

Sasha, pour one more!



A warm fur is important in Eastern Europe

For the third time, Sasha pours a vodka. No, wait, Valera, the neighbor is also here. Today he's doing the honors. At least three times is mandatory. After that, no one counts anymore. We are drinking – a mixture of vodka and beer. Actually, that's not done in Ukraine. But that's what I feel like today. First of all, I'm thirsty; and second, I'm sad. Occasionally tears roll down my cheeks, like little pearls. It doesn't matter, I add some vodka. I have to get through this. But what has happened? Actually, nothing in particular. That's the whole problem, that nothing happens. I come to Kiev and don't know why. Or the original reasons have evaporated – the business with the books, the consulting services, the position as advisor. Don't I belong here any more, here where I lived and worked over twenty years? Have I stayed too long? Does Ukraine still need me? Did it ever need me? Or did I need it? Did I use it to earn money, first as a journalist, as a foreign correspondent, then as a media consultant, followed by a time in the crazy city of Odessa as an advisor for culture and tourism? No one sent for me. I wanted it myself. I planned it myself. I stumbled into the trap myself. I spun my own net, from which it seems I can no longer free myself. Or was there an inner calling? A voice that lured me to Kiev? What in the world did I want there? Back

then in 1988, two years after the disaster in Chernobyl. Sasha says that it was exactly 25 years ago. He knows because his grandson, Anton, had just been born. Today, his daughter and son-in-law and the two grandchildren live in the USA. Zina, his wife, is there on a visit just now. That's right, back then I brought along Penaten cream, baby care products, and toys from Germany.

"Sasha, pour one more! I'm sad." My old friend does as I requested, sad himself because he knows that he can't really help me. How often did we have discussions about Ukraine, its history, its culture, the Ukrainian language, the politics – either in agreement or controversially? How often did I think I knew better, did I try to convince him that things could be done with Ukraine and its people? At home, a running battle was often waged between Sasha and Zina, his wife. She is from Murmansk, and therefore a Russian; he is Ukrainian. So they argued about which were the better people. Sometimes I thought they were really serious. But then they laughed again. No, their verbal mock battles were just daily banter.

Did I want to conquer a foreign part of the world? And why did it necessarily have to be Ukraine? Just because I had studied Russian at the university? Just because as a child I had seen Saint Basil's Cathedral in the Red Square on television and then absolutely wanted to go

to the place where that impressive building stands? Is that all? Or is it because I also loved secret writing as a child and was delighted when no one could read the mirror writing I had come up with and even less the Cyrillic letters, later? Yes, I have always been attracted to mysteries, to those things that can't be easily understood. For me, the entire Soviet Union was a big mystery – and, incidentally, the entire Slavic sphere, until the present day. The more time I spend in Ukraine and send out my feelers from there – earlier I was often also in Russia – the more I notice that I can't reach my goal. There is always a boundary somewhere. The solution to the mystery is elsewhere. Maybe within me? There are only individual people in Ukraine to whom I feel really close, with whom my soul resonates. Their number grew over the course of the years. Do I really have to travel more than two thousand kilometers to Kiev in order to understand my own feelings? Couldn't I have done that cheaper at home in Frankfurt or in Weilheim? Apparently not.

The potatoes on my plate have all been eaten. I'm starving. I haven't eaten anything all day. "Sasha, make more!" I peel the potatoes that I brought myself. It has to be potatoes, real, big, beautiful Ukrainian potatoes, from Ukrainian earth. Four or five more, thinly sliced, then placed raw in the frying pan. They cook quickly, with lots of oil. I add some of the good Ukrainian mayonnaise to

my plate. Today there has to be a lot of fat – real Ukrainian style. I want it like that. Occasionally a bite of herring. And, of course, more vodka. “Sasha, pour one more! I’m sad. I have to wash something down.” I know that the vodka doesn’t improve anything; it just lets the nagging thoughts temporarily slip into the background. Things will continue tomorrow. The problem or the situation will still be there.

That’s right, 25 years ago Sasha’s grandson, Anton, was born. Only a handful of cars were driving along the Khreshchatyk in Kiev. Ukraine was part of the large Soviet Union and I was right in the middle. I hardly realized what was happening as I began talking with Zina on the street and she immediately invited me to her home. I had just asked for the way to the Philharmonic. From this meeting grew a friendship, almost like family. At the time I was slightly older than thirty and Sasha and Zina were around ten years older. Today Sasha is over seventy. He sees poorly. He can no longer meet me at the metro station on the outskirts of Kiev, where they live, especially not in the snow of the century, in March 2013. But I know the way, even though the faceless prefabricated apartment buildings always irritate me. They all look the same. Sasha is standing in his slippers outside the door, next to the snow, waiting for me. We ride the jolting, dark, cramped elevator up to the sixth floor. We step out of the

elevator and onto the small landing, onto which two apartments open. We enter Sasha’s apartment, take off our boots, coat, and jacket, and make ourselves comfortable.

I feel at home here. I use the toilet, wash my hands, and “Sasha, pour a drink!”

Slowly I start to explain what has happened. Nothing much, really. But the representatives of Munich Airport who, like me, were at the tourism trade fair in Kiev, have explained to me that Ukraine International Airlines (UIA), with whom they cooperate, don’t want to buy my books, which I had offered especially for the launch of this airline’s new flight from Munich to Kiev in June 2013. A perfectly normal business matter – a perfectly normal offer and a perfectly normal rejection. But what were the reasons? Why this decision? My books were not slick enough. They showed Ukraine too much as it really is, without enough cosmetic treatment. And that’s what they said to me – to me who invested so much passion in the books. To me, who is being so honest, because that is



Snow and more snow