

The Temple of Poseidon

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For Bohdan Pevnyi

“Oi ty zh Haliu, Haliu molodaia...”
(From a Ukrainian folksong)

Atop the highest of the low mountains that rise over the Aegean Sea, in a spot not far from Athens, framed by the deep rich azure sky, soar the snow-white and mighty, albeit part ruined, marble columns of the glorious Temple of Poseidon—all that remains of what was once a slender, august edifice. These vestiges of its spiritual beauty have survived for millennia.

A skinny Ukrainian teenager stares, unable to take his eyes off the ruins of the temple, mesmerized by the glow all around him. He absorbs the sensation as one of the world’s great wonders calls him to an awakening of the soul. Enchanted, trembling at what he has seen during the several hours that he has been here with his parents, he touches the columns with his hands and approaches the remains of the temple from all sides, as his gaze imbibes the endless, wondrous blue spaciousness of the Aegean Sea with its tiny islands—the view a visitor has from the foot of the temple toward the sea. A sudden sadness overwhelms him because he must leave this wonder: he cannot take it with him, and who knows where or when he will again find himself in the presence of such a majestic creation of the human soul. This is a beauty that cannot be grasped, attained, nor embraced. It is beyond the bounds of the limits of the attainable. It just exists, a sliver of eternity.

Before leaving for Athens with his parents, enchanted by the splendor he has seen, he enshrines it in his soul forever.

Halia finished high school the year the Soviets entered Volyn. In the haste and tumult of that turbulent time, some fled to Poland; others lacking the nerve to leave, agonized about what was happening; and still others celebrated the unification with eastern Ukraine.

Halia’s mother, Marianna, remained quite calm. She was a high school teacher, and since her husband’s sudden death several years before she had become passive, believing that everything happens according to fate and

God's will: What is to happen will happen, what is not will not, and there is no use getting agitated. She was nearing fifty, and though still quite pretty as a woman, she did not seek lovers, because her life's meaning was in her work—which, Marianna was convinced, is always necessary, no matter what the times or who holds political control—and, above all else, in her daughter, the beautiful Halia, who was a good student and serene by nature. Now, under the new regime, Marianna imagined Halia studying at a university, maybe even somewhere in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Let it be Soviet—what was the difference? In these changing times, things could get no worse, no matter who was in charge or what they were saying. In fact, the communists say that we will live better under the Bolsheviks than we did under Poland.

But within a year, Halia married.

Vadym Medvedenko, a first lieutenant, was quartered at their apartment. The residence was large, and they were offered money. And when the arrests and deportations began, it did not make sense, to say the least, to refuse a request from the new authorities.

Medvedenko was twenty-five, Halia eighteen. He was tall and had dark eyebrows. Halia fell in love.

And things progressed as they always do in such situations: I can't live without him, I'll study by correspondence at Kyiv University; his parents live in Kyiv—we'll all go to Kyiv as their guests.

The neighbors were appalled—marry a Soviet?! Just look at what they're doing in Volyn. And in Galicia! Marianna, think about it. Talk Halia out of it!

But Marianna loved her daughter and wanted her to be happy: these were new times, everything was changing, let her live the new way.

The beginning was the hardest. Halia never did find out what happened to her mother: she died in a concentration camp, most likely. That Vadym had died she knew for sure. His closest friend, Mykola, also a lieutenant, jumped out of his car into the house for a minute on the first evening of the war: "Gather your things, the evacuation begins in two hours, trucks will leave from the officers' quarters!" And, in answer to the unspoken question: "Vadym died right before my eyes, killed by bomb fragments."

"Run! Run away, Halia! Things won't be good here!"

Things hadn't been good for a long time. Marianna did not want to go anywhere. She clutched Halia with trembling hands and kissed her good-bye. It turned out to be their final farewell.

The truck full of the officers' families did not get very far. When they ran into a German tank column, they stopped and everyone ran out of the

vehicle, scattering in different directions.

Halia made it back to Lutsk, barely able to drag her feet. Mother was not at home. Half-dead, senseless with fear, pain, and exhaustion, she staggered to her bed and fell asleep. They came for her in the morning.

She deduced that the Gestapo had also arrested her mother. She began asking about her, but soon fell silent. They already knew all about Halia too—a local and the wife of a Soviet commissar.

"You're a Soviet whore, that's what you are!"

Surprisingly, this German spoke a bit of Ukrainian. Halia had studied German in high school, so she was able to gather from the conversations she overheard that his name was Otto Hinzl.

"You're a good-looking Soviet whore. From now on, you will serve the Reich."

He was no longer laughing. Covetously, he bared his yellow teeth. Not very tall, he was handsome enough and somewhat pleasant, but when he smiled his face took on an eerie look: something deep in his smile signaled danger, destruction, terror.

He was the first to rape Halia. There was no one else in Halia's cell. This basement had been a prison for years—during the Soviet occupation, the NKVD had used it, too.

Hinzl entered the cell and commanded: "If you want to live, undress." Halia began to undress, but her trembling hands wouldn't cooperate.

Hinzl approached and ripped off her dress. Almost instinctively, Halia covered herself with her arms. In a frenzy, Hinzl hit her with the whip that he carried and then slapped his boots with it, as if that aroused him further. More from fear than from pain, Halia fainted.

When she came to, he was already inside her, moving mischievously and angrily, his face hovering over hers: she shut her eyes, but all of a sudden, with horror, felt pleasure. A second later, her head was spinning. "Oh God, it's been so long!"

Unwittingly, she responded to his actions and a wave of pleasure swept through her body. Her pleasure came just when his did, and this was what was most horrible: she could not reconcile the simultaneous feelings of hatred, revulsion, and pleasure.

"Lovely," said Hinzl, getting dressed. "You were made for this. This is how you will aid the German army—*Sehr gut!*"

He left, but before long another one came, and then another and another.

A week passed in this way and then another.

They fed her well and even brought her drinks, which she drank gladly, to dull her consciousness.

They made her a nice bed and brought a table and a few chairs into the room.

Finally, they let her rest, as one spells an overworked horse. But not

for long, because Halia was now being visited by some twenty men. At first she could not distinguish between them, but in time she learned who did what and how, and what it was that each wanted.

Several times she contemplated suicide, but she couldn't. The worst thing was that she actually responded to them, she gave them a part of her womanhood and got pleasure in turn. One day Halia decided that she had gone insane and so, was not and refused to be, conscious of what was happening to her. She lived from day to day: *Guten Tag! Sehr gut! Auf Wiedersehen!*

From Greece the Vozniuk family set out for Volyn. First they stayed for a while in Prague but childhood memories of Lutsk enticed the elder Vozniuk and eventually they settled there. Fedir finished high school and went on to serve in the Polish army, eventually entering officers' school.

He was well educated and bright enough to be offered admission to the officers' school even though he was Ukrainian. His father was not thrilled with this idea, of course, but eventually he found justification for it: someday Ukraine would need soldiers and its own trained officers.

Back in his own day the elder Vozniuk had graduated from Kyiv University, and he knew several languages. Greece impressed him most and as a participant in the Ukrainian national movement at the times of the UNR, he was sent to serve in the Ukrainian embassy there. But the Ukrainian embassy never presented its credentials to the Greek government. The UNR ceased to exist just as the Vozniuks arrived in Greece.

After returning to Lutsk, Vozniuk worked at a high school. When the Soviet army entered Volyn he was arrested. Before the Germans came, he was shot by the NKVD in the Liubart Fortress, together with thousands of other prisoners.

Mother, suffering from tuberculosis, had pinned her hopes on Greece, but she died in Czechoslovakia before the Vozniuks settled in Lutsk.

When the Germans entered Poland and the Soviets marched into western Ukraine, Fedir fled into the woods.

Eventually, he became head of a group in the UPA and took the nickname, "The Raven."

Someone informed on Hinzl to his superiors, and a commission arrived at the Gestapo headquarters in Lutsk.

Halia was called in for questioning. She didn't care what would happen—nothing mattered to her any more.

A plump, dark major gaped in stupefaction at Halia when she entered. She was indeed lovely. Graceful posture, large brown eyes, glistening light-blond hair, and they had even dressed her becomingly. She looked beautiful.

"Wow!" pronounced the major.

"I told you," said Hinzl, fawningly. "A high-grade whore, a rare find."

The major spoke briefly with Halia, asking some general questions. Then he turned to Hinzl.

"A bordello belongs in a bordello. Not in the Gestapo! Understood?"

"We'll put everything in its place, Herr Major—right away! At once!"

The major visited Halia too. An older man, he reddened and strained with frustration, and things were not going well for him. Halia, realizing that her fate had changed hands and now depended on the post-coital mood of this man, helped him to come.

The major's mood improved. Hinzl, elated, ran up to Halia ready to kiss her.

And within a few days he organized a small officers' bordello, with Halia as the star attraction.

What hides at the bottom of our souls, in the secretive depths of our existence? We succeed in realizing only a tiny portion of ourselves—and not everyone can do even this—and already night is knocking at the door: soon it will be midnight, a time for tranquility. Then later someone else will begin this all over again, and also will not succeed, and thus everyone, now and forever and unto ages of ages.

At the nadir of the deep well of our genes something steers us, something leads us to nocturnal flight, into unknown regions, into a borderless nowhere, from which there is no escape and just as surely no entrance, for it is eternal.

What do we really know about ourselves, harnessed in the restraints of our communal being? Where does our connection with the simple natural world end, and where does this thing we call a soul begin?

And what about this other thing, the urge to prolong life, that crazy gene of passion and feeling? That eruption of craving, that drawn-out insatiability, that need for love, behind which hides the specter of desire, which forces us into insane leaps in every direction, in pursuit of pleasure and the confirmation of life and of oneself in time and in our biological space while we are still among the living.

By whom and how has each been programmed in time and space? Grains of sand on an ocean beach, we fly with the wind, or a wave washes us into the ocean, or we dry out like billions and billions of other grains of sand. Who are we in reality?

Who are we?

They spent the night in Stara Vyzhva on the outskirts of the village, for it was understood that the NKVD was gone for now. They had come on reconnaissance but had succumbed to the temptation to spend the night

under a roof, something they hadn't done in a while. The rap on the door awoke Fedir, and his first thought was about his men, sleeping in the stable, that they had already heard it and would be able to hide. But for him it was too late! And then, like thunder: "Good Lord, I set up the owners of the house! This will be their end!"

He had slept with his clothes on, so he could get up right away. Revolver in hand, he stood behind the door, feeling the cold metal against his palm and his life about to end.

He listened as the owner of the house explained that there were no strangers in the house. That was true—there were no strangers. We are all acquainted—it's they who are strangers.

"Search all the rooms!" he heard: it must have been the commanding officer who spoke. The door to the room opened and a fair-haired young man with lieutenant's insignia ran in. He looked around, and saw Fedir, standing behind the door, revolver in hand.

For a moment, their eyes met.

With whom are we close? Who is distant from us? Is it the one we don't know, or the one who lives on a different street, or the one who lives in a different building, or the one who lives in another city or country? Or the one who lives on a different planet, or the next world, or in a different dimension?

You, the random passer-by on the street whose glance touches me—who are you? Why do you look at me that way? What do you see in me? What do I see in you? Whom do we both see: each other, or our mutual soul, that which unites all of us now living on this earth?

We have so little time to live, to know one another, to succeed at living.

From behind the eyes a soul glances out. Maybe once we are together, we will succeed at being? Give me your hand!

"There's no one here!" announced the fair-haired lieutenant, closing the door to the room. Fedir stood, stunned by what had just happened.

After the NKVD patrol left, Fedir could not come to his senses. For the rest of his life he would remember that glance—the gaze that had saved his life. Why did he say there was no one there? Why did he act that way?

Had his Ukrainian soul overcome his current role in an NKVD uniform?

Or was it some kind of subconscious biological logic that had stopped him? Had he realized they could both die in that instant?

Or was it because his gaze chanced on someone who was like him in some way, who could be close to him, who could someday have been a colleague or friend?

By now, Fedir was in the woods, telling his friends what had happened

to him. But at night, after lying down to sleep, he thought about the fair-haired young man. And the question remained—why?

There were five of them in the officers' bordello. Each one had her own story, but none was like Halia's. They were simpler than she was, and their lives hadn't been as bad. They ate and drank well, put on make-up for the evening, smoked long cigarettes. But they lived as if in a cage, rarely allowed to go into the city alone.

In charge of them was a clumsy, middle-aged warrant officer. He sometimes took advantage of their services too, but not often, probably because of his nature.

Hinzel, in contrast, was there almost every day, and usually with Halia. She was used to him now, and had long forgotten how it all began—she had forgotten almost everything now. She even liked him more than the other clients. Beyond his cruel lust there was an animal-like strength that affected her senses, though by now she had learned not to react to each client with her body, not to give herself to him, to control herself, waiting for him to finish. Now and then, however, nature took its course and she moaned in satisfaction, genuinely, not for the client's gratification. Later, when he was done, she slept peacefully, especially if he was the last one and she could allow herself to relax.

She was different now: the Halia of old had died. Her mother was not at home any more, she knew other people lived there now, and no one could tell her where her mother had gone. Hinzel had promised to look for her, but never came up with anything.

Halia never visited her former home: it was as if she had forgotten that she once had a different life. She now lived in the bordello, and she waited for night without fear and for her clients without disgust. She didn't care about anything any more.

She now laughed and joked with the clients, as the others did. She laughed at their jokes, rejoiced over new dresses and tasty chocolates, and remembered nothing about the past.

Fedir was dying. A few days had passed since he had come down with spotted typhus in the Carpathian mountains, just days before they were to break out across the border into Czechoslovakia and beyond. They had planned for a long time, but it turned out to be very simple. Moving in a large group, the Ukrainian partisans broke through the border, only just set up by the Soviet army, still pressing further westward in pursuit of the Germans. Changing into German uniforms captured in earlier battles, the partisans sped through Czechoslovakia in a long column of trucks filled with soldiers, to meet the Allied armies. They chanced upon the Americans, and after assessment of various kinds, wound up in a camp for "displaced persons," the term given people without a place to live in their own country.

Most such people were from the Soviet Union. Ukrainians, in light of their problems with the Russians, were handled separately.

The camp in Augsburg was a camp in name only, as Ukrainian schools, publishing houses, and artistic groups were soon formed. In short, a new, free, and post-Soviet life was brewing for Ukrainians there.

But all this came later. As soon as they reached the camp, they were all overcome by the incredible exhaustion, built up over the course of the entire war between the Germans and the Soviets. Now, finally, there was peace. Even that was frightening. It was shocking to think: had everything really come to an end? For them, indeed, it had ended.

With quiet and peace came deep, even ponderous, and bewildering dreams, visions in which an alternative, completely different reality emerged, where there were peace and work, but no homeland. Behind that stood yet another fear, albeit of a different kind—a fear of the unknown.

Nevertheless, now they could sleep. And they slept.

And Fedir lay dying in hospital.

They carried him—his war buddies, his brothers—in their arms. They did not abandon their weak, typhus-stricken commander, although in his lucid moments he told them, "Leave me—I won't live anyway."

They carried him all the way to Augsburg, to the hospital. But there they were told immediately that there was no hope. Fedir was just skin and bones, rarely conscious, dirty, covered with lice, not strong enough even to turn over on his own. He needed someone to wash him, someone unafraid of contracting typhus, someone with both strength and time. There were many patients with many ailments, and although there was enough medicine, there was no one who agreed to take on the task.

And Fedir lay dying.

Charcoal-gray clouds crawled across the sky, heavy and swollen, and dropped down to earth, swaddling everything in sight. In the fog stood dark figures, row upon row, aiming rifles at one another. They fired, fell, and stood up again, and they aimed again, and shot again and again; they were faceless and hairless. There were only the dark stains from which trickled reddish-black blood.

Fedir was lying on his back. A black cloud was dropping right over him, pressing against him, slimy and viscous, and he was losing his breath. But he couldn't budge his arm or his leg, and he understood that this was it—the end was coming, he was almost without strength. A large, bony hand stretched out from the cloud towards his throat. He was too weak to shout, to scream for help, but at the edge of consciousness he understood that if he did not give voice this phantom would choke him, and so he gathered every bit of strength he had left and screamed a final, frantic yell for life.

And the hand pulled itself back into the cloud.

Suddenly from the darkness glowed an island of light, and from the light there appeared a sorrowful angel with dark eyes and long, fair hair radiating a deep, peaceful sadness. Fedir felt sorry for the angel who looked so unhappy.

The angel approached and placed a hand on Fedir's forehead. A light shone upon Fedir, and his forehead cooled from the angel's touch. He breathed a sigh of relief, and his eyes closed.

When he opened them, he saw soaring in the distance, above the dark clouds covering the earth, the majestic ruins of an old temple—white marble columns against the backdrop of a bright, deep-blue sky that seemed to pour out from a similarly blue and calm ocean. They radiated warmth and wisdom, the strength of beauty, faith, and vitality.

Fedir closed his eyes and fell into a blissful sleep.

When the time came for the Germans to pull out, Hinzl was able to find them a car: German prostitutes would not be spared under Soviet authority, of course. And these were *his* prostitutes, especially Halia, to whom, if truth be told, Hinzl had become attached.

The prostitutes retreated together with the Germans. At first there was still time for partying, but soon the only thing they thought about was getting out alive.

They were already in Germany when a bomb exploded next to the car in which Hinzl was riding. Halia saw his dead face, flooded with deep-red blood and his shattered chest. The girls had been following behind in another car. Now they fled west, as far as they could. Finally, the American armies, their commanders, the camp in Augsburg....

They were surrounding her in an increasingly tighter circle, yet she felt no fear, only exhaustion at the sight of the countless naked male bodies, all with taut, red-violet rods ready to penetrate her, all wanting her and only her. She could not choose, she was never able to choose, particularly here when they were all together, everyone who had been with her in those years, everyone who desired her, who delighted in her body, who possessed both her body and her.

Yes, her—she knew they had possessed her, not just her body. She yearns to have said no, to have withstood the powerful lust of manhood, but she lacked the strength. She wants to wail at her own weaknesses, to yell, to cry for help, but they steadily approach, and in weariness she remembers them, remembers every one. Her whole being explodes and breaks free of any restraint and now she senses them differently, the bigger ones and the smaller ones, the uncovered ones and the covered ones, the fatter and the skinnier, the ones with large heads and thin rods, with powerful trunks and narrow heads—ugly, repulsive, with their red-blue fervor and inexorably

alluring, avaricious defilement. Each one was different, spoke to her differently, pleaded, demanded, penetrated her depths and released himself and his body to her, took her in a different way—and she gave herself and embraced, caressed, and kissed them, and climaxed with each one differently. Behind each one of them stood a different individual, a different character. In fact, she had once boasted, after a few drinks, that she could distinguish a man's character and destiny from the shape of his male rod, as gypsies do from the lines on a hand or the features of a face.

Now they were here together. It was bizarre and disgusting. Climax came after climax. She came from the memory of them, from their features, from their presence, from a remembrance of their flesh. Now they were all on top of her, penetrating her continuously, individually and collectively, and they all came together, and she came with them, and now she'd had enough, now it was too much for her, but they did not stop, and in the end, past the gratification of the body, past the eruption of the female orgasm behind which she had banished her damaged person, appeared the frigid reality of the recent past.

The satisfied pleasure began to recede, and she suddenly began to feel surrounded by a strange, wild sexuality, a strange body, a strange, disgusting craving, and all of this was now inside her, on top of her. She began to resist, she wanted to free herself, but the swollen rods banged her body from all sides, crawled up on her, like red snakes, ravenous and slippery, and suddenly exploded in unison, and a flood of white-yellow male fluid filled her character, her body, mouth, nostrils, arms, and legs; she was drowning in it, losing her breath, lacking any strength, she couldn't even breathe, and at once felt that she was dying, surely dying, that she should have died a long time ago from the nastiness, from the shame, from having betrayed the sense of her individual being. In essence she had died, died a long time ago.

But darkness continued to press in on her—an abyss, a nothingness into which, withdrawing into the past, she broke through with desperate relief: finally, everything was over.

Halia spent the first couple of days at the Augsburg camp as though waiting for something, expecting change of some sort, something new yet again. But here things happened as if in slow motion, in contrast to everything that had happened before. She was beset by memories of her past. In the camp people knew what she was. There were several others like her, and all of them were looked upon with disdain and generally avoided. Only when it was absolutely necessary or in matters involving obligatory camp duties would others speak to her. Except for those like her, whores of the Germans who shared her fate.

One day the dreaming came to an end, and Halia saw herself in totality—what she now was, how she had lived, and everything and

everyone around her. These were good, normal people, full of vitality, ready to create a new life for themselves, often with capricious but original ideas and views about the world and their surroundings.

But she had no views, no surroundings, no future. She would rather have died, but she was not capable of desiring anything, even death. She did not care. She did not care about anything.

So when they announced that help was needed in the hospital because there were so many patients, she volunteered: she didn't care. When they said that there were some typhus patients who would die soon but still needed care—washing, cleaning bedpans—which others had refused to do, fearful of infection, Halia agreed: she didn't care. She was no longer living, only by chance was she still alive, and the threat of infection held no fear for her. Dying would be an improvement.

Among the typhus patients was one in the very worst condition. They had just brought him in; he remembered nothing, was dirty, lice-ridden, thin as a skeleton—it was a wonder he was still alive. He needed to be washed and looked after until his final moments even though, as the doctor said, it hardly made any sense.

Halia came up to that one, looked down at the fever-ridden unconscious face of a swarthy, still young man, lying with the gray stamp of death upon him. She placed her hand on his forehead and held it there. Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked at her with a gaze as deep as life, and she shuddered at his all-seeing blue eyes.

He closed his eyes, sighed as if feeling better, and fell into unconsciousness again.

Halia took it upon herself to tend him.

The doctor warned her that she needed to be careful: his disease was infectious, he would not live through it, and she should not expend too much energy on him, for there were others requiring care who still might live.

"That's all right," said Halia. "I'm not afraid. I'll care for him, and when the time comes, I'll care for the others. I'm not afraid of anything. Someone needs to be near this one, too, even though there's no hope. Let it be me."

They were standing on the precipice of a tall mountain, looking out to sea. The deep blue of the sea, intensified by the sun's glistening rays, stretched out to infinity, where picturesque, bronze-green islands beckoned seductively. This fabulous beauty attracted tourists from all parts of the world. There were already many of them here, especially Americans. But it was only May, the start of the season, so romantics could still hope to find a spot to be by themselves.

"Now you know why I longed to bring you here."

A tall, thin, elderly man, graying and with a receding hairline, wearing jeans and an orange T-shirt, was addressing his fellow traveler, a woman. Also older, she wore dark sunglasses and was well-dressed, and she had obviously at one time been an unparalleled beauty.

"I know, Fedir," said Halia. "I know."

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