

Adam Pańczuk

KARCZEBY

TEXT

Kazimierz Kusznirow



The old adage goes, what is meant to be will always find a way.

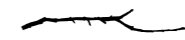




Father was eleven years older than Mother. He lived nearby. They talked casually, just like that, most often by the well. From his window he could see her draw water for the cows and horses. He would come out, help, and talk about this and that. He would never come to the evening get-togethers. In March 1939, after conscription was announced, he joined the army. When leaving, he asked Mother to look after his bicycle. No one in the village had a bicycle at that time. He explained that otherwise his brother's children would abuse it and break it. "If there's war and I come back, I'll pay for the storage, and if I die, you'll have something to remember me by." Mother was very happy and kept saying that it would be better if he didn't come back, so that she could keep the bike. She was learning to ride it all day, and in the evening she saw Father coming home. "Oh well, there goes the bike!" The war began. The Germans ordered the village heads to appoint boys and girls to be taken away to work in Germany. Father sent a matchmaker to Mother, and the fear of being deported made her accept the proposal. They got married in November.



Festive christenings were not customary back then. The godparents would take the child to church themselves, on a normal day, without the parents. Mine were a young lad and a girl. The priest wasn't there; he had gone to administer sacraments to a sick man, so the organist told them to wait. And soon they got bored, so they went to an inn and had a drink or two. During the christening they forgot what I was supposed to be called, because Mother and Father chose an unusual name, Hieronim Teodor. So they thought, the mother's name is Kazimiera, let's make it Kazimierz. All very well, since I didn't like the original names at all. I asked my Mother how they would call me: Heronek? Teodzio? My siblings would make fun of me: "Heronek has a fat neck" or "Tadzik has a beak." My Grandfather always said that I would be like that king, Kazimierz the Great, and he would tell stories of the ruler who was good to the peasants. I was very proud of that and I bragged to the other kids about it. And they would laugh and say: "Kazimierz the Great was overweight, and he ate all the bread, and now he is dead." But that didn't bother me. The only important thing was what my Grandfather Jan had told me.



I liked everything at my Grandfather Jan's place. On one side of the street there was a very large wooden house, roofed with shingles I think, with a porch, blue shutters, and a glazed veranda on the other side. It had a huge kitchen with an iron water pump, a large table, large chairs with armrests carved in flowers, and all of that indicated wealth. We only had a table made of boards and stools. Behind the house, towards the river, there was an orchard and gardens, and behind the orchard grew an enormous linden and an ash tree, and under them heaps of violets bloomed. There, Grandfather would let me play with old broken plates, bottles and worn-down mugs, and make mud pies. I was forbidden to do so in other places, in case I made a mess. There was also a walnut and a sweet cherry tree in the garden. No one else in the village had such fruit trees back then. And a bee yard. Across the street – a big yard with farm buildings. Barns, a granary, a byre, a well with a crane. I considered all of that to be mine. When I was about three, we moved from that house belonging to my Grandfather, Jan Derlukiewicz, into our own.





At that point there were seven of us. I remember that often in the evenings, especially in the winter, we were cooped up in one room. During supper our Mother would often forget to take out enough spoons. Everyone grabbed their spoons quickly, and there wasn't one left for me. Often there were elderly women present during the meals. In particular, one of our neighbours kept a keen eye on us. She would watch us eat and explain what sort of workers we would turn out to be. She'd say: "He who eats quickly is fast," or "He who slurps carelessly or gulps down food like a stork on a frog, he is a boor." And she pointed out to my Mother that I often didn't have a spoon. "And you, poor thing, don't forget, because it will mean that he will be lonely, that there will be no one to give him a spoon, and that he will have to always look after himself." And so her prophecies have proven true.



When Mother was nineteen she got psoriasis. This means that the skin grows scaly and cracks, forming open wounds. She even went to Warsaw to have it treated. But the doctor only gave her some sort of ointment so that it wouldn't itch, because she was constantly scratching, even though she tried not to. The illness was considered incurable. Wherever she'd go, she was told they cannot cure it. So she went to a medicine man. He said that someone cursed her with it. "And you crossed through water and you caught it." And she remembered. It was after a rain. Mother had a plot of turnips somewhere behind a marsh, and she went there to earth the turnips up. And then she rinsed her muddy feet in a puddle in the marsh. And it started to itch. The medicine man said: "Someone put a spell on you, now you have to reverse it. You have to go to a rushing stream." Mother: "Where? There is no rushing stream in Lubenka." "You'll find it, there's a cascade, some steps, where the water is rapid." He ordered her to collect burdock, those clingy burrs, and he gave her some ashes. "And all this you will cook, and mix with lard. Rub it on your legs, and then go to the rushing stream, and it will go away with water." My mother did not really believe in all that witchcraft and superstition. But the old women kept nagging, "Do it, rub it in, just as you were told." Mother sort of believed, sort of didn't, but made the concoction. Took the lard, cooked those prickly flowers, and mixed it with the ashes she got. She kept rubbing it in, but on its own it wouldn't help. And then one day she went to turn hay, and there they were, those steps into the water. She put her legs in, rinsed her feet, and it was all gone. The medicine man never told her what was in those ashes, but they say you have to kill a hedgehog and burn its spikes. And use those ashes.





Being a village musician, my Father was often just like a guest at our house. Means of transport were poor back then; he often had to walk from wedding to wedding. I can remember us waiting for Dad to come home, because he would always bring something back for us. Often these were biscuits, crumbled in his pocket, covered in tobacco from his cigarettes. Even though they were bitter, we would devour them right away. Each time he came back the neighbours would come in and inquire about the wedding he had been to. Was it good? Was the bride pretty? Usually my Father said "Hell knows, I wasn't looking, I was thinking about my Kazia all the time, only she is pretty to me." But he would slowly become agitated and tell the stories. For example, this one time the young couple was going to church. And the groom asked to stop the horses, then jumped of the carriage and ran into the forest. Everyone thought he just had to answer the call of nature, but he was gone for a long time. The bride knew he was being forced to marry her, so she started crying and asked the others to look for him. They saw him just out of the trees and started chasing him. Father, seeing that he was running and looking back from time to time, dropped to one knee, put the clarinet to his eye and shouted "Bang, bang, stop or I'll shoot!" He thought it was a gun and fell to the ground. They dragged him, all covered in mud, to church by force.

My mother's uncle got married in hiding, in the woods, when the Uniates were being persecuted. The girl was brought in under the cover of the darkness, and the priest performed the ceremony, lit by a single candle. In the morning it occurred that he got married to the wrong girl. Not the one he wanted, but her sister, who was very similar, but had suffered from polio, had her arms and legs twisted by the illness, who was crippled and retarded. He had been tricked. But marriage was sacred. He stayed with her, accepting the matrimony as God's will. You didn't use to hear about marriages out of mutual love, and even if such existed, they were always unhappy.







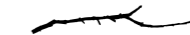
Grandmother – that's what I called her – was the mother of my godfather. Staszucha she was called, a name taken after her husband, Stanisław. Grandmother Staszucha was very stingy, but she referred to herself as frugal. Once, when I came to borrow some oil, she spilled some while pouring it into the glass. She then proceeded to lick it off the floor, wiped the rest with a slice of bread, which she then ate. Nothing could go to waste. Grandmother had four sons, three of them very handsome and good-looking, so she said that when they grow up, they will look after themselves, as gold shines even through dirt. They will find women with a lot of land, because if you fancy someone, even the arse smells fine. I loved the things she said. When the parishioners bought a hearse to transport the deceased to the cemetery, she told a story: "A grandmother dies, and the coffin is being put into the hearse. Her grandson is weeping and lamenting, and does not want to join the funeral procession. His mother consoles him, 'Don't worry, Grandma is in heaven for good now,' and the child cries 'I don't give a damn about Grandma, I want to ride in the hearse!'" And she'd add, "See, such a little boy and already so smart. The dead don't mind if they're carried in a simple cart or a hearse, but that one costs money and you have to pay for it." Little did I know how useful her philosophies would become when I'm preparing scenarios for the ritual theatre.







I remember how grand an event that was - Gagarin was launched into space. The teacher at school turned on the radio and we were listening to it happening. We didn't know what space is. One of the children asked, and we heard that "Space is space, he went up in the air, you moron." It somehow didn't seem right to me, so I quietly asked my friend "Do you know what that is?" And he answered "I don't know, but I think he went into shit, and that's a bad word, so Miss does not want to say it." I started laughing uncontrollably, because what kind of an event is that, a man flying into shit. I refused to say what I was laughing about and I got slapped on my hands with a ruler, and they got swollen. I didn't say why, because I was embarrassed. And a different situation, when I was asked to come to the front of the class. I was supposed to show where Warsaw was on a map. It was in primary school, second grade. We hadn't learned anything about geography yet. Our teacher didn't explain that I needed to specify the location of the city, so I pointed with my finger to a place on the map. I didn't even know how you spell Warsaw. In my village we used very non-standard Polish, the elderly people used an even more incorrect dialect, known as the chachłacki language. I stammered "bout 'ere to me." And the teacher laughed and said "do-re-mi", and that's because my Father played the clarinet.



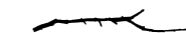
After primary school I worked with my Mother on the farm and sometimes I went to help the neighbours with threshing, harvesting, or other jobs. Rarely for money, just a piece of fat back, some flour, or a thank you. I really liked what our close neighbour once said. Everyone called him Dumb Manik. I was helping his brother with the threshing. Manik was sitting leaning over the barn, rocking back and forth, and singing whatever came to his mind. Suddenly, he started swearing, "fucking hell," after every verse of "When the Morning Lights Arise." It was funny, though there was nothing to laugh at, really. After we finished, Manik's mother thanked all of us, "God bless you, God bless you all," and Manik shouted out loud "God bless you for this damn threshing!" Everyone laughed and said "Hey, he might be dumb, but there is wisdom in it." Threshing was not exactly pleasant, you ended up dusty and tired, but you had to help each other.



I remember a student coming from Lublin. He was collecting materials for, if I am not mistaken, a radio programme called "On the trail of people and songs." He wanted me to find him people who knew old folk songs, legends and stories. And then he would come with a tape recorder and record them. I had never seen a tape recorder before. I was very curious what a device that was. Back then a gramophone was a big thing, a cardboard record would spin and play. But to have my own voice recorded, that was something special. I was waiting for him as if some sort of UFO was to come down from the sky. He came in winter with a reel-to-reel recorder. My Mother called her friend, and he recorded several legends, songs they sang together, and so the dusk came upon us. However, my Mother had arranged a meeting with two ladies who sang beautifully in chachtacki. I took him to them, but they just insisted they didn't remember any of them. I saw them glancing at him and his recorder suspiciously. We were desperately trying to encourage them. I said, "Kowełńczycho, sing, sing 'What the nightingale sang,' or 'My beloved does not write me sad letters,' or 'In the pantry!'" To no avail, they just kept saying over and over again "We don't know, we don't remember, our throats hurt, leave us be."

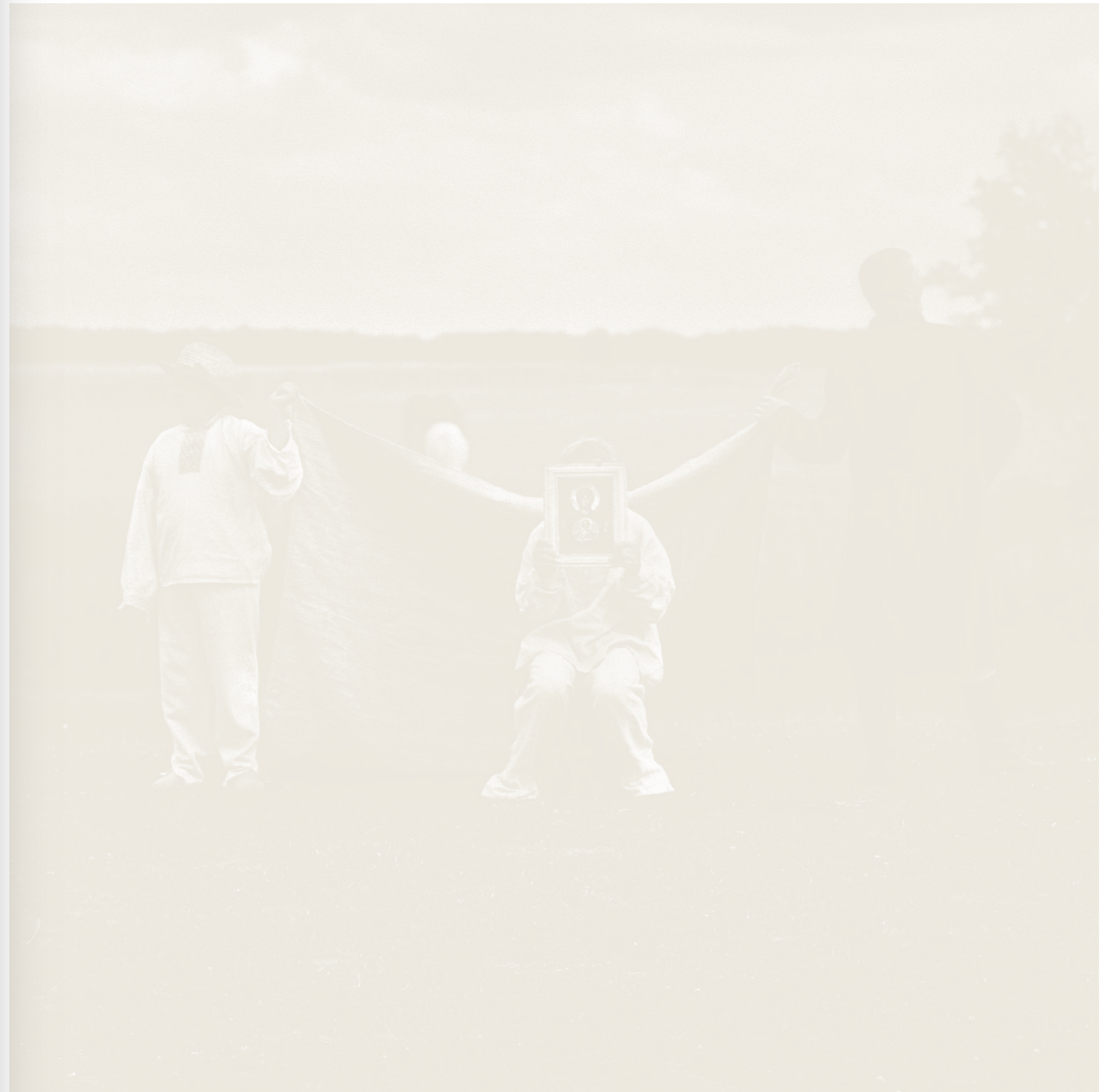
We failed to convince them. We came home with nothing. The chap had to stay till morning, as it was too late to catch a bus. I took him to our neighbours, who agreed to put him up for the night. It was not possible at our house. There was no space in the room where my Mother and my sisters slept, and my room was very cold. When I went to bed my Mother used to put a hot water bottle under the quilt to warm it up. I would often kick it out from under the sheets at night, and then I would wake up freezing. The next day I came to collect him. He wasn't asleep; he was talking to the neighbours. I noticed he was somewhat bleak. We came out and he asked what those jumpy things were in his bed? "I didn't get a wink of sleep," he said. "My arse looks as if after a series of shots, dots like needle pricks, and red spots around them. When I got up and turned the lights on I saw some tiny black midges jump from under the quilt." He didn't know these were fleas. He decided to give up on recording that day. He said that he would come back some other day, but only if I let him sleep with me in that cold room. "If you don't have those jumpy things there." I didn't, fleas only like it when it's hot.

In the morning my Mother went to Kowaleńcyczna and made a scene, since they had promised that boy they would sing and then they refused, that they made him lose time and money for a ticket. And they ranted "Why should we sing for 'im? Comes 'ere all dressed up dandy like a cock. Comes this devil, tassel on his head, and shoves a box under our noses, pokes a trumpet at our gobs, and asks us to sing! We say, go to hell, go to Beelzebub himself! You sing to him, because we ain't going to!" When my Mother repeated the whole conversation to me I cried with laughter. The chap had a woollen hat with a pompom, and no one in the village had one like that. Bikini trousers, some sort of suit, no wonder they decided he was dressed like Old Nick. And cock, well, we all knew what that meant.



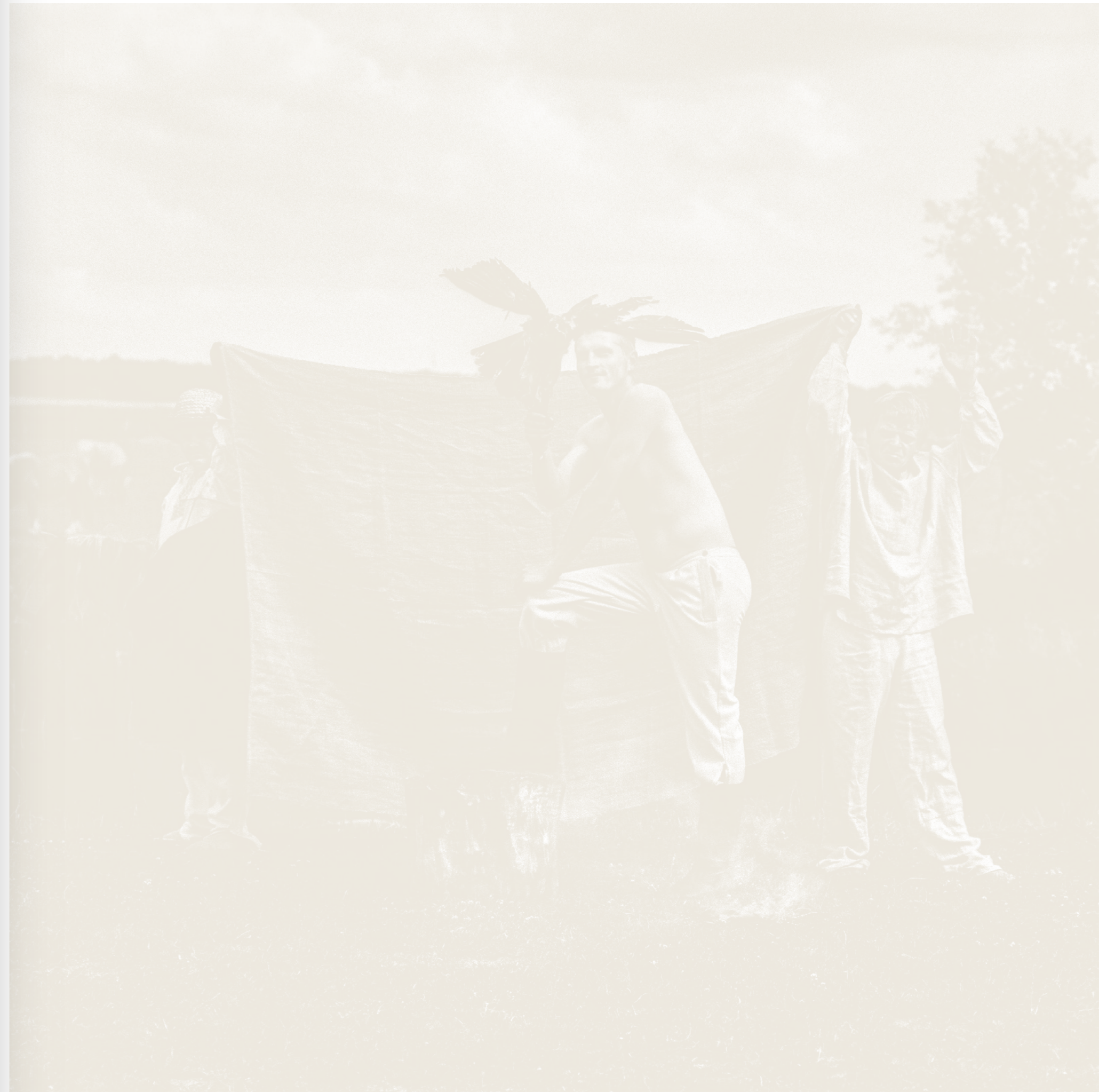
When I turned eighteen I managed to get a job for two months in Łomazy, in a Horticultural Cooperative. In the summer it bought cucumbers, and in the autumn, until the frosts started, sour pickled cucumbers. My job was to top up the brine that leaked out of the barrels, jam the rims on the barrels, mark the barrels, and load them for transport if they were to be collected. Very often I had nothing to take with me to eat to work, just some potato pancakes or some sourdough, and then I'd have nothing but pickled cucumbers to eat all day. I remember, one day I was going to work, and there weren't even any potato pancakes to take with me, because my Mother didn't have any oil or fat to make them. A day on cucumbers awaited me. I was half way, some people walking in front of me, children going to school, someone going shopping or something else. And then I see it, twenty zlotys lying on the grass. None of the people in front of me could have lost it, because the note was covered in night dew. Angels must have put it there for me. I went to the store, and the money was enough to buy a loaf of bread, a kilo of sugar, and margarine. I had some at work, and took the rest home, for my Mother and sisters. And my Mother said "When you went out I was praying, thinking how you're going to work all day having just those cucumbers, and I cried. God must have listened to my sorrow."





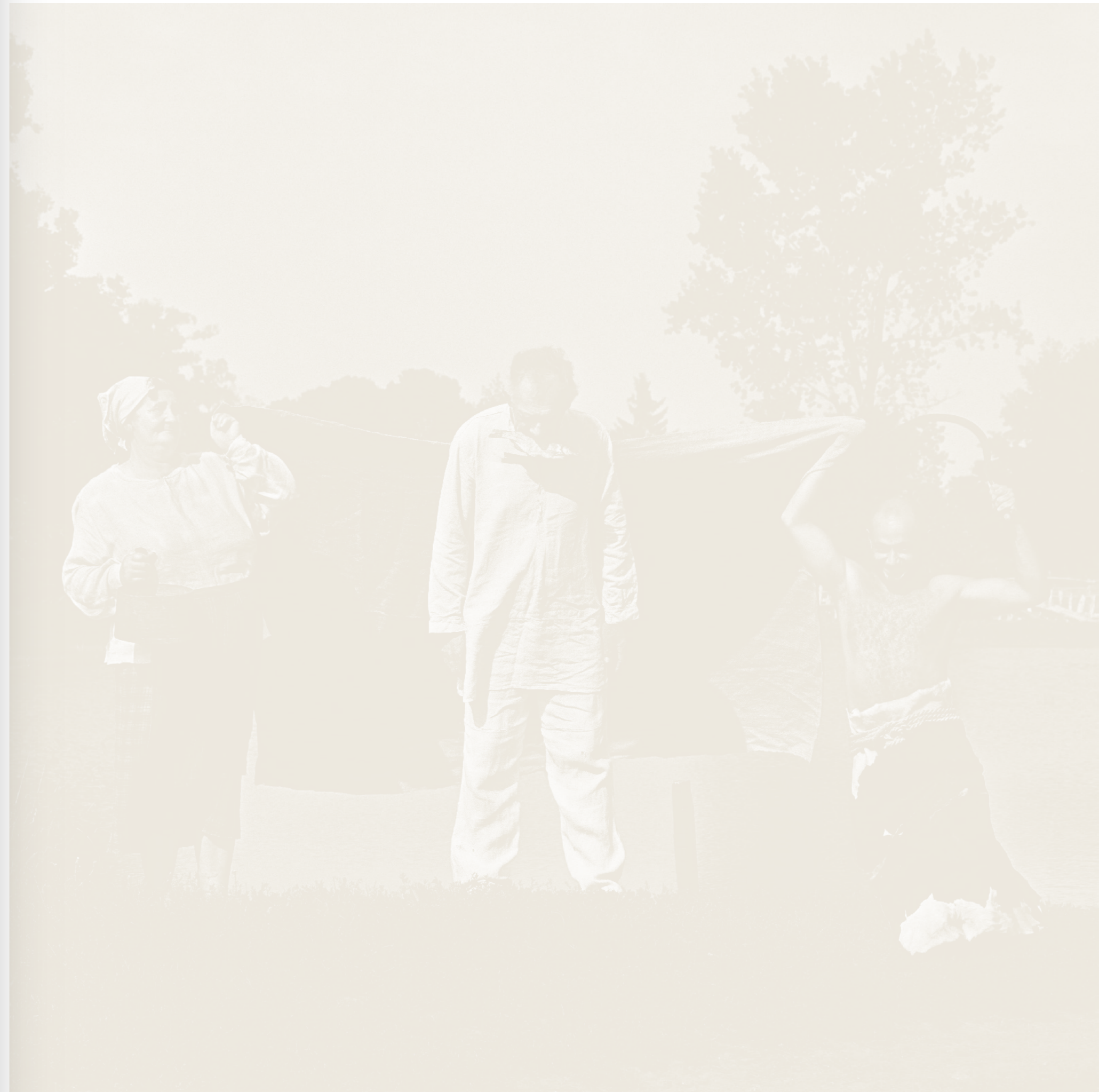




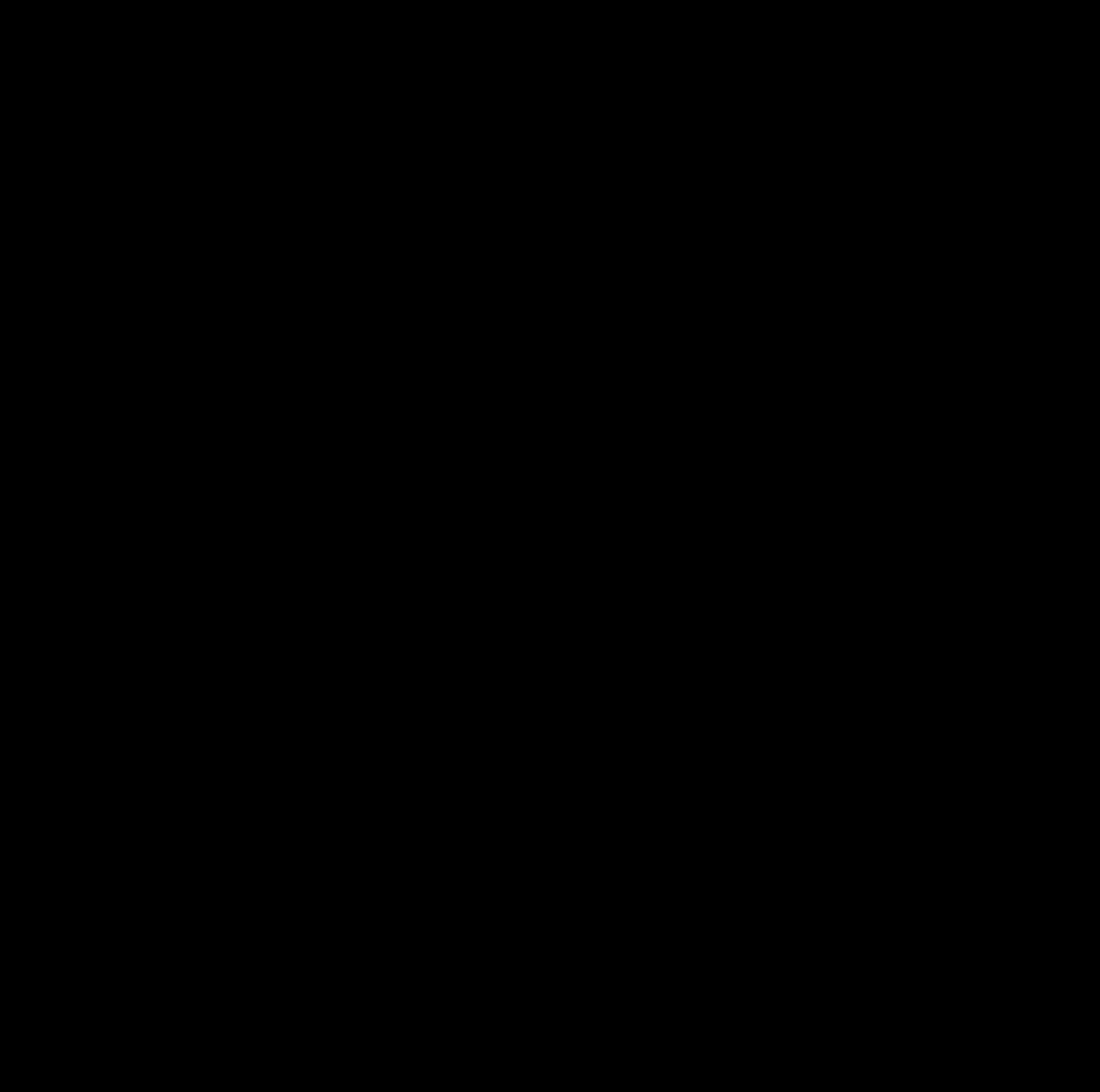








My name is Kazimierz Kuszczak. I was born in Lubenka on 1st July 1950 to a family of poor farmers. Life was my school: looking, listening, following folk wisdom. A yearning for an honest and fabulously colourful world led me to the times of my childhood and to simple people whose roots in the past support them in the present. This is where I found the theatre I had not known before.



I am sitting in a field belonging to Grandfather Sidorowicz Leon. This field is my Mother's dowry. Previously, when Lubenka was divided into colonies, each man got twenty four patches of land. And that was called a colony. And then, when they had children, they divided the land. So if a man had four children, each got a quarter of those twenty four, which makes six. And they were always divided beginning at sunrise, from the eldest, from the boundary strip. On the fifteenth of August, on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, you had a flower and ears of grain blessed. And then later, when it was time for sowing rye, you would pick the grains and make a sign of the cross, and you would sow these grains and tuck the straws into the sowing. I wanted to do that too, but I forgot.

Today, when I tell the stories of my childhood and youth to children, they envy me taking out the cattle to graze with my friends, working in the fields, the ceremonies and customs connected with them. Even though I was often hungry, I think I would like to feel that hunger again, and happily devour whatever I could lay my hands on. I can show parts of it by running my ritual theatre. In winter we have "Herody" – nativity plays and carolling. In the spring there is "Chodzenie z królową"¹. In the summer, "Sobótka"². And in the autumn, to celebrate the end of the harvest, "Wereja"³.

Walking with the Princess looked like this: they would take a girl who has not yet had first communion, because she was considered still without sin, and they would carry her around in their arms. The girls would dress up, wear hats decorated with flowers, russet coats, and they would all make a procession across all the fields. They would walk, carrying the girl, and sing. And there, where these willows are, they would stop and hoot loud in order to chase the devils and witches out of the holes in the rotting trunks, so that they wouldn't ruin the crops. They took prunes, ate them by the willows, and spat the pits out to break the witches' teeth. And at the edges of the fields, where mounds were made in the four corners, they would stop and sing. It took them a whole day to cross all the fields. When they finished, they visited the richest house in the village. The host organised a party, laid out food, and if there were grown boys there, he would also bring vodka. They called a musician, played, sang, and danced. And there was supposed to be no more storms, and the crops were to be abundant. My parent also attended these events, but in secret. When Jadźka, my Mother's sister, was little, they would take her and go, just so, you know, pretending they were going to see if the crops are doing fine. With time, those customs disappeared.



At the end of the harvest a sheaf of rye was left growing as a sign that the owner of the field had cut all his grain, because rye was the most important, for bread. The sheaf was decorated with flowers. At the top the ears were tied, and the grains picked out. The ground around the sheaf was cleared, the grass cut, weeds rooted out, the earth scarified, and the fresh seeds were planted. And a fence was made of straw that had already been cut. And then all of that was decorated with flowers, and people danced around it, singing, so that the crops next year would be good. Some of the ears were left in the field so that birds could eat them during the winter. That's what they said, so that the birds wouldn't die and could praise God with their songs. And the owners would invite people home, if there were a lot of them, or otherwise bring food and vodka out into the field, and put out a cloth on the stubble next to the wereja, and everyone celebrated, and sang, and danced. Some reaped, some tied. And women collected what was cut and tied. And the children had rakes, and they raked, and what they raked they gathered for the hens. And if there was more of it, then it was threshed. Then the wereja had to be harrowed. The people would sneak upon the owner, the women would grab him by the legs, and he would harrow with his hands. And at the same time the women would spank him. And everyone would shout, so that there would be no windgrass in the rye, no corncockles, no weeds ruining the crops. Everyone helped each other; the poor would go and work for the rich. That was called "czeladź," the service. And this is where I took the name for my ritual theatre from, "Czeladońka." A little group of people who go round and help others.

¹ "Walking with the Princess," a spring maypole procession

² bonfire night celebrations

³ old Polish word for a decorated sheaf of rye left in the field after harvest to ensure good crops in the future

They said there was a woman who had a baby girl. She was a widow and this was her only child. And then her daughter died. And she lamented and grieved, did not do anything else, no work, just sat and cried. One night when the moon was bright she saw her daughter fly from the cemetery. She flew to the window and said, "Stop crying, you will drown me in your tears." The widow got scared, but kept crying, until some advised her, "Go and plant hallowed poppy on her grave." So she did that, and on the second day after she planted the poppy she saw a footprint of a baby, just like her daughter's, on the grave. And then the grief was gone.



Often when the neighbours disputed borders between fields, particularly when a tree bothered one of them, because it put shade on their land and grow roots into their soil, and the other one did not want to remove that tree, then in anger one would yell, "You bloody karczeba, you'd grub up everything, because there's never enough land for you!" Karczeba was a name for a person who even on a Sunday would forget to dress up, wash or shave. Dirty and unshaven, they would toil from dawn till dusk. These were karczeby, who others despised. But karczeby were also people who never wanted to leave the place of their birth. Even though they suffered poverty and deprivation, they never agreed to move. To them the place where they were born was the most important, the land of their fathers, their inheritance. That was imprinted in them by their parents; they sucked it with their mother's milk. Even when they were expelled from their land by force, such as during forced migrations to Siberia, they came back as soon as they could. And like a karcz, like a stump, they grew deep roots into the soil of our forefathers, who cleared the woods with their axes, sawed and ploughed.

In 1914 Father and his parents moved deep into Russia with the wave of so-called "bieżeńcy." He came home to Lubenka on foot when he was eighteen. Since he played the clarinet, after the war he was offered a job in a navy orchestra in Szczecin. He refused. My Mother argued that we would have an easier life there: "You cling to those pathetic few patches of land like a leech. Like a rotten stump you grew into the soil!" And Father replied, "I crossed Russia up and down, and I have seen it all. I will not move anywhere. This is where I was born and this is where I must die." And he told us, the children, "This land will not support all of you, but let at least one of you stay. Don't sell it to anyone, and you will always have a home to come back to." After many years, when Mother came back from visiting her children in the cities, she said that it was a good thing that Father refused to leave, because you cannot get a decent sleep in a strange place. "We're rooted here like karczeby." Today I feel the same, and I will never leave. I think I might also be a karczeba.





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Autor: **Adam Pańczuk**

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