

Natalia

All special moments of our life are like a string of beads carefully threaded.

My autobiography began at Christmas time. My parents threaded the first bead – they gave me a name. Thus, I was born 55 years ago in a city Akmoła whose name translated from Kazakh means “white grave”; my name is Natalia Mużanowska. Elderly Kazakhs told a story about Chingis-Chan. When he set off his victorious march towards Europe, the way laid through Akmała. However, he did not stay for the night as he was afraid of “white death” (Kazakhs called in this way uranium ore bed)

Thousands of Polish families were sent to live forever to this “white grave”. Repatriating “the enemies of nation” to Kazakh steppes, Soviets well comprehended that people would not be able to survive without shelter, food, and domestic animals. In summer the temperature rose to 40°C and the land was pestered by sand storms. In winter the weather conditions were completely different, -40°C and blizzards. In my family archive there is still kept a document of my relatives’ forced displacement to Kazakhstan. There is an absolutely cynic phrase written on the document: “transport to the destination is free”

God gave man the power that is why my parents survived, I only regret I have no chance to meet my grandfather. He died shortly before my birth. My father’s parents actually gave birth to four children. Adam the eldest and of a legal age was sent to Karaganda whereas my juvenile father with his sister and parents had to go 36 km. away to Akmoła, that is why the place is called “point 36”

In Karaganda uncle Adam fell ill with a brain cancer. In frosty winter days my grandfather went on foot to Akmoła as he wanted to obtain a permission from KGB to see the dying son. On the permission there was only one word: “Rejected”

When my grandmother Józefa found out that the request was rejected, she came to a very risky decision – she went to Karaganda without any permission. She knew well the consequences. She took the risk although she could have been sentenced with 10 years of gulag. Her meeting with the son ended with her husband’s death, Mikołaj Mużanowski, my grandpa died of heart attack. Soon, in Karaganda died also my uncle.

So called “Polish problem” touched me soon after my birthday. My father was ordered to report at the Militia Station every month to confirm that none of his family had ever crossed the border of the settlement. I was only 1,5 so I do not remember well these events. I merely started my life. When Stalin died, the situation of the oppressed people changed. They could have studied at the universities, they left settlements, visited different countries in the Soviet Union. Due to Soviet repressive policy Kazakhstan became a country of over than 140 nationalities, all equipped with the individual past,

culture and language. It was a real mixture, nobody paid attention to different accents as there was no standardized language.

I could divide my autobiography into parts, the first one went by in the Soviet Union, where I successfully completed secondary school, university, then got married and gave birth to my children. I will let myself spend a while on my childhood and the young years. I always remained a sturdily independent person, because of that my parents were very often surprised by my unexpected, usually strange decisions. In fact there were not so many of them but all of them had a profound effect on my life. The first one was undertaken because of my poor health. As a child I was deprived of a normal childhood. I could not play with other kids or ride a bicycle. I lived in a kind of isolation. I felt that my parents' efforts to protect me from any physical activities could lead me to catastrophe. Consequently, I thought over everything and decided to take up canoeing in a sports section. My future coach let me take part in the activities under condition that I would learn swimming.

My father Rafał Muzanowski, who the whole life sacrificed to the family, taught me how to swim. Since me and my sister were 7-year old our father had worked in a pioneer camp 3 months a year during 10 years. He worked there to let us have a rest in the countryside and regenerate our health. The camp was situated near the lake so I slipped stealthily from it and learned swimming. I took a deep breath, dived and tried to swim. Fortunately, I did not come to a watery grave; actually, I became a good swimmer and was accepted by the sports team. When I went home, I told my parents about my first independent decision. They tried to dissuade me from professional sport as in their opinion I was not healthy enough, I did not obey them. They tried again saying that I was not able to swim. I answered proudly that I had learnt swimming. I told them where and how I had done it. They troubled constantly over me; nowadays when I am a mother I understand what they might feel when they found out about my swimming lessons.

Water sports had great influence on my life. Supposedly, due to them I shaped my character, I learned to pose challenges and achieve goals. Being the weakest in the team, I was a constant object of joking, they said that I wasted time trying to win. Hopefully, I did not take those words to heart and in two years I became a local and then national champion.

At the same time medicine appeared to be my second passion. Being 15-year old, I attended medical classes, which were organized by Medical Institute. The things did not go easily, I was explained that I should focus on chemistry so I changed school although the new one was far away from home. Fortunately, parents accepted my choice.

I look at my childhood in Developed Socialism and still feel strange. It is unbelievable how 15-year old children could take part in students' classes; we were shown how to use scalpel, assist with the operation and mark a blood type. When I was nearly 18, I assisted with delivery, it was unforgettable. I experienced many extreme emotions –

terrible fear when I saw an opening crotch, anxiety about unborn baby. How much I wanted to help that woman! I was on cloud nine! The midwife's laughing brought me down to earth. I was so engaged that I started to push with the woman. I felt a great relief when I heard baby's scream, when I saw a happy face of the mother. How delicate and strange was human life I thought, how wonderful is to be among the living.

After completing secondary school I came into adulthood; I deliberated over my future plans. Eventually, I decided to go to the University of Alma Ata to study Law. When I was at the end of my studies, I convinced my mum to buy me an excursion to Poland. I always wanted to visit the country of my ancestors and now there was a moment we gathered all key documents. I boasted about going to Poland to my father! Then, there was a serious conversation between my parents. They asked me to leave the room; my father explained to my mum that my depart could have a bad influence on my further education and career as the KGB still kept under surveillance so called "enemies of nation". Finally, I was allowed to visit my historical homeland. The journey changed me, I understood that there was another culture, another relationships among people, different life but at this time I could not dream about returning to Poland yet.

In 1991 the Soviet Union was over, Kazakhstan became an independent country. The great number of Polish people found support in different kinds of Polish societies. Polish teachers came to teach us. My children were sent on holidays to Poland, they fell in love with new customs and culture. My younger son literally got crazy about Poland. He talked me into gathering needed documents and go to Poland. There was the Polish government's guarantee for ten families to come back to Poland every year. After four years, in 2001, our dream came true, we were ready to start a new adventure. The 20th of August 2001 we embarked on a journey to Warsaw.

We were accommodated in a 3-room flat quite similar to those we left in Kazakhstan. New circumstances were not so easy, we quickly came down to earth. On the second day of our stay in Poland I comprehended how difficult the situation is. I did not know anyone in Warsaw, in the City Council I was told, I think reasonably, that we should rely on ourselves – send children to school or the university, find a job, rent a flat, pay the bills and learn the language. In other words we should live like every Polish citizen.

I felt hopeless, how easy was to be at the edge. My life in Kazakhstan was not bad, I had my career; before leaving for Warsaw, I hold the position of the head of the Law Department of the county, I was a member of the City Council. My children attended to prestigious schools. I believed that in Poland I would be able to obtain the same position. Then, let me return to the beginning of our lif in Poland.

We had seven days to enroll the children to school. We walked the length and breadth of our quarter but without any effect as Wadim could not speak Polish well. Fortunately, our Polish neighbour who had known that we came from Kazakhstan advised us to go to Niepokalanów, 50 km. away from Warsaw to talk to the director of the Lower

Seminary. Together with my children we went to Niepokalanów. My 18-year old daughter, as the only one who could speak Polish, talked to the director. She shed a light on our plight. The director listened patiently to her and asked to call in three days. Those were the longest three days in our life but miracle happened. Wadim was admitted to the second class of secondary school. It was the first and most important step in the new country.

But happiness did not last to long. My daughter was about to take her university entrance exams but because of the stress she got a terrible health problems connected with her allergy. A doctor was surprised when he examined her, he had never seen such symptoms yet. The whole week she stayed at home taking medicaments and preparing for the exams. Finally, she passed the exams and became a student. That was our second victory. I was more optimistic, the children went to schools, now it was time to me to find a job.

I have been looking for a job for two years. I was devastated and almost completely stopped talking. My 13-year old son, when he came home for holidays, shook me with his mature words. He said that they had been so proud of me in Kazakhstan, they had always followed my example. He suggested that I should not let them down. I explained that my coming to Poland was a mistake, that I miscalculated my strength badly, that I was not able to help them and they should be responsible for their own lives. I still remember his words, I keep them at the very bottom of my heart.

The sun shone for me one day. When I was passing a monastery an old woman came closer. She looked at me and asked: "Are you homeless or what?" It was a one hundred dollars question! I got angry, none asked me such a question earlier. I answered that I have a place to live but she looked at me and said: "I am not talking about your home, I only see that you are lost..."

I think that every man should be put on trial, hardship always motivates to take actions, it gives opportunity to go forward, not to complain about. I was tossing and turning all night long. In the morning it came to my mind that when I had been preparing to my depart from Kazakhstan an old lady called me and said that in case of any troubles in Warsaw I should turn to a society " Polish Community" The next day I went there and it was a lucky strike. I had a nice conversation with an office worker who was responsible for repatriates from Kazakhstan. I think that she was very touched by my story, she arranged me a meeting with the director of the Institution – prof. Andrzej Stelmachowski. The director listened to me carefully and advised me to confirm my university law diploma. I did so and he agreed to help me to find a job. It took 6 moths before something happened. .

I was invited on an interview by the head of National Library. It was May of 2003. On the 15th of September I was informed that I was offered a job. I was so excited that I even did not ask what I was exactly supposed to do. The next day I found out that I would be working as a specialist in the Administration Sector. I acknowledged my obligations

and was presented to the director. The elderly man spoke a little bit Russian, he encouraged me to work hard. He said: "Please, do not be nervous, I will personally write a Polish- Russian dictionary for you, and now take the Public Order Act and study it at home." Ironically, the first article debated natural disaster' cases.

The beginning was not easy but due to my co-workers I manage it and in a year I finished postgraduate studies (the Public Orders) and became a fully qualified office worker. Time went quickly, ma daughter graduated, my son studied at the university and wanted to be a layer. I accustomed to my work. I could not say that my Polish was on the same level as Russian but sometimes I caught myself speaking these languages without thinking about it. Polish was difficult to learn. In the morning when I left home I chose any Russian song and tried to sing it in Polish, then I analyzed lyrics. I had everything in my head but there was a problem with saying it aloud. I was ashamed of my accent. One day I understood that all would be all right, I only needed time. I calmed down, fear went out, my Polish became better and better. A sense of an inborn humour and optimism let me tackle many problems; besides, I never gave up.

In Poland I met a lot of fantastic people, when professor Andrzej Stelmachowski died in 2009, I felt that I lost someone special, very close to my heart.

As the second part of my life is concerned I cut a long story short. Do I regret anything? I can only say that if I had any idea of what I was going to experience, I would never arrive to Poland. However, I would not like to come back to Kazakhstan now. I have fallen in love with Warsaw, I admire its jazz concerts at the Old Town, festivals of organ music, Christmas with family atmosphere. I like people and the rhythm of the city, my children are happy here, their happiness gives me the strength. If anyone asked me a question what had changed in my life since I came to Poland, I would answer: "I have changed an attitude towards myself, my life. I have strengthened my belief in the family, together we can conquer the world. Life takes its course, which means that my autobiography will be continued.