

And then he'd return – all sick inside, aching – from these wanderings home, for that's what he had to call, in the end, his soldier's room in the guardhouse, constructed of rough boards, but with a concert Bechstein in the centre. He ate his dinner – which his wife always provided for him hot and fresh – and then he'd sit down at the piano then he'd sit down at the piano, playing until late in the evening, so as to chase away gloomy thoughts.

Sometimes he'd have to arrange service schedules and that's what he found most unbearable. The regulations clearly stipulated that every person's freedom of religious practice was to be respected, whether that meant morning prayers, evening prayers, or the most varied holidays. And he had his hands full with them, as he said. One day he counted them all up. There were fifteen Orthodox holidays, eight Protestant, five Jewish and six Muslim – not to mention the Catholic holidays; a person could go batty. This one has to have leave for the Feast of Tabernacles; that infantryman needs to be free for Resurrection services on Easter Sunday; here the Julian calendar, there the Old Testament calendar; one has the Baptism of the Lord, another Yom Kippur, and still another Ramadan or Bayram – and don't forget that the Muslim year, based on the lunar calendar, is shorter than the solar year, so the dates are all movable feasts... He tossed it all in the corner and returned to the piano with just one thought in his head: *How are they going to fight when it comes to war? And in whose name?*

And once more he remembered the Marshal's bagel. Maybe Roman was right? That you have to count on your own, and not on strangers... He heard the words of his father tumbling through his head as he drowsed from fatigue.

At last autumn arrived. The days grew ever shorter and the rains fell incessantly, making the road to the little town impassable. This worried him, because Marion's due date was fast approaching, *she'll need a doctor, or at least a midwife, but how? with mud and darkness covering the whole area...* This thought kept him awake at night, what would be and how to make sure that the child would come safely into the world, but you can never be certain, as with death. He thought of his mother, when she was dying and that time, hidden, mysterious, when you don't know anything. And he felt that again now, but after all, this is meant to be a beginning, not an end. Maybe the difference between them is small... Again, ill forebodings began to crowd

in on him in those backwoods. Marion could read his mind. He didn't say anything to her – as always, he didn't have to – again and again she repeated: 'Don't be afraid, Janio, don't be afraid...' and gripped his hand tight, so that he would remember what strength flowed through them, between them. This time it didn't help; he knew that the responsibility fell to him, and he didn't even want to lay an eye on any of the old village gossips who prowled around the guardhouse, like crows, asking constantly if he needed any help. He chased them off, taking them for a bad omen, but told his wife nothing of that. He just imagined all the more strongly what he'd do when the day came – his motions, his gestures, his words. He wanted to get everything ready within him, now.

Excerpt translated by Charles S. Kraszewski



© Wiesław Helak

**WIESŁAW
HELAK**

Born 1948

Góra Tabor [Mount Tabor]

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Kraków 2020

ISBN: 978-83-65350-51-0; 368 pages

Translation rights: Wydawnictwo Arcana

arcana@poczta.internetdsl.pl

Books published

Nad Zbruczem, 2018

Tchnienie, 2015

Tryhubowa, 2014

Scenariusze syberyjskie, 2013

Lwowska noc, 2012

Wiesław Helak is also a film director and screenwriter.

Selected awards

Identitas Award (2019)

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2018)