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OUR HACK/NASZA SZKAPA

A SHORT STORY

BY

MARIA KONOPNICKA

TRANSLATED BY JOANNA DIANE CAYTAS

INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND RECEPTION OF MARIA KONOPNICKA BY DAMIAN MAKUCH

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MARIA KONOPNICKA IN SEARCH FOR HER OWN REFLECTION

(AN INTRODUCTION)

BY
DAMIAN MAKUCH

It is not easy to assemble the image of Maria Konopnicka. It has been broken down into fragments by her works, by incomplete analyses and by warped interpretations of her biography. It is a loose assimilation of facts glued together with ideological tape, which has consolidated for the reader into a stereotype for an amazingly long time. Hence, the question 'Who was Konopnicka?' requires quite some contemplation on who she truly was - but for whom? This Polish writer looked into many mirrors, searching for her own reflection throughout her life.

Finding the facts just by using these fleeting reflections is a tricky task. Maria Wasiłowska was born 1842 into a landowning family in the northeast of Poland. When she lost her mother at the age of 12, her strict and religious father took over her upbringing. Her home schooling was supplemented by a private girls' boarding school in Warsaw, while her autodidactic development continued even when she was a wife and a mother to her six children by Jarosław Konopnicki (whom she married in 1862). The events reconstructed through the author's own narrative are considerably more varied – they will have to fit into the various imaginary roles that the poet from time to time considered to be her own.

The first of these imagined roles explains the circumstances of her relatively late début as a writer. The future Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz's enthusiastic review of Konopnicka's poem *In the Mountains* resulted in such an awakening from her dull provincial life that she left her husband in 1876 and went to Warsaw with her children to pursue a literary career. Far from his home country, Sienkiewicz imagined Konopnicka as a

charming debutante singing patriotic and wistful songs. This life-hardened woman took this reflection as her own. From this time forward, she not only portrayed herself in her biographical statements as younger than she was, but also started to bear an uncanny resemblance to rural girls on countless portraits.

Konopnicka's poems struck a chord with the Positivists, a social and literary movement that had been awaiting since considerable time a standard bearer who would sing about the future glory of an era of work and progress. Her rapprochement with this developing cultural movement was assured by the "dramatic fragments" from one of the first anthologies she had written during the first ten years of her career, titled *From the Past,* where she described the conflict between Church and academics but also, as is widely recognized today, by some novels dealing mostly with problems of poverty (including, for example, *Smoke* and *Our Hack*). Praised for her maturity, rationality and outright "masculine" poetic style, Konopnicka became the "bard of positivism," which, on a symbolic level, celebrated her forty-year jubilee as a writer in 1902. It also had another effect: she received, as a "gift from the nation", a mansion in Żarnowiec. In this instance, the writer assumed the role placed upon her: she underwent a metamorphosis from talkative 'country girl' to mature matron, wapped peasant beads for dignified spectacles, and wistful folk pieces for an anachronistic form of romantic songs.

Both these personas influenced the established reception of Konopnicka's work. Moreover, the recognition of her work by a socialist environment and its vulgar didactic interpretation in the spirit of a Marxist history of literature during the era of the Peoples' Republic of Poland led to a situation where Konopnicka appeared stereotypically as the symbol of the provinces, "worn thoughts, monotonous forms, parochial ideas that the world has long since ceased to care about".[1]

[1]T. Budrewicz, cited in L. Magnone, *Maria Konopnicka. Mirrors and Symptoms*. Gdansk: Slowo / Terytoria Obraz, 2011, p.5.

The questioning of the reflections of the author of *Rota,* a song proposed for the national anthem after Poland gained independence following World War I, brought on a critical analysis of her thus-far overlooked works, along with an attempt by Lena Magnone to look at her private life in her monograph "*Maria Konopnicka, Mirrors and Symptoms."* Magnone notes that, in the patriarchal public discourse of the 19th century, there were only two roles a woman was allowed to assume: she could either be what men expected her to be (that is, the embodiment of Sienkiewicz's romantic vision) or try to become a "man" herself (that was, to fulfill the vision of the positivists). This strictly feminist dilemma coincided with a strategy characteristic for positivist projects that relied on supporting elements of the opposition with the ideology of the time. This resulted in the creation of a malignant symptom and a return to the status of a victim of repression.

In Konopnicka's case, her success at preaching with a "male" voice was in stark contrast to the complete fiasco of her relationship with her daughters: the youngest, Laura and the oldest Helena. The former, incredibly beautiful and intelligent, wanted to become an actress. Konopnicka worried about the effect this would have on her daughter's reputation. She attempted unsuccessfully to prevent her divorce from Stanisław Pytliński. She also unsuccessfully attempted to frustrate Laura's plans and did not shy away from using her own position to have the doors of leading theatres closed to her daughter - who nonetheless became a well-known actress. Her complete lack of understanding of Laura was particularly confusing in the context of her own separation from her husband and departure to Warsaw.

Her relations with Helena were even more dramatic. Her eldest daughter became pregnant by an unknown man. Her decline in social standing led to several thefts occurring in residences where she was taken in as a teacher. Diagnosed as a kleptomaniac and suffering from hysteria, she began a 'pilgrimage' around various clinics from which she ran away, returning each time to her mother. Trying to trigger any sort of response from Konopnicka, Helena did not even shy away from the threat of suicide. The scandals of the

daughter went hand in hand with a complete lack of understanding from the mother's side. Konopnicka tried to isolate herself from her daughter, throwing the responsibility for her fate on her failed husband. On the one hand, she tried to explain Helena's behaviour using her illness as an excuse; on the other, she thought that her daughter brought these attacks on herself, and that by destroying her own reputation she was being spiteful towards her mother. At one point, Helena disappeared from her mother's letters. From that moment, whenever Konopnicka mentioned her children, even those who had passed away, she no longer listed her ill daughter among them.

In *Letters to Sons and Daughters* (1888-1910) recently compiled by Lena Magnone[2] it is apparent that strained family relations are a consequence of constraints that the author imposed on herself. Konopnicka did not understand her daughters' insanity, eroticism, unsettling beauty or desire for self-realisation, in other words: their confident femininity. Konopnicka, having been brought up by her father, aligned herself with a masculine discourse of that era and used so called strategic mimicry, conforming to the order of patriarchal requirements. This could never succeed as "positivists, who turned to their fathers, reproached their mothers, because the latter were too feminine and accused them of denying their femininity."[3] Konopnicka's relationship with Laura and Helena became a metaphorical symptom of this denial.

From this perspective, the author's creativity takes on a completely different meaning. It turns out that amongst her literary achievements, there are no works in which traces of her personal experiences would not be noticeable. The modern feminine novella (a form that lends itself to experimentation) is the complete opposite of the anachronistic and masculine poetry promoted at her time. As Lena Magnone notices, the literary innovation of Konopnicka emerges from the development of the feminine act of communication.

[2] Maria Konopnicka. *Listy do synów i córek* [*Letters to Sons and Daughters*],edited and prefaced by Lena Magnone, Warsaw – Institute of Literary Studies at Polish Academy of Sciences; Żarnowiec – Maria Konopnicka Museum, Warsaw 2010.

[3] Lena Magnone, *Maria Konopnicka. Mirrors and Symptoms*, op.cit., s.173.

Accordingly, the emphatic writer used her voice to relate, rather than commit to writing, the fate of the rural female protagonist, as if confiding it to her female reader individually. The distance between transmitter and receiver is narrowed with the help of the poet's intimate confession that excludes paternalism or didactic ambitions characteristic of literature at the time. As a consequence, Konopnicka established a matrilineal relationship of communication in literature based on the principle of secret confessions - a relationship that she was regrettably unable to develop in her own life.

The theme of her novels fits in nicely with this mode of communication. Konopnicka dealt with relationships between mother and daughter (*Miss Florentyna*) and mother and son (*Mrs Urban, Smoke*). She attempted to describe female insanity (in her series *Behind Bars* and *Anusia*) and even stepped into the dark world of female eroticism (*Józefowa, Krysta*). The themes of motherhood and sexuality became entrenched in the work of this Polish writer who partly stepped into the role of becoming a hostage of mass imagination, trying to put the experiences of women into words, fascinating and unnerving at the same time.

In contrast to the glimmering triumph of realism – which deceived with its "truthfulness", but really masked the trauma caused by reality, trying to silence the unconscious – the language of the author of *Rota* sidestepped this problem. Although speaking means to enter into the paternal order of symbolism, the physical experience of the sexes prior to discourse shone through the words. Lena Magnone claims that this happens with the use of physical description and the use of rhythmic elements: "female literature of the era of positivism is an attempt to mask the reality of femininity – the trauma of breaking with one's mother. The return of the real existence, feminine and motherly, is manifested through singing, music and the text's rhythm."[4] Analysis of the verses of her poems shows that the rhythm, in particular, opens the realm for freedom and

[4] Ibid. p.282.

what is natural, submerged in the sensual side of language. She exposes the sensual side of language, allowing bodily pleasure unmediated by what is characteristic and conventional.

Konopnicka found opportunity for self- realization not only in her own work. When Warsaw was bustling with gossip about Helena, in 1890 Konopnicka decided to leave the city she had come to detest and set out on what would become a 20 year voyage across Europe. The experience of travel was refreshing for her. Public and familial mirrors cracked and the gaps revealed a space in which she could confront her own existence. Her friend Maria Dulębianka, 20 years her junior, a well-known painter and active feminist, accompanied her in her travels. It is Dulębianka, not Konopnicka's husband Jarosław, who accompanied the poet to various celebrations (e.g. in her literary jubilee in 1902). It appears that, with Dulębianka, Konopnicka finally found an alternative, non-oppressive form of human contact.

Travel allowed the poet a great break, but also led her to return to "what before had to be abandoned: femininity, insanity, beauty, the delight at the prospect of life."[5] An account of these experiences may be found in a small anthology of poems (*Italia*) and in a series of novels *On the Norman Coast*. The sensual excitement, throbbing with erotica, ceases to be threatening with its murky influence. The delight at nature, in particular at the sea as an elemental creation of women, intertwines in Konopnicka's poetry with a description of works of art. The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites described in her cycle *Madonna* take on simplicity and severity reminiscent of rustic provenance. Her new use of simple folk song based on parallelisms of form where ekphrasis is contained expresses characteristics of centuries-long search for authentic Polish style and is not the result of provincial language or inappropriate stylization.

Konopnicka tried to give whatever aspect of folklore a kind of universal status. These collections have been least analyzed to date, but they contain within them the seed

[5] Ibid. p.364.

and spirit of modernism. Konopnicka tackled the problem of religiousness, which at the start of her career aroused great controversy in conservative circles. She recognizes the experience of transcendence outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church as an institution, convinced of the continued evolution of dogmas, as she searched for God predominantly in nature. Her reflections on the spirit of modern religion were accompanied by an attempt to reevaluate the romantic tradition in such a way so that it became attractive to a person living at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Despite having created her own space, Konopnicka never stopped identifying with the reflection of her by the mirror of the nation. More and more often, she stepped into the anachronistic role of a bard. That which was individual, novel and feminine remains hidden, exposing a caricature of people's imagination that allowed her continued participation in the public sphere.

Maria Konopnicka died in 1910 in Lviv. Only 100 years after her death, Lena Magnone placed a mirror in front of her, allowing her fragmented image to merge into one unified picture.

(Translated from Polish by Inka Roszkowska and Cecylia Pytel, reviewed by Joanna Diane Caytas)

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MARIA KONOPNICKA

OUR HACK

It started with our old bed where the three of us slept.

That day, Father returned from the river, angry with something, and, sitting down on the bench, he rubbed his head. Mother asked him once and twice what was wrong, but only after the third time he answered that his job with the gravel was over and done with and that the hack would now only be carrying sand. Instantly, Felix poked me in the side, and Mother moaned softly.

Father was supposed to bring the doctor in the evening, but somehow he couldn't get around to do it. He paced, meditated, looked in the corners, until he stood before Mother and said, "Annie, what do the boys need a bed for? I sleep on the ground, so can they."

We looked at each other. Two golden sparks lit in the gray eyes of Felix. Right! What do we need a bed for? All we do is watch Pete so he doesn't fall off of it.

"Come on! Let's go!" Felix cried out, and, before she had time to answer, the three of us pulled the pallet onto the ground, and Felix started to somersault on it.

However, after pulling the pallet down it turned out that two planks were missing from the bed, and one side was coming apart completely. So the peddler,[6] whom Father told me to call, didn't even want to talk about that bed. He gathered money counted out in pennies into his moneybag, tied it up, and tucked it behind his gabardine. Father let down a dime, then two, then a whole zloty, but the old Jew got obstinate. Only when he was in the hallway he stuck his beard back to the room, offering half a ruble without seven grosz[7] if Father sold him also the pillow.

Father hesitated, looked at us, looked at Mother. Altogether it was supposed to be eleven zlotys.

"Well, boys?" he asked, "Will you go without a pillow for now, as long as Mother is ill?"

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6 Orig. *handel*, a Yiddish word for a peddler (all the footnotes are the translator's notes).

7 *Grosz* - 1/100 of a zloty, the smallest Polish currency unit. During the partition of Poland between Russia, Prussia and Austria, however, the occupying powers' currencies were legal tender in addition to Polish money.

"Whoa" Felix bellowed with a stifled voice, as he was just standing on his head, and, without changing his position, he threw the pillow to the center of the room. Pete caught it and threw it at Felix. Felix back at me again, until the peddler snatched it out of our hands, so we would not tear it.

"But without the pillowcase!" Mother spoke up with a weak voice.

Immediately, we ripped the pillow from under the arm of the peddler, and started to pull off the pillowcase.

However, after the pillowcase was taken off, it turned out that the pillow was torn in one corner, and that it was losing feathers. Yet again, the peddler didn't want to give eleven zlotys, only ten without fifteen grosz.

After bargaining, he agreed with Father for the whole two rubles, if he got also our quilt.

Father looked at Mother. She was so weak and pale that she looked like dead, supine with deeply sunken eyes.

"Annie?..." Father asked, whispering.

But Mother was overcome with cough, so she could not answer.

"Dear Father, we don't want no quilt!" yelled Felix, "We only fight for this quilt every night. Ask Vince!..."

"True, dear Father!" I confirmed eagerly. "Every night we have to fight, because it falls down…"

The peddler already rolled the quilt and stuck it under his arm. Running, we followed him triumphantly to the courtyard.

"You know?" Felix yelled to the boys playing tipcat[8] there, "The peddler bought our bed, quilt, and pillow! We will sleep on the ground now, on the pallet!..."

"Big deal!" pale Joe from the tailor at the left annex yelled back. "I sleep on the ground since two years, even without a pallet, since I stay with the boss."

[8] Tipcat - a game in which one player lightly bats a wooden peg and as it flies up strikes it again to drive it as far as possible while fielders try to recover it.

He impressed us. It appeared that such a sleeping arrangement was not our invention after all.

That day the doctor came to us, and I ran to the pharmacy as many as two times, because Mother was worse again. But when the evening came, we could barely finish eating potatoes, being in such a hurry to get onto the pallet that we had laid in the nook behind the stove. Felix even knelt down to his evening prayers with bread in his hand, and, looking back at the pallet now and again, in no time whispered through Our Father and Hail Mary, and I hadn't started my offering yet when he was already beating his chest till it resounded in the room, and, having just thrown off his jacket, he quickly laid down next to the stove. To tell the truth, I had the same idea of lying next to the stove, but I did not feel like starting in with Felix, so I punched his ear and lay down next to the wall, and we took Pete between us. At first I thought my head was falling off my neck, because I was used to a pillow, but then I used my elbow instead and it was all right.

"How will I cover you, little worms?" said Father, looking at us cuddle one another.

He looked around the room, took his navy coat off the hook, and threw it at us.

We cried out with joy and stuck our hands in the sleeves at once. Only Pete whined, unable to find his way into them, but we covered him with the cloak over his head, so it got quiet. Father, before he lay down, came to us once more.

"How's that? Are you warm, tots?" he asked.

"I sure am warm," I answered from the depths of the coat.

"And how I am!" yelled Felix. "Here, dear Father, see just how hot I am."

And he stuck out his long, skinny legs, to show how he didn't care about the cover.

In fact, pleasant warmth was coming onto us from the stove, because Father brought coke before the evening, started the fire, and brewed tea for Mother. And so we fell asleep immediately. But in the morning it suddenly got very chilly. So I pulled the coat in my direction. Felix at first shrunk in his sleep, but then he, too, started pulling the coat; and when I didn't let go, since he surely was warmer next to the stove than I was, he tried to sneak deeper under the coat.

With this sneaking he must have somehow squeezed Pete, because the little one suddenly started to whimper, and then to cry for good.

Mother groaned softly once and twice.

"Philip! Philip!" she said with a faint voice, "check what's with the boys, 'cause Pete cries for something…"

But Father slept.

"Boys!" Mother spoke up again, "Why is Pete crying like that?"

"It's Felix, dear Mom!" I answered.

"Not true, dear Mom, it's Vince!" he immediately denied with a sleepy voice.

Mother groaned softer yet, and, when he wouldn't stop crying, she dragged herself out of bed, took Pete in her arms, and brought him to her bedding. We had more room at once, so Felix poked me in the side, I poked him, and, turning away from each other, we slept wonderfully till the very morning.

A few days later the peddler came again. Nobody had called him, but he came just like that, out of politeness, as he said, to ask if Mother was feeling better. At once he started to walk around the room, to look at the wardrobe, at stools. But Father was somewhat moody and didn't want to talk to him much.

The next day the peddler came again. That day we had potatoes with salt only for lunch, because the lard had run out; somehow, the bread was gone, too, and Pete went to the nursery without breakfast. Father told me to prepare the bag for coals. Felix poked me in the side, meaning that we would be warm now, because the wind whistled terribly in the room; and we laughed out at once. I stood for a while, but Father seemed to have forgotten about the coals, because, sitting on Mother's bed, he became pensive and picked at his moustache. I cleared my throat once – he didn't even look in my direction; I cleared my throat again – he looked, but as if he didn't see me; and that was when the peddler entered and started bargaining for the wardrobe.

Fidgeting, I waited a little longer, but I was in a terrible hurry, because the water by the pump was frozen and Felix rushed to skate. I risked it then and cleared my throat for the third time. How did Father turn around, how did he smack the table with his fist! I jumped to the hallway with all my speed, almost falling on the threshold, and the peddler left also, without wasting time, and motioned for the little Jew from across the street. In the meantime, Father called me, even though his hands were still shaking for some reason, counted out sixteen grosz, and told me to run and fetch coals.

When I came back, the peddler and the little Jew from across the street were carrying out the wardrobe. Father stood by the door to prevent too much frost from coming in; Mother turned her head to the wall and groaned softly.

Removal of the wardrobe from the corner where it had stood for as long as I could remember uncovered new views for us. So we squatted among the rubbish accumulated there, and the search began. Felix found a tin button, which he immediately sewed to his sleeve, and with a stick from a crook I dug out a big, rusty needle and a ladybug with crunched legs and a dented wing. We started to blow on it at once, but it was dead.

We shouted with joy at each of these discoveries, and Father could not get us to eat the grits that he cooked for us for lunch, and which only Mother didn't want to eat. Finally we had rummaged through everything, and, having convinced ourselves that there were no more treasures in the corner, we swept the rest of the garbage into the hallway.

Only now I noticed that, in the spot where the wardrobe had stood, a piece of wall seemed whiter than the rest of the room; I shared this news with Felix, and, since Mother also looked at that corner with sad eyes, Father got up from his grits, found two nails in the crate, and, having hammered them into this lighter piece of wall, hung on them Mother's brown dress for holidays and the other, blue one, for everyday; he covered them beautifully with a scarf, stretched out at the sides. It looked very good, and Felix and Pete immediately started to play hide and seek there.

Mother somehow got worse those days. The doctor told her to eat good broth and fresh meat, and although she shed tears about such a waste and forbade it to Father as much as she could, I still ran to the butcher daily for about a week, sometimes buying as much as half a pound.

And the peddler got so used to us that, whether somebody called him or not, he stopped by our door at least once every day. Even Rascal, the concierge's dog, didn't bark at him anymore. After the wardrobe, the peddler bought from us four walnut stained chairs that we had used for sitting down for dinner. We had great fun with those chairs because the peddler could not take more than two by himself, and the other two we carried ourselves as far as to Ordynackie.[9]

We paraded with those chairs on our heads in the very middle of the street, and Felix shouted so much: "To the side! To the side!" that even cabs were stopping. We left the peddler far behind us, although the old Jew rushed behind us, yelling that we were robbers, schwarzyuras and other such Jewish name-calling. And on Ordynackie, how did we start rattling the chairs! People came running, thinking those were tricks, until our peddler caught up with us, and, grabbing his beard at such a gathering by the stools, gave us three grosz just so we would go away.

[9] Ordynackie Przedmiescie – a street in Warsaw, Poland.

We liked this trip so much that we kept asking what to carry out.

Felix in particular always had new ideas. As soon as he was back from the nursery, he would fold his hands on his back, pace the room, and look in every corner like a tax assessor.

“Dear Father, and perhaps the iron pot? How about the washtub or the clock?

“Off you go!” snorted Father, who was now almost always angry and sad for some reason.

“Felix! What are you saying?” Mother said weakly. “It seems you would sell your own soul before long?”

Pete and I started to protest mightily, too.

“The pot!... What else now!... And how will we cook grits, or even potatoes?”

“Or the clock!...” added outraged Pete. “And how will you know without a clock when you are hungry, or sleepy?”

“Big deal!...” Felix shouted with the air of a complete libertine, “If it were for anything else, but for that! And you - whether the clock shows or does not show, you would always eat.”

“And you fetch rolls for the shop keeper, so she’ll give you headcheese.”[10]

“No I don’t!” retorted Felix with a blush.

“Yes, you do!”

“No I don’t!”

“Yes you do! I’ve seen myself how you ate that headcheese...”

“Me, headcheese? By the love of God, I didn’t eat it!”

Here he banged his chest with his fist till the echo resounded

“Blow, then!...”

[10] Headcheese - a jellied loaf or sausage made from edible parts of the head, feet, and sometimes the tongue and heart especially of a pig.

Felix focused and blew till vapor came out. He got out of this trial triumphantly. Nothing indicated the consumption of headcheese, and from the depths of his sunken belly came only a huge emptiness.

However, the outvoted Felix didn't lose his confidence. One day, making a round of the room and looking at the walls, he suddenly exclaimed:

"And the saucepan, dear Father! And the mortar! And the iron!..."

We got terrified hearing that. The saucepan, the mortar, and the iron – those were almost family jewels. Standing on the shelf across from the door, they shone brilliantly, almost golden. The middle spot was taken by the saucepan. As long as I can remember I never saw anything cooked in this saucepan. It would be simply a desecration. However, every Saturday Mother cleaned it with a brick or with ashes, and shining like that it stood, with the handle protruding towards the room, flashing in the eyes when one was entering the crib. Next to it stood the mortar with the pestle on the one side, and the iron on the other. The mortar was a contemporary of mine. Father bought it when I came into the world, to make Mother happy and to show her a good heart for the son. None of my contemporaries in the yard, nay, in the whole street did I respect as much as I respected this mortar. Mother took it down only once a year, on Good Friday, to grind cinnamon for the Easter pie. That was when one would usually recount the story in which the mortar and I were the protagonists. Actually, the only difference between us was that I was brought by the stork for free while the mortar had to be paid for. No wonder, then, that I considered the existence of the mortar to be more important than my own, especially looking at the respect that it always commanded, whilst my own fate varied, both then and afterwards...

The iron also descended extremely rarely from the heights of the shelf to the level of our daily life. Mother used it only to iron Father's Sunday half-shirts and her tulle bonnets; the rest of the laundry went into linen press. Once Mother even had a spat about the iron with the concierge's wife who wanted to borrow it from us.

"Dear lady!" Mother told her with a very firm voice. "Such an apparatus is not for rent, not for people's hands!... It costs!... It is a once in a lifetime purchase!..."

We all remembered well how the concierge had slammed the door, how she let her tongue wag in the hallway, how Mother's hands trembled with anger and outrage when she was slicing bread for our breakfast a while later. From that moment on, the iron gained a huge importance in my understanding. I even counted it among those things that are for life, such as baptism, for example, and confirmation, and the navy coat, about which Father also used to say that it was for life. And now, look at that, Felix talked about the iron as if it were a ladle, or an old broom.

I looked at Father; I was sure Felix would get a reprimand. But Father's eyes were glued to the ground, and he was picking his moustache. Good thing that at least Mother slept at the moment.

That day I didn't run for meat for Mother. Father only let me buy bones for three grosz and he cooked barley soup with them.

The next day he came chilled, and, rubbing his stiff hands, he called from the doorway, "Be merry, Annie! The Vistula[11] will break the ice any day now, because the wind turned west."

But Mother, having looked at Father, clapped her hands and even sat down in her bed. "Philip!" she screamed, "and the sheepskin?"

Only now did I see that Father came back without his sheepskin.

But I didn't have much time to look around, because Father grabbed Pete's hands and gave him a big twist around. Then he laughed out loud, let Pete go and, sitting down on Mother's bed, he laughed, till tears ran down his blackened face. He dried them quickly with the sleeve of an old jacket.

"So, Annie? How are you doing?" he asked.

But Mother, having fallen back on the pillows, lay like dead.

"Philip!" she finally whispered with reproach. "What'd you… You sold the sheepskin?..."

"Sheepskin! Sheepskin!" repeated Father. "So what, the sheepskin?... Big deal, a sheepskin! I carried enough of that burden for so long. And heavy it was, darn, like the conscience of a grain miller… A man feels lighter already to have gotten rid of it!"

And when Mother moaned quietly, he stroked her hair with his hand and added, "You are one crooked tree, Annie, to groan about any trifle… There was a sheepskin, there isn't one, that's the whole story! So what? Will the sheepskin feed me, will it pay my rent, or what? The spring is coming, the river will break ice any moment now, and I will be parading in sheepskins… Wait a little, and even the jacket will be too hot, when the job opens…

That day, the doctor visited us again, and I ran to the pharmacy again.

[11] Vistula – one of the main rivers in Poland passing through Warsaw.

"Cold here," said the doctor upon leaving, "and one can feel the humidity. One would need to heat better…"

And he shivered, wrapping himself in his short fur. Father listened with bowed head. That whole day Father was very merry. But there had to be something with him, because, whenever Mother didn't look at him, his face changed, he bowed his head, and his eyes from gray turned almost black, such grief he had in them.

A whole half a pood[12] of coke we bought in the shop in the afternoon, and the fire was such that the stove roared. Father pushed the bench to our pallet and sat on it, Mother turned to look at the fire as well, and we all warmed ourselves up beautifully!

Another two weeks passed. Father didn't have much income, and also here at home there was enough work: wash the laundry, cook a meal, although there wasn't always daily cooking anyway; always if not one thing, then the other, and we were good for errands at most… Mother was neither better, nor worse; she just dried out terribly and her face paled like a scarf; heavy coughs also came upon her more and more often, especially at dawn.

The neighbors sometimes stopped by our room, wondering about Mother looking so emaciated.

"Let Lord Jesus at last show either this, or that way!" the nail saleswoman would say to Father.

"Phooey!" Father spitted. "What kind of things are you talking here? What is it, am I impatient, or what? Did we vow only in health, and not in sickness? Didn't she lose her health with nobody else but me and my children?..."

That ended it.

And the freeze stayed on. Even though the wind had turned west, there was such a cold in the room that you could see the vapor. And when it eased up a little towards the evening, then again the snow would sweep in so badly that you could not see the world. Pete didn't even go to the nursery, only sat behind the stove, or in the legs of Mother's bed, such a delicate imp! And Felix and I made snowballs and threw them at each other to warm up.

One day there was somehow no fire in the stove. Father covered Mother up with a blanket, and sent me to a neighbor for a piece of sugar for the herbs. But the neighbor didn't have any. Father then opened the suitcase to see whether he could shake out a crumble from somewhere, because Mother coughed so badly that it ached in the chest. At once the three

[12] Pood - a Russian unit of weight equal to about 36.11 pounds. This and other hints suggest that the plot of the novel was taking place in the Russian sector of partitioned Poland.

of us surrounded Father, because the suitcase contained various things we could rarely see. There were, in a box, Father's razors; in another, there were Mother's beads; there was the black silk scarf that Father tied around his neck on big occasions; there was Mother's coat with red lining; there was a yellow, flowery tablecloth; there was a green Persian bed throw.

But this time we were thoroughly disappointed: the suitcase was empty. Only in the corner, tied up in a red scarf, there was Father's accordion from his bachelor's times. Father struck it once and again, looking for a bit of sugar, as if he was afraid of picking it up and moving it from the corner. It sounded and fell silent. But Felix already put his hand in the suitcase.

"And the accordion, dear Father!" shouted he, picking up the red bundle. "Couldn't we… the accordion?..."

"Felix!..." Mother cried weakly from her bed.

Father blushed. He took away from Felix the scarf with the accordion, and, putting it in the suitcase, he closed it with a key.

That day we didn't eat breakfast for a long time. And as for lunch – there wasn't any either. I thought Father would send me at least for bread, but no. Only Pete got a slice from yesterday. Felix and I went to the hallway to play because we somehow felt bored. It was perhaps two or three o'clock already when Mother called me to her bed and said with a tired, breaking voice, "Vince, go to the linen presser on Szczygla Street - you know?..."

"Sure… How do I not know… It's number three…"

"Number three," Mother repeated. "She's a decent woman; maybe she'll buy the iron…"

"Iron?" I repeated, unsure whether I heard correctly.

"But let her come not earlier than at dusk, so the concierge's wife would not see in the yard… Go now…"

I grabbed my hat, when she called me again. "Vince!..."

But when I came to her, she looked at me and said, "Nothing, nothing! Go…"

I was at the door when she called me once more.

She was half raised in her bed; her sunken eyes were widely open.

"And the mortar..." she whispered so quietly that I could hardly hear it.

I was petrified. I experienced a feeling as if I was to be sold myself.

"Mortar?" I repeated in a whisper, bending towards the face of Mother.

She breathed heavily, unevenly, you could hear a sharp whizz in her chest. She didn't answer, only held my hand. Her palm was cold, wet. Two or three times she opened her mouth without a sound, her yellowed forehead covered with sweat.

She inhaled with a deep breath akin to a sigh.

"And the saucepan…" she whispered with effort.

"Saucepan?" I said with a similarly quiet voice.

She just confirmed with her hand, her head fell onto the pillow, her eyes closed.

I ran out like burned, holding my hat in my hand. I met Felix in the hallway.

"Listen, you!" I yelled into his ear. "And the saucepan, and the mortar, and the iron, everything, we are selling out!"

"Darn!" Felix laughed and jumped up at that excitement, slamming his thighs with his hands. This jump was the best trick in his whole repertoire. I could never measure up to him in that. He threw himself into the air easily like a fish into water. At once the two of us ran to Szczygla Street, because Felix was ambitious and never let me get ahead of him even by a hair's breadth.

But the linen presser didn't want to talk to us much. She said she didn't need the saucepan, and a mortar and an iron she had her own. We left outraged.

"See the hag!" Felix yelled. "She doesn't need the saucepan! A saucepan such as ours, and she doesn't need it."

Mother waited with gleaming eyes; and when I told her about the outcome of our trip, she sighed, as if she experienced some huge relief.

But before the evening she called me again, and told me to bring the peddler. The two of us, Felix and I, ran out, happy that this matter was not over yet. The peddler came, looked at the iron, looked at the mortar, looked at the saucepan, and, contorting his mouth

contemptuously, said that all that was probably good for scrap only. For these three pieces, he gave ten zlotys.

Mother jumped and sat in her bed. "What?... Ten zlotys?... The mortar alone was five zlotys and thirteen grosz! And the iron! And the saucepan!"

"Well, for scrap," started the peddler.

But she didn't let him finish and with trembling hand she showed him the door.

"Go! Go! Let my eyes not see you! You are not the only one in the world." And she sent us for another peddler, Redhead, who had bought our table recently.

We liked this Jew very much, because he would tell various stories when he was buying our table, and for carrying it to the other street he gave me and Felix a nut each. True, Felix's one had a hole, but he whistled on it the whole day, as if the train was leaving. So we ran to fetch Redhead. He jabbered on the corner in front of the shop with the first one, the one who left our place. But he rearranged the bag of bottles on his back and followed us right away.

But, having inspected the mortar, the saucepan, and the iron, he offered for them only just nine zlotys and sixteen grosz; he also said that the mortar will not be good even for scrap. Mother was trembling in a fit, and, although she could barely move in her bed, she still ripped the saucepan out of his hands and dropped it on the floor. It moaned like a broken bell…

It was a strange feeling to hear that moan. It seemed to me that the quoins of our room moaned.

Mother covered her eyes and started to cry.

Before the evening five more peddlers came to us. But each one offered less: even two, three grosz, but less. They jabbered, argued with each other, ripped away our mortar and our iron; the noise was greater even than on Pociejow.[13]

Felix was only pinching me in amusement.

"What a lark!" he cried, choking in suppressed laughter, and to relieve himself he jumped a beautiful summersault.

[13] Pociejow – a Jewish area in Warsaw; also a synonym of the marketplace.

Finally the Jews left, having turned the air in the room stuffy. The saucepan, the iron and the mortar stood by Mother in a row on the bench. She was staring at me with a sad, tired, almost dumbfounded look. But when the frost started to increase towards the night, and Pete, as is normal with an un-enduring tot, started to whimper that he was cold, that he was hungry, Mother told me to run to the concierge's wife and ask whether she'd buy the iron.

But the concierge had not, apparently, forgotten that refusal of our Mother. So she puffed herself up at once, like a Carmelite pumpkin.

"If I were to buy, I'd get myself a new one! What do I need old junk for!"

When I repeated it to Mother, she ignited with rage.

"If no, then no!" she cried with a voice trembling with anger. "Have you seen that! Junk! Old junk!... What a big lady! When it came to borrowing, it was good for her, but when it's about buying, it's old junk! You'll see, you slattern... you hag…"

She coughed and grabbed her chest, but there was nothing to give her to drink, because the herbs were gone since long.

"What a theater!" Felix whispered, pinching me painfully.

"Vince!" Mother spoke up with a stuttering voice, "run to this first peddler who offered ten zlotys. To the black one, you know? Let him come." And, closing her tired eyes, she kept whispering, "I'll sell it for a song, I'll waste it, but you, you hag, you slattern, you won't be calling people's belongings old junk. You won't get any! You won't get any!"

And, completely exhausted, she fell quiet.

Felix almost hit his calves with his heels, so fast he ran with me to bring the Jew. We thought we would have to look for him at the end of the world, but he stood almost in front of our gate, stuck his hands in the belt of his gabardine, and spat to the sides. As if he was waiting for us. When Felix, having run to him, nudged his elbow, his squinted eyes flashed like those of a cat, and he sniffled. He followed us quickly, eagerly. But even he didn't want to offer more than *an even nine zlotys*. This *even* he enunciated as if he was adding at least half a ruble to these nine zlotys.

Mother's face ignited again.

"Man!" she shouted. "But it didn't shrink! But you offered ten zlotys at first! But these are the same things!"

"Well, so what that these are the same things?" the peddler answered phlegmatically. "I changed my mind."

"But give us those ten zlotys that you offered… Have a conscience!..."

"Well, I do have a conscience! If I didn't have a conscience, I'd give you eight zlotys, but because I have a conscience, I will give nine even."

"May God punish you heavily for my injury!" moaned Mother.

"What punish?" the peddler jerked. "Why punish?... Do I want it for free? Do I give you chaff? No, I am giving ready money."

Mother didn't answer anything anymore; her face was as white as a disc of wafer. When the Jew counted the money, Felix's eyes followed every dime. Whenever one was even a little rubbed off, he'd immediately throw it out of the row, crying that it was counterfeit. The Jew tsk-tsked at first, then turned red as if he was about to get a stroke, he even raised his hand at Felix once, brought to utter fury, then he suddenly smiled, took a well blackened cent out of his vest, and, handing it to Felix, said, "You, you are a smart boy! You will be a clerk! Here, for you, for gingerbread!"

But Felix didn't take the cent.

"Here, look, you didn't add three grosz," he said, tapping with his finger a pile of grosz that was to represent a zloty. "Add it here, and don't bother me with gingerbreads."

The Jew smacked his lips louder and louder in admiration.

"A kluger Bub,"[14] he whispered to himself.

Finally, they made their accounts. The Jew threw with a bang the iron, the mortar, and the saucepan into a dirty bag, and Mother sent me to fetch coals and bread.

When Father came home, there was already fire in the stove, and we took turns sipping bread soup out of a small iron pot.

Father stood in the threshold, looked at the fire, looked at us, then looked around the room, and when his glance stopped on the emptied shelf, he cast his eyes down and tiptoed to Mother's bed.

[14] Kluger Bub – in German: a smart boy.

Shortly afterward the winter eased off. You could hear at night the huge boom of ice breaking on Vistula. Still, we kept buying coal, because the dampness in the room was such that the walls were dripping.

Our room turned completely empty.

"Through and through…" as Felix would say.

Mother's worse dress was gone, the clock was gone, the washtub was gone, and when also Father's navy coat was gone, I completely lost faith in those things that *last a lifetime*, especially after my recent experience with the iron.

Now we walked around the empty room as if we paced around a church, and Felix hooted with his hands at his lips so that an echo would answer him. However, the doctor would still visit Mother, and I ran to the pharmacy, too. The iron pot was also still here, but we rarely cooked lunch in it; when we boiled potatoes in the morning, there were also some left for the evening, and at noon we chased the cats of the owner, because they screamed awfully on the roofs.

One day Father sat down on the ground by his suitcase, opened it, and meditated over it for a long time.

And on that day there was big thaw, it dripped from the roofs, the sparrows squalled, and the sun looked into our basement for the first time that winter. But Mother was worse again. The cough tormented her the whole night, and she called for drink more than five times. There was no medication. Felix stood on his toes and looked over Father's shoulder. He thought he would see God knows what, but nothing. Father only nodded his head, picked his moustache, and stared in silence at a red bundle lying on the bottom. Finally, he reached for it, took out the small accordion, and, sitting down on Mother's bed, he started to play.

Mother came alive a little bit as she was listening; she asked for Pete to be brought to her bed, and we stood nearby, listening.

At first Father played gaily, and, playing, spoke to Mother like this: "Remember, Annie, Bielany?[15] Remember, how we met? How I walked you, playing?"

"I remember, love," she said quietly.

"Or this, remember? It was on Trinity, at the church fair, in Solec…"

[15] Bielany – a district in Warsaw famous for its forest.

"I remember," whispered Mother.

"A great steirer![16]" murmured Felix, nudging me in my rib.

"You wore then that pink checkered dress, and I sorely missed you afterwards, for some three days," spoke Father softly. "And this, Annie?..."

"That I didn't know..."

"How don't you know? It was in Wola,[17] where we went with my brother-in-law, when I threw a growler[18] at that German for sitting down next to you..."

"Yes, true!" whispered Mother.

Father kept playing. He kept the accordion on his lap, stretching it and closing, and his fingers flipped fast on the keys.

I never heard more beautiful music in my life.

"Annie! And this?... How's that?..."

"I remember, Phil!" said Mother. "It was on that Sunday when you published the banns. We were in Czerniakow[19] with my late Mother …"

"We'd been back already a month," added Father. "We played the green game…"

"And how the lilac smelled… And how many nightingales sang…"

"And how pretty you were… Like a blossoming rose…"

Felix nudged my rib.

"And how you played, love… How you played…"

She smiled, sighed, seemed to be falling asleep.

16 Steirer – a folk dance of Austrian origin.
17 Wola – a district in western Warsaw.
18 Growler - a container (such as a can or a pitcher) for beer bought by the measure.
19 Czerniakow – a neighborhood in Warsaw, on the banks of the Vistula river.

Father played beautifully also now. At first gaily, sprightly, as if for dancing; our legs hopped all by themselves. Then, as if something had mixed into this gaiety, more and more sadly, as if for crying, so even Felix rubbed his eyes with his fist once or twice; then Father stretched the accordion from both sides at once and drew from it a tone as heartrending as when they play the organ for the dead.

Mother slept. She often fell now into such slumber as if somebody suddenly poured poppy seeds over her eyes. And then she would wake up weak, pale, with cold sweat on her emaciated face.

Father was sitting with his head down; he sat some more, and then sighed, got up, wrapped the accordion in that black shaggy scarf, stuck it under his arm, and, pulling his hat over his eyes, he left on his toes.

When the three of us retrieved ourselves on the pallet under Mother's scarf, Felix nudged me and said under his breath, "Vince!"

"What now?"

"You know? The old man cried when he played!"

"Naaah…"

"God knows!" swore Felix, and bumped his chest with his fist, till something resounded in it like a moan. "I'm not blind, I saw it… Those tears just dripped down his moustache…"

"What do you want!" he added after a while. "When one starts remembering one thing after another…"

He sighed heavily, lay silently for a while, and turned on his side towards the stove; shortly afterward I heard him snore. Father came home late that evening, but he brought medication for Mother, started fire, and made tea. I could not sleep that night till late; something kept playing in my head, once sadly, once gaily. And I dreamed of various things till the morning. About a garden in the room, and lilac blossoming on the stove, and about nightingales singing in the hallway, and about the wall where the clock once hung, and now there was a silver moon standing...

When I woke up, Felix already stood on the pallet and was closing the belt on his falling, shoddy trousers. Through an open, mightily mended shirt his scrawny ribs stuck out, from his collar stood out a neck thin like that of a sparrow, and exceedingly thin legs made him appear much taller than he really was.

"Felix!" I called out. "How come you grew this month like a stick!"

"Stupid!" laughed Felix. "I am only stretching like that to have my stomach smaller."

He stretched before me like a string.

"And?" he asked.

"And you look like a marinated herring."

"Good!" cried Felix. "I am trying for a clown."

And when I laughed, "Why?" he said, "You think it's bad bread?"

And, slamming his thighs with his hands, he jumped up, made a summersault in the air, and then fell quietly on all fours, like a cat.

"You know?" he said, "it's because of that tot I stretched so much," and he motioned with his head towards Pete, who, as usually, woke up first, and went to the pot to check whether he would find something left over from yesterday. "When we walk to the nursery," Felix continued, "he whimpers the whole way that he is hungry. I have to give him half of my bread every day to have peace."

"Eeeh?" I asked, incredulous, feeling that I might not be capable of such acts of heroism.

"For the love of God!" Felix swore immediately, slogging his dry like wood chest with his fist.

And, watching Pete, who rolled through the room on his short, bowed legs, with a big belly bloated by potatoes, the two of us cracked up in a crazy, uncontrollable laughter.

"Why are you laughing like that, boys?" Mother asked faintly.

"Because of Pete," answered Felix, "that he's so fat…"

"How is he fat, poor thing! How would he get fat!" said Mother. "Pete!" she added. "Come to mom, my orphan."

And she smiled at him, stroking his head, while the two of us chocked in laughter at that *lark*, as Felix called it.

Soon, however, our gaiety was dimmed.

"You know what, Annie?" said Father that day, sitting down on Mother's bed. "We'll need to put our hack up for sale."

"The hack?..." Mother cried out and even rose in her bed. "Don't you fear God, Phillip?! She feeds us all!"

Father supported his head heavily on his hand and picked his moustache in silence.

"She feeds, or doesn't feed!" he said after a while. "You cannot show up at the river, water tugs like you wouldn't believe it. There is no work with gravel, little, if anything, comes from sand; a man could carry it on his back. And here, every day you have to buy chaff, and at least a handful of bran, since one sees no oats in the manger; add to it the room, and the litter, and everything is expensive.

Mother just moaned.

We listen, terrified. Pete goggled at Father with an open mouth; I stood as if petrified.

Then Felix gave me such a nudge that I got dazed. "You hear, Vince!" he yelled right into my ear.

"I'm not deaf" I boomed into his ear even louder. And we ran out immediately to the hallway, since we were so overcome with grief that we would start fighting.

We loved the hack immensely. As long as I remember the world, there was always Father, Mother, and the hack. Felix was brought only later by the storks, so was Pete; but the hack belonged to the class of those beings that exist always. They are, because they are. I simply could not imagine either our hack's beginning, or its end. The hack belonged to us, and we belonged to her; neither could we separate from her, nor could she separate from us. It was so natural that I simply could not understand any different order. Whoever would be missing from our crowd, he'd be missed all right, but never the hack. She was our only joy.

When Father was returning home from the river, we would run out almost half of the way to see the hack sooner. Whatever any of us had, he'd bring it to the hack and push it into her mouth: a piece of bread, a potato, a lemon peel found in the courtyard…

The hack loved us very much, too. She neighed to us from afar and sped up, pricking up her ears merrily; and when we patted its neck and its sides, she understood this caress very well, and, hanging down her heavy head, she nibbled on our hair and on our jackets. Especially Pete was her favorite; the hack simply neighed at Father to take Pete with them.

When Father unharnessed her, the fun started. Felix at once jumped on her bony back rugged by an old horse-collar, and when the hack immersed her huge head in the depths of a bag of slim chaff that was tied around her neck, he would knee or stand on one leg and wave his hat, shouting:

"And here we have a famous rider from the basement that never loses his air of amusement! Felix Mostowiak is his name; a bone is his coat of arms, beware! He's skinny, but a blade! Who'll give more?..."

At this "who'll give more" we started such an infernal uproar, that people would run out of the annexes.

After Felix, Pete would scramble onto the hack, but we could barely lift him, so much his swollen belly would tip him. We led the hack with Pete on top triumphantly around the yard, not letting her eat her chaff in peace, and Felix waved his hat again and yelled, "And this is Pete, of the coat of arms: a rat! He has two patches and eight holes! He's missing two teeth in front, not in the back, and he rides on a hack!... Who'll give more?..."

Where he had got this "who'll give more" from, I could never figure out; Felix himself claimed that this is how it all fits together. And again, we started an infernal uproar, as if there were not three, but thirty of us.

"Look at that, ladies and gentlemen," would say the fat shop keeper who stood in the door, "what don't those beasty boys of Mostowiak do with that hack! Complete apes from the *ménagerie!"*

And she would grab her sides, shaking in laughter, till her eyes wholly disappeared in her fat face.

"Oh, one needs a whip here, a whip!" shrieked the skinny cook from the second floor. "How is it supposed to be well in this world, how is God to bless us here, when an imp barely grows a little, and he starts already with debauchery! Would that one and the other went to work, to trade, to books. Nothing to put in their mouths, but they make such Sodom-and-Gomorrah in the wide world!"

And Felix immediately started to bow left and right, and blow kisses to the skinny cook, till the hag, in utter fury, slammed the vent and left the window.

We consulted the hack in all life matters; we competed with each other for her favors and her grace. She was the last instance of appeal in our matters. Scoundrel Pete abused it; when he thought of himself as injured by us, he wouldn't say "I'll tell Father" or "I'll tell

Mom," but "I'll tell the hack." We didn't ignore this threat in the least bit; and, quite often, Pete got some snack, especially from Felix, so that he would not "tell the hack."

Because we could not bear it when she looked at us sadly with her one eye, while on the other, blind and whitened one, the lid with gray lashes would rise and fall slowly, as if with reproach…

"Listen, Vince!" Felix used to say, "What does this hack have in her eye, that it pierces you like that? I would even prefer for Father to strike me with a belt, than for the hack to look at me like that. It reaches one's very *honor*…"

We cleaned the hack every day. But it never passed without a fight for the brush and the currycomb. How much pelage did we rip! How did we tangle her mane! But the hack stood patiently, squinting her healthy eye, and only from time to time she waved her shabby tail, as if she were chasing away gadflies.

Right after Easter the bathing of the hack began. The water was still freezing cold, but we'd roll up our trousers – and hop into the river. What a triumphant parade it was! Boys from our street wanted to rush with us, but we chased them away with a whip.

There, we got to splash the hack; there, to rub her fetlocks and her sides, there, to whistle to her the way we heard from Father. The worst trouble was when, to get away from us and from our care, the hack would make a few steps deeper into water.

"She will drown! She will drown!" yelled Pete, turning all blue and crouching on the ground, clasping his belly with both hands. So we waded to bring her back and pulled her by her tail to the bank, after which, breathless and tired, we went back home: the hack first, and then us following her: wet, dripping with water, like drowned men.

And this beloved hack of ours Father was supposed to sell?

In our understanding it was something like the end of the world.

So, immediately, after rushing out to the hallway, I punched Felix in his ear, and he gave me a straight one in my neck, so I again, without delay, bumped him in his back, so he again with a fist in my side, so that I saw stars in my eyes. After that we caught each other's mane and, tangled like a hank, we rolled together toward the threshold. But grief was such in us, and such fierceness from this grief, that neither of us let out the smallest sound, not even a squeak.

We felt better after this *licking* at once.

We were already back in the room, since bad cold was coming from outside, and Father was still persuading Mother, “Right now we can get some pennies for her; but when she gets thinner, since I am already giving her less chaff, who will offer anything for her? Well, Annie? What d’you think, love?”

Mother sighed heavily. “And what am I to think, my Phillip?... I think that God punished us badly with this sickness. I think that I turned into a stone at your neck and I pull you to the bottom… I think of those orphans…” She covered her eyes and sobbed loudly. Father was kissing her head. “Annie!.. Love!... Annie!...” he repeated, till he suddenly burst in tears himself.

“Darn!...” murmured Felix behind me, wiping his eyes with his fist.

A few days went by, and somehow nobody talked about selling the hack.

Mother was getting worse and worse. Her heavy, hoarse cough woke us at night from our deep childhood sleep. Oftentimes she also fell asleep during the day, and although it got suddenly warm outside, fever sometimes shook her so badly that her teeth were chattering. Father walked around the room hunched, yellow, as if he suddenly had aged ten years; his hand got heavy and for any trifle he was grabbing our hair; but we didn’t impose much, spending much of the day in the stable.

Since when we were threatened with the possibility of losing the hack, she became twice as dear to us. We were moved now with every snort, every movement of her tail.

“Oh… she eats!” cried Pete, staring at the nag with rapture when she immersed her huge head in the manger and, raising it, chewed bare chaffs, squinting her healthy eye.

“Oh… she drinks!” he cried, when the hack put her head into the old bucket to gulp once or twice the water that we brought with our own hands.

Felix and I sat on the manger on both sides of the hack, and, waving our legs, observed her every movement for hours.

Even the potatoes, which we were now getting daily without fat, we’d bring here, to lunch with the hack, even though there was nothing to share, since we were getting less and less ourselves.

It was also merrier in the stable than in the room, because the sun shone straight through the wide open door here, while it never visited the basement on our corner as the year was long.

"How cold it is in your place!" the doctor would say, visiting Mother. "And a terrible humidity! You should get a dry, warm room for your wife," he would add when Father walked him to the hallway, "your wife cannot lie in a room like that. Terrible air, rotten, no ventilation, no light. You should take care of the woman when she's sick. She is worse and worse, and she's got to be worse under such circumstances."

Father bit his moustache with a lowered head and remained silent.

"She would also need fresh milk, meat, and a glass of wine from time to time… Medication will not help here, what is needed is a restorative diet..."

He had left already, and even turned into another street, because I looked at him, and Father was still standing in the hallway, looking at the ground, and biting his moustache.

But suddenly he moved, yanked his shirt on his chest, tore open the purse with the scapular, and, taking out of it a silver coin with the Holy Mary, sent me for coal and milk, forbidding me to tell Mother where it was from.

The next day at noon we were just getting ready for a show, and Felix was already climbing the hack, when suddenly Father entered the stable, followed by Mr. Lukas Smolik, the godfather of our Pete, who was also a cabbie from Praga.[20] I had an instant hunch, so I nudged Felix, and the two of us stood quietly.

Mr. Lukas, having stepped over the threshold, put down his whip in the corner, wiped his huge, bony nose in the flap of his navy capote, and, as he was stretching his long, skinny neck, he slowly took snuff. He was already an old man, tall and well hunched; his eyes were small, black, piercing, his brows bushy, and his chin skinny and growing stubble underneath. Under his bony nose protruded the yellow moustache of a sapper, which he moved like a rabbit while taking his snuff. From under a huge navy hat blue ears stood out, covered with whitish fluff; the right ear decorated with a silver earring. Mr. Lukas visited us rarely, even though he was related to us through baptism. Mother used to say about him that he was a miser, and that he hoarded money; at other times she would forecast that he would will everything to Pete, because he was a childless widower.

When we were staring at Mr. Lukas, dumbfounded, Father – as if he hadn't seen us – went straight to the manger, untied the hack, and smacked her behind with his hand.

"Hey, oldie!" he called out, turning her head to the light. The hack squinted her healthy eye, and with the blind, stupefied, widely open one she seemed to look somewhere far, very far.

[20] Praga – a historical borough of Warsaw located on the eastern bank of Vistula.

Mr. Lukas, holding a pinch of snuff at his nose, started to smile sweetly, and, tilting his head, looked at the hack once from the left, once from the right.

"Ha!... Ha!... Ha!... And what is it that you want to sell, mate?... The skin or the bones?"

Father glanced gloomily from the corner of his eye, and his moustache rose immediately, but he just swallowed and said, "The skin and the bones will earn you meat, crony. It's enough to just feed her with oats, and it will be round like a dumpling."

"Oh come on, mate!" Mr. Lukas laughed. "Feed her! Feed her! But oats are dear now, mate. Five zlotys for a quart, mate! And hay is dear, too…"

"Yup. Dear." answered Father indifferently, but I saw light in his eyes.

"Move! Leg! Hey!" he called hitting the hack, which stepped over the halters that dragged behind her.

"Ha!... Ha!... Ha!..." Mr. Lukas laughed even sweeter. "I can see that arthritis is also here…"

"Yup, there is!" Father answered tersely, with a dry voice.

I pulled Felix's sleeve, as it seemed to me safer to keep closer to the door, but he only pushed me away with his elbow and moved his wide open eyes from Father to the visitor and back.

"Oooo… arthritis, dammit..." Mr. Lukas kept saying, pulling his double chin out of a yellow, cotton scarf. "Oooo… arthritis!" and he started to smack his lips. "The hack will not get out of it anymore, nope!" he added, taking a sniff and nodding his head.

Father's moustache kept rising, so he jerked it down with his hand.

"I am not pushing her on you, crony!" he said, staring at the ground. "For me, it is good also with arthritis! If not for the illness of my woman, I would for sure not put the mare up for sale! It's our breadwinner, after all."

Mr. Lukas didn't answer. Bending, he set his hands on his knees and looked at the legs of the hack.

"Has spavin[21] perhaps?... Ha!… Ha!… Ha!…" he laughed inquiringly.

[21] Spavin – a bony enlargement of the hock of a horse associated with strain.

“Has spavin! This mare, a spavin!” yelled Father, all ignited. “May the Lord punish me if she has spavin! Show me, crony?.. Where does she have spavin?...”

“Eyy... Ey!...” Mr. Lukas was smiling sweetly. “I am just asking, since, when you buy a horse, it is like getting married: whatever you do not find out with your eyes, you’ll pay with a sack…”

“I’m not a fraud,” said Father impulsively, and his hands started to tremble. “I don’t want to cheat anybody! What is true, I’ll say, but what is untrue – I won’t.”

“And what’s with her?... Blind?...” asked suddenly Mr. Lukas standing up, and, opening with his fingers the dead lid of the hack, he looked into its eyes up close.

Felix moved, fidgeted, and pinched me in the flank, so I almost cried out.

“Yup, blind,” Father answered amazingly calmly, although his moustache bristled again. “Blind in her left eye. This is how I bought her and this is how she is. She didn’t go blind with me.”

“Ha!… Ha!… Ha!…” Mr. Lukas laughed out sweetly and reached for the snuff again.

“Say it so from the beginning, mate! Blind!... Ooooo… ugly blind!... Oooo!...”

He shook his fingers and put the snuffbox away.

“If she is blind,” he said, sniffling, “then it’s a different business, a different talk...”

A sudden fire raced through Father’s face.

“And what kind of a different talk is it supposed to be?” he said somewhat impulsively. “If she’s blind, then she’s blind! You won’t have her learn from the books anyway, nor send her to school. And I will tell you, mate, that some blind hack is better than one that can see. And this mare is so smart, that, as long as I live, I haven’t seen smarter.”

“Well, well!...” Mr. Lukas laughed sweetly. “You and your talk! You, my mate, would want me to believe that a blind hack is the best.”

“The best or not the best! But truly I haven’t seen a smarter hack. And it’s not about making someone believe in the least bit, since I am a Catholic, not a Jew.”

Father spoke slowly, holding himself back, but his voice was boiling.

Suddenly, as if he saw us only now, he caught Felix by his neck, and, pushing him through the door, yelled, “Off from here, gadabouts!”

We were blown from the stable like by a wind, and like the wind we rushed into the room.

A few minutes later our calmed Father came in with Mr. Lukas, since it is not proper to close a deal for an animal other than in a room, under a roof; only Gypsies do not observe that. They started to shake hands at once, Mr. Lukas through the flap of his cabbie capote, Father through the jacket that hung on his back in rags.

“God is my witness,” said Father, “that I would not sell this mare for any price to a stranger, even less to a Jew. Now I know that at least it is going into good hands.”

“Ha… Ha… Ha!...” laughed Mr. Lukas, “among relatives! Among relatives! I won’t harm her…”

“And if, God forbid,” here he motioned with his head to Mother, who lay like dead, with closed eyes, “well, one is not made of stone, I’ll carry her out for free in the name of friendship…”

Father didn’t answer anything, neither this way nor the other, just lowered his eyes and tugged his moustache, and Mother woke up with a moan. Perhaps she wasn’t even sleeping.

When Mr. Lukas, bent in two, followed Father out of the room, we dashed to see the hack.

But Father suddenly turned around. “Not one inch beyond the threshold!” he yelled sharply. “Stay in the room…”

And he slammed the door.

We were just like stunned. I looked at Felix, he looked at me; his eyes were becoming bigger and bigger, and more and more transparent; his mouth and chin trembled like in a fever, until, grabbing his hair with both hands, he cried out, “Darn!” and then he burst loudly into tears.

Good times began now. The room turned warm, mold stopped growing on the walls, and we borrowed a second pot for grits from the shopkeeper.

Only that we were terribly sad without the hack, and whenever any of us looked at the stable, his eyes welled with tears. Also Mother somehow didn’t have much influence.

"I will be dying shortly, Philip…" she'd say with a voice as soft as a summer breeze. "Don't spend on me anymore…"

Then again, out of nowhere, she'd get better; she'd call for mulled beer, or even for hot milk with butter, and she washed and combed Pete herself; she told us stories then how she'd recover, how she'd go to Czestochowa[22], how she'd take us along; what towers we would see there, what a church, what organ music there would be. And she had fire in her face then and her eyes shone like dry rot. It usually happened in the evening.

But when the morning came, she lay as if without a soul, whiter every day, and was transparent like a haze. There was no voice in her, no breath, no will of any kind. Father would jump up, put his ear to her mouth, tell us to be quiet – and listen. Then he would sigh loudly, as if he had come back to life himself all of a sudden, and raise his eyes to that black cross over the bed.

But one day he somehow couldn't hear it.

Mother had died at night so quietly that nobody had even heard.

Pete slept next to her that night, and even he didn't hear anything. Her soul left her like a vapor; it didn't even flutter as much as a sparrow when it flies away.

So after Father, tearing his head off her withered chest, cried that Mother had passed away, we stood in front of the bed in big astonishment, looking at her bluish lips, and at Pete, who had been next to her cold, rigidly stretched legs, and had slept, warm, ruddy, with a pearly sweat covering his little forehead… What a tot – death nudged him with its elbow, and he – nothing.

A great tumult started at once in our room; the neighbors came over, started to debate, to nod, to sigh, and since Father didn't cook grits for us that day, and Pete wept that he was hungry, the shopkeeper took him with her, and even to us she gave a roll each.

"Look how the hag softened!" whispered Felix, after which he kissed her at once and shuffled his bare feet in a sweeping bow.

The whole day I felt as if somebody whispered to my ear, "Mother is no more!... Mother has passed away now…" So I wiped my eyes with my fists at once, as I sorely felt like crying.

[22] Czestochowa – a city in south Poland famous for its Pauline Monastery of Jasna Gora, an old place of pilgrimage.

In spite of that we had a great fun that day, because there was a crowd in our place like on Ordynacka Street.[23] As far back as I can remember, I hadn't seen so many people in our basement; and whoever passed by us, there he would start to pat our heads, there he would start to pity us, there he would start to snuffle.

Only yesterday nobody in the whole tenement called us anything but rascals or scoundrels; and today, as if somebody rubbed their mugs with honey, they all went: "Orphans! Little orphans! Poor things!..."

And Felix only puts himself up, and blinks his eyes, and whenever somebody passes, he nudges me. "What a comedy! What a theater!..." he whispers, and his tongue scandalously stretches from behind his teeth all by itself, thin and sharp, like a sting.

In the meantime Father walked around the room like a lunatic, whatever he'd grab, he'd put away, although there wasn't much to grab in this emptiness.

And womenfolk started to look around at our poverty, and whispered into each other's ear, and shrugged, and shook their heads, and groaned… I thought there would be no end to it, but finally they left, as their lunches were boiling over in their pots.

If it were not for this pity of people, we wouldn't even have felt it all that much that Mother had passed away. In her illness, she hadn't got up in her bed since about half a year already, and lately she lay in her bedding as quietly as now. And now, when I looked at her, it seemed to me that she still followed Pete with her eyes from under her eyelashes, and she smiled faintly, and was just about to say, "Nah, he's not fat at all, poor thing!" just like before; only candles were not lit next to her like that…

From those candles a yellow transparency fell upon her, and it scared me; I also felt that her hands were cold, when Father told us to kiss them. But Father must have felt warm next to her, because, having run errands the whole day - to the office, and to the carpenters, and for a cart - when people left, he sat at a stool by the bed, put his head on his hand, and looked: at the black cross hanging over Mother's bed, and at the deep shadows of her closed eyes. I fell asleep, and he still sat. But at night a quiet sobbing woke me up.

It was Felix, who had exerted himself the whole day, putting himself up, making fun of people, and giving me nudges, now sat on the pallet in a shoddy shirt open to his chest, grabbed his protruding knees with his arms, looked at the empty room, and cried.

On the third day we were still sleeping under the linen press in the hallway, where Father had told us to drag our pallet, when I heard in my sleep something like a familiar neighing.

[23] Ordynacka – a street in Warsaw.

I jumped up; my heart beat like with a hammer.

The neighing repeated.

“Felix! The hack is neighing!” I shouted, grabbing his arm.

He jerked and turned to the other side, but when it sounded again, he jumped, too, sat on the pallet, and, opening his eyes widely, he listened…

A long, quiet neighing sounded once again.

“The hack!” yelled Felix and, throwing the jacket on, he dashed towards the stairs of the basement.

I started to dress hastily, but my hands shook so much that I could not make it through any button.

“Get up, Pete” I yelled, “get up! The hack is here!”

And I shook him like a bundle of straw, as it wasn’t easy to wake him up.

Indeed, in front of the gate, harnessed to a simple cart covered with a rug, stood our hack. Felix already hung at its neck, hugging her with both arms, as far as he could reach; by the cart stood Mr. Lukas Smolik who was offering snuff to the concierge.

We raised indescribable clamor.

“The hack! Our hack! Our dear, our beloved, our old one!” we cried one after another, stroking her, patting her, cuddling against her, wherever we could. Pete wanted to climb her at any cost.

“Our hack missed us, huh?... Our hack came to us?... She came?... Our kind, good, old hack.”

And we started to look into her teeth, and feel her legs, and comb her mane with our fingers. It didn’t even cross our minds why this hack came to us, and what that cart waited for.

But the hack recognized us, too, and she was happy with us; with her front leg, the one that was thickened visibly by arthritis, she was hitting the cobble stones merrily, eagerly, as if striking sparks of joy for us. Her head was rising and lowering, the nostrils snorted briskly;

then again hearing our voices and laughs she pricked her ears, stretched her neck, and her loud neighing filled us with indescribable delight.

This neighing merged with the Trinity bell that began to ring gloomily at that moment. At the same time, a dull thud of the hammer sounded from the basement. We didn't even notice when the coffin was placed on the cart.

"Go!" yelled Mr. Lukas. The hack started, and we trotted next to her.

On the corner of the street I looked back: the gathering of neighbors and passersby already dissipated, and behind the cart lead by Mr. Lukas who sat on it, Father walked alone, with his hat in his hand, and his head down.

As for us, we ran right next to the hack, merrily, eagerly, without stopping our talk and caresses even for a moment. It was a May morning, sun rays flooded with glare the streets, the bridge, and Vistula; sparrows chirped from every cornice. Louder than the sparrows, however, chirped our bunch.

"See, Vince," yelled Felix, "how she fattened! How padded her sides are?... See this new harness… And what a halter..."

And again, all of us, in a choir: "Hack! Our hack! Our dear, old hack!"

People turned their heads after us. It seemed an odd funeral, headed by three children having so much fun. Especially on the bridge, when we had to slow down in the traffic, our funeral procession made a striking impression.

The passersby stopped and shrugged. A few times Mr. Lukas even yelled at us to walk behind the cart, but we didn't want to leave the hack for a single step.

The sun sweltered more and more; the road turned into a sandy, difficult one; the hack carried her burden with some effort: her healthy eye squinted in the glare; on the blind, stunned one, sat flies irritated by the heat. Immediately we broke off a few willow withes[24] and started to repel them eagerly. We didn't feel fatigue ourselves. Barefooted, wearing shoddy galligaskins and patched jackets, we toddled merrily, eagerly by the hack, and cemetery crosses kept growing in front of us…

Since there was nobody to carry the coffin, they let us through the gate with the cart. But there we had to wait, because the grave-digger wasn't done with digging the pit, and only now started to hastily throw yellow sand out of it. At once we started to pick for the hack

[24] Withe – a slender, flexible branch or twig.

some sorrel and juicy ribwort that grew abundantly on the path. In the meantime Father and Mr. Lukas took the coffin off the cart and put it on the edge of the pit. It couldn't be heavy, since the godfather, although he was old, stood straight under it; but it bowed Father to the ground like that cross on the falling Christ, whom I saw on Stations of the Cross at the Benedictines'.

Soon a small bell sounded with a high-pitched voice, and a while later came a priest wearing a surplice, and a verger with a cross and an aspergillum. Father glanced at us severely, so Felix and I knelt, holding bunches of fresh grass in our fists. Mr. Lukas and Father knelt, too, and the grave-digger was finishing his work. In no time the priest celebrated his Latin prayer, mentioned the name and surname of Mother, and told us to say Our Father, starting loudly himself.

Father raised his face and both hands towards the sky; from his eyes dripped heavy, fat tears. Felix, kneeling right next to me, muttered quickly his prayers with his eyes fixed on the hack.

Such silence fell that you could hear the slightest rustle of the willow and the chirping of a grass-hopper.

"Oh, she eats!... she eats!..." sounded suddenly in this silence the high-pitched voice of Pete, who held handfuls of grass and spring flowers in front of the hack's muzzle, scattering wild pansies and white daisies. The hack delicately took grass with its lips from the hands of the child, and chewed it, tilting her head, melancholically turning her blind, whitened eye towards the sun. The priest looked, Father frowned, and because I knelt closest to him, he pulled my ear hard.

Soon enough Felix started to beat his chest loudly with his fist, as a sign that he finished his prayers and all his duties thoroughly; after which, having peeked at Father, he snuck out to the hack, and he motioned at me, too. The priest, having sprinkled the coffin, a blessing of which we, too, got some, left with the verger as well.

The pit was not emptied yet. The grave digger encountered clay, and he took it on his shovel only little by little, like butter on bread.

Father kept praying, but Mr. Lukas seemed to be in a hurry, as he took his snuff again and again, and looked at the cart, and scratched his head, until they hugged, shook once and twice with great friendship, after which the godfather went to the hack.

We had already decorated her like a bride. Fresh, blossoming branches of acacia stuck up behind her ears, behind her harness, behind her horse-collar, wherever we could stick something. A bundle of yellow dandelions was set over her forehead, under the crossed

strap. From her mane fell delphiniums and anemones. We held the rest of the greens in our hands to chase gadflies away from the hack.

Now a really triumphant parade started.

First walked Pete, without watching the road, stepping on small children's graves, fresh, made with yellow sand, whenever he looked back at the cart. Behind Pete, there was the hack – with quiet snorting she tossed her head burdened with flowers and greenery, and Felix and I, like squires, were on her right and left sides. The cart rolled slowly, rising and falling on sunken graves, and behind us, with a muffled, ever so muffled rumble, earth was falling on Mother's coffin.

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EPILOGUE TO THE TRANSLATION OF NASZA SZKAPA/OUR HACK TRANSLATOR'S COMMENTS AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Maria Konopnicka (1842-1910) was one of the most popular and most discussed Polish authors in her days. Known for her novels, poetry, short stories, literary criticism and journalism, Konopnicka revolutionized the genre of children's literature by endowing it with artistic esthetics that replaced a moralizing approach. Having left an arranged marriage of 16 years to raise her six children in Warsaw as a writer and tutor, she was awarded a rural farming property for her accomplishments of 25 years as a poet. Her life partner became Maria Dulębianka, a portrait painter and feminist twenty years her junior who introduced Konopnicka to the women's movement. Maria Konopnicka became an activist for women's rights, but she rejected the label of a feminist.

"Nasza szkapa" ("Our Hack"), first published in 1890, is a prominent example of Polish literary realism. At once confrontational and stirring up deep consternation and a sentiment of inevitability as its young protagonist relates the story with shocking indifference and superficiality that are his tools for survival, this novella portrays the life of poor urban street urchins under Poland's occupation by the partitioning powers Russia, Prussia and Austria. Konopnicka's literary techniques, though obvious, are also subtle and profoundly compassionate – yet it is always the reader who is gently led to the most damning conclusions of his or her own.

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I am a Polish-American mathematician educated at Columbia University with a broad range of interests that includes translation of classical and modern post-dependent Polish novels into various languages. My fascination with Maria Konopnicka dates back to high school days at the Emilia Plater Lyceum where I first studied the contribution of female intellectuals to Polish nationhood and its contemporary shape. When it became apparent that this short story had never been translated into English to this day, closing that gap became a debt of honor I felt I owe to one of the great literary heroines of my adolescence.

JOANNA DIANE CAYTAS