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Too Smart

My grandma used to say ‘It is not worth being too smart.’ These words come to my mind when I’m thinking about the Ns., who were our closest neighbours, living on the opposite side of the road, slightly to the right of our house. They were also close to us socially, so to speak. The N. used to come to discuss political issues with my father and his wife used to visit my grandmother to exchange cooking recipes for cakes and jams. She was also keen to borrow small sums of money, which she used to repay in a week or two. I always considered the Ns. funny. He was funny on account of his loud voice; she due to being fat, short and extremely energetic. Later I also learnt that they had funny names: Teodor and Teofila, which for me suited better animals in the children television programmes than real people.

The Ns. lived in a large house with a huge orchard and courtyard, and plenty of sheds. However, they were not farmers, as there was no field behind their house and I never saw Teodor driving a horse cart or a tractor to a field outside the village. But then I do not remember any of them having a regular job either. Irrespective of the season Teodor used to work around his house and Teofila was busy in the kitchen or visited neighbours to spread gossip. When recently, for the sake of writing their story, I consulted my mother about Teodor’s job, she told me that he was on incapacity benefit. This might have surprised a stranger,

given that Teodor was always moving a huge amount of wood around his house or building a shed, sporting an athletic figure, but during the communist times almost half of men in our village were on incapacity benefit. The second half were farmers, who could not get incapacity benefit even if they were sick. The smart people tried to move from full-time employment to incapacity benefit as soon as possible so that they could engage in better paid work or devote their lives to acquiring shortage goods. Apparently the three mansions the local doctors built for themselves and their children were paid by fake certificates about incapacity of the local people. But let's return to the Ns. Making sure he was not short of shortage goods was Teodor's favourite occupation. Getting what was difficult to get was everybody's ambition, but Teodor went in this respect further than anybody else. The peak of his thrift was during the martial law in the early 1980s when the contents of the Polish shops were transferred wholesale to people's pantries, leaving only vinegar and tins of squid imported from the Soviet Union boxes on the shelves. During this time my parents amassed over twenty kilos of sugar and flour. But Teodor looked at our supplies with disdain, confessing that of sugar alone he had 200 kilos. As for flour, tea and dry sausage he was not sure, but if a war of the length of the Second World War was to start the next day, the Ns. had enough food supplies to keep them going till its end. They had also plenty of coal and wood. It filled all the sheds in the courtyard and when there was no more space for wood in the sheds and for sheds to be built, Teodor used part of his house as storage. I think it was around this time that my grandma described the Ns. as too smart. Too smart for their own good – this was what she meant.

For Teodor food did not mean the pleasures of cooking and eating, or at best they were of secondary importance to him. Food meant fuel. Therefore he liked most what was rich in energy: meat, bread, potatoes and deplored everything which was too fancy. Adding spices was for him like polluting petrol. Teofila tried

to process the excessive food acquired by her husband, hence her constant baking of cakes, jam-making and rolling dough for dumplings. I still remember the taste of her layered cakes and redcurrant jam. In exchange, my mother, who worked in a local chemist shop, kept bringing her medicines for indigestion.

It would be a literary achievement to come up with a theory explaining Teodor's hoarding obsession, for example to discover that he was a concentration camp prisoner who suffered from long-time hunger and cold, but unfortunately it was not the case. He suffered no more than ordinary inhabitants of our village and many people would say that the Ns. got a better life than most of us. This was because they benefitted from good connections. Teodor's brother was a local Party dignitary and Teofila's sister lived in West Germany. While the advantages of the first connection was difficult to measure, the second was obvious. The Ns.' daughters used to wear western clothes and Teofila had various kitchen appliances which provided a discord to her otherwise old-fashioned and poorly maintained kitchen. She even passed on to us one or two foreign items, but they turned out as useless for us as they were for them, proving that everyday life is a system; one cannot change one element without moving many others.

Teodor and Teofila had two daughters. I was never friends with them, because being seven and nine years older than me, they belonged to a different generation, but I liked them. The older, Ela, had a very loud voice, like her father and was joyful, tall and pretty. The younger, Lidia, spoke quietly and was rather mousy. The only remarkable thing about her was that she was a heavy smoker; she started early and must have smoked two packets of cigarettes per day as she seemed to always have a cigarette in her mouth. Maybe because of that she couldn't find a husband, which greatly worried Teofila. At the time spinsterhood was seen as a pretty grim predicament. It was a great relief for her mother when Lidia got herself a boyfriend as she was over thirty by then.

I'm not sure when the lives of the Ns. took a turn for the worse. Perhaps it was after the fire, in the early 1980s. The fire broke in their courtyard and did not damage their house, only destroyed some sheds and wood laying loose in front of them. But afterwards people started to point to the Ns. the danger of having so much fuel around their house. Even a local fire inspector told them that if they did not comply with the health and safety regulations, they would face hefty penalties. Some things indeed changed, as was later discovered. Teodor, without giving up his wood and coal, switched to a 'smarter' form of energy by diverting the stream of electrons aimed to the households of his neighbours to his own house. This operation, in which Teodor was assisted by his son-in-law, was initially very successful as proved by the fact that the Ns.' electricity bill shrank to zero. However, the trick ultimately frustrated Teodor, as he was unable to hoard electricity – what he stole he had to use on the spot. Moreover, another inspector came to check why there were electric lights in their house while, according to their electricity bill, the Ns. lived like cavemen.

These brushes with the law drove a wedge between Teodor and his apparatchik brother. The brother did not want his reputation to be tarnished by a connection to a criminal. Teodor, being a man of an independent mind (as he liked to present himself), not only ignored his brother's warnings to use energy like everybody else, but got more defiant. His sheds got higher and more elaborate, more like fortresses than sheds, and there was a sign of a bunker being dug in the Ns.' orchard. Somebody on our road even named the Ns.' adobe 'little Albania'. For a time this name stuck and when people said it, they pointed to their foreheads, indicating that the inhabitants of this place were not healthy of mind. Teodor did not care. His next project was a small chapel to the Holy Mary in his front garden. Later on a chapel of this kind would also appear in the garden of the Bs., but in the case of the Bs.. it was a reflection of their true religiosity; in the

case of the Ns. of spite towards Teodor's brother. On this occasion he again proved 'too smart', because by the mid-1980s religiosity started to be seen not as a handicap, but as a way to save one's public life. In due course Teodor's brother claimed that he was always a good Catholic, as proved by his brother's private chapel towards which he contributed financially.

The final blow to Teodor came in the 1990s, when the economy of shortages finished in Poland and money became the only thing people were short of. He still had some hope that the domestic and world politics would turn to his advantage and at times the world appeared to move in his direction. Every closed down Polish coalmine was like honey to his mouth, as it meant less coal for a Pole. Teodor also looked with hope at the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab countries, predicting that it would lead to cutting oil supplies to the West. Russia also would eventually say 'no' to the persecution of Russians in its old republics and at a minimum would invade Ukraine, which would reduce oil stream coming to Poland. Furthermore, there might be a conflict between Poland and Germany as, after all, Poland stole a large chunk of its neighbour's territory in 1945. All these developments were meant to leave Poland isolated and cut off from energy supplies, giving Teodor an advantage. His prophecies, however, were increasingly a subject of jokes in the village.

By mid-1990s both daughters of the Ns. were married and the older left the family home to live with her husband and two children in the regional capital of Włocławek. Since then she was rarely seen in our neighbourhood. The younger stayed in her parents' house and in due course also had two children. However, by the time the younger child was born, Lidia's husband disappeared. The common belief was that he was a drunkard and a crook, who eventually ended up in prison. People even wondered if it wouldn't be better for her to be a spinster rather than having a husband good for nothing. As the first decade of

democracy progressed, Teofila was losing her energy. She got diabetes and stayed indoors more and more. From being a chief disseminator of gossip, she was downgraded to its recipient. Teodor fared even worse, as in his older age he got all the illnesses he faked in his young age to get incapacity benefit. He lost his strength, he got back pain and his heart was failing him. He could not build any more sheds or even mend those which needed repair. He was also constantly harassed by the police, even when he was bed-ridden.

But the misfortune which befell the Ns. was small in comparison with that of their daughters who died before reaching forty; the older from colon cancer and the younger from lung cancer. Although people in our village were neither particularly superstitious nor profound, they saw a connection between their deaths and the sins of their parents. This is because cancer is a reaction to excess, for having too much to burn: food in the case of Ela's cancer and fuel in Lidia's. Teodor, being metaphorically and literally deaf, made nothing of such comments, but Teofila took them to heart. However, she had little time to ponder on her guilt, as she had to look after Lidia's children. The alternative was an orphanage, as their father was behind bars and wasn't interested in them anyway. Teofila's main objective was to survive till her granddaughter, Joanna, reached seventeen, as by then not only would she be too old to be taken into care, but she could become her younger brother's legal guardian. Teofila died five months after her husband and two weeks after Joanna's seventeenth birthday. Her funeral attracted a sizeable crowd. Although people remembered Teofil's eccentricity and criminality, in the hour of his wife's death what was remembered was only that they were one of 'us'.

Focusing on preserving one's physical existence, as was the case in the Ns' last years, made everything else decline at an accelerated rate. The house got more hunched every time I visited our village,

the wood in the courtyard was rotting, the Holy Mary in the chapel lost an eye and her blue heart, and their dogs roamed the streets, howling and attacking the cyclists, as if they were strays.

It was very difficult for Joanna to lose all her family, although the blow was cushioned by certain advantages. She inherited some money from her great-aunt, the one who lived in Germany and got compensation for losing a part of their garden when a motorway was built nearby. She had money to live on for some years and even to sort out some of the problems around the house. But this I know only from my mother, as when Joanna was a child, I was already living abroad. In fact, I did not even know how she looked. Hence, I was surprised when during one of my summer visits, she came round, bringing a bucket of black currants. She said she did not know what to do with all the fruit growing in the orchard and it occurred to her that we might want to use them for jam. Her granny told her that my grandma's jam was the best on our street. Joanna did not look anything like her grandparents or her mother, so it was almost a shock for me to think that she came from the same family. She was a very blond, slim and pretty girl, but seemed to be a bit shy.

I invited Joanna to the kitchen, and she was happy to sit, drink tea, smoke cigarettes and tell me about herself. She confirmed that her life was hard, but not only because her relatives were dead or in prison, but also because she was not smart. She had a problem learning new things, failed twice her driving test and was not sure if she would pass her A-levels. The ultimate proof of her not being smart was that she was stuck in the village, like the old people, while almost everybody else of the working age left, for England, Germany or at least Warsaw.

'You also must have been smart to move to England and even do so before everybody,' she finished her autobiography.

For a while I did not know what to say and then asked, 'do you know how to make jam?'

'I do,' said Joanna. 'Cherry, plum, redcurrant, blackcurrant, even apple. I can bring some for you if you want.'

'Yes, please do. Maybe we can build here a small jam factory. There is still so much fruit growing nearby and nobody is buying it. This will be smarter than moving to England. We can even add a special spice and call it 'smart jam'.

'This is a great idea,' said Joanna. 'We can do it.'

As she was saying it, my mother was already in the house, bringing shopping bags into the kitchen. She must have heard what we were talking about as she turned to me and said, 'Making jam? Communist jam?' and then to Joanna, 'did she tell you that she burns everything she cooks and does not even know which bank she keeps her money in? If you want to start a business, better stay away from her. And stop smoking or you'll end up like your mother.'