rowohlt

Szczepan Twardoch

KHOLD

Kälte

- A new brilliant novel of this exceptional author.
- 100,000 copies of *Die Kälte* sold in Poland, months under TOP 10 of the Polish bestseller list.
- 1 MIO copies of his works sold in Poland altogether!
- His novel *Der Boxer* was translated into 11 languages.
- English sample translation available.

April 2024 · 400 pages

Epic, captivating journey through the Arctic in the Soviet Russia – from the revolution to the purges, Gulag and beyond.
A native of Upper Silesia and a veteran of World War I, Konrad Widuch is wholeheartedly committed to the revolution. After the war, together with the communist Karl Radek, he goes to Soviet Russia and fights in the 1920s for the proletarian order.
Years later, Widuch wants to leave the turmoil behind, starts a family and soon lives in seclusion in the barren landscape of the Russian-Norwegian border region.
But Stalin's bloodhounds do not grant him peace. In 1937, the year of terror and massive purges, Comrade Widuch is arrested as an 'old Bolshevik', convicted and sent to the Gulag in the far east, just outside Kamchatka. Widuch dares an incredible escape, as reckless as it is brutal. He succeeds – but now he stands alone in the vastness of the taiga, which is breathtakingly beautiful and no less hostile to life. Widuch eventually ends up in a mysterious isolated settlement called Khold by its inhabitants. There they live according to the rhythm of the harsh polar nature, raise reindeer, hunt seals and bears, speak their own language and have never heard of Stalin.
Khold is a story of the disillusionment of ideas, of an individual caught in the maelstrom of the times and the moment of peace outside civilization. However, only for a brief moment …

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Szczepan Twardoch, born in 1979, is one of the outstanding authors of contemporary literature. His breakthrough came with *Morphin* (2012). Twardoch and his German translator Olaf Kühl were honoured with the Brücke Berlin Prize in 2016 for the novel *Drach*, and in 2019 Twardoch received the Samuel Bogumił Linde Prize. His most recent highly acclaimed novels include *Der Boxer* (2018) and *Das schwarze Königreich* (2020). Szczepan Twardoch lives with his family in Pilchowice/Silesia.

Press Quotes:

"Twardoch is a kind of Tarantino of historical narrative." FAZ

"Brilliant novelistic fantasy about the Polish-Jewish underworld of the interwar period … highly exciting.'" *FAZ* about *The Boxer*

"Twardoch's depictions of the individual characters, moods and political currents are precise, pictorial and ecstatic, even close to delusion. Yet stylistically Twardoch remains true to himself and has now written his third exceptional and excellent novel in a row."
Rolling Stone about *The Boxer*

"Gripping, gloomy, this novel drags you in and drags you down" taz about The Black Kingdom

"Twardoch's prose lives from its furious rhythm ... Content and form create an impressive panorama." *FAZ* about *Dragon*

"A novel about a family reminiscent of Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks that is never just a novel about a family. The same is true of 'Dragon', which is above all a novel about the meaning and transience of life." *Spiegel Online* about *Dragon*

"A front-line diary of humanity à la Céline, the ragingly loud and at the same time sensitive novel of an archaic century." *Die Welt* about *Dragon*

"A novel that in its force and vividness leaves everything behind that is usually offered in the genre of the contemporary historical novel." Süddeutsche Zeitung about Morphine

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH
KHOLD

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2019, I felt like I had to escape, and that's where this story begins.

Life was squeezing in on me like a daily-tighter noose, as always when I spend too much time in the world to which I belong. Human faces and human voices tormented me, my friends and enemies irritated me equally, I'd had enough of human love and hate, and equally enough of the cities, which I pass through, and the Silesian countryside, where I live.

Every morning I found it harder to get out of bed, as if overnight someone had been piling weights onto a burden that seemed to rest on my shoulders; my footfalls grew heavier and my temper shorter, increasingly I saw faces that I thought were in urgent need of my fist, so I felt I had to escape to the place where I have always escaped for fifteen years, to Spitsbergen, so that, on my return, I might rage less at the world, at people and at myself.

I bought a plane ticket, packed a backpack and a rifle, and not long after, I disembarked onto the tarmac at the airport in Longyearbyen. The Cold Coast greeted me in its usual way—with a cool breeze and a low, steel-grey vault of cloud. I stopped at a campsite not far from the airport, pitched my little tent, and then took a seat in a mess-cabin with windows, drinking coffee and gazing at the fjord and mountains on the opposite shore, at a parasitic jaeger chasing seagulls around, and at a silver Arctic fox sniffing among the stones.

The next day I got on the quick ferry going to Pyramiden, a Soviet mining town abandoned in the nineties, where for a few years, a dozen or so Russians had been staying in a renovated hotel and attending to the anemic tourist traffic. The several-hour ride went by peacefully; I disembarked at a makeshift quay, threw my backpack onto my back and my rifle over my shoulder, and marched through the buildings of the abandoned town to reach the interior.

I was led by a guide, a Russian-speaking Ukrainian woman from Kharkiv, who had been waiting at the quay for a sightseeing group of tourists from Moscow arriving on the same ferry as I—this was three years before the war and, despite

the Russian seizure of Crimea and Donbas in 2014, in Pyramiden the Ukrainians and Russians actually lived in harmony. At least at first glance.

My guide was maybe twenty-five years old and had thick braids, which got tangled up in the strap of the old hunting rifle slung across her back. I was a little attracted to her, and I think she to me, though I'm sure I'm just flattering myself. We talked as we walked, for maybe ten minutes, the way people do who know that before long they'll part ways, never to meet again. She said she came from Kharkiv, but now she lived in Irkutsk, Russia; I replied that I had been to Irkutsk, a couple times, even, but long ago, twenty years; she said Irkutsk doesn't change, and then she asked, teasingly I think, or even as a challenge, whether I was scared to go into the interior on my own, since as recently as two days ago they had seen a mother bear here with two cubs. I replied that of course I was scared but this—and here I swept my arm along the line of the horizon—was worth the fear. She grew serious and replied that the landscapes were beautiful, yes, but she'd come here to work, they were paying her to, and she would never understand why someone would come here in their free time, on vacation. For her vacation, she always chose Crete.

I didn't try to explain anything. I just said that I also liked Crete, but here, this—this was something completely different. We said goodbye, she wished me good luck and clumsily kissed me on both cheeks, which gave me pleasure. From then on, I walked alone.

I wanted to get over to Skanskbukta, passing Jontufonna glacier, but I couldn't find a way there, even though Skanskbukta wasn't my goal, after all, my goal was escape from the world and the life I had left behind me.

So escape I did, for a week I didn't see a human face, I wandered through branching valleys and canyons, pitching my tent beside streams; if I managed to find some planks of wood left long ago by geologists, I would use them to light a small campfire and sit in the white night by the glimmers of flame, meticulously measuring myself out bourbon from a graduated plastic bottle, so that a fifth of liquor would last me my whole trip.

I didn't speak. I didn't meditate, I didn't even think much. I ate, I walked, I chose somewhere to camp, I pitched my tent, I slept.

In the evenings, I would set up poles around my camp for an alarm—whose cord was attached to blanks and, when tripped by a careless bear, would set off

the rounds to frighten it away, while waking me up—and then I would lie down in my sleeping bag and in the white night, under an unsetting sun, I would fall asleep filled with primitive fear, I would fall asleep touching the butt of my rifle, I feared as I slept and I would rise happy, boil water on the gas camping stove, pour it over a freeze-dried meal and some instant coffee, eat slowly, get dressed, strike my camp and continue on.

I ate, I walked, I slept. I didn't speak until finally, after seven days of wandering, I ran out of food and alcohol, so I returned to Pyramiden, dirty, tired, somehow secretly and mysteriously happy, calmed by solitude.

The ship I intended to take back to Longyearbyen was not meant to arrive for another two days, therefore I stayed in the hotel, the only inhabited building in this abandoned mining settlement, and which the Russians from Barentsburg had only renovated after ten years, when they realized the tourist potential of the former town.

The hotel was fairly grim, but it did have a bar, where, after taking a shower and swapping my thermal underwear for my last clean merino sweatshirt, I sat down to have a drink.

I wasn't looking for company, after a week of absolute solitude I didn't crave it in the slightest, nor voices, nor faces, so I sat in a corner at the bar and ordered a large bourbon, straight up. I intended to finish it in silence, while reading a book, maybe making some notes too, and then go and rest.

That's when I laid eyes her for the first time. She was sitting across from me, on the opposite end of the bar. She looked to be seventy, she was short and stocky, dressed in a worn-out, faded, once-red fleece, her hair was completely white, cut short, her face weather-beaten, intelligent, her eyes keen, her cheeks red from dozens of chilblains arranged into a map of cracked capillaries, meandering like an arctic river rolling out into canyons of wrinkles.

She raised her glass in a silent toast and smiled, revealing worn, slightly yellowed teeth; her eyes smiled as well, small, close together, light blue.

I felt irritation. I wished to sit and drink among the background characters of the bar, polar travelers, scientists and tourists, but without being bothered by anyone; I also wished to emerge slowly and gently from my solitude, yet since she had caught my gaze, anything else would be rude; I smiled awkwardly and also

raised my glass, then she, clearly hungry for conversation, came straight up to me, sat down on the stool next to me, and addressed me amiably:

"English, Deutsch, по-русски…?" she asked, obviously guessing that I was sure not to speak a word of Norwegian.

She herself spoke perfect English, only a barely discernible trace of a foreign accent led me to believe it wasn't her first language.

I replied, English oder Deutsch, but English was better. She asked what I was doing here, so in three sentences I told her about my solitary week in the wilderness, about how, as I went up Tordalen mountain, I didn't find a route to Skanskbukta, the canyons' slopes were too steep, I couldn't get through, to which she replied, of course, you have to go across the glacier, because it isn't a glacier that slopes downward, a breen, but rather a fonna, meaning an ice cap that has no dangerous crevasses, you don't need mountain-climbing crampons, you just need chains that attach to your boots. I said with a laugh, all right, in that case next year I'll know what to do, and I politely asked what had brought her here, though I couldn't have cared less. She replied right away that for a very long time she'd been sailing her yacht to Svalbard for the summer and staying for as long as ice conditions would allow. This time she wanted to circumnavigate the whole archipelago, but it turned out this year the ice hadn't retreated, the whole north of Svalbard was frozen, including the Hinlopen Strait, so that meant she was hanging out down here, going back and forth among Longyearbyen, Pyramiden and Ny-Ålesund.

The yacht caught my interest, so I started questioning her, and the more eagerly she spoke, the more detailed questions I asked; she was surely pleased that her interlocutor showed elementary competence at sailing. So she said that her Isbjørn was a steel expedition ketch, fifty feet long, with watertight bulkheads, a water desalination unit, a strong engine, a generator, almost three thousand liters of fuel, a few sets of sails, heating, a freezer, a satellite phone, an enclosed pilot house, so you could steer and keep warm, and so on. She went on at length, I could see she was proud. Such a big ship was hard to sail alone, she said, but she'd set everything up for herself so that she could handle it herself.

"My name's Borghild Moen," she finally said, offering her hand.

I shook it and introduced myself with my first name.

"But you can call me Stefan, I know that 'Szczepan' is impossible to pronounce," I added as usual in such situations.

She protested, replying she would try somehow to pronounce the strange "sh-ch" sound at the beginning, and it turned out she could manage perfectly. She asked where I was from. From Poland, I replied, though I'm not a Pole, but I doubted she wanted to hear long stories about the convoluted issues of multifaceted ethnic identities in what was once the Polish-German-Czech border region. She smiled and surprised me, saying, "So you're a Silesian?" Yes, I replied, and expressed my amazement that she was aware at all of the existence of my God-forsaken land. She just waved a hand dismissively, not intending to get into it, and when I asked her about her origins, since after all no one was from here, she gave a broad sweep of her arm, saying she was from nowhere and everywhere, she had been sailing for forty years.

"The ocean is my only homeland," she added.

I laughed that after all she wasn't the offspring of a mermaid and a merman, so finally she said she had a Norwegian passport, but she wasn't especially attached to it.

She asked whether I sailed. Yes, I answered, I did a bit, I had skippered a little on the Baltic and the Adriatic, but that was hardly anything, vacation sailing, I was no sea dog.

Then Borghild Moen suggested I sail with her to Longyearbyen. She had dropped off four people who were staying in Pyramiden and she could, of course, sail back alone, because she'd been sailing alone for decades, but that made her appreciate company all the more. She was setting off the next morning, the Isbjørn was moored at the same quay from which the fast ferry ran, and the trip to Longyear would most likely take a few hours.

I agreed without much thought. I didn't want to keep hanging around in Pyramiden, I had no reason to, and sailing an expedition yacht was always an adventure, even if only for a few hours. Borghild ordered another round of whiskeys, which we finished, and then I said goodbye and went off to bed, not wanting too quickly to wear out my impression of her as quite good company.

I was the first one to turn up beside the Isbjørn that next morning, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. I dropped my backpack onto the quay, sat down on it

and lit my first cigarette in a few weeks. I'd had a pack of Djarums with me this whole time, I hadn't even unwrapped it, but now I felt like smoking.

The Isbjørn rested alongside the quay, firmly moored with two lines and two springs. She was an impressive yacht, well cared-for and superbly equipped. The sides of the mighty hull were painted red, the covered deck of well-maintained, warm-hued teak had been meticulously scrubbed, the mainsail and mizzen were reefed in hidden rollers on the masts, the staysails were reefed on the stiff stays. By the pushpit, grips held two long, aluminum poles for moving the hull away from icebergs, and next to them stood two fishing poles, a long one for trolling and a short one with a lure, probably for cod.

Borghild arrived a good while after me, with a small bag and a hunting rifle over her shoulder; we greeted one another, then she leapt vigorously onto her boat. I waited for her to invite me aboard—and she did. I made my way into the three-walled cockpit, Borghild opened the companionway, in the cockpit I took off my boots and walked down into the cabin.

The interior was set up in private owner style, not like a charter yacht, meaning only three cabins with bathrooms, two for guests in the bow, and a large one in the stern. Inside, not a single piece of steel protruded from under the dark mahogany; in the mess, the couches were upholstered in burgundy, the spacious galley held a large stove on a gimbal, under the little windows to starboard was a long shelf full of books, and on the mahogany bulkhead over the navigation station, next to the AIS data display and radar, hung some antique bronze devices, patinated with age: a chronometer, a barometer and hygrometer. The chronometer, mounted in the middle of these three, had a decorative engraving reading Invincible, as if brought from another yacht.

Borghild asked me to pick out one of the bow cabins, I chose the one on the right, dropped my bag and rifle onto the bunk and went out to the cockpit. She was standing at the helm, pushing the engine starter; a gentle tremble went through the steel hull of the Isbjørn, water spit out of the exhaust on the starboard side and the diesel engine under the floor started running evenly in low gear. Borghild asked if I knew how to handle the hawsers, which stung me a little, so I replied that I'd been sailing for twenty years, so I certainly could, which immediately made me feel foolish, because how much sailing had there really been

in those twenty years, and anyway only someone unsure of themselves asserts their competence out loud.

Borghild smiled and asked me to pull in three of the lines but keep us for a moment on the aft spring, meaning a line connecting the hull to the quay running from the stern toward amidships. I did as she wished, then she threw the boat into full reverse and lay the rudder on the side, the spring went taught, the prow of the Isbjørn slowly moved away from the quay, Borghild moved the shifter into neutral, waited for a second, and then moved it half-speed ahead, while I at her command pulled the spring onboard, and so we were off.

I don't remember what we talked about then. Certainly not about Khold or the lost S/Y Invincible, nor about Konrad Widuch.

All that I learned about a while later.

I suppose we didn't talk much at all, though one thing must have been said in the course of those seven hours, otherwise the story I am trying to describe here would not have taken place. At some point, as we crossed the thirty miles dividing Pyramiden from Longyearbyen, Borghild must have asked me if I'd like to sail on further with her.

She must have, because if she hadn't, I wouldn't have sailed on, and I must have replied that it was kind of her, but that was absolutely impossible, since I already had a plane ticket back, and commitments in Poland, children, work. Borghild asked what I did for a living and I, embarrassed as always, replied that I was a writer. That caught her interest, she kept asking what I wrote, asked me to repeat my name, and whether anything had been published in other languages, then when I mentioned translations into English and German, she said yes, now she remembered something, the name seemed familiar, she read German newspapers, that must be why. At the time I thought she was lying to make me feel better, which seemed not only kind but also smart on her part.

Or maybe she didn't ask that until we were at port at Longyearbyen. I don't remember. Did she tell me how long she wanted to sail? I don't know.

At any rate, no, I couldn't stay. I had no time. My plane was leaving in two days, before that I was meeting a writer I knew, Ilona Wiśniewska, for a beer in Longyearbyen, and then—so many professional and personal plans.

I couldn't stay, I had to go back home, to my life, to the world, to everything I'd run away from.

I had to. And yet what happened was, as we stood at the quay at the crowded marina in Longyearbyen, I left my gun and backpack in the cabin and went into town to do some shopping. In Svalbardbutikken I bought proper ocean oilers, then I took a seat in the Svalbar, ordered a beer, drank it and made six phone calls, of which two ended in unpleasant arguments, one losing me a lot of money, and the remaining three ended with somewhat curt goodbyes. Next I called my sons as well and with my voice cracking, told them I wasn't coming back yet, a little longer, a week, maybe two, maybe three. Maybe more. I don't know. I'm sorry. I was aware that I was behaving badly. Yet I could do nothing about it.

The younger one didn't want to talk to me at all, the older one only said: "Obviously you need to spend a little longer up there," I felt my heart bursting with sadness, yet it didn't burst completely, and so with my heart still beating I got back onboard the Isbjørn, which Borghild was just stocking up, unloading a sizeable cartload of purchases. Seeing my rather somber expression, she asked if everything was all right. I only shrugged. No, not everything was all right, basically nothing was all right, but I saw no reason to complain.

Two hours later we unmoored and went out onto the waters of Isfjorden, whereupon Borghild, finally satisfying herself that my sailing skills were sufficient, decided it was now time to leave me alone on the watch, clipped to the rail with the tendrils of a safety tether. She ordered me to maintain a heading of 250 degrees, nearly due west, and went to sleep, while I, warmly dressed, sipped tea with lemon and slowly froze at the helm, despite two sweaters, wool underwear, oilers, a hat and gloves. When sailing in Spitsbergen, it's rare to set the sails, but this time the wind was ideal, easterly, so we set the two fore staysails in a butterfly shape, while the mainsail and mizzen remained reefed on rollers, the large genoa and jib had no trouble getting the Isbjørn up to six knots.

After six hours of sailing, the Isbjørn passed Kapp Linné, and before long we were on the open ocean; the prow of the steel ketch dug into the water and slowly sliced through the rising waves, while, in the steel grey of the sky blending into the sea, a terrible menace lurked, the same one that I always fear when I go out on the water. I fear and have always feared the ocean, its dark, pagan might. That is why I have loved it so much. An old English proverb says that only a fool doesn't fear the sea.

I inspected the horizon through binoculars, glanced at the AIS display integrated with the radar, I made sure no collision threatened us, since there was no trace of a ship on the horizon, apart from the bobbing grey hull of a Norwegian coast guard ship, the patroller Svalbard, which passed us a long way off as it slowly made its way to Longyearbyen. I activated the autopilot and went down into the cabin to wake Borghild, yet Borghild was no longer sleeping, she was bustling around in the galley, pouring boiling water over two bowls of freeze-dried goulash. She asked me not to take off my oilers yet, we'd make a turn, I'd help her trim the sails, so I returned to the cockpit. Borghild came out after a moment in only a light jacket, but with a properly fastened life vest. She showed me where to clip onto the rail for work on the sails, we rolled up the jib and the genoa, as you had to in order to make a turn, then Borghild took the helm and with an aft turn we crossed the wind line, I was working the sheets, Borghild set a heading of 180 degrees, meaning due south, we trimmed the sails on the backstay of the port tack, we held steady like that for a while, I put on the preventers, the wind picked up a little, it was blowing at maybe fifteen knots, evenly, without gusting, Borghild switched on the autopilot, scanned the horizon and we returned to the cabin.

I gave a two-sentence report of the last hours of my watch, I said the KV Svalbard had passed us, Borghild asked if they hadn't hailed us over the radio, and I truthfully answered no, she only nodded, as if that lack of hailing meant something; she glanced at the cabin multifunction map plotter display, which also showed data from the AIS and radar, then served me a bowl of freeze-dried goulash, with the water now well absorbed. We sat down at the table in the mess, we ate in silence, and then Borghild asked what I'd like to drink, to which I asked what there was, whereupon she opened up a richly stocked liquor cabinet and replied, everything, including glacier ice thousands of years old, great for whisky. I asked for a bourbon and since it was from a glacier, I'd take it with ice; she poured me a large portion in a glass, got out a bar of chocolate and poured herself a coffee.

Then I said I'd like to contribute toward the provisions, I saw she'd done a lot of shopping and it would be crude of me to abuse her hospitality. She agreed and named a sum, I think it was two thousand kroner, I counted out the bills, offered

them, she took them, thanked me, counted them, pocketed them. I thought in theory I could now ask where we were going and for how long, but I didn't.

I suppose I didn't yet want to know.

Now I realize that by signing onto the Isbjørn, I was still running away, running further than I could by living as a nomad in the interior of Dickson Land. My satellite phone remained in my luggage, turned off, I didn't want even that limited form of contact with the world, I was ready neither for a phone conversation nor for busily tapping out texts on the numeric keypad, like back in the nineties.

Even that was too much for me.

"I didn't want to tell you this before first watch, I preferred for you to enjoy the sea and my lovely ship, but for the future, you're better off standing watch in the cabin, in the pilot house, at the navigating table, until we get in among some icebergs or growlers off of glaciers that are easy to miss from the cabin, and hitting ice is like hitting rock, or for that matter until we get a storm that's too serious for the autopilot. But I don't like sailing in storms. There's not a second ship's wheel here, but you have got the autopilot controller, so you don't need to touch the wheel, plus you've got the throttle and gauges for the motor, AIS and radar, and there's some visibility all around, it's only difficult looking aft, so you can correct course in the warmth; in such sparsely frequented bodies of water as this, you only have to go out maybe once an hour, well, and when you have to trim the sails," said Borghild then, and it was the longest statement I had heard from her so far.

Of course I acknowledged she was right. The Arctic Ocean wasn't the Adriatic, there was neither so much traffic here, nor such temperatures as would make you want to sit for eight hours at the helm in the cockpit, since from the navigation station in the cabin you could also correct the autopilot settings, while the pilot house, protected against arctic waves behind thick glass, ensured tolerable visibility.

I said I missed the sea, the horizon growing more immense as I moved further from land, and freezing to the bone was a price I was willing to pay for it.

She only nodded and said I should get some sleep.

Something about her fascinated me. She was a good couple decades my senior and that gave her a certain serenity, a confidence that she didn't have to try to

please anyone, after all she was the owner and skipper of her own fantastic expedition yacht, on which I was only a crew member. Today I think what fascinated me was the mystery concealed inside her, because ordinarily I can see right through people, I flatter myself that I can read them like an open book, while Borghild remained inscrutable, her face furrowed by the deep wrinkles of sea folk, her strong hands red from cold, her short-clipped nails, her completely white hair told me nothing apart from what was obvious anyway, that the sea was her home.

I finished my bourbon, ate two squares of bitter chocolate and went to bed.

I fell asleep right away, the moment I got into my sleeping bag, and, exhausted, I slept in blackness, without dreaming, rocked by the waves and the dull roar of the sea as it toyed with the steel hull of the Isbjørn, which was better soundproofed than any steel yacht I had ever been on.

I slept a black sleep, and when I awoke, it was bright and grey out; I looked at my watch, which showed ten o'clock, and realized that I didn't know if it was ten in the morning or ten at night. I went into the mess, without it occurring to me that I was wearing only my black thermal underwear, covering, of course, my entire body, but not particularly suitable for parading around in front of strangers, and when I did realize, at the same time I could tell that it didn't bother Borghild at all.

I could walk around in my skivvies if I were here on a trip with my friends, not with a silent sailor old enough to be my mother, or even grandmother.

Borghild was sitting in the pilot house, three steps up from the mess, at the navigation table, on which rested an open military-style armored laptop. Near the laptop lay a device familiar to me: a satellite modem, linked by cables to a power supply and an external antenna.

"I checked online and I finally managed to figure out how to spell your name," Borghild said with a smile. "You really are a writer," she added, confirming my intuition that she'd been lying earlier when she said she recognized my name from German newspapers.

Yet later I realized that she couldn't actually have checked that now: we had long since moved out of range of the cell network, and the internet over a satellite modem was limited to downloading e-mail and weather reports, you couldn't use

it to access websites, therefore there was no possibility of typing anybody's name into a search engine.

So maybe she'd checked earlier how to spell my name? I don't know, I simply replied with a smile and, as I set the kettle on the gas stove, asked if she was hungry, because I'd be glad to cook something up. Borghild replied, of course, anything at all, the galley was mine. I looked through the supplies and, since nothing else came to mind, I fried an omelet with relatively fresh vegetables and ham. While I cooked, Borghild put on a jacket and safety belt and went out into the cockpit with her binoculars; she returned after a moment and we sat there at the table in the mess, eating and drinking, I, coffee and Borghild, beer.

She said that while I was sleeping we'd done over fifty miles, the whole time the wind was blowing fifteen to seventeen knots northeasterly and we were now as far as the West Torell Glacier. In twenty miles, so in about three hours, we'd pass Hornsund, and in ten hours, the islands on the southern edge of Sørkapp, where we would luff and go as far eastward as the wind would allow. The weather forecast was good, the ice conditions were ideal for us, though somewhat worse for the planet, meaning there was no ice at all.

"Where are we sailing to?" I asked then, and immediately felt as though I'd broken some unspoken rule that Borghild and I had silently established.

"It's no secret, but the answer to that question is long and complicated and I would have to start ab ovo. It will be simpler if you read something first. It won't make for easy reading, but I think you'll like it, since you're a writer. Maybe you'll even find it useful for something."

I shrugged, to indicate that we didn't have anything better to do here, so gladly.

"I can tell how eager you are, you like mysterious stories, after all, you professional writers, that's what you live from, isn't it, other people's stories?"

"I write novels, not journalism," I protested.

"But you'll read it, won't you?"

"I will. Just, you know, I hear so often that someone has a great idea for a novel…"

"I don't have an idea, Szczepan," she replied teasingly. "I've got a story ready-made for you."

I cleaned up from breakfast, brushed my teeth, put on my pants and fleece, then in my cabin I pulled my satellite phone out of my backpack and for a

moment I weighed whether to turn it on, whether to contact the people who were waiting for me to call.

I didn't. I couldn't. I put the phone away and went to the pilot house. Maybe by now they had stopped expecting me to call. Borghild politely indicated a seat at the navigation table, from which the laptop had now been removed.

"It's your watch, the yacht is yours. I'm going to sleep and you'll be able to read. Heading 160 degrees, until we pass Sørkapp, and keep an eye on the echosounder and the map, because it sometimes gets shallower here, and the maps aren't the newest. Of course that's an abundance of caution, but you can never be too careful."

I agreed, then put on my jacket and security belt, picked up my binoculars and went out for a moment to the cockpit, where I immediately tethered myself to the eye at the ship's wheel.

I inspected the horizon, first on the starboard side. The sea was empty, steel-grey waves as far as the eye could see. To port, far on the horizon spread the thin line of a coastal plain, and on it, the white tongues of a glacier and the sharp peaks of Kokkfjellet. A few hundred meters from the hull of the Isbjørn slicing through the water, I noticed a dozen or more white shapes rolling through the waves and after a moment realized I was looking at a pod of belugas, swimming lazily toward land.

For a while I watched through the binoculars, a little out of curiosity, and a little to postpone my return the pilot house. But finally I was freezing, so I cast another glance at the sails, checked the fastening on the preventers and went down into the cabin.

"I saw belugas," I said, sitting down at the navigation table.

"That's a good sign," replied Borghild. "Belugas are always a good sign."

She was sitting at the navigation table, holding a book in her hands, or rather a notebook perhaps, old beyond a doubt, bulky, double-bound in old leather—double, because the thick covers of the notebook were leather, as was the case, fastened with three strips with brass clasps—which lay open now on the navigation table.

"This is for you to read," she said. "The original, composed in Polish. I've only read it in a translation I commissioned long ago. It was done for me by a certain Polish immigrant, in London, supposedly a general… But first he had to sign an

agreement to keep it confidential. Just so you understand it's an important matter."

"Whose diary is this?" I asked.

"Don't ask. You'll find out for yourself. You'll do what you want with this. Just read it. I'm going to bed. We'll talk afterwards."

"Fine. But I wouldn't want this to place any obligation on me, in the moral sense, all right?" I warned her, because too often I get accosted by people who're convinced they have a great idea for a book that I should write.

"Obligations? No obligations, Szczepan. You'll do what you want with it. If I was younger, then I'd never hand this story over to you. But, you know, I'm eighty-three and I'm sick."

"You're how old?" I said, amazed.

"That's right, eighty-three, my dear boy."

"I thought you were more like seventy."

"Clearly life at sea has served me well. It doesn't sound so good if I mention that I started looking seventy by about fifty, but now, as you can see, my years have more than caught up with my face. Not that I care much."

"I'd never have said you looked sick either."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Let's not get into it. I'm not likely to see my eighty-fifth birthday."

I didn't reply. That's how I was raised, what's there to say. For a moment I checked the plotter and the echosounder, as is appropriate for the person on watch. My grandfather, when he felt overwhelmed by something, would go down to his basement workshop and get to work. My mother starts cleaning. My father works in the garden. So what was I supposed to do? I read out our position on the plotter and marked it on the paper map, which seems unnecessary, redundant, since on the Isbjørn we had two independent GPS systems, plus manual extras, but in training they teach you that such redundancy can sometimes save your life. Then I made the hourly entry in the paper log: position, course, speed, sea condition, windspeed, pressure, temperature. Good maritime practice, that's called.

Borghild observed me with a smile as on the map I manipulated a navigational triangle, a parallel ruler and a divider. She understood why I was doing this at that very moment.

"Well, all right, all right, I could have not mentioned it, because I can see it's made you a little grumpy. It's no big deal, no big deal, don't worry. Just start reading. Then describe what you read, the normal way, describe it in those books of yours. Maybe someone will like this story. And let the Isbjørn sail. Steady as she goes. Don't bother her. Look after her, but don't get in the way, let her sail. She's a good boat."

I finished with the map, reached for the bulky notebook and weighed it in my hand, not daring to open it.

"Come on, read," she urged me. "And read wisely."

Borghild got up, stroked my head, the way you stroke a child's head, and went to bed.

I was left alone with the notebook she had entrusted to me. I opened it at random—the pages were covered in tightly packed, tiny, uneven, slanted handwriting.

What of these pages, written in tiny cursive, is true, what is invented, what is inadvertent warping of the facts, and what is delusion, I neither wanted to decide for myself nor settle finally then, and I don't wish to do so now, as I write these words. But I myself quickly came to believe the author of this diary and I believe him to this day, though believing someone and establishing their truthfulness are two entirely different things.

THE NOTEBOOK OF KONRAD WIDUCH

JUNE 16, 1946

I am person?

Was I ever person?

Up there I wrote date. Eight years I didn't know what day of week, month, often even what month. Just in general. But now I know. I have calendar next to me. Today—Sunday. The Lord's Day.

I look at my hands. One I try and stretch out, to hold down notebook, left one, because I am right-handed, in right one I hold pencil. Both hands are marked with scars from ulcers, from old illness, on right I am missing one joint of my

little finger, frostbitten long ago, on left I am missing whole little finger and most of ring finger, but that time was accident clearing forest. Or maybe not accident, I don't remember anymore. Maybe Rebane did it on purpose back then. After all his name in Estonian meant fox. That's what he said. Maybe on purpose. Fox. Maybe those fingers are still lying there somewhere, I mean bones of fingers, three joints each, in forest bed, buried in rotten wood, under clumps of pushitsa, with its little balls of white fluff blown in wind.

I don't know how pushitsa is called in Polish or how in German, but in Russian is just like that, пушица, it's type of grass with balls like cotton, it grows in sendukha, beyond where trees can reach. In Khold from these balls they made wicks for stone seal-fat lamps, Yukagirka Ibisi taught me how to twist fibers in fingers, wrap it to make tidy little twine, too weak to use for houseline, but absorbent, perfect for wick. But best grew in Nord, at foot of huge, smoking mountain, balls of Arctic cotton were largest there, yarn so strong you could make thread from it too.

But where I lost my fingers, there could not be pushitsa, where I lost my fingers, there were still trees and thick undergrowth of taiga, since we were clearing forest; sendukha and pushitsa of sendukha, and mosses, and willows creeping along ground, that came later. Somewhere else. Long before all this.

So maybe they lie under little bush full of berries, juicy and sweet, we used to eat them while clearing forest, but we had to be careful, because some could make you sick, and sick there, in that place whose name I do not wish to pronounce, sick there meant corpse.

Maybe they're lying there. I didn't miss them, they were wrecked anyway from squeezing handle, hooked like claws, besides, I still have seven and two-thirds fingers, I can share two with earth. Berries drew all their sweetness from them, from those fingers of mine that life amputated from me. And those I still have look like fingers of my great-grandmother, that were consumed by rheumatism, all twisted, broken and grown together. But they still serve me. They will pull trigger.

But am I still person?

I write these words slowly, pencil is scraping. I would rather with pen, but I don't have pen. Anyway here, in nord, pens freeze, but pencil writes even in cold. Although now is warm. Maybe somewhere in world they now have such pens that write in even in cold.

Big Guy gave me this notebook and pencil when he left. He said he will not need it anymore. That was not long after he broke my nose, but I only started to write now, after two months alone.

Big Guy was not named Big Guy, but something else, Jean or something like that, I did not know how to pronounce it, although I have it written down. Little Guy was named Jules, like Verne, who I enjoyed reading so much as kid in German, but I preferred to call them like that, Big Guy and Little Guy, because anyway we didn't talk much after all, although I know a few languages.

German for instance I learned in elementary school, Polish later, in self-education clubs of Polish socialists, it was not hard, because at home we actually spoke our tongue, so I picked up Polish easily, I studied English some as elective in Marineschule and I can understand something, though for sure I forgot everything now. Russian I only learned when Radek and me arrived in Moscow, but I learned well, didn't I, seventeen years I lived in Rossiya with that Russian language, with Sofie I also spoke Russian, though she knew German better than I did Russky. We were a little scared to speak German, of course.

One way or other, Big Guy and Little Guy talked in French, that is, Little Guy did, and he also knew few words in English and few words in German, and at first we would tell each other some stories, that is, again mainly Little Guy would tell, I listened, after all I was not going to tell him about the place whose name I don't wish to mention, nor about Khold, or Nord and its giant, smoking mountain. Big Guy said almost nothing at all, as if he forgot human language.

Maybe in reality I no longer speak single word in human language either, I just repeat, like parrot. Our commander—in the first one of places whose names I do not wish to mention, forgive me, my reader, unhappy because you are nonexistent—had parrot like that, completely grey, but with red tail, she sat in cage and shouted: "К черту Троцкого!" and "Ленин молодец! Сталин молодец!" but then, feeling glum, she pulled out her feathers and finally died, and commander at roll call announced it was conspiracy of Trotskyist rats and so we would go out to work one hour earlier.

And maybe I am like that parrot, who after all did not know who is Trotsky, why he is hanging out over in Mexico or Paris, did not know who is Lenin and Stalin, maybe now I also just repeat words I heard, maybe I don't know anymore what is behind them.

And yet I write, do I not? I write in Polish. After all this I never learned to like writing in Cyrillic, but in Polish, though incorrectly, I know, still somehow I did learn to like, because learning came to me easy, after comrades from Polish Socialist Party organized for us in Partition self-education club, so it turned out that this Polish is quite similar to our tongue, though more snootier, kind of like some funny lord was talking and I think that snootiness makes it better for writing, though talking Polish is awfully silly and I was always embarrassed talking Polish, because when a person is speaking Polish with all its pan and pani, ą and ę, right away it sounds like some Polish nobleman strutting around and like he's got pinky finger sticking out while drinking tea like wing of some delicate little fledgling, well, mann sounds grotesque when he's speaking Polish, always like clown, but in our tongue is like it should be, normal, no puffing up, like ordinary guy, normal. And in Russian also normal, no snootiness, no pan and pani, or ą, or ę, like guy or gal, normal, and not some lord or lady or who in hell knows what.

But writing Polish is all right, somehow this Polish fits in hand, even those ę and ą are not so bad to write. Well it's sometimes like that with languages and speaking, and writing.

I don't remember last time I wrote. When last time I held in hand pen or pencil.

In Khold were no writing apparatuses. No one needed them, because no one there wrote anything, people more remembered instead, than wrote. In soul they knew. In place whose name I don't wish to speak, there was also nothing to write with, nor reason why, nor anything about, although I knew poet there, who on some scraps of paper he found somewhere or other wrote his verses down, and then learned them by memory, which did not help him much after he died, normal way, from starvation. I did not write anything down there nor did not want to remember anything.

So even before. Much before I wrote often, almost every day, mainly letters, first to Sofie from war and then after war, when we were dislocated to Caucasus, where we starved, horses did too, fed brewed chaff and rotten straw torn from peasant thatch. Then, when Sofie and me were already living together in Moscow, then I would write to old comrades, because new ones I didn't have, I even would write to Germany, which was not rational in fact, but back then I still had illusions about freedom in Homeland of World Proletariat, and then, when after downfall

of Radek, we lived in communal apartment in Murmansk, to keep as much as possible low profile, almost disappear, by then I was scared to write, because after all, one stupid word meant death. Better not to write, not letter, not postcard, and certainly not God forbid journal.

But Vilena was still in lessons, so I wrote something there with kid, bukvy in little cahier, we didn't have courage to teach her Polish or German, although Sofie usually talked to her in Norwegian, that was when our second little girl was born, we named her Ninel, that mean Lenin backwards, by then we were writing nothing at all. All our notes, from whole life, all notebooks, cards, letters received and copies made on carbon paper of sent ones, everything, Sofie and I burned then, but it didn't help anyway, though it didn't hurt either.

Let memory remain memory, fluid and changing like us, people, matter inside us exchanges around, because we eat, we digest, particles of matter are planted in our body, and others we expel, in our bodies is nothing permanent, we are from matter like wave from water, we appear, we swell like wave and fade away, and our memory with us, changing, reflection of reflection, so it's good that everything we had written down, we burned. I did not regret then and I do not regret now. But I am writing this only because no one will read it, my sweet, albeit nonexistent reader.