TRANSLATED EXTRACT

The Price of Freedom

by

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Translated from Norwegian by Lucy Moffatt. Translated with support from NORLA

Foreword

In 2019 Dad received a serious cancer diagnosis. When we found out he had only three months to live, my brother Denis and I both felt an urgent need to ask him about everything under the sun – to get him to talk about his years in parliament, before it was too late. I travelled from Oslo to Belarus to visit him as often as I could. While I wrote in a notebook, my brother recorded a series of video interviews with Dad, which gave him something to think about other than the hideous pain and the realisation that he was dying. It was so important for him to preserve all the stories, all his life experiences. It was also a way of giving my children their maternal grandfather.

"One day, when they are old enough, this can be a way for them to get to know his voice, his facial expressions and his laughter," I thought. "Who knows? Maybe they'll find out that they're like him."

When Dad died, we asked the hospital director if we could borrow the hospital's assembly hall, so that anyone who wanted to say a last farewell to my father could do so there. After all, Dad had worked at the hospital for close to forty years. Even though the director had no time for my father, he gave us permission us to use the space. He led me through the long corridors and opened the door to the hall. In the middle of the wall hung a huge picture of the country's dictator of three decades, Alexandr Lukashenko. Without saying a thing, the director went over to the wall and took down the president's portrait – a gesture that meant more than any words.

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THE GREEN HOUSE

I was born in the summer of 1984 in what was then known as the Byelarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was part of the Soviet Union.

We were a fairly ordinary Soviet family. Mum worked as a violin teacher, while Dad was a surgeon at the local hospital. We lived just outside the capital of Minsk, in the little town of Lahoysk, whose main square was adorned with statues of Lenin and Marx, much like other Soviet towns. The place was set in a valley surrounded by hills and woodland, which made it feel slightly shut off from the outside world. But we felt protected and safe.

Our flat, which overlooked a big roundabout, was on the fifth floor of a white block that had neither lifts nor hot water. Lifts and hot water were the preserve of the capital: we who lived outside Minsk had to settle for using the stairs, and heating up the water ourselves or going to the public baths.

The state owned all the housing in the Soviet Union and there were waiting lists for flats, holiday cottages or cars. The state decided the size and location of your flat. My parents were in their mid-thirties and I was two years old when we finally moved from a one-room 20-square-metre apartment to a relatively large flat with three bedrooms and two balconies. The block had five storeys and twenty apartments, all with a storage space in the cellar and a patch of land outside the building.

In line with the ideals of communism, our neighbours were a mixture of construction workers, teachers and doctors, many of whom had children. Several people on our staircase were alcoholics, and now and then we would witness drunken brawls, fistfights and arguments. We children learned to deal with all kinds of people, and I was used to finding

our neighbour sleeping on our doormat, often cushioning his head with a loaf of bread. People would frequently ring on our doorbell seeking my father's help. Sometimes, they had sick children, other times someone had been injured in a fight. Dad kept his medical bag ready by the front door and was always prepared to help out.

The public sauna was important. The white building lay between the town hall, the courthouse and the bank, and was the town's meeting place. Every Sunday, we would spend several hours in this warm space. First, we would stand in long queues in the waiting room, after that, we would go into a washing hall, where we washed and scrubbed ourselves, and then on into the sauna itself. The building was dimly lit but lovely and snug. Everyone would bring switches made of birch or oak twigs, and the smell of the leaves blended with the smell of sweat.

Through the noise of running water you could hear the conversations between the people of our little town. Their voices echoed around the tiled walls, making it hard to distinguish between them, but I worked out that people were exchanging home remedies and gossip. In the sauna, we were all naked and vulnerable, and that made us more alike, humble in the face of each other's faults and flaws.

In the sauna, too, people would approach my father to show him their wounds and injuries, and ask him for advice. The sauna was the glue that held our little community together, and I dreamed of working there when I grew up – selling tickets in the little booth by the entrance. After the long ritual, we would drowse in the sauna cafe, where I was allowed to drink a pale green, pear-flavoured fizzy drink called Duchesse.

Not far from our house, in the middle of the town's historic centre, lived my maternal grandparents, Elena and Joseph. Their house was tucked away in a cul-de-sac, surrounded by a large garden with apple and cherry trees, raspberry bushes and vegetables – always lush

and well-tended. It was a little green wooden house that Grandfather had built himself after the war. The exterior had beautiful carvings around the windows and under the eaves, but it was very plain inside. A wood-burning stove in the living room, a brick oven in the kitchen. There was an outdoor toilet in the garden.

At one end of the garden, they kept chickens and a couple of pigs. That was also where they stored the firewood that Grandfather chopped and stacked in the summer. Their little garden provided them with several of the staples that could be hard to find in the shops, whose shelves were often sparsely stocked or empty. Grandmother thought it was best to be self-sufficient: you could never quite depend on the state. She had been let down many times and relied on no one but herself.

Grandmother grew up in a little village in the east of the country, in a region where there was nothing but swamp, forest and very little farmland. During the Second World War, her family had to take to the forests to hide from the Germans, and the villagers survived on roots, berries and bark – there was nothing else to be had. But even after the war, her parents, who worked on the collective farm, were so poor that the family always had to rely on the forest to find enough food for the five children. Grandmother spent a lot of time in the forest, especially in the summer. The berries she picked there were sold at a market in town. This enabled them to save money for the harsh winter months.

Grandmother worked as a pharmacist at the town's only chemists shop, while Grandfather was an engineer, a lay judge, a chess enthusiast and a war veteran. He would often visit the schools to tell the pupils about the Second World War.

We spent a lot of time at Grandmother and Grandfather's. Their little house was a meeting place for the extended family. Here, we would be served the best pancakes, with butter, sour cream and jam. Here we would make blood pudding and sauerkraut, gather

eggs from the henhouse and play endless games of chess and Old Maid with Grandfather. And it was here that the most important choices in life were discussed and decided. My grandparents had the last word on family matters. Grandmother always had a piece of good advice and a treat up her sleeve.

When the whole family was together in the summer, we would eat under the big pear tree that grew right outside the kitchen window. The tree cast a perfect shadow over the dining table. On summer days like these, Mum would sometimes take out her fiddle while Grandfather played the mandolin or accordion. We would sing and dance, the neighbours would stop by and it would turn into a little neighbourhood party. Grandmother and Grandfather had a good, close relationship with their neighbours. They helped each other out on a daily basis, borrowed from each other, and chatted whenever they got the chance.

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WHAT CAME BEFORE US

Some days after Belarus became independent, the new school year started. No one commented on or discussed anything; no one explained to us that something important had happened.

“We know you’ve been looking forward to being October children,” the teacher said. “Unfortunately that won’t be happening. Now you’ll be Skaryna children instead.”

Skaryna children?! We’d never heard of Skaryna before. We were sceptical. The teacher told us that Skaryna was the first printer in Belarus and the man who had translated the Bible into the old Belarusian language. He was one of the most important figures of the Belarusian Renaissance, and had studied in Krakow, Prague and Padua. Then she showed us

a picture of Skaryna – a man in a long brown tunic holding a book. He looked terribly dull and held little appeal for us seven-year-olds. It wasn't clear why *he* should be a hero. But our form teacher seemed determined. She lined us up and fastened lapel pins on our uniforms. We were the first Skaryna children in the history of Belarus, but the tradition was short-lived and barely a trace of it remains today.

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According to my parents, our teachers were too ill-informed about the country's history and complicated development to explain the new symbols. Under the Soviet Union, historians had largely focused on the Second World War, or the Great War of the Fatherland as they called it. Anything that didn't serve the purposes of the regime was neglected and swept under the carpet. Neither my mother nor my father, both of whom were born in 1952, had learned about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, to which the territory of Belarus belonged from the 13th to the 16th century. Nor had they heard about the countless rebellions against the Russian empire. The task of Soviet historians was to ignore all historical forms of nationalism and, as a result, whole decades – if not centuries – had been erased from Soviet schoolbooks. Nothing liable to foster national romantic feelings or pride got past the censor. History was chopped up, revised and became just another component in the Soviet machinery.

Mentioning the economic and cultural golden age of Belarus in the 16th and 17th century was forbidden. Back then, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania formed a union with the Kingdom of Poland to create the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – then one of Europe's largest states. The commonwealth stretched from Smolensk in the east to Poznan in the west, and from Pärnu in the north to central parts of modern-day Ukraine in the south. The state was

governed by Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian[1] aristocrats through the national parliament, the General Sejm, thereby limiting the power of the king, who could not pass laws without approval from the Sejm.

Large parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were annexed by the Russian Empire in the 18th century as a result of Russia's attack on the commonwealth and internal power struggles in the Polish parliament, the Sejm. The aristocrats were forced to convert from Catholicism to the Russian Orthodox faith. Many lost their aristocratic titles, while others had to serve the Russian Tzar. The Soviet historians presented this annexation exclusively as a liberation. In their eyes, the Belarusians, who called themselves Litvins and Ruthenians in the 18th century, had simply been freed from the despotic rule of the Poles.

Several of my father's party colleagues were historians and archaeologists, and they spent a lot of their leisure time informing other members of parliament about the history of Belarus. There was a great deal of emphasis on the country's past in those years. When Dad was home at the weekend, he would enthusiastically regale us with everything he had learned from his colleagues. I heard thrilling tales about the 1794 rebellion led by a man called Kościuszko, and about another man, Kalinowski, who'd led his own rebellion in 1864. Both were aimed at the Russian occupation. New history books and monographs in short print runs started to appear in the bookshop in Minsk, and Dad bought everything he could lay his hands on to fill the gaps in the knowledge his generation had been provided with. He had an insatiable need to know more, to know everything that the communists had tried to erase from Belarusians' memories.

My mother also got caught up in this. Her involvement in folk music further education

[1] Ruthenian refers to the East Slavic languages that were used in parts of Eastern Europe, primarily modern-day Ukraine and Belarus

brought her into contact with the country's foremost ethnographers and cultural historians, and she became deeply fascinated by what she learned.

"Just think – the first-ever chamber orchestras in Belarus existed long before the Russian Revolution," she used to say. "Wealthy noble families had their own orchestras and ballet troupes! That's very different from what I learned in the 1970s. All that nonsense about how the first orchestras in Belarus were founded under the Soviet Union, that it was all thanks to the Communists!" She was enraged and felt cheated.

Belarusian authors, composers and scientists had been excluded from the history books. Marvellous literature, music and theatre had been forgotten. If any of them were mentioned at all, they were referred to as capitalists who exploited the people.

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Now I, too, discovered our little hometown anew. The first history book about Lahoysk was published. The park we used to go to every weekend wasn't just a park, I learned. It turned out to be a vast landscape garden founded by the noble Tyszkiewicz family. A garden that had once surrounded their palace. And the strange ruins on the edge of the park were the single remaining wall of the Tyszkiewicz palace! Once upon a time, it had graced the town with its classical architecture. How many times had I played hide and seek in those ruins without realising that a palace used to stand there!

I read about Konstantin and Eustachy Tyszkiewicz, two brothers who were born in the palace in the early 19th century. Passionate about the past, they had excavated burial mounds all around the Lahoysk region. The brothers compared different burial patterns and classified the earliest inhabitants of Belarus. The findings they made were so important that

the Tyszkiewicz brothers are today ranked among the founding fathers of Belarusian and Polish archaeology. Their collections were the starting point for the archaeological museum in Vilnius.

"Just imagine! They had a French gardener who planted so many rare plants in the park."

"Look at those thick-trunked trees. Perhaps he planted them," Mum would say when we went for a walk.

As I'd grown older, our little town had started to feel so provincial and boring. But now everything around us suddenly seemed more alive, more interesting. Dad got it into his head that the snails the park was crawling with had also been imported by the French gardener.

"Those counts who used to live in Lahoysk must have liked snails!" Dad concluded.

Somewhere or another he came across a recipe for snails in garlic – *escargots* – which my parents had read about in books but never had a chance to try. Enthusiastic and determined, Dad went to the park and picked an entire bucketful of snails that we just "had to have a taste of."

The sand crunched between my teeth and the delicate flesh was overcooked and chewy, but we felt a little bit closer to Europe, a bit closer to France and the West.

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"NOT ENUGH OF A BEATING"

The hunger strike had lasted all day. After school, I went home and heated up the meatballs Mum had prepared the previous day. I watched the French teen series, *Helene and the Boys*, which was so popular back then, and went to my piano lesson. After that Mum, my big brother and I ate dinner while we watched the news.

The hunger strike and the referendum were the lead stories. We heard that parliament had voted down three of the four questions put by Lukashenko. Only one of them won a majority: the question about economic integration with Russia. Yet still the hunger strike continued. The opposition didn't think it was enough to vote against Lukashenko's proposals. It was a matter of respecting national laws and regulations. The strike was also a response the illegal firing of the editor-in-chief of *The People's Gazette* some days earlier, and the president's control of the media. The opposition were calling for the public prosecutor to launch an investigation into the corrupt politicians, and to immediately drop the charges against Siarhei Antonchyk, who had presented the corruption report before Christmas.

Dressed in a pale-grey suit, Dad sat on the steps with his fellow party members, his face grave and his eyes sad. The TV screen also showed Lukashenko screaming into the microphone, promising that the strikers would pay dearly for this "circus" if they did not return to their places.

Later that evening, Dad called to tell us that they would continue the hunger strike and that he, along with the other hunger strikers, would spend the night in the Supreme Council ~~House of Representat OK? Har sjekket dette og det ser ut som det heter slik på engelsk. Jeg kunne også referere til «the parliament chamber», men det høres litt feil.~~ Someone from the party had found sleeping bags and blankets for them, so it wasn't all that bad. We were reassured. Dad's voice was determined and cheerful, and they seemed to have the situation under control. What's more, a journalist from Radio Freedom, Alena Radkevich was there. People would be kept informed of how the strike proceeded.

That night I slept in Dad's place. On his bedside table, there was a German text book, the fourth volume of Uladzimir Karatkievich's fantasy series about Belarusian history, a book

entitled *Colon Surgery in Children* and a tube of ointment to soothe his eczema, which flared up in periods of stress. The pillow still smelt of his cologne – a faint aroma of sea and leather.

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Just after seven the following morning while I was eating breakfast, the doorbell rang. Who could it be? No one ever came visiting that early! Was it a neighbour or someone from the council who'd come to read the electricity or gas meter?

I went to open the front door with my brother. First the upper, then the lower lock. And there stood… Dad! His beige overcoat, which he'd only bought a few months earlier, was covered in blood and had a massive rip on one side. His suit trousers were filthy and there were huge bloodstains on his jacket. Dad looked exhausted, desperate and frightened. None of us had ever seen him like this. We were speechless.

Mum came running down the stairs.

"What happened, Sasha? What happened? You poor thing!"

Mum was horrified to see the state Dad was in.

Dad took off his jacket and told us that uniformed men had entered the House of Representatives at around midnight and ordered them to leave the building because the police had received a telephone call informing them there was a bomb hidden in the House.

"We said we wouldn't move, that they could search for the bomb as much as they liked and we wouldn't hinder their work, but that we weren't going anywhere. We knew it was a provocation, of course. After all, they couldn't touch us: we have parliamentary immunity!"

Without looking us in the eyes, Dad told us the police had searched for the bomb for a while but found nothing and then left the House. The strikers lay back down to sleep but at around three o'clock, the uniformed men returned and gave the members of parliament five

minutes to leave the building. The officer in charge counted down: “Five, four, three…” but the members of parliament didn’t budge and after five minutes had passed, 200 black-clad men stormed into the chamber wearing black masks to conceal their faces. They began punching.

“Four or five people for every one of us! They punched us on the back, on the legs, in the stomach and on the head. Someone had squeezed Zianon’s eyes with his thumbs. Then they led us out of the building and stuffed us into cars, drove to the edge of the city and dumped us on the roadside, right in the mud. Eventually we found our way to a police station, the ambulance was called and the doctor recorded our injuries.”

“Denis,” Dad said to my brother. “Get the camera!”

I was sent to school while my brother took pictures of the huge bruises on Dad’s back and legs. Then Dad had a shower, put on some clean clothes and headed back to the capital in our black Lada.

That same morning, some of the hunger-striking members of parliament addressed the Speaker of the House and reported what had happened. Myechyslaw Hryb, chairman of the supreme council of Belarus, expressed surprise and said the police and the KGB both denied any involvement, then added:

“Unless it was the special unit, Alfa, which reports directly to the president…”

The occurrence was scheduled to be debated in parliament too, but the debate happened in the absence of the striking parliamentarians: they had been denied entry into the building.

“Your names aren’t on the list,” the police said to the hunger strikers.

List? The idea of elected representatives being barred from parliament is absurd. In the end, the BPF members of parliament broke through the police checkpoint and made it into

the building.

The atmosphere in parliament was chaotic. Even the Lukashenko loyalists and those who were nostalgic for the days of Soviet rule looked frightened and pensive. Some elected representatives believed Belarus had suffered a coup d'état, while others said it was time for a vote of no confidence in the president or that parliament should be dissolved. Lukashenko's people claimed that no one had been beaten up, and that the whole thing had been a rescue operation because there was a bomb in the building. That's when my father unbuttoned his shirt and showed the whole of parliament and all the journalists the big purple bruises on his back.

"You didn't get enough of a beating! You should have got a worse beating!" screamed the Speaker of the Council, Dzyemyantsyey from his place. Several of Dad's parliamentary colleagues laughed.

Lukashenko accused the opposition of escalating the dramatic situation in the country. From the lectern, he screamed that the strikers had threatened the police, saying they would open their veins – just so they had something they could blame Lukashenko for; that there was no hunger strike; that the strikers had food and alcohol in the chamber. He also implied that the female journalist from Radio Freedom was there to satisfy the parliamentarians' sexual desires…

After that, there was talk of making video recordings from the cameras installed in the chamber public, finding those responsible and investigating what had actually happened. But the recording was never made public and no one was ever held responsible. The photos my brother took when Dad came home remained in the family album – they were never seen by anyone other than our closest family members.

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When Mum went to work the

next day, her boss turned to her and said:

“Not enough of a beating...”