

I NEVER SMOKE WHILE WALKING

I was absolutely convinced I would be a pianist. Then one day my teacher said: “You know what, Kasia, there so are many fields of art, maybe you should take up photography, this could be interesting”. I wept like an animal.

TEXT Beata Kęczkowska PHOTOS Marcin Kaliński



HOW I WAS BROUGHT UP

My parents met on a train to Warsaw. My mother was going to study there and my father was going to work. Dad was eight years younger than her. He was a lathe operator and earned three times as much as her, even though she had a degree. It was during their first meeting that he told her that she would be the mother of his children. My parents kept their letters from the engagement period and my father gave them to us – they are very intimate, moving and somewhat old-fashioned, starting with “Dear Miss...”. Mum and Dad kept writing to each other, because he had to leave to work in Cyprus when Mum was already pregnant. There are many declarations of love and devotion. While reading the letters after my father's death, my brother and I would leave some of them unread, in order not to invade my parents' intimacy. Even though there were no blush-inducing erotic passages, we did not want to intrude on this confidentiality.

They were the love of each other's lives, but their relationship was not a peaceful one. Mum and Dad were both hot-blooded and argued a lot. My father was very dependable and planned everything. Silent and solid, he held the whole family under his thumb. His “yes” meant “yes, one hundred per cent”. He bought a cabin close to the Belarusian border, to keep grey geese and spend his retirement there. He never got to do it though; the cancer progressed very quickly. After his death, my mother moved to the cabin and lived there for nine years.

DAD ADORED MY MUM. She used to wrap her long braid around her head and wore wide-brimmed hats and colourful dresses. Now I am proud of her, but back then it embarrassed me – I wanted her to wear a perm and put on blue eye shadow like other ladies. She was like a colourful bird, and it was because of her uniqueness and beauty that my father fell in love with her.

My father's illness lasted eight months. We took him back from the hospital because he

said that he wanted to live his last days at home. He was fully aware of his condition. We talked a lot during that period. My father was ordinarily a man of few words, usually it was my mother who talked, but in this time he really opened up. Once he said: “Before the wedding we agreed that I would make all the big, important decisions, because I am the man, and Ninka would decide about the less significant things. And you know what? It turned out that Ninka decided everything, because in life there are no big decisions”.

We laughed together but then I had to leave the room and cry.

MY FIRST MEMORY? The scent of incense in an Orthodox church, a fountain in Hajnówka. It is derelict now, I have just checked, it was a huge disappointment.

I also remember sunlight sparkling in the mist. We went for a walk and my brother, who is four years younger than me, lost my mother's golden necklace and pendant. Everybody was looking for it. And it was me who found it!

I was very shy at school and had problems talking, although this only started after I began primary school. I had never had such problems before. Every Christmas I would terrorise my parents and their guests – I would take a stool, climb on it and sing the carol *Wśród nocnej ciszy* (*In the Night Silence*). They had no choice, they had to listen.

I WAS POSSESSIVE. My mum has one godson, Leszek, her brother's son who lived in Wałbrzych. One time, before Christmas, Mum was preparing a package for them with some clothes she had sewn and knitted herself. She also bought two toy dogs, shaggy and absolutely hideous. The pink one was for me, and the blue one was intended for Leszek. She packed everything up, took the parcel to the post office and sent it. When she came home, there I was, playing with both dogs – the pink one and the blue one.

I WAS VERY JEALOUS WHEN MY BROTHER WAS BORN. When Mum was breastfeeding him

I would climb onto her lap and try to join. She gave birth to me at the age of 38 – in those times it was considered very late. She was the oldest one in the maternity ward. For a couple of years my parents would treat me with kid gloves and spoil me, so the arrival of my brother came as a shock to me: how come? Isn't the world supposed to revolve around me?

I did not make it any easier for my brother. I was a competitive child and would always demand everyone's attention.

I loved to play post office. It was my own idea. Everyone would have to come and send letters – I terrorised the whole family. I gave my brother the most difficult tasks. He had to make lottery tickets and colour them, he hated it because I demanded precision. All our guests had to participate in my lottery. If we had some change, we put it in a piggy bank. One could also pay with *kukułki* (caramel-vodka candies). We took pralines, too, but never *kartoflaki* (“potato candies”) – jellies in sugar, we gave those to the dog. I still hate them, and jelly beans. We also carved stamps out of potatoes and passionately stamped my father's priceless philatelic collection with poster paint. I would nobly take all the blame, but we both got punished anyway. When our parents would go out to dance we would turn on the TV and watch late-night movies, things like *The Omen*, the one with the flesh-eating car, or *Carrie*. Sometimes we were too scared to go to the bathroom and I still remember some scenes, for instance when a glass pane cuts off that priest's head in *The Omen*. We also shared a tiny room and this made us compete with each other even more. There was this shelf where I kept my favourite books and my brother kept his games. Sometimes, coming back home from school, I would be welcomed by a stack of books under my desk. Loud arguments always followed, but when our parents came running, we never breathed a word of what it was all about. We got closer over time. Now we understand each other without words and draw each other's thoughts telepathically. When I suddenly start thinking about him I know I must call him because

something has happened. We have a very strong bond.

OUR FAMILY ORIGINATES FROM THE VILLAGES AROUND HAJNÓWKA – Wólka Wygonowska on my mother's side (my grandfather was a rich farmer) and a village closer to the Belarusian border on my father's side. Once, when I was 14, I went to visit my aunt on her farm. Everyone had to work in the field and I was told to go and pick strawberries. For me this made no sense – I had a book to read. While they picked several basketfuls, I barely managed one. I picked some, I ate some. They called me lazybones. My relatives regarded reading books as the most boring thing you are forced to do when you go to school, so during the holidays none of them touched books, even if they knew they would be punished for not reading. One evening I witnessed them kill a hen. The headless bird kept running around the room – the country kids found this very amusing. I was shocked and I remember vomiting, which caused peals of laughter. I was the laughing stock of the whole evening: I was not just an idler – I was a “city girl”. There was no bigger insult. That same night I packed my things and went to the railway station. Even though the next train wouldn't arrive until morning, I wanted to wait. It was only at the very last moment that they stopped me. When my mother asked why I had behaved like that, I told her that the place stank and they had not allowed me to read, and so I would never go back, ever.

MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER REMARRIED – THE SISTER OF HIS FIRST WIFE (GRANNY KASIA) WAS HIS NEW BRIDE. They had many children. My mother was taken out of his will – she had run away from home because she wanted to go to school. My grandparents spared no expense on her brother's education but wanted my mum to get married as soon as possible. She told me about her suitors: one was old but rich, another one was an alcoholic, and another one had a bad leg, but also owned a lot of land. Typical country negotiations – with my mum as the bargaining chip. So she

ran away and her father disowned her. They eventually made up, but their relationship remained cold.

Everything that my mother achieved was her own doing – she found work, went to university and was able to support herself. For her going to Hajnówka meant a confrontation with something new – the city. History repeated itself when I moved to Warsaw.

My mum was a great seamstress, which enabled her to afford a flat and to buy food. After completing her degree she found work in a woodworking plant in Hajnówka. This is the reason she married so late. She had stopped expecting she would ever start a family. She also had no inheritance.

BEING A CHEMIST, MY MOTHER HAS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING. When she tried explaining my chemistry homework to me and took out her own books, I could not understand a word she said. She too was diagnosed with cancer, and so she quit her job in the laboratory. Her line of work might have had something to do with her sickness. She never returned to the lab, instead, right up until her retirement, she worked in the library and ran the local seniors club. The granddaughters of the ladies who had had classes with my mum still come to my book signings.

After school I would join my mum in the library and help her stamp the books (on the first, seventeenth and last page), do the inventory and add new entries to the catalogue. I could borrow anything I wanted, so I used to bring whole piles of books home. I also accompanied my mother when she went to retrieve books from people who hadn't returned them. She knew everyone in Hajnówka and knew where everyone lived, including those with books overdue. There was one man who would give some of the books back but keep some others. From time to time my mum would let people bring different books in exchange, just as long as the numbers added up. But one time the book in question was a beautiful edition of *The Count of Monte*

Cristo (hardback, on coated paper). Beautiful books were very rare back then. We arrived at the guy's home and he said he'd lost the book. My mother carried out a search of the entire apartment, just like the police, and it turned out that he had put a casserole dish on the book. What an outrage! Later I turned my metal-head friends against him. I suppose he never realised why they were pestering him. I could not stand how he had treated my favourite literary character.

IT WAS FROM FILMS THAT I LEARNED HOW BABIES ARE MADE. My mum might have said a thing or two, but Dad never talked about it. It was never really taboo in our house though.

There was a cinema in the building that housed Mum's library and Mum would sometimes tell me to go to Miss Henia to let me see a show. I saw *My Mother's Lovers* with Krystyna Janda there. My parents used to watch a lot of television too, it was awful. This is why I don't own a TV today. But I have seen a lot of stuff on telly too.

I WENT TO THE BIGGEST PRIMARY SCHOOL IN HAJNÓWKA. My Polish teacher, Grażyna Pater, was great, but very suspicious. In seventh grade I read *Gone With the Wind* and wrote a paper about it. I did not understand anything about the Civil War, so I wrote about Scarlett as an independent woman. Ms. Pater did not believe I had written it and called my mum into school: "How could you, you of all people, you run the library, for goodness' sake! How can such a wise person do her own daughter's homework?!". My mum tried to explain, but Ms. Pater remained unconvinced. We went back home and Mum gave me extra ice cream as a reward. The next day she brought a couple of books for me to learn more about the Civil War.

My classmates used to rewrite their notebooks – a nice notebook meant better grades. Mine were always ugly, I have awful handwriting. My mum did not intervene because she thought that imagination is more important than knowledge.



I WAS NOT THE ADVENTUROUS TYPE. I didn't climb trees, I didn't cause any problems – until secondary school, when I started to talk back to the teachers.

There were two secondary schools in Hajnówka – the Polish one and the one with optional Belarusian. I chose the latter, because it was better; there was a volleyball team and a huge gym. We had more hours of German and a modern language lab. I did not know the Belarusian language, I had to learn the alphabet and I was never any good at it. We also learned Belarusian history and our teachers would try to brainwash us. For instance; they told us that Tadeusz Kościuszko was from Belarus, or that the Union of Lublin in fact resulted in the partition of Belarus, and was orchestrated by Poland and Russia. Most children did not dispute what the teachers told us, but I could not accept it and started arguments myself. Once I got seven F's in a single history lesson for talking back. I enjoyed

school a lot though, and I liked most of my teachers. Our Polish teacher, Elżbieta Mikłaszewicz, was our form-mistress and the terror of the school. The levels of the students were all very uneven, with some unable to manage even simple sentence construction. How can someone not figure out objects and modifiers? My behaviour was outrageous – I made nasty comments and had a whole gang of friends who would also mock the others. One time Ms. Mikłaszewicz called me to the blackboard: "Seeing as you mock so much, please, show us what you can do".

She gave me more and more difficult sentences to analyse. It was quite an ordeal. But it was thanks to her that I read so many books. She had a great influence on who I am today. Sometimes she would invite me to her home, where she had a pet rat that would sit on her shoulder. Ms. Mikłaszewicz was very strict – I respected her very much and always stood to attention when I saw her.

I WAS ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED I WOULD BE A PIANIST. I practiced for four hours a day. I played volleyball too, and was captain of the team. I also had to do posture exercises every day – I have a bad spine and my mum did everything she could to save me from surgery. I exercised before and after school. Now, without the pressure to do so any more, I avoid most physical activity, and I hate sports.

However, down to the fact that I had to work so hard in my childhood, I've learnt to be very conscientious. Other kids would go to the local disco or just hang out around their homes, whilst I had concerts and sight-reading lessons. There wasn't a music school in Hajnówka, only a music centre, and a very exclusive one. My father had to take a second job just to pay for it.

I DID NOT HAVE A GREAT TALENT FOR MUSICAL COMPOSITION, I didn't feel it, but I enjoyed perfecting my renditions of the various musical pieces. I polished every interpretation: everything was important, every semitone, the rhythm, the way in which my fingers touched the keys... I even learnt to play in the dark. I was convinced that the next step would be the conservatory and that later I would play in the philharmonic. I hated performing in public, with my mum always dressing me in white shirts, pleated skirts and patent shoes. I hated it. Everyone would look at me, but for me music was something very personal.

My teacher was Halina Rowińska, a violinist from Vilnius. During our lessons she would peel tangerines and smoke cigarettes, and I would play in a cloud of smoke. She had this one rule that I decided to adopt into my own life. She said: "Kasia, remember, never smoke while walking. If you want to smoke in the street, fine, but you have to stop walking when you do. One can smoke while talking or standing, but never smoke while walking, like some bum". Also, she always stood up or sat down with a very straight back. "If you begin to lower your chin, you will end up with goitre". Pointing at her neck, she would ask: "Do you see goitre here?" I would not even think of saying so, even if I did see something. She swore like a sailor and used to go fishing in her

wellies, but parallel to that she spoke four languages and never left home in a creased shirt. She was a real lady.

One day, when I was halfway through high school, she said she wanted to talk to me. "You know what, Kasia, there so are many fields of art, maybe you should take up photography". In Ms. Rowińska's opinion, I was not talented enough for the piano. Of course it was true, but I thought that working harder would do the trick. When I stopped being taught by her I cried like an animal. It was a huge blow.

MY MOTHER TOOK THE TEACHER'S SIDE. I realised that everyone thought music was not my thing – everyone except me. I decided never to play again, and I kept my resolution, although it took me some time to accept this lesson. I also realised I did not want to stay in Hajnówka, and would not listen to my father telling me that I was pretty, and that I would soon find a husband.

Once I baked a cheesecake but forgot to add any flour. My mum always baked two cakes on a Sunday, with one usually disappearing before lunch. When I took the cheesecake I'd made out of the oven, Mum gave me a stern look and said: "My child, you will never find a husband".

My father took a spoon, put some of this sad pulp on his plate, tried it and said: "The taste is perfect".

This was the moment I decided to go to Warsaw and study journalism. It was supposed to be a substitute.

IT CAME AS A BLOW TO MY PARENTS. I tried to explain to my father that I did not want to spend my life in the kitchen. I wanted to have adventures.

What they were most afraid of was that they would be unable to support me. They spent their whole lives living under communist rule. My father never ventured further than Białystok. He knew that, within the limits of his own territory, he could do something, but in Warsaw he was completely helpless.

It hurt his sense of dignity, so he

initially disagreed with my plan. Mum had to put in a lot of effort to persuade him. He complained he was afraid because he knew me and, knowing how stubborn I was, he pictured me sent to some war where I would get shot and killed, and I was his only daughter. He eventually agreed, on the condition that I apply to law school and Polish studies. Journalism was something unimaginable for them. I might as well have told them I was going to China to become the party leader. They were afraid I would fail and come back with my tail between my legs. I was accepted into all three faculties, but the choice was obvious, so I did not even collect my papers from the two that did not interest me. I still cannot tell where all this self-confidence came from. Maybe I owe it to my parents, after all? They had always taught me that I could do anything I wanted.

HIS NICKNAME WAS "SCRAP". We met at a school disco. He was one year older than I was and went to technical college. He listened to metal, and I was into Nirvana. He played volleyball, was super handsome, tall and had his gang, and a whole bunch of groupies. I felt honoured, because he chose me. I was not your typical pretty high school girl. He shaved his head, wore a tiny braid, cargo trousers, black T-shirts and bovver boots. I wore bovver boots too, and long black gothic dresses. My mum was afraid I would become a Satanist, also because of the number of horror books I read.

It was that type of once-in-a-lifetime, romantic love, I believed everything would be alright. We seemed to understand each other like characters from kitsch romance novels. He was the first boy I kissed and the first one to fool around with at bus stops. Once, when I had come back home only a couple of minutes after 10 p.m., my father was already half way out the door to look for me, and my mother welcomed me in floods of tears. The most important thing we had in common was music. I was very much in love and absolutely convinced this would last forever, while in reality it ended during my second year of university. I was the one who broke it off. I chose my own way – he wanted kids and cheesecakes.

I wish that every girl's first boyfriend was like my "Scrap". If I had stayed with him I would have had to come back to Hajnówka. The agony of that relationship was long and I suffered a lot, but I would later repeat the experience over and over again.

WHEN I CAME TO WARSAW, in 1999, I think, the city seemed impossibly huge to me. Everyone jokes that I bought my apartment in a neighbourhood resembling Hajnówka, where everything is close to home. I had this feeling of *déjà vu* not so long ago, in London, when I was standing in front of the building that houses the headquarters of Hachette, my British publisher. It had been over ten years since a Polish author had had their books published by such an important company. Standing in front of the building, I felt lost. Everything seemed so big and strange. I am still the same girl from Hajnówka and this will never change, even when I've grown old. It is my great strength, though. A couple of days ago I went to Zagórow, a town with just three thousand inhabitants, and tomorrow I am heading to London. Nowadays it doesn't make any difference to me, I am ready to talk to anyone, anywhere. This is my greatest asset.

I HAVE NEVER HAD A NICKNAME. My last name is so strong that everyone called me Bonda. Now people often ask, whether this is my *nom de plume*. I would never have chosen a pseudonym like that; it really is my real name. I have checked, it goes back several generations. Even my great-grandparents' tombstones have the name Bonda.

SINCE MY NOVEL *OKULARNIK* [THE WHITE MERCEDES] WAS PUBLISHED, the name "Hajnówka" has appeared in the media more often than when the town was granted borough rights. For many people it is a reason to be proud. But there has also been a lot of negative feedback, and I have received some directly too. I expected it though, it is my home town after all. I love it there, it is my *бацькаўшчына* (homeland). And if it were not, I would not be so exotic.

MY PARENTS MADE SURE THAT I SPOKE POLISH WELL. I think they should have taught me Belarusian too, though. I do speak it, but not very well and my accent is terrible. Mum and Dad did not want me to be burdened with the same things that troubled them, they wanted me to feel Polish. I have not forgotten my roots, but I speak Polish, I think in Polish, I read in Polish and experience emotions in Polish. The fact that my books revisit the past is an homage to my ancestors. I have only so much strength, I can't dig any deeper. The story of the pogrom crushed me. But I will come back to it – for my daughter. It is wrong to cut off one's roots and not know one's past, however painful and difficult it may be. Knowing my ancestors' genogram has helped me understand a lot, for instance, why I could never accept being a typical, cheesecake-baking housewife. For quite a long time I thought I was weird. I wondered why I can't be compassionate. I have always wanted to be a soft-voiced jellyfish – someone who makes men want to protect her, rather than be deterred by her. Instead, in whatever I do, I have to be competitive.

WHO DO I COMPETE WITH NOW? An example might be the Scottish writer Stuart McBride. I don't want my books to just be translated into foreign languages. I want them to be mentioned in the same breath as other great authors from around the world. I want people to say that they like Stuart McBride, Helen Fitzgerald, this Scandinavian writer, Larsson, and that Pole, Bonda. This is my goal. Of course, this is sassy arrogance speaking, but I know how to achieve it. London and Berlin seem so huge to me now, but Warsaw used to too.

