

Daniel Odija

## Keeping up the manor

Nowadays, that era has passed into memory. You drove a kilometre into the empty fields, which in summer were yellow with low-growing rape. At a rural crossroads you turned left, went past a worm-ridden old farmhouse, and two hundred metres further on, in a cloud of dry dust you came to a stop at a half-closed gate. It was an expensive gate, a fancy iron one. Three dogs greeted you, a big black Alsatian and two little dachshunds. They weren't aggressive, because they knew everyone. They wagged their tails and barked happily at the car.

The farm entrance was lined with long rows of arthritic apple trees. The little trees had been shaped by an invisible hand attempting to prove its dubious gardening skills on their fragile bodies. From the uneven results you could see that the skills of the invisible hand had never passed the limits of the enthusiastic amateur, convinced that after reading a book or two on orchards he could conduct a revolution in the successful union of cherries and apple trees.

There were several hens running about among the trees. They were white, because that was the only kind kept in the two big henhouses. Standing grandly on a gentle rise, the buildings were like long, angular cigars, coated in white plaster. Together they housed nine thousands hens, an enormous holding merely by contrast with the other local farms where two pigs was a lot. The henhouses indicated not just wealth, but also power. And Bronisław Broda had it – he was a burly fellow, canny in his own way, with a thick moustache and a petite wife called Irena, fragile as a crisp. He greeted everyone effusively, without a glint of insincerity in his eyes, you

could say, a glint you so often suspect in people who are a bit too well-off for the country they happen to live in.

As a farmer, husband and father Bronisław Broda had firmly established principles. His opinions were irrevocable and his decisions were irreversible. Everything had to be just as he wanted. His wife had to agree, and silently take the belt blows, and when her husband had drunk too much she had to swallow his hard fist like a tender caress. The kids had to run like clockwork, with no rebellion in their minds or actions. What would they have to rebel about anyway? He gave them everything they needed – they had food to eat and a place to sleep.

Bronisław Broda loved animals. That was why he killed them himself, rather than condemn them to the sort of needless suffering the butchers were said to enjoy. He liked entertainment too. Sometimes he took the gun his father had left him and did some shooting, at the sky, or at the trees, or at tins to practise his aim, or at a pig's snout. He shot the pigs instead of whacking them with an axe, using a large-bore rifle and bullets meant for boar hunting to make it humane. So what if the meat might get imbued with gunpowder? All you had to do was to hang the carcass head downwards, so the gunpowder ran out onto the ground with the blood – that made the ground stink of powder, not the meat. But then the ground went rusty and developed an animal hatred for the murderer. A vindictive spirit hovered over the farmyard, shaking its clenched hoofs and swearing to be revenged. But Broda thought nothing of it. He felt confident on his own ground.

"I've always enjoyed hunting," he liked to say with satisfaction as he took out the airgun he used to shoot at the sparrows that held noisy conferences on the barn roof. The sparrows were soon dropping like

hailstones. Some managed to fly away, but came straight back to the roof, bewildered by all the banging, and fell cheeping into the cracks scored in the air by a salvo as thick as buckwheat.

Sometimes Broda used to fire at the rats too. That summer they had nested in the cowshed. The ceiling and beams were shot to splinters and the pigs were in a panic, squealing loudly. The rats were hardest to hit. Smarter than a man, they silently raced under the cowshed roof at lightning speed. But they only had to shake down a straw or a cornstalk without noticing, and at once Broda let loose with his gun, firing a dense volley of shots at random. He never did shoot a rat, but he made plenty of holes in the cowshed.

After his fun Bronisław Broda went home, a little tired and extremely pensive. He stroked his sons and promised to buy them a video, so they could watch foreign cartoons. It was the first video in the neighbourhood. Even in town nobody had one yet, but he did. All the films had German dubbing. Donald Duck quacked away in German, Mickey Mouse shouted: “Hund Pluto!”, and even Bruce Lee had learned German. Mostly they watched cartoons and karate films. To spice things up, Broda would throw in some porn for himself – that was in German too. His head was soon full of moaning and low-budget gymnastics. Irena was too embarrassed to watch, so he scoffed at her, saying: “For shame! For shame! Look how imaginative they are! It’s not like that with you!”

Whereas Irena made the best scrambled eggs in the world. Scrambled eggs was what they ate most often. When you’ve got that many hens, there are always going to be some broken eggs the shops won’t take, so you have to eat them or give them away. Broda smiled to himself. In his henhouses nine thousand hens were humbly forcing thousands of eggs

out of their back ends, completely unaware that nothing would ever hatch out of them apart from scrambled eggs.

Everyone round here lived on scrambled eggs. Like a guy called Tosiek Sobola, who lived at the end of the village in a tumbledown hovel he'd inherited from his father. His stony field always lay fallow. Gradually it became overgrown with a fleece of densely tangled weeds and infertile grass. Freezing cold and hungry, Tosiek Sobola only just survived the winter, until one night, half-starving and desperate, he knocked at Broda's door.

Broda just smiled and gave him a job. From then on Tosiek Sobola lived in a small stall in the henhouse. Here, with three or sometimes four of the neighbours he would wipe the hen shit off the dirty eggs with a wet rag and carefully pack them in cardboard egg trays. The broken ones were set aside to be fed to the animals, or sold off cheap to people from the village. Tosiek used to make himself scrambled eggs out of them, frying up eight or nine eggs at a time. No one ever saw him eat anything but scrambled eggs and bread in those days. He didn't drink – never a single glass. He was a good worker, and he felt warm and cosy in his stall.

He carted the animal feed, shifted the chicken shit and monitored the temperature in the henhouse – it had to be warm enough for the hens to lay more often and more copiously than normal, but not so warm that they began to suffocate. Bronisław Broda paid him very little, too little. If Tosiek had liked to get drunk now and then, on an income like that one he'd have had to go hungry as before, but he never complained. Bronisław Broda reckoned he was an idiot for wanting to go on working for so little money. Tosiek kept quiet, because it wasn't his habit to talk. But after three years at the job he announced that he was moving to town. Broda just shrugged

and said: “You’re longing to be somewhere else? Me too sometimes, but so what ...”

So one sunny morning Tosiek Sobola emerged from the henhouse dressed in his Sunday best suit with his hair combed back, his face clean shaven, though wrinkled by his difficult life, and got on the black “Ukraina” bicycle he’d bought off some drunk. Without saying goodbye, sitting proudly upright he rode through the gate. Now he cleans the streets in town, slowly and meticulously, without any hurry, just as he did with the hens. Leaves and dog shit, shovels and brooms. He’s happy. No one manages him, and he doesn’t have to be grateful to anyone. Maybe he eats something besides scrambled eggs. He has even found himself a woman – a good fifteen years older than him, but she’s good and resourceful. They take care of each other, and even love each other a bit. “So let them mate if they want to,” quipped Broda at the news; to him Tosiek was the human equivalent of a domestic animal.

But before Tosiek left the farm, the time came for the slaughter of the layers. They had been laying for three years now, and had to be replaced with fresher, younger ones. They were already laying far too few eggs. Life had worn them out.

Broda hired some extra hands to help the “operation” run as smoothly as possible, and rolled up his own sleeves too. Round-up time! The swarm of bewildered birds didn’t know what was going on. Crowded into a dense flock, they moved into the centre of the henhouse, with people surrounding them on all sides. Each man grabbed three or four, tightly bundled their convulsively flapping wings and set them under the axe, specially sharpened for the hens’ necks. The astounded little heads fell off and rolled to the feet of the sweaty Broda, who performed the executions himself. He

liked to watch the beaks gaping in surprise at what had happened to them, as if asking: "Where's the rest of my body?"

Deprived of their heads, the necks spat a stream of blood. The blind bodies waved their wings, happily hopping about in a posthumous dance, as if glad their chopped-off heads were no longer pressing them to find grain. Some hopped from foot to foot in perfect rhythm, lined up in a neat row like inspired ballerinas performing Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake – until they fell, struck down by a muscle spasm; only their wings still went on beating against the ground, gathering the dust of the earth beneath them. Finally they lay still in heaps of white feathers, in praise of the God of birds.

Tosiek Sobola gathered up the heads in a sack, because by now the dogs were puking from overeating. Once in a while he scattered sand around the chopping block so Broda wouldn't slip on the blood, and went to fetch the next lot. Some of the hens may have realised this meant death, that their numbers were decreasing rather than increasing, and that the area around them was getting empty. They began to stamp their feet harder. Inanely rebellious, they anxiously cocked their not-yet-chopped-off heads, blinked and tried to dive from under the men's hands.

Some of the hens were playing tag. As they ran away, they swayed awkwardly from side to side. But the men drove them down a narrow corridor in the henhouse and barred the way. The kids had fun, because it was their job to chase the hens towards Tosiek Sobol and his gang. The men's hands were as nimble as pincers. Meanwhile, the women plucked the headless corpses, filling buckets with feathers and innards. Although the hens were drained of all their meat by long years of egg-laying, they would still do for a thin stock. Apart from that, Broda sold them at a reduced price for pies.

A pungent, acrid smell wafted about the farm. The axe flashed in the sun like a mirror reflecting the boundary of life. The sun illuminated the drops of blood that fell on the sweaty Broda in a bracing shower. Its posthumous nerves apparently emitting a sort of super-hen power, with the full force of its stiffened limbs one of the headless hens went running towards the fence. The careering corpse did a perfect imitation of life until it crashed into a wire railing. The hen was thrown backwards, its bleeding neck began to sway and, finding no support, plunged into the sand like an ostrich. The black Alsatian gently grasped its tail end and carried the body to his master's feet. Broda smiled and stroked his favourite pet, promising him lots to eat.

The slaughter had been going on for a while now, and the kids were bored. It had all gone crazy – the only difference between the dead hens and the live ones was the lack of a head. But the initial attraction had worn a bit thin by now, and the surfeit of entertainment provided by the hen Holocaust had ceased to amuse them. Their interest had waned with each successive flapping bird. The agony of the individual is rarely very moving when it turns into mass extermination.

Both Marek and Janek, Bronisław's sons, preferred to play at the foot of the rise, where there were eight piles of carefully stacked planks. They had a fun time running about between them. Best of all was playing at war. But they forgot there was a wasps' nest among the planks, big fat yellowand-black ones with stings in their tails, capable of injecting a poison that spread like wildfire, turning your body into a swollen lump, where pus gnawed away under the skin depressingly. Four of these wasps stung little Janek on the back as he ran by their nest. They must have thought that was the way to discourage a potential attacker. Fools! Janek's crying

provoked a greater evil. On Broda's orders, once he had finished with the hens, Tosiek was to destroy the nest and put an end to the wasps. Tosiek merely nodded and said nothing – just as usual.

Next day he went in among the planks with an armful of kindling wood and a small pot of lime granules. He set the kindling alight so the wind would blow smoke at the nest. The wasps must have been suffocating, doing the insect version of snorting like horses, or coughing like people. Meanwhile Tosiek cautiously approached the nest, unobserved by the stupefied insects, who were flying about pell-mell, doused in poison and swollen with asphyxiating smoke, and calmly began to scatter lime on the nest. He had thick gloves and overalls to protect him from being stung. The day after that he repeated the entire procedure. The ground was soon littered with dead insects. That was Tosiek's final task at Broda's farm.

As soon as he left, a storm broke. Water poured from the sky, and not even the oldest villagers could remember a storm like this one. Dragged across the district by its leaden body, it oppressed the fruit trees, henhouses and houses. Some people whispered that it marked the onset of powerful spirits that were forcing their way from the invisible world into the visible, lured by the murder and blood of animals. Shafts of lightning snapped at the ground, melting it to stones. The nearby river flooded, giving the world a new shape. The wind ripped trees up by the roots. The dwarfish apple trees flew in the air as if salvation were waiting for them somewhere up there. But it was just nature's way of being ironical, for having grown from earth, they were bound to crumble to earth.

The gale, the river and the downpour made a muddy mire of Bronisław Broda's farm. The roar of thunder mingled with his curses. Broda's world lay in ruins. Before his very eyes the barn roof dissolved into tattered

shreds of tin, fluttering overhead like flimsy flakes of burned paper. Despite its stone foundations, the cowshed was soon being undermined by the raging surge of stinking sludge. A few hours later the wind dropped, but the water went on pouring. And so it would be for forty days. Soon there would be no time left to take shelter.

And once the water level in the cowshed drops, bloated pigs and cows will be left there. Drunk to excess, slung over the fence and wedged into the troughs, the corpses will start to stink, attracting clouds of flies. Broda will work himself into a proper sweat cleaning up the remains. So they wouldn't have to wade about in carcasses he took his wife and children to his mother-in-law's place in town. The town was better prepared for this sort of disaster. Nature doesn't have quite so much supremacy over man there. Concreted over and cleared of trees, it keeps quiet, buried by an avalanche of engines.

But for now all Broda could see was a flood. He stayed at the farm – he couldn't abandon his hens. Someone had to take care of the property, feed the stupid birds and watch the water make the walls of the house disintegrate. The henhouses weren't flooded, because they stood on a small rise. Broda moved into the stall where Tosiek used to sleep, as nine thousand fresh layers impatiently did their own sort of grumbling. In a few days they would get used to the steady patter of rain and would feel unsettled once it began to ease.

So Broda gazed at the sea, which had no end. He looked up, down and all around. Still it went on raining. And as he looked around, he felt as if he were standing on Mount Ararat, knowing why the people had been inundated. These small islets of dry land were left for the corpses. They stuck out from under the doleful veneer of water like pangs of remorse. "I

wonder if the whole world is flooded? Perhaps there's dry land somewhere else," he thought.

He felt very lonely. He missed the buzz of people talking, which often drove him wild, and the chaotic noise of the animals, which were now floating about dead. For the first time he longed for his wife and wanted to hug his sons. He saw a bird fly by. Hell's bells, what sort of a bird was it? What mattered was its presence. He knew that once the flood ended he'd prove right. The main thing was that the henhouses weren't flooded. So what if people said the devil rocks the rich man's cradle – he didn't give a damn. Let them think what they liked. Misfortune isn't handed out in equal shares to everyone.

A bird. It renewed his strength for new exploits. Those two henhouses were his strength. Just let the bloody flood end and everything would be fine. Meanwhile, every day of the downpour crushed him to the ground. After a while he began to stoop, roaming around the henhouses with his nose close to the mud. He looked as if he were searching for grain, or a precious keepsake that he'd lost somewhere, roughly hereabouts, and now an irresistible need to find it had come over him. He was sure that if he found it he would be forgiven and the waters would recede – if he found what he had lost, his sense of superiority over others would be gone for ever, and respect for everything that lived would flow over him.

He got up from all fours and drank another bottle of vodka. A watery inferno flooded his throat, but it helped him to get up. Stooping slightly, he grabbed some buckets full of feed for the hens and went among the clamorous fowl. Never before had he felt so good among them, safe in his own way. He felt warm and cosy among these birds, better than in the house, which had already flowed away with the water.

The hens started pecking at the grain before he had finished tipping it out of the buckets. They nipped at his shoes and gently pecked his hands. He sat down among them and gave in to this strange form of caress. Not on the eyes! Not on the eyes!, he thought. Now he was smiling. He could have gone on sitting like that for years on end, but once the waters dropped, there would be a lot of work waiting for him. First he'd have to do away with death.