

To Essay

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This is a book.

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THE SEVENTH DAY

(Prologue)

When I was a child, I thought people only died on Sundays.

My first encounter with the so-called “fundamental questions” took place early on in a rather non-traumatic, even comical manner. In Lom, where I was born and spent the first seven (so-called formative) years of my life, there were funeral processions going down the main street every Sunday. We used to live smack in the middle of that street in a municipal building that we shared with three other families, with my grandmother breeding hens in the backyard.

It was only later that I learnt what dying really meant, and that it didn't only happen on Sundays, the only day off people had at the time, and that funerals could, in urgent cases, be “held” on a working day, too. In my childhood, those “lucky enough” to be buried on Sundays, were paraded in open caskets up and down the main street. A brass orchestra in front, mostly gypsies, then the casket with four or six pallbearers, gypsies again, (their number seemed to depend on how heavy the casket was), with mourners at the back and onlookers at the sides, lining the sidewalks. Trumpets, trombones, clarinets, davuls and other highly inappropriate instruments would play – expectedly – funeral marches; monstrously orchestrated. The repertory comprised a total of three “numbers”: Chopin, Beethoven and Shostakovich. Each time, my father would announce the name of the composer then scrunch his face, as if pained by the interpretation. Because this was not merely a procession but a relay that juddered between the two ends of the street, where caskets were replaced and a new round of marches would start – Chopin-Beethoven-Shostakovich(x2), and again, Chopin-Beethoven-Shostakovich(x2).

You fe-e-ll-ll victi-im in an une-equa-al fi-ight. . .¹

They seemed to be doing the Shostakovich bit best because they always played it twice - and Dad didn't grumble and mock but hummed along. I hadn't heard Shostakovich's Funeral March yet so that I didn't know how rich and elaborate the music actually was. At any rate, even in this simplified version, this was the only piece adequately performed by the Lom Orchestra. Years later, when I was a “Pioneer” and then a YCL “Comsomol” member², I would stay stock-still at the never-ending Last Post ceremonies for the “fallen heroes” and I would listen to the same funeral march (until I fainted due to low blood pressure), and think how, in fact, all humans were victims in the unequal fight with death. Later yet, when I made the Shostakovich waltzes the soundtrack

¹ A funeral march originating in Russia around 1878, later sung for the fallen of various uprisings, culminating in the communist October Revolution of 1917. It continued to be sung in the Soviet Union thereafter. Subsequently, it was incorporated into Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11, Op. 103, Mov. III. The translation here renders the opening stanza as it was sung in Bulgarian with traumatic elongation of vowels.

² Communist equivalents of Scouting movement, with ideological functions and compulsory membership

to my euphoric moods, I finally grasped why that ‘piece’ sounded somewhat decent when interpreted by the Lom City Brass orchestra. Well, it turns out Shostakovich really liked brass orchestras.

The same orchestra did weddings as well. Which led me to think that Goran Bregović, who was born in the Balkans at approximately the same time as me, must have listened to similar “multifunctional” kind of musicians, so that he named his band “An Orchestra for Weddings and Funerals.” I also found out that both funerals and weddings could be held “at gunpoint”, albeit for different reasons.

My parents were not too concerned about the impact funerals would have on me but they did worry about all the rumpus the brass orchestra produced at 20-minute intervals right under our windows (we lived on the first floor). My brother - a chubby, curly-headed, wide-eyed baby I loved pinching with doubtful benevolence - would wake up and start bawling with fear and exhaustion; I’d laugh into my cupped hands, watching Mom take him away to the bathroom (the only room not facing the main street), Dad would fuss around, harping on about “the million times” he had said the baby should sleep in its stroller in the riverside park, and Mom would snap back from the bathroom that my brother refused to fall asleep there. I think the stroller scenario held some glimmer of hope that the baby would doze off and somehow skip the impending bawling. When I got bored with this sequence, I would retreat to the balcony - my presidium - and wallow in the death parade. Another round, another old lady, her face and her frame so tiny that one of my first conclusions about death was that it made people shrink. Four light-footed gypsy men carried the coffin down the street. The next round, however, “featured” a hefty fellow with ample moustache and a necktie, which disproved my theory. He was carried by six men, all crouched under his weight.

I was certain that only the adults could die. One Sunday, though, the oblong box was smaller and it contained. . . a little girl, like me! A man and a woman of my parents’ age walked in tow with some elderly folk, wailing so loudly you could hear them over the banging and clanging of the orchestra. Why were they crying? Immediately I sneaked out and started walking down the street, alongside the procession. I had to know exactly what had happened to that little girl. I asked some lady who stroked my hair and blubbered, “Oh, dear, dear, my child, an awful tragedy. . . Where are your parents? Are you lost?” I wrenched myself free of this old bore and slipped back home unnoticed.

My parents had already told me – out of goodness knows where – that when people grow old (growing old was defined as the final stage of being an adult), they get tired and *fall asleep forever* and we lay them to rest (“yes, in wooden boxes, in ... the ground”). The word *forever* was problematic, but my parents promised to explain it when I was old enough (which, of course, didn’t happen and the explanations I could find elsewhere introduced another problematic word, *never*.) Neither could I fathom why the living, i.e.

the robust rosy-cheeked ones, were crying. Dad had told me that they were very sad because they could no longer talk to the person who had “fallen asleep forever”. The box in the ground with the sleeping person inside disturbed my imagination, even though that person would *never* wake up. But I didn’t speak to my parents about it.

When I got back from the little girl’s procession, Mom and Dad were discussing something in the living-room while Grandma had taken my baby brother to the bathroom. I asked my parents why there were children who ‘fall asleep forever’ when they were visibly not ‘old’ and ‘tired’. Mom told me off for having gone to the balcony and ordered me to sit down and start drawing. I felt I should punish them for ignoring my question, so I snapped back, “One Sunday you’ll fall asleep forever, too.”

My intentions were totally innocent – after that ‘one Sunday’ I’d be able to go out and do what I wanted while Mom and Dad were *asleep*. But my words had an unexpected effect on my parents - they went quiet.

Then summer came, and on Sunday nights the funeral processions were followed by a tractor driving down the main street and spraying the air profusely with a white mist that was supposed to keep mosquitoes away (with DDT or something of the sort). My parents were worried how poisonous it was. Dad closed all doors and windows so the little provincial town went peacefully quiet.

I guess it was this convenient perception of death as a certain part of the week and part of the cycle of sleep and wakefulness, which led to the encounter with my grandfather, the one I was named after. The thing was, he’d died seven years before I was born. When I told my parents and Nana that I’d met Grandpa on the upper street, the one that led to school, that he’d been riding a bicycle, and that he’d stopped, smiled at me, waved, then jumped back on the bicycle and disappeared around the corner, complete silence fell over the room. Then Nana decreed that I should be escorted to school. Practically, that meant that she would have to do it because my parents worked from dawn to dusk.

“But she walks the streets all day, not just on the way to school,” Mom said.

The impending peril of being kept under lock and key and having my half-paralyzed, limping Nana accompany me to school just because my Grandpa had interrupted his nap and gone for a bike ride prompted one of my first observations about life, namely that truth and freedom are hard to reconcile. Years later, when I came to know that in general (with the exception of *singularities*...) dead grandfathers don’t take bike rides around the neighbourhood, I reconsidered the concept of truth, too. What is true and what isn’t? What *is* it other people refuse to acknowledge? Sometimes the truth isn’t obvious, or maybe different people see different things. As I sat through my college courses in philosophy (in which we learnt about the idealists and their father Plato, only

along the broadest lines so we could denounce them) and Western Literature (especially the lectures on German Romanticism) I often thought of my grandfather on that bike, the apparition in the ossuary monument and the mesmerizing dream I had a few nights before I came of age.

Well, back to my childhood. I'd learnt my lesson, after telling my family about Grandpa's Sunday escapades, I decided to remain silent about the ossuary, a monument to the heroes of the September Uprising.³ The sculpture atop the monument (two men and a woman with submachine guns and raised fists) stood at the center of my childhood jungle – the town park. We were playing hide-and-seek and I huddled in the portico at the base – thick glass shielded by a tangle of wrought iron. I squeezed my face through the metal features and pressed my nose against the glass. There was something in there, shrouded in white veils, it was moving – trying to brush away the veils. A real ghost! Under the materialistic grandeur of the communist heroes sticking up above. I didn't know what a ghost was because at that time there were no horror stories for kids in Bulgaria, or horror movies. The word 'ossuary' didn't ring a bell, either. There were no children horror books, but there were real ghosts and dead grandfathers idly around. I got a bit scared standing there, benumbed, watching the thing move. I told myself that I would only run away if it started coming towards the door. I was so engrossed, I completely forgot I was hiding and got spotted by the other kids. All was well, except that my head got caught in the ironwork and the kids had to ask a lady for help. While everyone was fussing around me, that thing stopped moving, the white veils turned into long white curtains covering something that looked like a big cabinet. Later on, I realized this was the ossuary itself – a place for storing bones, human bones, of course, those of the heroes aesthetically sculpted atop the pedestal. I scraped my ears but my head was finally pulled out. I decided not to tell the kids and the lady, or my parents and Nana. Only I would know the *truth*. Or else Nana might suddenly decide I needed to be escorted to the park, which was just across the street. All Mom had to do to summon me home was to step out on the balcony and call my name (loudly and repeatedly, I must admit).

I was quick to forgive Nana's role as my chaperone, though I had to drag her tortoise speed all the way to school. Most days she made me disgusting toast, which I threw out of the window or shoved under the bed that we shared. (When an oil-and-paprika slice landed on the beehive head of a lady comrade and the hiding place turned into an ant-hill, I changed tactics but never told anyone about my ingenious disposal methods.) But on other days Nana made pancakes with white cherry jam. Oh, the sweetness! And yet, what I most appreciated about her were the books that she read to me and the interesting things she told me. She would say, for example, that words came from

³ An unsuccessful armed insurgency in 1923, initiated by the Bulgarian Communist Party, on command from the Communist International in Moscow, in an attempt to overthrow the government that had come to power by a coup d'état. It led to a meaningless civil war, in which terrorist tactics were used by both the communist party and the government.

other very old languages which people had spoken a long time ago, and the words we use today might have meant something else back then. That piece of information piqued my interest immensely and bred lots of unrelated thoughts in my tousled head. For instance, I wondered how people had decided to call an apple an *æpəl*, what was the connection between the apple itself – this red apple that I had to eat – and the word *æpəl*. What had *æpəl* meant in the fairytale past, and would the people in the fairytale future think of an apple when they saw this assemblage of signs? That took me further ahead – I separated the world from the words for it and even started coining words of my own. I liked *apple*, but *ballpoint pen*, for example, wasn't much to my taste. Once I put my new words into use, I instantly figured out what the existing ones were for - no one understood what I said. Mom nervously insisted that I cut out the nonsense and eat my apple. So, the true purpose of words was for people to understand each other when they talked and to grasp the meaning of what they read. If I wanted the new words I'd invented to be understood, everyone had to know what they meant and agree to call them by those words. But everyone had conspired that *æpəl* would mean this fruit here and all other red, green and yellow ones, too, while *ballpoint pen* would be the other thing that we write with which isn't a pencil.

Primed by this weekend existentialism and the semiotic distrust of words, I started school. In second grade, we began studying a second language, Russian. Nana said it wasn't a "real foreign language" because it would be of no help to me in a "really foreign country". That sounded pretty vague at the time. Yet Nana, a former teacher who read Pushkin and Lermontov in the original Russian, revealed to me something truly amazing through that language, which was not so foreign after all, indeed.

One of the first things we covered in class were the days of the week. How easy it was! The words were almost the same as in Bulgarian. Except for Sunday - *vo-skre-se-nya*. *Voskresenya*. A far cry from the Bulgarian word for Sunday – *nedelya*. I asked the teacher what *voskresenya* meant. She blinked and said, "Sunday, I already told you." I recited Nana's lesson and patiently explained about the history of words, about Russian not being an altogether foreign language because it shared so many words with Bulgarian, and that many, many years ago Bulgarian and Russian had been the same thing – Slavonic. Nana had, for instance, explained to me that *nedelya* (Sunday in Bulgarian) means *not to work, not to deal with anything, to rest, to unwind*. She had pointed out other words in Bulgarian with the same etymological root and had linked them with similar words in Russian. In my mind, her explanation was totally in line with the fact that old and tired people would fall into eternal sleep on the day for *not working*, but I kept that to myself. After that etymological detour, I returned to my question:

"What does *voskresenya* mean?"

The teacher was, to put it mildly, impressed, and, yes, she confirmed that Bulgarian and Russian were once the same language, hence the days of the week sounded almost the same.

“But the word for Sunday is ... different... No, *voskresenya* doesn't mean ‘doing nothing’, it ...” Humming and hawing, the poor woman didn't know what *voskresenya* meant and quickly moved on to numbers and counting in Russian.

But I had my Nana and that night she told me what that weird word stood for.

“Yeah right, she didn't know what *voskresenya* means, did she! Darn communist!” Nana growled.⁴

I had no idea what the Russian word for Sunday had to do with the communists. All I knew was that communists were yucky and that we were not like them. I'd had the blue chavdarche⁵ scarf officially tied around my neck a year before, which mostly meant (to me at least) that I'd grown up and was already a schoolgirl. And yet I had been deeply impressed by the ceremony promoting me to the rank of a chavdarche – loudspeakers and strange ponderous words, a litany of heroes... and once again that mournful ‘*You fell victim in an unequal fight. . .*’ which somewhat puzzled me at the time. I quickly put the blue scarf to use as a dancing veil. I got so carried away that I hit my chin on the edge of the bed, split it and had to have three stitches, done without anaesthesia (that part of the jaw could not be desensitized). That was how I came to associate the blue scarf, one of the first symbols of the communist regime I was growing up in, with a jar of rounded needles, with my screams, with my father and two nurses pinning me to the examination table while the bald doctor pushed the needle in and out. Meanwhile the monumental heroics of the ossuary - another first symbol - was completely overshadowed by a very *real* (and, should I say, rather “appropriate”) ghost.

As for that odd word *voskresenya*, Nana told me a suitably eerie story. Once upon a time, there lived a lad named Kris (she'd called him Christ, but I'd never heard that name, so I tweaked it a little bit). This young man was also paraded up and down the main street of some far-away town. He hadn't fallen asleep yet, though he got a good beating because he was a very good person. I couldn't get my head round why on Earth you'd go beating someone for being a good person, but I didn't want to interrupt Nana.

“In the end, they put him up on a big wooden cross and he *died*.”

Nana spared me the details of how exactly you attach a person to a big wooden cross and how beating was related to the big sleep, what *dying* seemed to mean. There was no Internet at the time, and no books in the library told this story so I couldn't have all the gaps filled in. I had never gone to church because Nana, Mom and Dad were atheists.

⁴ The literal meaning of the word *voskresenya* is *resurrection*. Communists are not supposed to believe in religion.

⁵ Communist equivalent of being a Brownie

“So, he fell asleep forever?” I clarified.

“No, not forever, that’s the thing,” Nana raised a finger. “He *was* re-sur-rec-ted, *vos-kras-nal* on Sunday; that means he came back to life. *Vos-kras-vam* comes from the word “cross” and means to come back to life after *death*. And here we get to the word *voskresenya* – the Russians name Sunday this way because Christ rose from the dead the night to Sunday.”

My little brain was going at full speed. That was the first time I heard the words *die*, *dead* and *death*. They didn’t sound like *falling asleep*, be it *forever*, nor like *sleep*, be it *eternal*. So... wow, fancy that – there is another “scenario” for the Sundays, not only the *falling asleep forever*! You could actually wake up or *be re-sur-rected*. It turns out that my Grandpa, the one on the bike, hadn’t just woken up, he had been... *re-sur-rec-ted*.

Nana observed me carefully and stroked my hair as though she was consoling me about something. We were both silent.

“Nana,” I swallowed, “is this ... a true story or it is a fairytale?”

Nana looked down and stopped stroking me. Then she sighed.

“Please, tell me!”

“I ...,” she took up hesitantly, “I don’t believe that story is... true. Neither do your mom and dad. But millions of people around the world do. They’re called Christians – after the name of Christ. We don’t believe Christ really rose from the dead. But we follow his commandments to be good people,” Nana continued, more animated, “not to hate, envy, beat and kill each other, to help other people. To love each other, to treat everyone like a brother or a sister... Now it’s time for you to go to bed.” Nana rose up and limped away to the sink. “Come brush your teeth.”

Whenever adults don’t want to tell you something, they always tell you to brush your teeth or wash your hands, eat your toast, do your homework or go to bed. But the question, the only and most important one, was already ripe on my young lips.

“Nana, was it only Kri ... Christ who was re ... sur-rec-ted? Do people rise... from ... the *dead*? You. . .because you’re already old and tired, will you as well ... *die*?” swiftly rolled out of my mouth the new word, replacing the old *fall asleep*. “Will you come back to life afterwards... will you be *re-sur-rected*?”

Nana was fussing around at the sink. She was rubbing a soap cloth against the muddy stain on my red coat. She didn’t speak.

“*Смертью смерть поправ,*”⁶ she said with her back turned to me. I didn’t understand a thing. “That’s in Russian. And in liturgic Slavonic.”

⁶ *Trampling down death by death*. Canonical Orthodox expression, usually proclaimed at the midnight Easter service, meaning the death of death, i.e. the elimination of human death, obtained through Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection.

“What does it mean? That you’ll rise from the dead?”

“No, pumpkin,” Nana turned around and gazed out the window. “No one does. Christians believe that they will, but that’s a dream, a fabrication. . . something to console themselves with.”

Well, I did see Grandpa riding a bike down the street, I thought but I kept my mouth shut. Nana turned her back to me and started rubbing the stain again.

“Nana...” I said hesitantly, “if you have to be Christian... to rise from the dead... then do, Nana, please! Please, believe in that Christ!” I begged her and started weeping, not knowing why. Nana dropped the rag, sat beside me on the bed and hugged me with her non-paralyzed arm.

I was weeping under Nana’s arm; I had no apparent reason to do so but she kept stroking me, anyway. I already knew it wasn’t Grandpa I had seen. Somewhere deep inside I already knew that the answer to my question applied not only to Nana, but to Mom and Dad, to my baby brother, to my aunts, my cousins, to all of my girlfriends, my teachers, to everyone, absolutely everyone, to every human being on Earth... Me included.

Years later, when I was a philology student, I thought about the Sunday funeral processions of my childhood and the story of the word *voskresenya*. I found it interesting that language – the not-so-foreign language training in particular – had not been just a means for naming the world I was getting to know: it had been a primary source of knowledge (and not just *any* knowledge!). All Slavs had focused on the fact that their God, the grandfatherly figure Bulgarians believed in, twiddled his thumbs on the seventh day. Russians, however, were more mystically inclined, so their language remembered this as the day of Christ’s resurrection. The conservative memory of language had prevailed against the thoroughly non-transcendental materialism of communism as the people awoke from “*the opium trance of religion*”⁷ (although Russians were not exactly jolted into sobriety). Language thumbed its nose at ideology. It was hard to believe that Stalin and Lenin hadn’t imposed a new name on Sundays. Neo-Latin and Germanic languages call the seventh day of the week God’s day or simply a sunny day (most probably because there isn’t much sun in the North). That sunny day of God, even in its cloudiest, rainiest and iciest North-European versions, had become inextricably linked with *Frère Jacques* and the procession of peaceful, neatly dressed people, a community, taking off time from work and going to church.

Eleven years later, when my Nana died on a cold April Sunday, I was nineteen and I wrote in my diary:

⁷ as per Lenin

On Sunday, God took a rest, while his son Christ rose from the dead. We, humans of all languages and religions – some wasting our time on a Sunday, others going to church – we all die, irretrievably, on the seventh day of our lives.

They say life truly begins the first time a loved one dies. I still wonder if I should be counting from Nana's death or from the first time death peeked behind the curtains of my Sunday children's theatre. In any case, I find death a riveting and meaningful beginning to every story about life.

TIME IS IN US

[...]

As a student in Vienna in the early 20s of the previous century, my Grandpa (the one on the bicycle) bought himself a pocket watch – a thin, elegant Longines. The hydro-engineer kept his Longines on a silver chain in his waistcoat pocket. He would wind it up each morning after breakfast, after shaving, to mark the beginning of the new day. When Grandpa got sick and bedridden, the Longines sat on the night table and he kept winding it up every morning to mark another day he had lived. Then he motioned for Nana to wind up the watch for him, first with his hand and later with his eyes only.

Grandpa died on a chilly February morning in 1960. Nana wailed and glanced at the watch – it said 5:28. Tenderly, Nana closed his eyelids, washed him with the help of a neighbour, then ran around arranging the funeral; Dad and my aunt arrived in the afternoon. In the evening Dad sat by his late father for a while. He took his watch in his hand. He found out the watch had stopped at 5:28. My Dad marveled at the coincidence but thought that the watch just hadn't been wound up. He wound it up, but the hands didn't move. He took it to the clockmaker who, after admiring the Swiss beauty of time's delicate insides, told him that either the mainspring or the main wheel were irreparably broken. The watch had been working flawlessly for 39 years and had stopped the minute my Grandpa died.⁸ Was this a coincidence or a shockingly literal metaphor for the end of Grandpa's personal time?

Nana kept that permanently *deadlocked* watch in the little drawer of her night table. She had told my parents that she wanted to take it to her grave. She was an atheist, I had never seen her make the sign of the cross or go to church. She had told me the story about that lad Kris rising from the dead only to explain the meaning of the word *voskresenya* (*resurrection*.) Why did she want to be buried with Grandpa's watch since she didn't believe in the afterlife? And why that particular watch? I never asked. Probably because once, when I was still a child, she terrified the hell out of me because of it.

As a playful and rather inquisitive kid, I used to rummage everywhere (of course) and Nana's drawer was no exception. I inspected that watch a few times, and then once I tried turning its hands. I found out it didn't work and, disappointed that it wouldn't make much of a treasure, I discreetly placed it back in the drawer the way I had found it – under Nana's passport and some other documents. That evening Nana came into the living-room, limping briskly towards me, and ... slapped my face! Startled, I held my burning cheek and couldn't believe what had just happened – my Nana, who made pancakes and knit cardigans for me with her single unparalyzed hand, she who read books to me and told me

⁸ All this sounds like the popular children song, but it is actually a true family story.

wondrous tales, my Nana was looking at me with livid green eyes. Never before had I seen such expression on her face. She held the forefinger of her better arm in front of my face:

“Don’t you dare touch the watch in my drawer again!” she intoned, turning around and limping out of the room.

Mom had tried to defend me, but my father had stopped her. They were both silent. I felt cheated by Nana who didn’t seem to be the person I knew. I felt abandoned by Mom and Dad who said nothing and didn’t bother to console me. Heavy tears rolled down from my eyes. Only then did Mom come over to give me a hug.

“Let me tell you the story of that watch”, Dad said. “You’ll see why it’s so important to Nana and why she got so upset.”

“But I didn’t break it or anything! It wasn’t working when I touched it,” I sobbed.

“Did you move the hands?” Dad asked.

I didn’t lie. Later, when I heard the story, I found out I had thoughtlessly dipped child’s hands into the magic of time. Having met Grandpa in the street didn’t make up for that. A few days later, I had a discreet peek at the drawer – Nana had turned the hands back to 5:28. Her green eyes were full of their usual vitality and affection and her better hand touched me tenderly as before.

Years afterwards, as I was studying for my Ancient Greek Literature exam I suddenly remembered that episode. It felt like as if I had unwittingly desecrated Grandpa’s grave, and that had provoked Nana’s *wrath*.

When Dad made some money, he got himself a Longines, too – a thin, plain leather-strapped thing. I’ve often caught him gazing wistfully at the watch, obviously not really checking the time, making sure he wasn’t late to something, or admiring its beauty.

*Tick-tock, tick-tock,
how much time I have in stock?
Tell me, watch, and do not lie,
how much time before I die?*

In an outburst of black humour, I got the idea of writing a letter to the Longines company and offer them my family story and metaphor for commercial purposes: “Longines - for as long as you’re in. It will tick with your ticker, it will stop with your flicker”.

A few years ago, I saw another watch – a massive, heavy, techno design thing. The engraving on its back said, “*The first watch worn on the Moon. Flight-qualified by NASA for all space missions.*” The guy wearing it was also part of an engineering clan, a German guy full of childlike admiration for gadgets and the human technological genius. He had visited Cape Canaveral a few times to watch spaceships launches. A lawyer by education and a banker by profession, he solved integral equations for fun (and these equations often

lean towards infinity) and exhibited enviable knowledge on music and a surprisingly cultivated taste in the visual arts. All in all, an exemplary product of the German mania for precision (hence the talent for composing trains, cars, rockets and music), holistic development and self-improvement (hence the penchant for philosophy, art and sports.) His father was a German engineer who had built railroads and developed mines in Africa, his grandfather - an engineer as well, and a friend of Niels Bohr, and his great grandfather built railroads - in Siberia, as engineer-in-chief to the Russian Emperor.

The engraved assurance that the watch will work in *all* space missions impressed me immensely. I found it funny how in space that human watch and its round face would continue to measure, in human seconds and hours, the circular earthbound time. Time in the Universe, and our personal time as well, are linear.

I enquired if that technological marvel around his wrist would still work at a speed of 186,000 miles per second, and, if so, what kind of time it would measure, whether it would keep on ticking and how it would go about it inside a black hole containing, they say, antimatter and hence antitime, whatever that is, and, if we went to the big planet of my teenage reflections, which rotation would the watch take into account – that of the big planet or that of the Earth. The German guy admitted he didn't know and no one knew. Yet.

"Therefore," I concluded mercilessly, "this guarantee is only valid for familiar and, above all, humanly possible space missions."

All boys, even grown-up ones, and especially German ones, dislike questions and situations where they feel helpless. I gave him back the watch and changed the subject to something more down-to-earth.

But then, I kept thinking about his watch. If our clocks only measure terrestrial time, which exists only insofar as we think of it, embody it and measure it, our earthly time would have no meaning outside our lives, the life of humankind, and the life of all living things on Earth. If the *t*-time is more of a constant relation between certain quantities in the Universe, a function of distance and velocity, then that thick ugly watch with the overweening declaration was an instrument for the *temporal colonization* of space or at least for the definition of a cocky macho baloney of humans to that effect. Weird things cross a person's mind while making love.

[...]

THOU SACRED LANGUAGE OF MY FOREMOTHERS

Language is the house of the truth of Being.
Martin Heidegger

[...]

After the pink tractor debacle, a year later Santa Claus brought the four-year-old Misho a puppet theatre. As an introduction to the human comedy of the adult world, the set included the three puppets from the classic triangle – a princess, a prince and a dragon.

We demonstrated how the fairy tale world of the theatre is supposed to work. Rada got behind the curtain, playing out the classic scenario in French – the dragon wanted to abduct the princess, the prince killed him (with a sharp and absurdly colourful cocktail stick), the prince and the princess kissed each other and marched off to get married.

Then Christian got behind the curtains and played, in German, a more humane version of the story – the dragon was, in fact, the enchanted brother of the princess, but the prince was not scared of him, he didn't leave the princess – on the contrary, he loved the dragon like his own brother and that broke the spell. Rada was whispering in my ear, summarizing the action in Bulgarian. When at last the princess, the prince and the dragon held hands and waited for the spell to be broken (which was to happen behind the scenes as we didn't have a fourth puppet for the human version of the dragon brother), I started humming the Ode to Joy while Christian recited, from behind the curtains, Schiller's words about all people being brothers and God giving everyone (every male, that is) a peaceful home and a loving wife.

Then I got behind the curtain and played, in Bulgarian, the Cyrano version where the dragon was the shadow of the stupid prince, prompting him the words to win the heart of the princess. The dragon was in love with the princess, too, but he was, indeed, an ugly dragon. On the other hand, the girl was no ordinary princess but one who valued words above looks. She found out about the scheme and wasn't scared by the dragon. I left the story open-ended instead of making a smooth transition to the "Beauty and the Beast". Rada was whispering in Christian's ear, translating the action in French.

Michael watched, wide-eyed, all three versions. When his turn came, he got behind the curtains, fumbling a bit, making the curtain swell but finally managing to get the puppets onto his hands. And then, having understood that the story depended on *who* was telling it and in *which language*, he popped his head between the curtain and asked: „Français, allemand ou bulgare?" The audience laughed and voted for French, the language the four of us shared. Misho finished my story, but choosing a Shrek type of scenario instead. If I got it correctly, the princess was actually a dragon-girl who's been magically turned into royalty, which explained why she liked the dragon's words so much.

The silly prince had no chance of winning her heart with rings and castles. The audience was mesmerized.

I was wondering if my son would finish the story in a different way if he'd chosen to tell it in German or Bulgarian. Is language really a reflection of a certain model or philosophy, or is the speaker expressing his philosophy of the world, his culture and his character through a certain language and its expressive armory?

[...]

Language is the house of Being and an attribute of consciousness (to quote Heidegger). There's only one language in which we *are* – in the existential and Biblical sense of the word⁹. Your first language, your mother tongue, as they called it until recently, is the language you don't consciously learn; this is your intimate language, in which you become a human being. This is the language of Being and all things pertaining to it. In this language words cast shadows of emotion, colour, aroma, pictures, gestures, faces and stories. These shadows, superimposed upon the literal meaning, are handed down to you by history, literature, culture, by the Others who *were* in this language before you. And by the Others who *are* concurrently, together with you, in this language, that is to say the community who develops the language in colloquial speech, media, education, literature. Language is belonging – to a bloodline, people, history, culture, spirit, mythology.

[...]

As the notions of “home” and “abroad” are dying away, so does the recognition of any language as your arterial tongue, of any culture as your own, unlike all other languages and cultures. It's no longer your origin, your citizenship or your mother tongue determining what language or languages you'll be speaking at home, at school, at college or at your job. Language is less attached to the idea of belonging. My children have not taken Bulgarian with their breastmilk (the fact that they were not breastfed at all was hardly crucial in that respect). Bulgarian is their mother tongue only in the literal and narrow sense of the word – as the language of the mother, the language they *only* speak with their mother (and, from time to time, on Skype or for a week or so in Bulgaria – with their grandparents, their uncle, Dad, or aunt).

To my children “the mother tongue” is no longer the language in which they *are* and the language in which they learn about the world, the Universe and people, the language in which they become part of their bloodline and their people, the language they will learn to perfection with all its grammar, idioms, connotations, intonations, and expressive punch, all the culture, everyday life, history and mentality that are built into it. Bulgarian is not the language in which they think, they dream, the language in which they talk in their

⁹ Two at most, if the family and the environment are bilingual; and even then these two languages would be complementary in the fundamental discourse of the Word.

sleep, the language in which they love and feel homesick. Bulgarian is not the language they set apart from all *foreign* languages in which they *are not*, from those foreign languages they only use as a pragmatic means for communication with the non-Self, with the non-intimate world, for learning and transmitting information, for professional accomplishment and money-making. My children's mother tongue, Bulgarian, is not home to them. It's still "sweet magic" only because it's the language of Mom, the language of home, of those sweet verses from their childhood, only because one day it will be or it will have been the language of Grandma. And yet, if they can't say something to Mom in Bulgarian, my children will say it in French or English. They could even say it in German if Mom had taken care to learn that. For my children, Bulgarian will be what savory is for Iliya Troyanov.

For the new citizens of the world there are no places whose history makes them feel pride or shame, love or hatred. The notion of "native soil", the sense of belonging to a certain nation are dying away as personal identifiers; they have no meaning to a global nomad. Our children feel no emotions with a national denominator. By the way, they feel less emotional as a whole – despising passion and the (melo)dramatic excess of gestures and words. They are only curious and anxious as tomorrow's citizens of the planet. In their world there's nothing heroic, proud and fatal, nobody loves and hates anyone to death. There's no content that's beautiful and inexpressible in any other language. There's no cultural collective memory. No mythologies. There's politically correct history, non-fiction, scientific publications of present interest, professional journals, political analyses, social causes. And news. And all of that is primarily in English.

[...]

About fifty years ago the author was proclaimed to be dead – with quite a bit of postmodern manifest pathos (just as history was supposedly over). The author, though, has been coming to life ever since, in strong and authentic narratives (as for history, it merely "kept going"). It's not like that with language. Languages die imperceptibly, non-heroically, once and for all.

Will our children and grandchildren even need an intimate arterial language, a language of Being, a homeland language? Will they be able to achieve the magic, the revelation, the insight of The Word? Will they have something to express in their native tongue, and nowhere else? Will they have something to read and relate to – in this language only? There's beautiful, strong poetry written in all languages, but are there stanzas and meaning that's inexpressible in any other language which are laid in the foundations of their consciousness, which, in the intimate and biblical sense of the word, are the beginning of their word? And if The Word is there at the beginning of their consciousness, what language would that Word be in? Will language remain the organ of consciousness for our kids, the one that keeps them human, or will it be just a practical

instrument for communication and information exchange? Could the beginning of consciousness and the realization of man take place in other sign systems – pictures, music, dance, film, augmented reality, videogames, mathematical, physical or chemical law?

Language is the organ of our consciousness, of that “unwavering band of light” that is everywhere and at all times. And yet languages die because our humanity does. Our children are not only orphaned in their lack of homeland and national identity. They fall into an ever greater un-consciousness as humans, too. Having outgrown their bloodline and their people, and things like memory and culture, religion and ideals, our children are modern and alone. They have no community of shared destiny, shared goals, shared time and shared transcendental fate. The only thing bringing together tomorrow’s citizens of the planet is their shared fear, their existential survival project that has replaced all the other future projects. And their drive for success, affluence, possessions, happiness, here and now.

Men and women today are numbing their consciousness, pushing it away to the basement of their personality as some kind of impairment, a disability, an obstacle to their rush to be happy. That’s why the globe-trotters don’t need a language for their consciousness, a Sein-Sprache, they don’t need The Word. The new generation has no language to touch upon The Word, it doesn’t need revelation and insight, a language beyond the everyday stuff, a language in which to experience Being. The Word is no longer at the beginning of the world and consciousness. Language is no longer the organ of consciousness in which you emerge as a person. People have no further need of a discourse in which they can rebel against oblivion, pointlessness and death. What we have come to rely upon is artificial intelligence, digital memory and science. Their language, however, is made up of data, numbers and laws, not words, emotions, memories, dreams and daydreams.

[...]

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Now I suggest the kind reader carries out a thought experiment, very similar to those which are attempted in fundamental theoretic physics and astronomy. It seems quite in order to include such a text in a book, which is anyway titled Experience. Contemporary science sounds more and more like literature with Sci-Fi (up to now) elements and even like popular philosophy with existential elements. Despite the fact that scientists (still) look as if they don't accept the conditional or existential element. But then philosophers seldom understand or are interested in physics, astronomy and mathematics. Everyone ploughs their own furrow, occasionally spits out some biting comment, and the laymen wonder who to listen to.

The experiment will take an hour and a half¹⁰ and it will consist in reading this text and a few quick and quite simple tasks. And it's OK – there's no specialist knowledge needed, there's nothing difficult either to understand or to do.

First phase of the experiment

Macro

“What would a person see, who's being transported on a ray of light?” Albert (Einstein) asked himself when he was still a child.

“My dead Granddad riding a bike round our block,” another child would have answered a little more recently in earth time.

After another 45-46 years, a woman, who's essaying to find meaning and to write, would have added, that to see the dead and various other “transcendental” stuff, it isn't even necessary to rush at the speed of light. It's enough to store the cosmic dust over your retina, with which you were born¹¹, to use your bed more often as a flying machine, dreaming and awake, including when you're making love, to look more often at the starry sky, not to shove that fear of nothingness and death into the corners of your mind and to stuff them with *things*, and to crawl backwards and forwards in space-time on the unyielding ray of light inside you¹², which is your consciousness, which is you, uniquely and humanly you. As you are “transported” in your mind, and eventually you sometimes fill up with the petrol of human knowledge and science, but rely more on the propeller of intuition, memories, imagination, art and love, you can try everything, see everything, be where you want, and when you want. The real problem is whether your human mind is

¹⁰ If you don't read the optional footnotes it could take even less time

¹¹ According to me that's why we're blind as newborns. Blind to this world

¹² after Kurt Vonnegut, see also the Epilogue

truly capable of seeing and processing everything. And something else, which you shouldn't forget on this journey: who is observing, thinking and calculating defines to a great extent the very object of observation? That's why the story I'm telling you is special. In it everyone, and above all you, who at this moment are reading this, as observers and thinkers, are the main heroes. And perhaps authors as well.

And so, once upon a time...No, this story starts differently. At the beginning of time, before there was time at all...there was no time. And there wasn't anything at all. Nothing! Even space did not exist. False start? I'm stumbling here, too, and cannot imagine this. But that's what thought experiments are for – we accept the *a priori* situation, like the axioms that Mummy can't explain, and we continue.

[...]

[...]

Habitats! The first prototypes were small and ineffective. They accommodated 70-80 people, “packed like sardines” (although by this time there were no sardines and people didn’t understand this ancient phrase) and three or four cows, which were provided with a green square of two hundred square metres, separated and isolated (the cow’s excrement and farts, like those of the people were extracted and also used for energy). There were no decorations at all or other luxuries, the covering, although revolutionary for its time and used in principle later on, had tears, punctures and other defects. The first habitats...

In the second half of the 21st century, as they saw where things were going, the rich countries, alliances and states, and wealthy people shrugged off the risk of asteroids or other cosmic disasters, and because of the lack of technological time to transport life to Mars and the moon, decided to begin to build habitats, devised and planned, long ago. These new Noah’s arks were conceived in faraway 1976, as an extreme futuristic vision, in a science fiction novel – “The High Frontier” by Gerard O’Neill. Gerard imagined habitats, as glazed hollow cylinders, high as mountains and as wide as ten to fifty kilometres, which would feed on solar energy, and inside they’d be furnished with replicas of beauty spots and works of art. Fifty years later a really rich dude returned to this idea, now a project, “inspired” by climate warming and a period of humanity’s speediest technological progress. The Futurist scientist and the rich dude¹⁴ had not foreseen two things – that the first habitats would only become reality hundreds of years after their conception, i.e. their grandkids would live in them, and that because of extreme need and urgency, the habitats would be built on the Earth and not on another planet.

Their “positioning” on Earth had two big advantages. And two big disadvantages. The two advantages were that there was no need to wait another few hundred years and to spend half of the world population’s brute-product in order to build on another planet – they could and urgently had to be built on Earth. And there was no need for the cylinders to wildly rotate, to simulate gravity – the earth still reliably provided this. This at least. Actually, with Earth location, it was no longer necessary for the habitats to be cylinders – there was no strangely high horizon, strange days and nights, strange dawns and sunsets. There was just a transparent wall, behind which the now sterile uninhabitable world would lie, with its known earthly horizon, day changing into night in the familiar earthly rhythm, the day still lasting 24 hours, forever summer. Only that outside the frightfully scorching sun was clouded in a fog of dust. The habitats simply had to reproduce and, under a huge transparent dome, maintain the life conditions where man could exist.

¹³ I hesitated a great deal about where to put this chapter. Because for some readers what is described will be a desired heaven, for others, the terminal phase of human civilization. My hesitation is reflected in the title, which leaves the right to realise the text to interpretation and the reader, including within a certain *time* context.

¹⁴ Jeff Bezos

The two big risks were the continuing threat of a completely chance cosmic disaster and the availability of energy sources. The first risk was accepted willy-nilly, but everyone avoided mentioning it. As to energy, in the projects of the science-futurist and the rich dude, the alien planet provided its inexhaustible natural resources for the purpose. In reality man had to harness solar and atomic energy, water, hurricanes, shit and farts, in order to secure energy for the habitats, the vertical farms, the intelligent machines, and virtual reality. The environment was risky too – alien planets were limitless and uninhabited, while the earth of the Earth was melting every year like...*the biscuit in hot chocolate* (another already incomprehensible phrase.) And overall the two gentlemen were proved wrong in their thoughts about the cosmos, as feeding man from the cradle with unending material wealth. It turned out that man had first to *exist*, and only then eventually to *possess*.

The habitats became ever bigger, as at the zenith of habitat-civilization, the largest contained 100,000 people, and in the most luxurious there were heavenly beaches, the Venice *Grand Canal*¹⁵, and Paris' *Petit Palace*. Thinking of culture, leads us to mention, that the *built* cultural heritage was left to the mercy of... the sun, there in the reality of the low oxygen and high temperatures, where it quickly got lost and more precisely – was burnt out or rotted away in the hurricanes and floods of over tens of metres. There was no way to transport these enormous buildings fountains and murals. Just a few statues were installed in the habitats. Of course all this was preserved in the greatest detail in virtual reality¹⁶. Everything portable – paintings, manuscripts, sheet music – was moved early into some special habitats, which turned into store houses, not tourist destinations, because people now rarely travelled any distance.

[...]

¹⁵ The model presented by Jeff Bezos is just like this. Clearly the guy has romantic memories of Venice. Just like me in fact.

¹⁶ including architectural plans, similar to the virtual plans of Notre Dame, Paris, which became very precious after the fire in 2019

ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL

[...]

The orchestra conductor was Uncle-Dan, as I thought the old man was called, with his wild white hair and his frameless spectacles, which skewed on his nose after some furious move. Uncle Dan was a now pensioned ex-dentist. “Unlike me” Dad told us at home, “he wanted to be a conductor, to be a slave to music, but his people in the village didn’t even know what that was and cut him off with ‘a musician don’t feed a home’. Look, being a dentist is different. And Dan became a dentist.” “He helped people feed themselves” was my private conclusion.

Uncle Dan would close his eyes and cradle the music with his hands, then suddenly he’d be wide awake, tapping his stick on the podium, the music would stop in stages, featuring instrument after instrument, he’s shout “But listen, please, the oboe has just overslept.” Or he’d continue to rock the sound and just signal to some instrument to be quieter or louder – “more, more, more”, he’d suddenly wave his arms furiously, to beat the rhythm and to chase that “Presto, presto!”, unattainable for the amateur orchestra.

What happened with the music itself in these rehearsals also amazed me. The music was dissected, bar by bar, instrument by instrument and then sewn up and reassembled instrument by instrument, bar by bar. And again. And again. I discovered the voices of separate instruments and the beauty of their parts, which otherwise I didn’t hear entirely. I sat open-mouthed, amazed by the beauty of the combined voices and parts of two-three instruments. In the end the musical tapestry of the whole became somehow transparent, because I now could hear the different instruments, their voices and music. And even so I forgot about them, hypnotized by the power and might of the total orchestra, of the total music.

[...]

The orchestra’s repertoire was inevitably limited. The orchestra itself was not fully manned because of a lack of qualified staff, so to say. They called on a gypsy from a wedding and funeral brass band for the percussion. But in spite of his efforts he still came out too strong and somewhat inappropriately playful and Uncle Dan would scold him that this wasn’t one of his gypsy weddings.

The solo singers were also quite colourful. The Soprano was the daughter of a “Boruna drunk” – with a slight squint, but even so a pretty girl of about twenty, with long coppery hair, who the rest of the time cleaned fish. Although her voice was not at all opera trained, she sang like an angel and even Uncle Dan sometimes dropped his baton, to listen to her, without the orchestra. I asked Dad what “Boruna drunkard” meant, because it sounded to me like a dragon. The alto was the snooty secretary to the Mayor, who mostly owed her voice to cigarettes. Every time she was made up for the stage. A dock-worker

roared out the bass parts. He let loose his voice and drowned out the anyway undermanned orchestra. Uncle Dan would signal “pianissimo, pianissimo”, then he’d lose his rag. “This has to be tender! You’re wooing a woman, for fuck’s sake, not swearing.”

The Dock-worker would snigger and carry on as he knew best, showing off his unchallengeable strength and virility over the pale intellectual Tenor (otherwise an accountant) who seemed almost ashamed of his voice and the high notes that it could reach. Afterwards he’d cough in embarrassment, as though his voice had somehow cheated on him. The cross eyed angel and the dock-worker couldn’t read music and learnt everything by ear. The back-up vocal parts were performed by male and female teachers, and sometimes they hit false notes, but then they obeyed Uncle Dan and sang more quietly so the false notes didn’t jar too much. A flock of pensioners made up the choir, which sang in the protestant church (on the rare occasions when the church was open for a service). Otherwise the reading room hosted a small mixed amateur chamber choir and this dozen men and women led the church support.

Every season the orchestra premiered something new – whole operettas like *The Countess Maritza*, *Rose Marie*, *The Gypsy Princess* came down the river from Vienna. Once set up with costumes, stage sets and all the props, the operettas would run for years ahead. There were recitals of the lighter more popular arias or whole instrumental concerts – *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, Liszt’s preludes, *Peer Gynt*. I remember the last one, rather I hear it in my head even today, as something mostly deafening. With the speeding up of the tempo, Uncle-Dan fell into an apoplexy and in the end jumped convulsively, his arms spasmodic, and the gypsy with shining eyes, smashed the percussion in the places Grieg had and had not foreseen.

[...]