

We lived poorly, but I can't remember us ever going hungry. We usually ate manioc, or manioc flour with a vegetable of some kind. Meat was an extreme rarity. My father always had two or three cows, but if he did slaughter one of them, all the meat went to the market. We needed the money to pay our debts; we always owed our neighbours for something. The food eaten by the Luo, the tribe I am from, is quite like the food of the *mzungu*, the white people. The main ingredients are cooked vegetables or meat. The *mzungu* eat potatoes; we eat manioc, buckwheat, or rice. Except that it's not enough for the *mzungu* to have a little buckwheat or manioc, and a small piece of meat; the *mzungu* have to bake cheese too, put it on their vegetables, and stew the meat in wine first. *Mzungu* cuisine is the food of people who want to show that they have power. Because food is power. I learned that from cooking for presidents. If you have food, you also have women, you have money, you have people's admiration. You can have whatever you want. Our food is the food of people who know what hunger is. We have nothing to prove to anyone. We eat to have the strength to go on working.

While I was living with my parents, I had various occupations. First I dabbled in music; I played the *orutu*, a kind of fiddle that's popular among people from the Luo tribe. It has one string, and you play it with a bow, resting the instrument against your hip. I used to earn money playing it at weddings and other special events.

Then my uncle took me out on his boat to be a fisherman. I sailed with him for about two years.

Until one day a hippopotamus attacked our boat. We saw it from afar, swimming toward us. An angry hippo is much worse than a crocodile: it moves very fast in the water. It swam up and overturned our boat, sending us all flying helplessly in different directions. It's a miracle no harm came to anyone that day, because that hippo had already killed several people, and all the fishermen around the lake were afraid of it. After the hippo attack I said to my uncle, 'I wasn't the only one of fourteen siblings to survive just to die now if it comes back.'

My uncle agreed with me. One of his sons, Sylvester, was working in Kampala, Uganda, at a club that was popular with the *mzungu*. My uncle said I should take the boat to Kampala and find the club, and his son would be sure to help me to find a job.

For us, the Luo, family ties are very important. Did you know that the former American president Barack Obama is Luo too? His father comes from a village twelve miles from here. And even though he has never lived here, Obama often helps his family in any way he can. So I knew that Sylvester would not refuse to help me.

I boarded the boat from Kisumu to Entebbe, and as soon as it docked, I went straight to my cousin.

The "Kampala" club was a very important place for

the *mzungu*, because most of the people sent by the British government to work in Uganda spent their first few weeks living in the hotel next to it, until a suitable rental home was found for them. My cousin was a groundskeeper there and swept the floors. He was very pleased to see me and went straight to the manager and instantly got me a job as a waiter's assistant. I didn't know a word of English, but luckily it wasn't necessary. All I had to do was smile and carry food from the kitchen to the dining room.

What about the hippopotamus, you ask? One day it simply disappeared. People say it must have been the spirit of a warrior who had come to take revenge on his enemies.

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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## WITOLD SZABLÓWSKI

Born 1980

### *Jak nakarmić dyktatora* [How to Feed a Dictator]

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Szablowski's other works have been published in Estonia, Finland, Germany, and Spain as well.

### Selected books

*Sprawiedliwi zdrajcy. Sąsiedzi z Wołynia*, 2016

*Tańczące niedźwiedzie* [Dancing Bears. True Stories of People Nostalgic for Life Under Tyranny], 2014

*Zabójca z miasta moreli* [The Assassin from Apricot City. Reportage from Turkey], 2010

Szablowski is the author of award-winning reportages and interviews published in magazines and newspapers.

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Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards (2019) – nomination

Angelus Central European Literature Award (2017) – nomination

Teresa Toranska *Newsweek* Award (2016)

Ryszard Kapuściński Award for journalists (2013)

Nike Literary Award (2011) – nomination

Beata Pawlak Award (2011)

European Parliament Journalism Prize (2010)