

The Shining Sabre of the Cavalryman

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Tens of years after it had ended, the First World War still reverberated and echoed as a shadow in people's life and children's minds. The words 'attack', 'battle', 'siege' were in all children's games, which by that time took place on The Island. This "Island" divided the Osam River into two. This was the place where children built their fortresses, lit a fire, and did all other kinds of mischief. Summers were endless and the local kids used to spend all their time there. They were bathing in this marvellous pool located in the river's right branch, above which a walnut tree – the Lachov-Gadyuv tree – was bending over.

The pool was big enough and could accommodate all the children. They were splashing, touching the river's bottom with their feet, and smacking the water while yelling and screaming. Over there, together with all the other children, there was Georgi Nemcheto (*Georgi 'the German'*) – a boy from Austria whose father was a manager of the textile factory in the city. Georgi was skinny, blond, and with blue eyes. He learnt to speak Bulgarian like the other children and everyone was delighted by that. Once, a headstrong fellow climbed the walnut tree but he did not use the branch, from which the children used to jump into the water; instead he climbed the one that was inclined over the rocks. In that moment Georgi Nemcheto yelled: "Ivane, come back. If you fall from there, you will be squashed like a pear."

One day, as the kids were playing in the pool, someone said that Georgi Nemcheto and his mother and father left town and went to Austria. This was the first child who left the happy gang, and no one saw him after that. For a long time all the children missed him but little by little time did what it does best.

Many years later, when those children became men and women – and this was by the end of World War II – the news came to the town that Georgi Nemcheto had died as a pilot at the Eastern Front. People learned that he was actually called Georg Lehniger but this did not change a lot – Georgi Nemcheto died. Many people were mourning for him but nothing could bring him back. What remained were the childhood memories and the vague surmise that people are brothers regardless of where they were born and of where they died.

Then, upon hearing the news about the death of Georg Lehniger, one of the boys remembered yet again the story of another death, which had taken place at the end of World War I, and which he had heard from his father. A propos, there, on the "Island", this boy was having – together with all the happiness and joy – also some strange feeling

of shame due to the fact that his father had not carried a rifle during the war; he had not taken part in battles, and he had not been wounded. His father had been a mere clerk. That is why the heart of that boy was sinking when the other boys were proudly telling stories about their fathers who had experienced all kinds of challenges and adventures – some scary, others not so much. Only that boy had nothing to tell about his father...

Two of his peers used to demonstrate with wooden crooks how their fathers had been brandishing their sabres in Odrin (*in Turkish: Edirne*), and how General Radko Dimitriev had said: “Heroes, it is up to you whether your sabres will shine in Odrin, or whether the Turkish will drink their coffee in Sofia.”

Another boy was telling how the military company of his father had managed to defend themselves from the enemy cavalry by forming a ‘Hurricane shield’. That is, the soldiers had been standing next to one another and behind each other, while aiming their rifles’ bayonets outwards, and thus forming something like a huge hedgehog. All children rejoiced and often formed their own ‘Hurricane shield’ – boys and girls, together, piled up and aimed upwards all kinds of crooks and sticks, and they were happy that their company was saved.

Alas, winters always followed. Children’s games had to take place somewhere else, and little by little summers, winters and years went by. Back in those times, the nicest religious holiday in the winter was Epiphany (St. Jordan’s Day). On that day, the boy’s father, who was a clerk during the war in some field hospital, was celebrating his name day, and a lot of his friends and family members were coming on a visit to congratulate him. These holidays, celebrated by his father every year, were memorable to the boy. But he would never forget one of them, because something happened that left a trace in his soul throughout his entire life.

On that particular name day, as always, a lot of guests came home. It was warm in the room, the stove was rumbling, the ‘cooked’ Rakia beverage and the cigarette smoke filled the room with an aroma that was typical only for the day of Epiphany. The people were sitting around the table, taking a sip of their drink, and looking at the photo album, which was given to them by the mother of that boy. Someone took in their hand a picture, then raised it in the air and said: “So, this is Petraki Balevski?!”. “Yes, that’s him”, – somebody else said and added: “He died too young; the cholera took him.” At that time the boy heard the voice of his father: “Yes, this is Petraki.” Then he continued with some hesitation and bitterness in his voice: “Do you know that at the end of the war our guys murdered an Englishman – and he looked exactly like our Petraki; he had the same hair, the same eyes, face, figure – he was absolutely like him.” The people in the room quietened and he went on: “One morning they brought in to the military infirmary an English guy whose hands were tied, and who was slightly wounded but I do not remember where exactly. Three or four of our guys brought him in. They had captured him somewhere at the front line so that they could find out the location of the enemy troops, but he was unwilling to talk at all. The English man wore epaulettes of a

lieutenant, his uniform was muddy, and he was rather bald. As he looked at me, I swear I could see Petraki Balevski in him. He said his name and I wrote it down – Cyril Williams from Newport. One of our guys turned angrily to him and said something in English but the English man bent his head down and did not say anything. ‘He must tell everything! That is why we captured him!’ – another man fiercely said, and after that they took the captive out. They all went away.

Later on, in the afternoon, as I set off for Furka village, I saw along the road a half-buried body. I froze. Judging by his trousers and his hand, which remained unburied, I could recognize the body – this was the same English man who they took in the military hospital in the morning. All kinds of horrific things happen during a war, but this killing made me feel weakness in my knees and I sat down on a stone. There were no graves around; nor were there any other buried bodies. Soldiers from our troops were passing by me but no one asked anything about the English man who was half-buried by the road. And this was Cyril Williams from Newport who I entered in the “slightly wounded” column, and who, evidently, kept silent until the end and that is why they killed him.”

The one telling that story fell silent, and the boy felt as if anyone around did not hear anything from the story; no one said anything and no one asked anything. But the boy heard it all, and he was horrified when he realized that a person who is tied and helpless could be killed during a war just because he refuses to betray his own people...

The guests started talking in a low voice. Someone put more woods into the stove, while another asked if they could open the window a little.

The boy slowly approached the table with the photo album on which there laid the picture of Petraki Balevski. The boy took the picture in his hands and gazed at it. It was Cyril Williams who was looking from that picture, with his gentle eyes, and he was smiling to the boy, who felt as if some slight breeze was ruffling his hair.

The boy closed his eyes and saw this man’s grave somewhere there, close to the unknown village Furka, along the unknown road to the front line of the First World War, which was far away from the unknown English town Newport.

The boy felt his mother’s hug. She slightly pulled away the picture, which he was kissing and making wet with his tears.

Then, in that very moment, he realized that he was no longer a kid. And what is more, it seemed to him that all these people around, who took part in the war and suffered all war-time nightmares, didn’t actually know everything about it.

And that was his first step, which took him on his way to adulthood.

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