

Lyuba, who cooked for the workers responsible for the clean-up at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant following the catastrophe of 1986.

All right, perhaps it's time to tell you something about the food?

I'll tell you one thing, Witold. Although I was a cook, and although I'd worked at a power station and also at a good restaurant before, never in my life had I seen such an abundance of good food as at Chernobyl. As if the state wanted to reward the people for sending them to such a dreadful place. Go and die, but have a nice feed first.

There was a whole sea of produce there. Little cubes of butter, full fat cream – it sounds funny, but in those days, under Gorbachev, that was a real delicacy – strawberry, blackcurrant and cranberry compote, on top of that there had to be a Soviet drink called *mors* [made of lingonberries and cranberries], and to eat there was aspic, meat, ham, sausage, sea and freshwater fish, smoked, roasted, any way you liked. And all sorts of fruit: watermelons, melons, oranges, pomegranates from Azerbaijan. As a kind gesture, a fellow from Italy sent us two railcars full of lemons, so every day we made lemonade.

The menu was drawn up for us by food technologists to provide the right number of calories. And there was plenty of cooking. Goulash, salads, compotes, pizzas, cheesecakes, meat rolls. Various soups, including pea, buckwheat, Ukrainian borscht, Russian borscht, all required to include meat of course, to give strength. And if we had the time and the energy, we made pancakes or baked buns.

Each person was given a glass of cream too – apparently calcium helped against radiation, so there was also a lot of *tvorog* [curd cheese] and other cheeses. In spite of which, everyone believed vodka helped the most. I was convinced it helped against radiation, and although I'm not a drinker, every day before work I forced myself to drink a shot of it. [...]

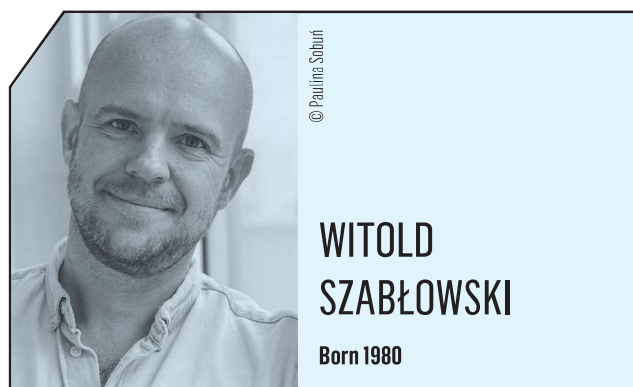
Gradually other canteens began to open near ours, at similar pioneer camps, and Valentina thought up the idea of competing with them. We all sat down together and discussed what we could do, what these people needed. And we devised a plan to set up a table the length of the room laden with all the healthiest foods, so they could help themselves to dessert and enjoy the sight of it all at once. We wanted to give them some comfort, we knew it wasn't easy for anyone, but even in the most dreadful times if you eat well, you'll feel better for a while at least.

So we did it – we set up three tables end to end the length of the dining room, we called it the Vita-

min Table, and every day it was a point of honour for us to make it look as beautiful as possible. What wasn't there? Raya made little roses out of pearl onions dipped in sugar, it looked lovely. I carved carrots into flower shapes. There were also little hedgehogs with pickled apples on their backs. And large thermos flasks filled with digestive teas made with Siberian herbs. Everything was pure, fresh and delicious.

We worked so hard our hands were sore and our eyes stung. One time I was so sleepy that I went to work without any shoes. But everyone who came to our canteen left satisfied.

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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**WITOLD
SZABŁOWSKI**

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anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl

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Selected books

Jak nakarmić dyktatora, 2019

Sprawiedliwi zdrajcy. Sąsiedzi z Wołynia, 2016

Tańczące niedźwiedzie, 2014

Zabójca z miasta moreli, 2010

Selected awards

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)