

# Mother Departs

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*Mother's eyes rest on me*

## now

now, as I write these words, my mother's eyes rest on me. The eyes, mindful and tender, are silently asking, 'what's troubling you, my darling...?' With a smile I reply, 'nothing... everything's fine Mummy, really,' 'but tell me,' Mother says, 'what's the matter?' I turn my head away, look through the window...

Mother's eyes which can see everything watch the birth watch throughout life and watch after death from the 'other world'. Even if they turned her son into a killing machine or a beast a murderer mother's eyes are looking at him with love... looking.

When a mother turns her eyes away, her child starts to stray, becomes lost in a world stripped of love and warmth.

Tomorrow's Mother's Day. I don't remember if when I was a child there was an official day like that... When I was a child every day was Mother's day. Every morning Mother's day. And noon and evening and night.

You know Mummy, I can tell it only to you in my old age, and I can tell you now because I'm already older than you... I didn't dare tell you when you were alive. I'm a Poet. It's a word that frightened me, I never spoke it to Father... I didn't know if it was decent to say something like that.

I entered the world of poetry as if into the light and now I'm preparing to exit, into darkness... I trekked across the landscape of poetry and have seen it with the eye of a fish a mole a bird a child a grown man and an old man; why is it so difficult to utter these words: 'I'm a poet', you search for synonyms to help you

come out to the world. To Mother. Of course, Mother knows. But to say something like that to my father was unthinkable... So I never did tell Father 'Dad... Father... I'm a poet'. I don't know if my father would even have noticed... he'd be so remote... he'd have said (while he read the paper, ate, dressed, polished his shoes...) 'what's that you're saying (Tadziu)?' After all it was just silly 'what's that again?' but of course I couldn't repeat it, let alone louder, 'Dad, Father, I am a poet'... Father might have looked up from his plate, his paper... looking surprised or perhaps not looking but nodding and saying 'good... good' or saying nothing at all. I wrote a poem called 'Father' (in 1954) 'Walking through my heart goes/ my old father...' I never knew if Father read that poem, he never said a word... anyway I never read it to Father either... now it's 1999... and my voice is so quiet that my Parents can't hear my words 'Mum, Dad, I'm a poet'... 'I know, Darling' Mother says 'I've always known.' 'Speak up' says Father 'I can't hear a thing'...

## a poet's promises

For years I used to promise my Mum three things: that I'd invite her to Kraków, that I'd show her Zakopane and the mountains, that I'd take her to the seaside. Mum never got to see Kraków. She got to see neither Kraków nor the mountains (with Lake Morskie Oko in the middle) nor the sea. I didn't keep my promises... It's been nearly half a century since Mum's death... (anyway, clocks, calendars, I'm losing interest). Why didn't I take her to Kraków and show her the Sukiennice, Saint Mary's Church, Wawel Castle, the Vistula.

Oh yes. Her son lived in Kraków... and the young 'promising' poet... a poet who wrote so many poems for his mother and so many poems for all mothers... didn't bring Mum to Kraków not in 1947 nor 1949... She never insisted, never reproached me.

Mum never saw Warsaw. Mum never flew in an aeroplane, sailed on a ship. I never went with Mum to a café, restaurant, florist, theatre, opera... Or a concert... I was a poet... I wrote a poem 'A Tale of Old Women', I wrote a poem 'An Old Peasant Woman Walks Along The Beach'... I didn't take Mum to the seaside... I didn't sit with her on the beach, I didn't bring her a seashell or a bit of amber. Nothing... and she never will see the sea... and I'll never see her face and eyes and smile as she looks at the sea... a poet. Is a poet a man who writes lamentations dry-eyed, so that he can see the form clearly? Who must put all his heart into making sure the form's 'perfect'...? A poet: a man without a heart? And now the wailing in front of an audience at a book fair, the poetic indulgences, the Literary Stock Exchange. I can't even fool myself that 'in the other world' Mum is strolling through the Planty Gardens, through Kraków, to Wawel... Is there a beach in 'heaven' where our Mothers can sit in their poor old fur stoles, coats, slippers and hats...? But even now I'm writing – dry-eyed – and 'correcting' these beggarly lamentations of mine...

## **in the midst of life**

It is now sixty years since World War II broke out.

I'm 77, 78 years old. I am a poet. At the start of the road I couldn't believe in the miracle... that one day I'd become a poet, sometimes at night woken by nightmares and spectres I clutched at the thought 'I shall be a poet' I shall drive away spectres darkness death... I shall enter the light of poetry, the music of poetry, the Silence.

Now as I write these words, Mother's quiet mindful eyes are on me. She watches me from the 'other world' the other side I do not believe in. In this world another war is raging. One of the hundred that have raged continuously from the end of World War II until today...

My world that I tried to build for half a century is crumbling into fragments under the rubble of houses hospitals and temples man and god are dying, man and hope are dying, man and love.

Once, a long time ago in 1955, I wrote a poem 'In the Midst of Life'...

After the end of the world  
 after death  
 I found myself in the midst of life  
 creating myself  
 building life  
 people animals landscapes

this is a table I said  
 this is a table  
 on the table there is bread a knife  
 the knife is for cutting the bread  
 bread feeds people  
 man must be loved  
 I was learning night and day  
 what must be loved  
 man I answered

a poet! He grew old he stands on death's doorstep and still he hasn't understood that a knife is for hacking heads off hacking off noses and ears what is a knife for? for cutting heads off... some place over there, far? near? what else is a knife for? for cutting out tongues that speak in foreign tongues and for cutting open the bellies of pregnant women cutting off the breasts of nursing mothers cutting off genitals gouging out eyes... and what else can we look at on television? read in the papers? hear on the radio?

what is a knife for  
 it's for cutting off the heads of enemies  
 it's for cutting off the heads of  
*women children old people*  
 (That's what they've been writing in the papers  
 for a century...)

now as I write these words mother's quiet eyes are on me  
 on my hand on these maimed blinded words.  
 our mothers' eyes that penetrate hearts and thoughts are our  
 conscience they judge us and love  
 full of love and anxiety  
 mother's eyes  
 Mother watches her son as he takes his first steps and then as  
 he seeks his way, her eyes watch as the son leaves, they take in  
 the whole life and death of her son

possibly my words will reach mothers who abandoned their  
 children on a rubbish dump or reach children who have forgotten  
 their parents in the hospitals and the old people's homes

I remember Mother saying  
 to us, only once probably... I was five... only once in her life  
 she said to us 'I shall leave you... you're so naughty... I shall  
 go and won't ever  
 come back'... three small naughty boys... I have remembered  
 all through my  
 life the fear and dark despair that we three felt...  
 I remember my heart bleeding (oh yes 'my heart was bleeding')  
 I found myself in emptiness and darkness... Mum only said  
 it once  
 and today I still remember my tears and despair...  
 but mum didn't go away she was with us and she will be...  
 now as I write these words... mother's searching eyes are on me

I lift my head, open my eyes... can't find my way, fall, get up, words filled with hatred ptomaine explode rip love faith and hope apart... I open my mouth to say something 'people must be loved' not Poles Germans Serbs Albanians Italians Jews Greeks... people must be loved... white black red yellow

I know my beggarly wailings lack good taste...

and I know that of all worldly things what survives is... what?!

The great ludicrous genius Norwid said:

Of all worldly things only two survive,

Two only: poetry and goodness... and nothing else...

Oh Don Quixote, it's the Nothing that's survived! And if we do not begin to use our heads at last, do not get some grip on this vast expanding Nothing, then... then what? speak up, don't look so petrified! what's about to happen... we shall make such a hell on earth for ourselves that Lucifer will look like an angel, oh a fallen angel yes but not absolutely without a soul, prone to hubris yet at least dense with longing for a lost heaven dense with melancholy with sorrow... and politics will turn into kitsch, love into pornography, music into pandemonium, sport into prostitution, religion into science, science into faith.



# the village of my childhood

Stefania Różewicz

IN THE TSAR'S DAY the village of Szyńkielew belonged to the *guberniya* of Kalisz, the *poviat* of Wieluń.

There are two manors: the local gentry's and the Governor-General's. The village itself is large. Although not as poor as other nearby villages, there is a great deal of poverty here. The roads are terrible. In the winter, if the ground has not frozen, clogs literally vanish into the mud, because a leg can't hang on to a clog while you're dragging yourself out of the mud. The clogs have wooden soles. Hardly anyone has proper shoes, they are a luxury. Those who do will only wear them for special occasions. There is no school, to reach church people have to walk nine kilometres.

I came to Szyńkielew when I was five. I really liked it tremendously. I did not understand how so much human poverty could hide behind the beauty of nature, even in a better-off village like this. When I was about ten I began to notice the life of the common people. From those times I best remember the year 1905. Folk from town came and told us the Tsar would soon be gone, that the people in Łódź had made an effigy and dressed it up like the Tsar. They paraded it around to mock him. Another day I heard that people had boiled a cook. And that happened in the army, so there was hope the Tsar would go and people wouldn't be taken away to Siberia any more.

The village was horribly neglected. The rulers made no effort at all to improve people's condition. The best proof is that one tiny school was supposed to suffice for several villages in the area. So children scarcely ever went to school, because in winter when there was so much snow it was impossible

for them to get through, and then in spring and autumn the parents couldn't allow children to waste their time, as they put it, because one child had to look after another. I saw it for myself when three- or four-year-old children had to feed toddlers and babies and keep them quiet while the mothers weren't home. The mortality rate among the children was high. The strongest survived, but as for the frail ones – there was no one to treat them, no nourishment for them.

I remember visiting some farming people once who were quite well off. The mother was in the field. There was a baby left at home lying in a cradle in bare straw. The straw might have been covered with some sort of cloth but the baby had kicked it away. It was a sorry sight, the baby had defecated and started eating the faeces. Hygiene was appalling. Children went to bed at night without washing. They were exhausted, because a child who was five or six already had to mind the geese. The children never got enough sleep. I often saw tiny infants dragged from their beds to mind the cows or geese at four or five in the morning, they would fall asleep on the edge of some field while the animals wandered off. My God, I was so sorry for the children whose cows or geese strayed, and the poor little cowherds were scared in case the cattle might cause damage. They chased them, tried to bring them in, and if they couldn't, they'd get a beating at home for failing to mind the livestock.

Children were undernourished. Very often there was no bread. Then the mother would hurriedly make a pie from potato scraps and some flour and bake it on the stove or the cinders. It was a great day when a child got a bit of a bun or a sweet. The sweet would be the worst kind. The colouring was made from starch, with saccharin not sugar.

I had a chance to observe the dreadful existence of the smallholders. Those who never saw it first-hand wouldn't believe it. A smallholder had three or four acres of land, sometimes just sandy soil (and many only had two or three

acres), and lots of children. Sometimes there was an old granny too on what they called a 'life tenancy.' I remember I went into one of their rooms once; there were no floorboards, just compacted clay – one space housing a family and the rabbits they reared for meat at Christmas. The window was tiny, nailed up so you couldn't open it. The better-off had different windows, with four panes. All the roofs were straw.

Smallholders couldn't afford to keep a work horse, so they had to labour for the better-off who later helped them transport their manure in return, sometimes corn. The rich always brought in their own harvest first, while the poor man's grain got drenched. In the autumn the rich farmers would already be ploughing and sowing while the poor man – who had to work to pay off his debts – still had his rye in the field. When the first frost came I often saw smallholders carrying their harvest on their backs into some dilapidated shed. And this was usually the women, because their men would have gone away to work in Germany, to earn some extra money and buy shoes or clothes. Even the better-off farmers had to send their children to Germany to work. Nobody could clothe themselves from what farming earned.

The homes were very poorly furnished. Usually there was not much more than a box, they called it a chest, containing clothes and linen. The linen was very modest; shirts had three sections: it was thick cloth at the bottom like a sack, higher up the cotton was thinner, and at the very top the collar was made from fine cotton bought in a shop. As for the bed covers, underneath it was homespun cloth, on top it was patchwork squares.

There were no mattresses. You could say people lay in bare straw, usually several slept in one bed. There might be sheets thrown over the straw, but they would kick them off in their sleep. Better-off people had tables, but they usually ate on benches. They put small stools beside the bench, that's how



*Mum after graduating from the housekeeping course  
at the Kozarski manor house in Konopnica*

they sat for a meal. They ate from quite large bowls, so for a family of six or five the housewife would lay out two bowls of food.

There were hardly any dishes in the kitchen, perhaps two or three iron pots which they called *żeleźniaki*. Some housewives had a few plates but kept them in the cupboard for show. I never saw a proper washing bowl. There was a big wooden tub where they did the washing up and they used the same tub for watering cows. With my own eyes I saw little children get up in the morning and pee in it too. Some people washed themselves by sucking up water and spitting onto their hands. Still others washed themselves in a *szkopek*. That was for milking cows. Everybody ate together from one or two clay bowls.

Normally food in the village was equally poor. Breakfast usually meant potatoes and *polewka*, which was a kind of sauce. It could be made several ways. Poor people thickened water with rye flour, sour milk, richer people used fresh milk, and buttermilk instead of water. In the countryside potatoes were usually cooked in their skins. Dinner probably meant potatoes, cabbage and dumplings, of which there were a variety. Sometimes they had *zacierka*, small dumplings with milk, or bigger ones called *bociany* (storks), with buttermilk. The cabbage was pickled whole and the loose leaves were chopped and shredded and mixed with the cabbage heads. Poor households enriched the cabbage with some oil or cooked beans. Millet or pearl barley were common too. Those were usually cooked in the days before the harvest when food was scarce. They hardly ever ate meat. If a cow broke her leg or there was some other accident the peasants would share the meat among themselves, but generally a butcher would come and buy it for a pittance. When the rye yielded a good harvest, those were the happy times. They would bake white bread for every Sunday. But when the crop was bad the women could only grind rye in the quern to make soups and sauces, borscht

and other *polewki*. They hardly ever ate sugar and only bought it for religious festivals or for the sick.

As for vegetables, in the old days people didn't grow them. I never saw red carrots, only the white sort they used for animal fodder. There were no vegetables in the village, I clearly recall that, because women always came to us for green parsley as medicine for their new babies. If a baby couldn't pass urine, they made a parsley infusion as a diuretic and gave it to the baby to drink. Fruit was no better. It was mostly wild pears. They grew between the fields, and so thickly that it looked like a wood from a distance. This wild fruit was abundant but I'm sure the pears couldn't provide many vitamins because they were so very hard. There were two orchards in the village with good quality fruit. They belonged to the manor house and were leased out to some Jews; the fruit didn't benefit the village children. But yes, I do remember a few small gardens owned by rich farmers too.

The village was large, and wealthy compared to other hamlets, but there was literally not one single family who could afford to send their child – not even a gifted one – off to school in the town. I knew a few boys who had the potential, but they had to go to Germany and work. Against all the odds, there were two in my generation who wanted to make something of themselves as people used to say, and so one of them – Andrzej Kałużny – went back and forth to Germany to save up for his education, or for clothes. Then he had to run nine kilometres to the parish priest, who was preparing him for school – Year Three or Four, I can't remember. Anyway he went to a seminary from which he returned utterly exhausted. People told me that at his *prymicja*, the first Mass, he had to be helped to the altar, he wasn't strong enough to celebrate Mass by himself any more. Soon afterwards he died.

The other boy was Antoni Walasik. He must have been very gifted, he had so many talents. More than once I saw him

carving religious figures out of pine bark, really well. He was self-taught. His parents wouldn't even give him the money to buy a slate pencil and tablet, but he truly wanted to write so he did it with charcoal or sticks in the ground, and when he got older he used to trek to Germany to study writing. He wrote letters home for his fellow workers in Germany. Very few villagers could write. Almost everyone was illiterate. I must say more about Walasik because then he started to study by himself. After some years he stopped going to Germany, and the court secretary Mr Świerszczak took him in as a helper, to give him some experience. And although he was self-taught he managed very well. His handwriting was beautiful. He was so hard working. After this apprenticeship he went to Kalisz as a clerk.

I am describing these two people whom I knew to help readers realise what living conditions were like for folk who really had so much to offer to the culture and the community. Today, when I see hundreds of thousands of young people from rural areas gaining an education, I feel so happy that things have gone this way and aren't as they used to be in those tragic times for education, when I was young. I cannot stop thinking about my village where I grew up, about how it was then and how it is now. If someone in the village could write, even badly, then this scholar would gather the children in the winter and teach them too. He would get a few pennies or something in kind. Yet whatever the children learned in the winter, they would forget in the summer. Because in the summer this teacher went to work in the fields, and the children minded geese and cows.

To tell the truth, people didn't want schools. Because there was no education, ninety per cent would say their granddad or their great-granddad didn't know how to write, and he managed to survive without it – even if a few farmers wanted their children in a school, and even if they tried to persuade the

authorities to start a school in the village. Sometimes Father would say, 'Your children badly need a school.' They would answer jokingly, 'He who knows how to write well, knows the right road to Hell.'

The village was deeply religious. Even the priest was treated like a saint. The poorest folk, who often denied themselves a piece of bread, found the rouble for the collection plate. Though the church was nine kilometres from the village, people went there every Sunday. In winter it was often bitterly cold, even so folk rose at four in the morning to go to Advent Mass. They strictly observed fasting. Lent before Easter and Advent before Christmas. Even so, if someone wanted to eat a slice of meat on a Sunday in Lent, they would go to the priest and ask for a dispensation. A dispensation cost a rouble. Throughout Lent, people virtually lived on *kapušnica*, which was cabbage soup cooked with dried mushrooms or added oil. And there was fasting on the so-called 'cross days' (when there were penitential processions) and before every festival of the Virgin Mary. People belonged to all kinds of religious societies such as the 'Rosary Brotherhood'. The Rosary Brotherhood guaranteed that when you died, even if nobody paid, there would still be a mass and lots of candles at your funeral. There were many such societies, like the 'Circle for the Living Rosary', which meant that the women who were members gathered each Sunday at a different woman's place to say the Rosary. They said it was Living because they kept reciting it.

A baby was christened by two weeks at the latest. They were rightly afraid of the baby dying before it happened, because he or she would be condemned for eternity 'like a Jew' or some other un-christened person. The mother also had to go to church after childbirth, to be purified. Until then such a woman was not allowed to fetch any water because they said worms would appear in it. People went to confession quite often, and at Easter everybody had to undergo a special



confession supervised by the parish priest. So someone from every house went to the parish office and bought a card for every member of the household, and then each person went to the confession with those cards. After confession they gave their card to the organist, and he would cross out the name in a book which included a list of all the people, this was compiled before Easter. And so the parish priest knew how many infidels he had. In my days few couples lived out of wedlock. Of course there were always a few cases in a parish.

I was talking about the Easter confession, I must also describe how Easter was celebrated out in the country. All Holy Week was rather solemn and sad. The parents went to Lent service and they told stories about Jews tormenting Jesus Christ, the earth splitting and thunderbolts crashing down. During the storytelling people took their hats off to show greater respect. Then the traditional spring-cleaning took place: whitewashing homes, washing the linen. Next came the baking of bread, richer people baked pies. You had to prepare your best Easter food to be blessed. On Holy Saturday the priest arrived to give the blessing. Women and children dressed up in Sunday clothes brought their Easter food to the front of the chapel. They sat in rows on the ground, which was sprinkled with yellow sand. The Easter food consisted of bread, cheese and *szperka*. *Szperka* is meat cooked with pork fat seasoned with bilberries. Vinegar and horseradish were essential. Vinegar because the Jews gave it to Jesus to drink. Nearly every adult went to the Resurrection Mass.

Holy Sunday was celebrated grandly. Easter Monday was all about *šmingus* – the traditional custom of drenching people with water. The farmboys drenched girls with hand pumps, and some girls ended up swimming in a ditch. Young men also went round the village with a *gaik*. This was a small Christmas tree decorated with various dollies and cockerels. While doing this they were singing, ‘We’ve got the *gaik*, there’s a chicken with

an egg,' and the housewives would bring out a treat – a *dyngus* – which included eggs and a bit of pie or bread.

Christmas was a huge festival. People observed it reverently. There were very many dishes at Christmas Eve supper. You had to grind hemp grain and boil it with milk. That was Christmas Eve soup. There were honey dumplings, dried snow pears and many other treats. Christmas Eve supper consisted of seven, eleven or thirteen dishes. After sharing the holy wafer, the man of the house took a pink wafer (the church organist baked it specially) and he was allowed to give it to the cattle, because the peasants used to say, 'You must give some to the cattle, 'cos Lord Jesus come into this world among the cattle.' The villagers also said, 'The night Baby Jesus was born, the cattle spoke in the human language and even now the cattle talk on Christmas Eve.'

In a corner of the room they placed a sheaf of straw, and the whole chamber was lined with straw to commemorate the fact that Baby Jesus was born in a stable. On the Second Day of Christmas, named after St Stephen, the farmers swapped places with their farmhands and shepherds, hence the saying 'On St Stephen's Day every servant's a master.'

Then the carnival began. If a man had his eye on a girl, he would collect some vodka, choose a neighbour to be his *starost*, his wedding planner, and go matchmaking. If they struck a deal – that is, if the girl's parents offered as much land as the chap wanted (and if he already had land, he would accept money or cows) plus some extra arrangements on the side – they would all drink the vodka and have the banns published. If there was no deal, then on the very same night this chap and his *starost* would go round other girls until somebody said yes. Then they went to the parish priest. They asked him to read the banns. The priest would test to see if they knew their prayers. Very often the couple did not know their prayers. If so, the priest wouldn't read the banns until they had learned their prayers.

In fact the priest told them off: 'You know how to do certain other things, only you can't say your prayers.' The priest was right. The wedding took place after the property matters had been completed, and the church business.

The wedding was given by the parents on both sides. Usually the groom bought the vodka, paid for the music, paid the priest, and bought shoes for the bride. The bride would buy fabric for his wedding shirt, which she would sew herself. The wedding lasted several days. The outfits were colourful. The groom's best men spent the whole previous night going round and inviting guests. Almost everyone went. The best men were rather festively dressed. They all tossed scarves over their shoulders and wore caps decorated with flowers they'd bought, usually red flowers. They made themselves walking sticks, though I couldn't say which type of wood. I think it must have been willow because the sticks were stripped of bark. Later they carved the sticks with a knife and dyed them different colours. Every best man had to have a stick. The bridesmaids had coloured garlands of flowers on their heads, with long ribbons at the back reaching to the ground. It all looked pretty. The bride had a different headdress or a very flimsy veil. Only a virgin could wear a veil with a garland of mint. If the priest discovered the bride was pregnant or even had a child, he would rip the garland off her head in the church, because she was not a virgin and was unfit to marry in a garland. It was a warning to the rest to guard their maidenheads well, and it was shameful.

Sometimes, if the family was wealthier, as many as twenty carts went to the wedding. The horses wore flowery plumage. Before they set out, the young couple would thank their parents for their upbringing. There would be somebody who could read, so he would read about the state of wedlock, about Original Sin, about Adam and Eve as the first parents whom God Himself joined together at the beginning of the world. The

couple would kneel at their parents' feet before leaving to ask for a blessing. They would set off for the wedding accompanied by the singing of the bridesmaids and the groom's men – who might also shoot off salutes. They played mournful music on the way to the wedding. Usually the bride cried, bidding her parents farewell. She also said farewell to her doorstep, as follows:

farewell my footpath,  
farewell my doorstep,  
here my feet learned their steps,  
alas no more, etc.

After the ceremony the entire wedding party went to the inn. Everyone drank and danced. When they'd had enough of a good time and were all drunk, they raced each other to the wedding house. On the one hand this journey was extremely jolly, with cheerful music, on the other hand the race often ended with the carts upside down. When she returned from the ceremony, the bride was led into the wedding house to the accompaniment of wedding songs. What followed was the bridal dinner and the *oczepowiny* – a ceremony where the groom had to take the garland off the bride's head. The bridesmaids would have done a supernatural job of attaching it earlier so that removing it was like cutting the Gordian knot. While this went on, everybody sang and drank vodka. The bridesmaids sang wistful songs about losing your virginity, and the *starost's* wife circulated with vodka and a sieve. She collected money in that for a new bonnet for the bride and sang, 'Give her money for some pearls, so she can have pretty girls.' The *starost* sang in response, 'Give her money for amber toys, so she can have pretty boys, give her money for the sieve, she'll have all she needs to live.' Through it all the bride sat on the kneading trough. When the groom finally got her garland

off, the *starost's* wife put the new bonnet on the bride's head. The bride took it off again, she placed it on her lap, because other housewives were also giving her bonnets, including her mother and mother-in-law. If she were wealthy she might collect twenty or so bonnets and perhaps a hundred roubles. The money set the couple up. The bonnets in our area were very pretty. Large, decorated with many colourful ribbons. Women wore beautiful silk scarves on top of the bonnet. On the second day the wedding party moved to the groom's parents, and on the third day they celebrated at the *starosts'*. Then the guests chipped in together. The men chipped in for the vodka, the women brought cheese, butter, eggs, sausage or even a freshly killed rabbit, and they resumed the eating, drinking, dancing, singing and playing all the way through until Sunday. Because weddings were usually on Tuesdays. On Sunday the bride would go to church for a blessing. The priest blessed the bride as a future mother.

Rich farmers often invited priests and the county clerk. The best guests were served the best food. The dishes for the wedding party included sour-cooked pork, boiled dumplings, cabbage with peas, buckwheat, bread and a very deep pie.

Later the women would often moan about the wedding house. They might tell tales about how the hosts let their own people into the room before the feast, to gobble all the best titbits: 'I seen with my own eyes, out they come, fat dripping down their chins. While they was dancing around I had to go home to find something to eat, that's why I only put half a rouble in for the bonnet.' Or, 'You must have seen it, the candle on the altar was flickering, the whole time! Oy, that man's going to beat her. And she could've turned him down, she's still young, some bachelor could've had her, don't she know how he battered his dead wife?' etc.

In the country All Saints' Day is also observed with great reverence. As early as two weeks before All Saints' Day, people

give money for what they call *wypominki*. These are prayers for the Souls of the Deceased. For several weeks, the priest and others pray for these Souls after the sermon. The priest takes some money for every Soul. People dressed the graves with all kinds of twigs, sprinkled sand over them, or made wreaths from tissue paper – red and other bright colours.

Then when the day came there was an evening procession, and after they returned nobody went outside. Not even to their next-door neighbours or into their own yard. They used to say, ‘All Saints’ Day belongs to the dead folk so we mustn’t disturb them.’ Once I asked why. A woman we knew explained that the Souls will appear to nosey people. She told me how a certain peasant thought he was clever and went out to the mill that night, ‘And when he got there all of a sudden the wind blows and howls, so miserably this bloke feels the shivers running up and down his spine from the terror. He looks, and all his grain is in the dirt under his cart, there’s no holes in the sacks, they’re all tied up, but there’s nothing left inside ’em. Terror seizes him, he wants to fly, but the horses stand like stones and won’t budge, so he has to run away all by himself. This is a warning, you see, you must spend that night praying for the Souls – not meddling with ’em.’ I said to the woman, ‘Perhaps the Souls don’t haunt us at all, but people are scared because of the stories,’ but the woman replied, ‘Miss, it’s all true whatever you think. There was another man ventured out on All Souls’ Night, and all of a sudden his horses froze. Stuck there. They feel heavy, they can’t move. He has a good look, feels about in the dark – and he finds something lying in the cart, some thing, hairy and huge. He was in such a fright, covered in sweat, he couldn’t hardly reach home. After that he got sick. It seems he never spoke a word for two days except when they asked him, what’s happened to the horses? He tells ’em, “I don’t know, it could be some Souls who was out walking for a penance got tired and took ’em. Never mind though,” says the peasant, “Shame about the horses, but

let it be a warning to you all: don't mess with spirits." After that he spent his whole life only praying, he wouldn't go out, and I still feel the shivers going up and down my spine as I think of it.'

On another occasion a peasant told me that everything people say about the Souls is true. 'Because one big-head said he'd only believe things if he saw 'em with his own eyes. So he took a ladder, put it up against the church window, and he tries to peek in – because they said the last parish priest, who was dead, used to come back to celebrate the Mass with all the parish Souls, like a shepherd with his sheep. Now, whenever this peasant steps on a rung of the ladder, it snaps. But somehow he got up to the window. And when he peered in and saw what was going on – all the Souls are kneeling, and there's the priest celebrating just like he was alive – he went numb from fear.'

Anyway, the common people were terribly superstitious when I was young. They used to say, if a mother dies leaving orphans behind, she always comes back after death and breastfeeds the youngest in the night. I say, 'But surely the dead don't have breast milk,' but as a woman explained to me, an old granny saw it with her own eyes because her daughter used to come back at night, kneel beside the cradle, and feed her baby. And the granny claimed there was just a sort of swoosh when she went back to Heaven, the door didn't even open. I loved listening to the people in the village telling me tales about the ghosts and other times. It never crossed my mind that one day I would be talking to you about the dreadful ignorance people lived in.

The priest lived in the manor house with the gentry while the common people were left totally to themselves. They had a strong faith in magic. They explained that if a master shepherd wants to, he can 'do it' to anyone. 'Do it' means 'put you under a spell'. Evidently this happened in Radoszewice. The squire dismissed his master shepherd, and he put a spell on him in revenge. 'The spell was such that he couldn't pass a stool, except

inside his trousers. So this squire couldn't ever go out amongst people, couldn't go nowhere, 'cos whenever he tried he straight away soiled his underwear and had to stay home. They say his butlers didn't like working for him.' Such was the power of the master shepherd. 'More 'n once, if a neighbour had a grudge against another neighbour he'd go to the master shepherd and pay him to cast a spell. He could send lumbago, or a fever as won't go away.' A master shepherd apparently drew his power from the fact that at some point during the full moon he would dig up a dead Jew from the Jewish cemetery and bury him in the sheepfold under the threshold. A sacked shepherd could also make the sheep disobey the new man. 'They'd flock up close together and, do what you will, they would not move or a disease'd strike 'em all dead.'

The women believed in black magic. If a woman came for milk after sunset, she never got it or if she did you had to sprinkle salt, because otherwise your cow would go dry. If two neighbours had an argument, they instantly started shouting at each other 'you witch': 'You come to get milk after sunset, don't you? You bitch, d'you think people don't know your mother was a witch too? You think no one saw her churning butter at night, stark naked?' Or sometimes there were women who, if they merely looked at something, then – *zmykało*. I think *zmykało* meant it was instantly ruined.

People also believed in exorcism. Apparently the priest in Brzyków had the power to expel the Devil. An old woman told me she was just back from his church, where he had been casting the Devil out. 'They brought this possessed woman to the church, but soon as the Devil saw they was going to drive him out, he wouldn't let her near it. He roared, he threw himself around inside the woman, there's foam spewing from her gob. Then the priest blessed her 'n prayed for her 'n the Devil started doing terrible things – but the priest he just carried on blessing. The woman starts to howl. And suddenly there's fire in her



mouth, and smoke, and that's when the Devil left.' People also believed that 'If a howling dog looks upwards, then it's certain there'll be a fire. If on the other hand he howls head down, death's coming. There's always omens before anyone dies. Either a picture will have fallen off the wall, or there'll be such a frightful bang as us all shivers, or there'll be some sort of spook.'

People in the village used witchcraft to treat various ailments. They had faith in healers. A healer usually treated people with incense. He ignited herbs on a lid and circled the sick person several times, saying prayers and burning the incense. It was supposed to be the best remedy for most illnesses. If someone had a swollen face or boils, though, the healer used other cures. He recommended passing stools onto a dirty rag. That was to disgust the illness and frighten the pain away. More often than not, it seems to me, it was the patient who went away after that treatment, to Heaven. If somebody had a headache, people had to lift the spell. Exceptionally, someone went to Osjaków and fetched a medic. The medic treated every condition. He even used cupping if someone had a bad stomach, and as for teeth, he extracted them using small pliers or he applied root treatment by numbing the teeth with *krauzet* or alum. Of course that was a temporary measure, the teeth rotted afterwards.

I remember that things improved, medically speaking, in Osjaków later on. This was when Father Michnikowski came to the parish; he was quite good at administering treatments. If you wanted to reach the nearest doctor you had to transport the patient, who was often gravely ill, twenty kilometres to Wieluń. Usually they died during the journey. People were afraid of doctors. They said, 'No need for a doctor,' cos "If you're sick to death, don't waste the doctor's breath", better fetch a priest. After a priest, things will turn for the better.' I was a witness when some parents brought their child to the priest for treatment. The child had croup and by the time they made

the journey from another parish, the child was dead. Such was medical care.

Pregnant women were dreadfully scared of the midwives. In the country the midwives in the villages usually had no medical knowledge. They often came to a patient straight from the field or some other dirty work with terribly filthy hands and clothes, and so many young women died afterwards from infection or bleeding. The midwife wasn't simply dirty, she was heartless too, insisting you must save the baby before the mother. Because if the baby died unchristened it would suffer eternal damnation, whereas the mother was christened already.

A priest told me he was summoned to a sick woman who would soon be with Lord Jesus. He was horrified by what he saw. The cottage was full of old women, the patient was barely alive, and the village midwife was heating a hooked poker in the fire. The priest asked, 'What are you going to do with that hook?' The midwife said, 'Baby won't come 'cos it's stuck in the girdle. So, Father, I'll catch its ear with this hook and drag it out. Then it won't stay inside mum when she's dead, humph, and we can christen it.' The priest called the man and told him to rush to Wieluń and fetch Doctor Domagalski, who managed to save the woman.

At the second birth I attended – I went with a woman I knew – it transpired that the husband had to fetch a gynaecologist. Of course the old women tried to shout us down, saying that if a doctor comes both the mother and the child are bound to die. But the doctor arrived and gave a general anaesthetic because he had to carry out a difficult procedure. The baby was massive of course and weighed fourteen pounds after they took out its brain, but the mother survived. The doctor told the women the patient must go on a diet, because after a serious operation there was a risk of post-partum fever. My friend was afraid the women would do things their own way the second the doctor left. She proved to be dead right when they tried to feed the patient

eggs fried solid. My friend was so alarmed, she tossed the eggs into a bucket of pigswill and took care of the patient by herself until she got better. Those women had strong constitutions. I remember a woman who gave birth while raking oats in the field, walked home by herself (I don't know how she did it, it was quite far away), and a few hours later gave birth to another baby. She even said she felt no need to lie down.

Newborn babies were usually reared with no special care. Not only was hygiene never mentioned, but tiny children had to get along without being looked after. People usually bathed babies in the same bowls where they kneaded dumplings and bread. The baby had very little clothing. Nappies were made from some ghastly scraps of rag. A tiny baby would be taken to the fields. They used to arrange three sticks there, so that sheets could be tied to them to create a kind of hammock, which the mothers put pillows in. You couldn't see the baby in this cradle. They were always sweating and overtired from being rocked, because another little child kept rocking the cradle.

The older children were unsupervised too. I did see mothers finding some time, usually on Sunday, to wash a child and clear off the insects. Village women, even the richer ones, were always overworked. They had to labour in the fields, tend the poultry, pigs and cows. Usually women worked in both field and farmyard, and so their children and their dwellings were in a miserable state. There was a lot of work even in winter – wool had to be carded by hand. They used special brushes with wire bristles. Then there was wool to be spun, linen. Plucking feathers was better, because girls from several homes would get together after supper for an evening and all work together. Of course that was more cheerful, together you could sing, joke, gossip. The hostess would always prepare some nice food. After the plucking, there was coffee and white bread and dancing.

Things were always tidier in winter, because daughters – usually unmarried women – came home from Germany. They

brought their mothers all kinds of German clothes, pots, bowls. It was when people began going to Germany that they started getting enamelware, better clothes. Because people in the villages usually wore homespun garments – long russet coats for the men, or black or dark blue. A russet coat was decorated with shiny buttons, trousers were tucked in the boots. Women wore bright woollen clothes and woollen aprons. Even their jackets were homespun. Round the neck they wore ruffs and layers of necklaces. Sometimes they used their aprons as headscarves. Children were poorly dressed. Boys up to the age of twelve and fifteen wore trousers sewn up to a bodice with sleeves; it looked very unattractive.

There were lots of paintings in their homes. There were tiny pictures under big pictures, as well as little pictures in-between big pictures. The walls were literally covered with devotional objects and coloured paper cut-outs. The table too was dressed with holy figurines and a cross. And there were bouquets of tissue paper flowers. In my days people didn't usually have chairs, there were benches. They used wooden ladles to draw water. Beds were covered with a high pile of bedding. Sometimes the pillows reached the ceiling. They stacked them on one side of the bed.

There was usually no flooring. After sweeping the ground, women sprinkled sand over it. They swept up a lot of dust. In the dwellings there were lots of flies. I was most cross when I saw how unhygienic the bread-baking was. Women would put loaves under their bedclothes so the dough would rise in the warmth. House-proud women put a clean sheet under the bread, but most just stuck the bread in bed in the morning, after chasing the children out of it. Cottages were whitewashed with lime. The ceiling wasn't whitewashed for a few years after they built it, but scrubbed with a wet broom. Outside, the cottage was whitewashed often. There were plenty of flowers in the windows, usually geraniums, but they didn't look very nice there because

people grew them in cracked pots. When the girls came back from Germany, homes were much tidier. They also learned knitting in Germany and made the family stockings and mittens.

I was very young when I lived in the village, so it's difficult for me to describe the peasant's attitude to the manor, or the peasant's psychology in general. He was distrustful, because the manor never lifted a finger to get closer to the village. The peasant disliked the manor because he had to work on the lord's estate for fifteen kopecks a day under the harsh hand of a steward. They said that when Adam Krasowski went to a ball, he wiped his bottom with thirty-five-rouble notes. The servants knew him well. They looked forward to it.

There was too little space in the village to build houses at a proper distance. They built them right beside each other or just a few metres apart. People stored firewood, branches, chopping-blocks and so forth in the gaps. One day a fire broke out. It was just before the harvest, people were in the church. The fire started in a cottage and they say the whole village went up in smoke. There were no fire brigades in the countryside. People had hand pumps which were useless, the fire spread so quickly. Over ninety houses burnt down in two hours. A great deal of livestock burnt – mainly pigs and horses because the cows were grazing in the fields. It was a hideous sight. Even things people managed to rescue from their homes were burnt in the fields. Some children and women burnt to death in the fire. There were no fire hoses to put it out, because peasants were taught to have poles ready with rags attached and to smother a fire with that. Some people ran round the flames holding pictures of St Agatha and poured St Agatha's salt into the fire to drive it from their homes.

The manor could make an agreement with a peasant for the land to be parcelled out. Most peasants said: 'We'd have to pay the bank, and the lord of the manor will grab the land back whenever he chooses, he'll always dig up some law or other.'

They thought they were being astute. There were a handful of wise peasants, though, especially one named Dobras. My father took him and another poor farmer, Rabokowski, to see the Governor-General's wife who lived in Odessa and they bought a few hundred acres of land from her. They paid for it through a bank. Other small farmers saw that those who took the risk were doing better, but they scratched their heads and still they said, 'They'll never make it, either the leaseholder or the government'll take it back.' They were so terribly distrustful. But Wojciech Dobras twirled his moustache, smiled wisely and a touch mockingly, and said: 'Neighbours, you can worry about it till they've took the lot away from me. Worry and eat dry bread. But me, while I wait, I'll spread my bread with butter 'n honey. Let's see who ends up best off.' Well, the land never was taken away. The next generation is farming it today.

Wojciech Dobras was enlightened although he couldn't write. He always wished there had been a school there. Since there wasn't, he asked my father to teach his children to read and write. The children were clever of course, and even though my father only spent an hour a day teaching them, they learned to read and write quickly. Meanwhile Dobras twirled his moustache, happy that his children would know more than the neighbours' children. Besides, he had a great deal of common sense. He had Jewish lodgers, so when Father Chrzanowski made house calls on his parishioners, he refused to pay a pastoral visit to Dobras' house because of those 'lice-ridden sheep'. Dobras' wife cried quietly, his children were sad because they got no holy pictures from the priest, but Dobras simply said, 'Wait till I drop a rouble in his collection plate, he won't bother to ask did this rouble come from a Jew's rent, he'll snap it up. And if they have a baby, I'll take it to the Governor-General himself to order the christening. I won't listen to nobody, there wouldn't be Jews in the world unless Jesus wanted.' Dobras was very fond of horses. They were

his great love. Honestly, no one else in Szykielew had such beautiful horses. One day thieves stole a pair from him. With all his peasant stubbornness he spent six months going round the markets, until he recognised them somewhere near Kraków and after a few court cases got them back. Even a dog in Dobras' house looked better than other dogs. The man wasn't a patriot; he didn't know about Polish history. He often told me how his father fought against his lord in the Parzymiechy uprising, where the gentry were defeated and sang: *It's a sin, it's a sin, Parzymiechy done us in!* His audience was very amused by that.

The peasants were very accepting of the times they lived in. I never heard anyone complaining that Poland was in bondage. They used to say about the Tsar: 'Our lord and master knocks spots off Mr Wilhelm.' Some had a portrait of the Tsar's family nailed up among the other pictures. But equally, those who travelled to Germany brought back portraits of Mr Wilhelm and his family, and put them up.

I often chatted with people on Sundays, when they came to have their correspondence with relatives in Germany written or read out to them. I tried to tell them that if we were not in bondage, we'd be much better off. Because as things are, who cares about the Poles? 'Let them suffer in poverty!' I could see they were not convinced, they quickly changed the subject. These were the things they liked to talk about amongst themselves: 'Why's the Tsar taking so long to give us the gentry's land?' 'Maybe we'd be better off doin' a deal with the manor, the ones who got the land from the Governor's wife are doin' all right.' Some took one view, others took another: 'Don't envy 'em. When it comes to it, they won't even keep their shirts.' And so they went on, smoking their *siekanka*, which was their name for the cheapest tobacco. On nights like that you could hear a lot about someone's twenty-five-year-long service in the Russian army. I'd see old soldiers still wearing the greatcoats in which they returned from the service. Everyone

listened to the old soldiers. They had seen the bigger world and its customs. They went to it young, and they came back old. Many forgot their mother tongue or married Russian women.

Very often on summer nights they took their animals to eat clover in the squire's field. Usually they went with their horses. Many a horse gorged itself and burst. At night the farmers watched their own flocks. They would tell stories about ghosts and plagues and wars. Everything they said, they knew from hearsay, because of course they couldn't read. Everything was passed along, mouth to mouth.

I also remember 'the Barracks'... That was the nickname for the poor homes on the manor farm. The roofs were full of holes, you could slide on the clay floors after it rained. Around the Barracks were cesspits. The children went dirty and hungry because their mothers had to labour on the estate. Sometimes I walked with my Mummy through the village and she would say, 'The masters ride in their carriages and give fine balls, they'd do better to found an orphanage for these children.' And I'm thinking, 'Perhaps it isn't as bad as Mummy says. When the mistress or the master walk through the village, I see old people and even children kiss their hands.' I ask Mummy, 'Why do they kiss them, if they are so bad?' Mummy says to me, 'They have to, because they're poor.'

*Stefania Różewicz*