

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

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(independent scholar)

Abstract: *This is a short work of creative ethnographic prose that relies solely upon crafted narrative to show rather than explain its message. In the mid 1990s, I spent two years doing ethnographic fieldwork with European traveling circuses. One troupe I worked in for a considerable amount of time included members of 16 different nationalities. They had a posted rule banning the display of national flags or symbols within their circus community, and – other than some fleeting heated moments during World Cup soccer – seemed to keep conflicts by nationality group to a minimum. Nonetheless, historical tensions rested barely under the surface. Although none of the people portrayed here were alive for the events of WWII, that conflict still echoed down into everyday life in the circus over 50 years later. This story is based upon actual characters and events the author experienced, although all individuals' names and some identifying characteristics have been changed.*

Keywords: *creative ethnography; narrative; Europe; nationality; war; circus; history*

1.

“They shot them all”. Polish Piotr spat into the sawdust at his feet. He raised his voice as the artists for the Cossack act arrived in the back of the Swiss circus tent. “The Katyn massacre, look it up”, he said, and spat again. It wasn’t the first time the European history classes I took back in the U.S. had failed me.

The tempo of the orchestra increased as the clown performance reached its climax in the ring. I settled my pair of horses beside Piotr's where we waited for the next act. The younger one's sleek shoulder vibrated under my hand, but other than a quick toss of his head, he stood quietly for me.

Piotr clipped the fixed reins onto the snaffle rings of his two charges, expertly avoiding the lead stallion's teeth with a rough palm. We all knew the horse's temper. Only the veteran stable hands handled four-year-old Benito.

The artists beside us leaned into each other's shoulders to stretch their hamstrings, just out of reach of the horses.

"My grandfather was an officer", Piotr continued. "We were on the same side, fighting Nazis". He turned his back to the two artists. "Fucking Russians".

The orchestra trilled a shift and the dark-haired Tajik rider stepped up beside me. He gave me a quick half-smile as I handed him the loose lead lines of my two young stallions, clipped together.

But Piotr ignored the blonde lead rider who stepped up to him.

"*Proszę*, please", the man tried, almost the same word in Polish and Russian.

Piotr bent down to readjust the horse's leg wraps. "You have to be careful with these", he told me. "Benito will kick himself bloody". The horse took the opportunity to snap forward, but the reins stopped him from reaching any target.

The Russian artist looked at me sideways, one eyebrow raised in entreaty. He was running out of time. I moved closer as Piotr stood up.

The stable hand finally grunted as he handed off the rough leather lead lines to me and stepped away.

I immediately passed the paired horses on to their waiting rider. Benito flattened his ears and snorted.

"*Achtung!*" the Ringmaster called. Piotr and I stood back as the blackout curtains were pulled aside, and men and horses pressed their way past us into the lighted ring.

2.

"You sure you're safe with me?" Chevalier teased as I set my voice recorder on the table between us in his worn but tidy camper. He raised his glass in mock toast – I'd already declined the proffered beer twice. It was too early for me.

“*Konterbier*”. He laughed. “But I like your American expression better. Hair of the dog”.

Everyone told me stories of the wild partier, but the man I’d come to know over the past months was the most dedicated circus person I knew. The uncredited head trainer for most of the signature animal acts, and an expert jack-of-all-trades all around the circus lot.

A visit by the senior owner somehow meant Chevalier had a rare morning off from practice with the horses. That “*alter österreichischer Bastard*”, Chevy had called him before: the old Austrian bastard. I could imagine he’d been a hard man to grown up under.

“So I don’t quite understand”. I opened my small notebook. “Your family is French, you said. But people keep saying you’re German” – I hesitated – “or English”.

Chevy snorted. His oldest daughter was born in England, he explained. The ex-wife I’d heard about was English too. He launched into a long description of raising his daughter in the circus. She started performing before she was two, Chevy said with a mix of pride and apology. Maybe I’d heard of her in America? She was famous with big cats now.

A breeze ruffled the lace curtains on the trailer window beside us, bringing in the musk of the elephants.

“My family is six-generation circus”. With quick hand chops across the table, Chevalier indicated a succession of European countries. A sibling born in Sweden, a cousin in Denmark, himself in Germany. He quirked his lips. “No problem with the taxes”.

His grin faded. “The war came and we were all stuck in Paris”. He continued to look down at his imaginary map. “The Americans walked through and they ruined us. We were in the Grand Palais”.

He looked up and shook his head slowly. “They bombed it. Everything went in flames. The money, the costumes, we lost everything. The clown lost all his costumes”.

A thump and a neigh came from outside.

I paused my pen.

“The only thing they saved was the horses”.

Chevy swallowed the last of his beer and set the glass back onto its thick paper coaster advertising a local bar we’d passed maybe five or six towns ago. He tilted his head toward the circus lot outside. “*Schaffe, schaffe*, time for work”.

I reached out to turn off my recorder.

“That was 1945”, he said, “I wasn’t born yet”.

3.

“So ...” Piotr let the word draw out over the sweating draft horse in the tent stables as we unbuckled the harness with practiced tandem steps – he on the right, me on the left. I expected him to fish another scrap of paper from his coverall pocket and ask me how to conjugate or pronounce an irregular English verb. He wanted a higher-paying job in America. But he was silent.

He must have had the morning off, since I hadn’t seen him since introducing him to my visiting parents the night before.

The heavy gelding towed me impatiently into his stall, headed straight for his water bucket. I slipped off the bridle before I noticed we’d somehow forgotten the leg wraps.

Piotr stood in the doorway, weight awkwardly on his back leg. He reached out and automatically took the bridle I handed him. “Your father”, he finally said. “He is German? Lutheran?”

I bent to the horse’s feathered legs and agreed.

“He came to America when?” Piotr persisted behind me.

He stepped back for me to exit the stall, but didn’t walk away as I latched the door.

“After the war; he was a child”.

“So, so”. Piotr nodded, smiling with what looked like apology. Maybe confusion. He stopped, bridle still hanging from his hand. “But your mother”. He paused. “She is Jewish?”

I sighed. Tucked the leg wraps into the tack chest, and turned back to give him my full attention. “Yes”.

Piotr vehemently dunked the bit into the cleaning bucket and jiggled it once, twice, a third time, rinsing off the horse’s generous spit.

He hung the dripping headstall on its hook, carefully straightening the leather. He absently pressed his thumb to the label where the adhesive had come loose. I waited.

“No”. Piotr finally burst out with a shake of his head, still facing the tack wall. “But No. This is not possible!” He slapped his hand against the wall, startling the horses.

“America!” He snorted.

He grinned at me, and we moved off together to tack up the pinto ponies for the Wild West act.

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