebody had that bear, but the army was big, almost 100,000 people – impossible to know everyone."

And that bear had been acquired by some of the soldiers when they were still in Iran. A Persian boy had been holding it so they exchanged it for canned food and chocolate. They named him Wojtek, in honour of the war. He slept in the tent with the soldiers, and wrestled with them: he and five men against him. Somehow he managed not to hurt people. The soldiers even taught him to smoke. Apparently, he didn't smoke, but he kept papyros in his mouth and thereby made everyone laugh. When the army was due to cross the Mediterranean, a problem arose: beasts were not allowed on board warships. So they officially made him a soldier – Anders Army regular Vojtech Pers. He became more and more human: he was trained not only to drink beer with the others, which he especially loved, but also to give military greetings to the seniors in rank. And in the battle for Monte Cassino, a miracle took place: at its height, the bear ran to the truck with artil-

lery shells and began to unload these shells together with the other soldiers. I don't know, maybe it's just a legend, it's hard to believe this last episode, but this is the legendary bear Wojtek, so it could be true. After the war he was transported to the UK and ended up in Edinburgh Zoo. There he fell ill, walking sadly, rubbing his sides against the sides of the cage, and only came to life when veterans of the Anders army approached his cage. The men jumped over the fence, pushed him in a friendly way, and then they all sat down to smoke. And once more the bear smoked with them. And was happy. Everyone in that cage was happy. It was the biggest attraction for visitors to Edinburgh Zoo: "Where are those wild people from? And why does this predator let them in?" These were the liberators of Rome, victorious warriors stuck in this foreign country. And so, on V-E Day, they ran to their Wojtek, the only bear in the world who had fought in the war, who knew best what kind of meat grinder they had survived, what victory had brought them and how they felt after that. He had also been given refuge here. Without the right to move freely around the country.

This beast became human at a time when millions of people had become beasts. And today, I feel a bit like him. Just thirty years ago, I stepped out of that Soviet cage from which there seemed to be no hope of escape. I went out of there semi-wild and entered the feast of humanity, when the walls collapsed, everyone embraced and everyone's eyes burnt with the hope that it would be forever. After that the euphoria subsided. The celebrations of European victory were overshadowed by everyday life as everyone sank into their problems. We began to look at each other again with suspicion: Western Europeans were tired of the flood of poor Eastern Europeans, and Eastern Europeans were tired of being second-rate in Europe. We went halfway to overcoming our economic differences, but did not overcome the other half. And to justify this fatigue, we began to argue that it was not about economic differences but civilizational differences. Which means we are all too different to be united.

I was invited here because of my innate optimism. Because of an essay I wrote several years ago. It had the title "In love with Europe". After its publication in several European newspapers, the largest Lithuanian portal wanted to reprint it. But only on one condition: the title should not contain the word "Europe". Because it turns out that readers in Lithuania do not want to read articles with the word "Europe" in the title; they find it boring. I disagreed and they kept the original title. But they were right: this essay is the least-read of all the writings I have published in Lithuania.

What does this mean? It means that Europe has become boring for people. Just like democracy, peace and the like. And I am very sad about that, just as Wojtek was sad in his cage. Because I, like him, still remember that euphoria of unity, I still live with it when others forgot it long ago. But on the other hand, my innate optimism also says that I should be happy about this. Because boring is stable. When Europe is in real danger, we, the beasts and the citizens of the continent, will once again feel united.

Of course, it's a pity that the feast cannot last forever. And each new rise requires a corresponding decline.

*This is the text of a talk given at the Borders conference in Belfast on September 15.*