

The evening was approaching and the lights in the windows of the tenement houses by the market square were going out even though the blackout orders had already been lifted; yet people got used to covering their windows tightly during the occupation in fear of enemy soldiers shooting them at night. And dusk fell instantly, except for the white pages glimmering here and there on the pavement, the new mobilisation leaflets dropped from the Soviet crop dusters yesterday, even though the war had already ended, and they seemed unnecessary. Now the wind was blowing them from place to place while no one bothered to read or to sweep them.

“It’s time,” Marion said.

She put on her little grey hat that Janio had bought many years ago in Lwów for their honeymoon trip to Italy, the same hat she wore every year when they renewed their vows in front of the altar. Yet, after the Soviets had come, she would never take her purse or gloves with her, also taking off her gold wedding band and ring so that the comrades would not rob them. She looked at her husband anxiously, as if urging him to hurry up, because it seemed to her that it was the safest time, a dead period of fewer patrols before the curfew, still in place even with the Germans gone a long time ago. He touched her arm gently – she needed more and more affection – also taking off his wedding band and taking his father’s gold watch from his pocket to place it on the table next to her valuables. They were ready to leave – they both made the sign of the cross. She gave Janio one more look of trust, like a wounded partridge in need of help, completely surrendered to her guardian. And she asked without words if he would lead her to their destination on this special day for them.

He opened the door to check for strangers hiding nearby, a habit developed after they had been driven out of their manor and forced to live in the city. He always went out first now, to protect Marion from everything unpleasant, sudden or even sad – the years of war and occupation had weakened her greatly – first, their flight from the Bolsheviks approaching the Seret river area, their family seat that was to be their refuge forever, then the loss of another home at a time when life in peace looked like a real possibility at the end of war, and finally, the fear that even their current apartment was also under threat due to the many informers eager to serve the new authorities for a bottle of vodka. They both knew that the communist decree forbade

the landowners to stay near the estates taken away from them, so they could be kicked out even from their present place at any moment.

It was already dark when they reached the street, its lamps turned on here and there to cast faint circles of light through which late passers-by flitted occasionally. Janio tightened his grip on Marion’s arm and led her straight across the market square to reach as quickly as possible the darkness of the secret passages between the backyards that offered more safety since the patrols avoided them. They were already entering the street with the outline of the collegiate church visible against the ink-blue sky, when suddenly several soldiers appeared around the corner. At the last moment, Janio stepped back instinctively and hugged his wife as if to shield her from danger with his body. He recognised them from afar by their faded jackets and papasha guns.

Excerpt translated by Mirek Lalas



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Selected books

Góra Tabor, 2020

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 Award (2018)