

EUGENJUSZ MAŁACZEWSKI

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THE NARRATIVE OF THE WHITE SHE-BEAR

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The History of Baška Murmańska

I.

By the time Warsaw saw her on the Saski Square, the history of her life was epic, as was the „kaniowczyki”¹ migration from Murmań² to the homeland. It was taking place on the exotic background, where seals were as usual as piglets in Poland, where, instead of old Matthew’s pear tree, cranberries and wild raspberries grew. It was there, where women wore fur trousers, never washed themselves but greasing themselves with fish oil gleamed as if they were polished.

The hero of my story was born on the Arctic Ocean, 250 sea miles from the snow-covered land, on the huge ice floe, drifting slowly like a crystal raft on the icy seas. She was born by a magnificent royal specimen of polar she-bear, 2.69 m long, measured from her nose to her tail, and twice as much from her tail to her nose, covered with beautiful snowy fur, looking like the lush pelage of angora goats.

It so happened that the little miss bear (half a year later Polish legionnaires called her Baška) had never met her father.

He was a very special bear. He had this unique something, like incurable Robinson’s longing, something from Columbus’ exploratory ambitions. Baška’s mother wasn’t able to endear her husband to her. The old bear had a persistent urge for roaming, the powerful globetrotter, scamp and idler’s lingering in him. He was absolutely too romantic and visionary as for the polar³ beast.

He was exceptionally strong, so if he’d only wanted it, he could have hunted young whales. However, on the contrary, he usually wandered hungry. Despite the family and tribal habits he didn’t kill seals, main nourishment of white bears, at all. He kept on lurking for flying sea gulls instead. He used to run after them in a limping gallop for hours, exhausted, his purple tongue hanging out from his raised to the sky muzzle, bloodthirstily snapping his frightful mouth, without any evident results. So his everyday meals consisted of different remains washed ashore by the ocean at high tide. In this manner Baška’s father was passing his crazy life. And then, the moment came when he felt such unbearable abomination for his wife, and at the same time, he swelled with such a sudden, impulsive and savage longing for roaming across all arctic seas, that he silently slipped, in a one hundred cubit dive, from the ice floe on which they spent their honey moon.

When he finally emerged from water, not even looking back, with a feeling of wild happiness, he swam as far as one can see. And while swimming he produced sounds like a horse in a race, convinced of his great luck and opportunities. He ripped the waves with his huge body with the first impetus of a torpedo, heading directly to the North Pole, just because he liked it. And that was the last time he was seen.

¹ Kaniowczyki: legionnaires, soldiers from Carpathian brigade, in 1918 under brigadier Haller command they broke through the Prussian-Austrian ranks to the Ukraine. There they were perfidiously bottled up by Germans and defeated at Kaniów.

² Murmań shore in north Asia, on Kola Peninsula by the Arctic Ocean.

³ Polar - situated at or related to either of the earth’s poles.

II.

Baška was born in a beautiful white fur, with a muzzle full of strong little teeth, as sharp as dog puppies have. In her clawed, but yet helpless paws, she possessed, typical for her species, perfect ability to cope with all elements related to water, the same as in seafowl, which swimming efficiency is given to them in their web-footed legs right from the moment of hatching out from the egg.

Her bear-mom after the delivery felt as good as though she wasn't a birth giver but a newborn one. This was because of the mighty power of habit to deliver little cubs in the open sea space, on the bedding made of crumbling ice, in the temperature of 45°C below zero. And immediately her martial, furious and enraged spirit came back to her, as it always happens to these usually gentle animals, once they drop the litter.

The same day the mom and her daughter had to swim across the gloomy, troubled by high winds sea to reach the nearest land. They were forced to do so by an accident, bearing all characteristics of a maritime disaster. The ice raft, on which they were drifting, being perpetually attacked by furious waves, finally broke into several pieces and got completely useless for the further bear's navigation¹, because of its significant tonnage² reduction. It all happened with a bang, similar to the shooting in the air from the middle caliber cannon.

Castaways, submerged up to their nostrils into the salty swirling waters, were forced to immediately, without any longer reflection, choose between the two nearest points of the firm land available in this new situation. First one - was 250 nautical miles away on the mainland, second one - only 3000 feet far, but at the bottom of the ocean beneath them. They chose the longer way.

The force of wind intensified, blowing out, from the depths of the high seas endless chains of enormous waves. Giant waves with finny, broken ridges swept one after the other, in a shape of leviatans³ rolling with heavy splashing from one side to another. The sea was roaring, as was the mother bear, fighting hard with the overwhelming storm. Baška clung her snout to the furry leg of her mom, tightly closed her puppy's half blind eyes, and swam as a boat dragged by a big ship. At the very beginning of life she learnt what the great fear is.

After forty eight hours of fighting with the distance, wind and water, they reached the so much desired land. Snow that was lying there in thick layers appeared to them as comfortable and delightful as a cosy featherbed for a tired tramp. At once they hid under the snow, up to the tops of their heads, and spent still two days and nights. And despite this overwhelming numbness, they intensely felt inside them all their bones together, and every one of them separately, as they were so tired.

After this epic⁴ exodus⁵ not even one week expired, when Baška started her education.

The education consisted of practical training of two skills: the art of hunting and swimming. Although, from the human point of view, such a limited scope of knowledge may seem easy to master, one has to bear in mind, that each of the two bears' education

areas can be further divided into many smaller "subjects", which, very similarly, are also being taught in high schools and at universities.

In addition, a human being, in spite of an excellent completion of all classical academies and getting the right certificates, may easily be a lifelong example of a classic goof, but still enjoy respect of his neighbors and lead a very comfortable life. While a polar bear, quite the opposite, has to study both of his skills earnestly, so as not to be treated in his habitat as a goof. Otherwise it would constantly swell with hunger, or would be eaten by placid sea calves⁶ or even pecked alive by sea gulls⁷.

Baška, as well as many famous people, as a child, didn't show in her early education neither outstanding abilities nor any special enthusiasm for learning. She'd rather gave the impression of the under the age undeveloped, lethargic and refractory being. Therefore the mother bear did not spare her painful remainders, served temporarily by the loving parental paw. Because of such reprimanding, that would easily break into pieces the most solid school bench, Baška's lint flew around and she squealed as if her skin was peeled off her. Anyway, that method had its good effect and under the supervision of the prudent teacher the student started to make a visible progress.

Before three months passed, Baška had already mastered an art of hunting seals. It's not easy, mind you – to hunt seals – when you remember, that a polar bear is white, but its nose is still black. And Baška was no exception – head to toes white like a living pack of cottonwool, not so different from virgin snows on milky deserts, but her nose looked just like ink.

If not for the nose, those bears would have nothing between them and complete happiness.

In a country where God painted everything white, a black nose was a huge obstacle. Even though seal is dumb and deaf, it still has a very good sight, so a black point, moving towards it carefully, makes it jump right into the sea, where it controls the situation, swimming much better than its white enemies.

That's why hunting seals is such a craft for polar bears. When a furry huntsman gets close to its prey for several feet (and it does so with a straight face, as if it never really cared for any seals in the world, maybe never even heard of them), it goes on only three paws, with the fourth one covering the nose. The last dozens of feet take even few hours, when it crawls with a caution of a thief, up to the point in which it is so close, that a few jumps cut the whole distance. Only at that point it can be sure that his prey won't run away.

Considering this, mastering the art of covering the nose is pretty much the same for bears as maturity exams for humans – no more a cub, but a true bear.

Because of her mother's frequent reminders, Baška finally learned to do it sufficiently. This knowledge was taught to her very zealously, to the point when she felt mighty ashamed of her nose, and she felt the shameful impropriety of having one.

It was worth to see Baška being trained in hunting, when under her mother's supervision she crawled towards a previously killed seal, hiding her exceptionally black nose.

She did it with a gesture so graceful, so bashful, one can only see on paintings – like Susanna emerging from her bath.

During that period, Baška advanced her skills in swimming. She quickly outperformed her peers in this field. It was a wonderful view, her bathing.

The swimming school was located in a small bay on the Arctic Ocean, grinding into the land with a widespread crescent of green water. A steep bank, all covered in snow, wrapped around the emerald bay like a wide, silver sickle. The bay was closed to the sea with a huge wall of glaciers, like ruins of a fantastic fortress, ages old, built with marble and translucent stone.

In the few miles' radius of never-freezing waters, tens of bears paraded their swimming prowess. Their mothers observed the show, sitting on the bank like on couches. Their youngsters bathed, neighing like a herd of foals, growling like cattle, and letting out noisy squeaks like two thousand swine, which according to the Word, 'with great speed fell into the sea'.

In the bathing group, Baška was exceptionally agile and graceful. No one dived like her. With leagues of clear water over her back, she pierced right through it like a bullet made of sugar. Moments after, she would float gently on the surface like a snowman, made by playing children. Or she'd swam in zigzag, steering herself with much charm, like a white swan on a pond. No one could do the "chrysanthemums"⁸ like her. To do a chrysanthemum, in polar bears swimming, is the same level of artistry as hiding their noses in hunting.

The trick is to gather all four paws together, toe to toe, bend your back and give completely to the ocean's current, float without even the slightest of movements, with nostrils above the water level. This position ensures an excellent balance and makes it possible to float even for a few days without any effort. Hundreds of miles can be travelled, as long as one knows, which current is taking him, because currents cross on the ocean like tram lines in a huge city. A bear, travelling with his paws together, with a bended back and his fur combed out by water, looks just like a white chrysanthemum flower, detached from its stem and floating into the unknown.

I am not sure, how this swimming trick is called in the bear language, I call it poetically, the chrysanthemum.

After having her fun in ice cold water, Baška emerged from the coastal froth, purely white and alluring like the Venus⁹ of ice lands. She would squat on the snow, wiping it with her butt beforehand, so she could sit comfortably. Her wet fur sent clouds of steam into the icy air, like a cracked stove. She sat like that, steaming and dreaming.

She would dream, like a human child does, before it feels the feelings and thinks of thoughts for the first time. Sometimes she'd dream impersonal dreams, slow like arctic nature's pulse, with pictures in her head she did not understand, but majestic like boreal¹⁰ lights.

Strange emotions would take over her, from the bottom of her soul, like bubbles of air, which emerge from the abyss astir, similar to glass beads on an invisible thread.

She felt a funny feeling in her throat, a tickle in her nostrils. She'd sneeze then, dozens of times, one after another.

Baška would always sneeze when overflowed with emotions. Others would hold it against her – bears thought of sneezing as a major impropriety, incompatible to ancient polar bear's habits. Baška was not used to those customs, because unlike her peers, she was prone to strange feelings without any apparent reason, therefore – to sneezing.

There were quarrels caused by that, especially with an old she-bear, who, trying to stop Baška from her indecent behaviour, did not spare painful hits with her clawed paw, ready to scalp a lion with one move.

That irresolution grew, and Baška was feeling worse and worse, more and more alienated from her folks. Instincts she inherited from her father began to grow in her. She could not resist that longing to something indescribable, even in human languages.

When the sun was setting over the bay after one of those short arctic days, Baška was standing on the shore, with her beck extended and head held high. She looked at the sunset of bloody and violet lights. Glaciers, blocking the bay from the sea, were blooming with a colorful shine, like they were covered with hanging rows of hyacinths. The water looked like a peacock's tail, on which sparks flew and jumped around like diamond fleas.

It was so beautiful and yet afflicting, that Baška started to sneeze, like a battery¹¹.

Then she jumped into the water and swam towards the distant glaciers. She swam into the sun – before it set, she was on the open sea.

Later, she has found a strong current – and so, she did the "chrysanthemum" and went to sleep. No force could stop her at that point. She felt the same kind of aversion to her mother, like her father, the old sea vagrant, would feel back in the day.

The shores vanished. A lonely, magnificent ocean was around her, wherever she'd look, rocking the wool of its waves. The stars mirrored in the moving abyss like silver bands. Then the night time came.

¹ Tonage - capacity of a ship, what it can carry, without sinking.

² Navigation - sailing.

³ Leviatan - (*Bible*) a monstrous beast, esp a sea monster.

⁴ Epic - an episode in which heroic deeds are performed or connected to epic poetry

⁵ Exodus - departure or leaving, here: related to journey through ice.

⁶ Sea calf - seal' species.

⁷ Sea-gull - sea bird.

⁸ Chrysanthemum - a flower.

⁹ Venus, the goddess of beauty, born from the sea foam (in ancient Grece and Rome).

¹⁰ Boreal - northern, Aurora Borealis: lights seen around the North Pole.

¹¹ Battery - some cannons assembled together.



THE VISITOR FROM THE WHITE SEE.

The white polar bear, caught in the Archangelsk tundra, domesticated by Murmań legionnaires and brought to Poland.



THE MURMAŃ LEGIONNAIRES IN THEIR POLAR OUTFIT.

III.

In early spring of 1919 Arkhangelsk on the White Sea¹ was occupied by the Entente alliance², which, under the British board and deliberate command³ was going to conquer Russia from the north, to hang on lampposts Kremlin's red rulers, and above all make a good deal on the exploitation of natural resources of the country. End of the expedition was less great than the beginning. Entente came out from this mercantile-military business as our proverbial Mr. Zabłocki⁴ on the soap. But this happened six months later.

At the time when the referred to below accident occurred, Arkhangelsk was firmly planted with military crews from almost all over the world. Of course, there could not lack Poles, because where the two combats, there's always a Pole willing to stick his head out.

On the main street of the town in the afternoon pedestrian traffic grew stronger. It was a time of meetings and walks. On the sidewalks, knocked together from slats, which moving like a keyboard used to suddenly knock up a passerby's foot like a kind of devilish trampoline, the conquerors from the overseas were strolling. They rambled happily in the company of ladies – local natives – whose unrefined simplicity of ordinary head-dresses was compensated with the beauty of faces, sparkling in the cold with colors of blood and milk, and the beauty which was raised by the fact that for a hundred of young warriors in this town only one woman occurred.

And so used to walk on the treacherous sidewalks the stilt-legged, tight-lipped and redheaded Brits, with the Anglo-Saxon phlegm painted in their faces, stiff like a leather strap for sharpening of a razor. With an effortless refinement strolled the French, in their askew worn velvet berets of Alpine shooters. Americans proceeded with a pipe or with a piece of chocolate in their teeth; they chew it while walking free, without a hassle, with a natural freedom of children returning from school. Apart from them there were the Serbs, and the Canadians in eared caps and Indian mocassins⁵, and the Italian Bersaglieri⁶ who with an abundance of feathers on helmets looked as if on their heads sat back ruffled hens hatching eggs. In the back of one of the lanes leading to the main street, a few young military men appeared.

They had rakishly bent „maciejówka⁷” caps with legionnaire eagles on their heads, khakki colored coats, worn in legionnaire style, with some artistic negligence which clearly betrayed gravity towards the Vistula style⁸ elegance. One of the young men in the charge of a cadet officer, held in his right hand as thick as a finger iron stick, while in the other hand there was, wrapped several times around his fist, a steel chain ending with a collar. In the collar a little white bear was jerking, observing, with the grim glances, the buried in the snows over its fences street.

The sun was shining straight into the little beast's face, so she was moving her black nose all the time, licking from time to time, and sneezing repeatedly and loudly like a cat with a runny nose.

The lazy conversation was taking place – typical waffle of loafing soldiers, loitering around in the sunshine in the safe garrison, far from the battlefield:

- He, or she?
- Who? – the cadet officer asked.
- Well, this fierce animal...
- She.
- How do you know?
- She whispered it in my ear, when we were alone...
- Nonsense. It couldn't be like that.
- Indeed.
- And what are you going to do with her?
- I'll raise her up. Look, how pretty she is! Still a little bit savage, yesterday she bit my leg, but this can be worked out. If she won't listen to a good word, then she will listen to a stick. As for now I manage her with this!

Here he clattered the iron stick on the paving. The little bear yanked the chain and bristled her back. There was a grave growl, then a short, fierce roar.

- Couché⁹, scoundrel, or I'll break all your bones! – the cadet calmed down his pet, not without a warm note in his voice, despite the threatening sense of his words.
- Do you feed her?
- Well, yes.....
- What with?
- She had a pound of fresh flounders today, besides that – a pair of shoes, which were drying near the stove after greasing them with fat.
- Congratulations on such good appetite! Very, very nice creature. With quite an intelligent face. And an honest expression of her eyes. You mistreat her unnecessarily. I would advise kindness and gentleness. Can I stroke her?
- Of course. Try.

The amateur of gentle methods leaned over the bear and reached out to stroke her over the flattened head. The animal licked the snow with her crimson tongue not apparently paying attention to the lowering arm. But when barely the tips of her hair were touched, she made with her lethargic head an astounding, rapid movement. The gentle methods amateur involuntarily uttered a cry and jumped back as if stung. At the same time there was a loud snap of tremendously toothed jaws, which, instead of the hand withdrawn quickly enough, encountered a vacuum.

- What a wild beast! And she really bites!
- I'm not kidding. Say "thank you" to her for the fact, that apart from a pair of my shoes, she haven't eaten a piece of your hand.

The cigarettes were smoked. From everywhere the melodious sounds were coming - echo tones of sleds riding through the city. The surface of snow glistened in the sun, as if dusted with mashed glass. In the cold air swirling sparks of flying hoarfrost were floating, like diamond powder, which turned on and off in slanting sun beams entering the room by the window. The little bear muttered and mumbled, fumbling in the snow with her black nose.

- Where are you going to go with her now? – asked the corporal's colleague.
- To the promenade¹⁰, - was the answer.
- Have you lost your mind?!
- No. It's about the honor of the entire Polish army.
- How come?
- I'll tell you in a minute, – said the corporal. – Do you know the Bersaglieri captain, the Italian who walks, eats and sleeps with a monocle¹¹ on his muzzle?
- The one you had quarreled with at the last ball in the French mission, because of the doll in the lilac dress?
- My dear, I'm asking you!... Try to choose more decent expressions when you talk about the lady that I more than respect... Yes. That's the one. Imagine this, what pranks this fellow is capable of only get her attention.

He has already had lots of advantages over me: he is dark haired, I'm blonde – and she prefers brunets; he wears the monocle, and it impresses her; he is a captain, I'm only a cadet: his name is: Andreas Giovanni della Stupida count Bambini, and my name is: Walenty Karaś. As if it wasn't enough: all evenings he keeps on rolling his eyes and sing for her in Italian all his canzonas and barcarolles¹².

And once, when I tried to equal him and roared aloud „Husia – Siusia¹³” she plugged her ears and said:

- Please stop it. You are much nicer without singing. Mahomet must have stepped over your ear in your childhood.

The Italian, happy with my defeat, at once started to sing, with his velvety baritone, the song starting with words: „O, cara mia...¹⁴!” I was ignominiously vanquished. Every day we encounter each other on the walk in front of the house of our donna¹⁵, who is waiting, sitting in the window, and looking through the little hole puffed in the frost-covered glass.

The Italian has learned that she likes animals. One day he came with a domesticated weasel, sitting on his shoulder. But the day after I won, because I brought on a string a live ermine. The Italian, however, did not give up and the day after my ermine was defeated by an authentic yellow fox. And then I got determined. I found a young wolf, which at the first meeting chased his fox away. And I would surely win this tournament,

if not for all the dogs from the town, that came together and tore apart my wolf, still sitting at the warm corpse of a yellow fox. The Italian found somewhere a „blue fox” and for a few days keeps parading with him every day on the promenade, causing a big impact in the crowd, and favourable smiles in the hole, puffed in the frost-covered glass.

I fell into despair and I would drink to death, if not for a lucky coincidence. The day before yesterday, in the local market place, I met a „samojed¹⁶” peasant, who brought on sale this bear. I bought her without hesitation, and now we’ll see who’s better: me, or the Italian. It can not be, that a Polish legionnaire capitulates before the nation which God created only for one purpose: so that Austria, constantly beaten by the whole world, also has somebody to beat!... The rascal will crack with envy. Today I’ll finally subdue him in the eyes of our donna and I’ll get her heart. There’s a bane hanging over the Italian, unless this time he would bring a living crocodile!...

- You’ll win. Go. You’re right. It’s about the honor of the army! – an audience shouted in chorus. At the same time, a soldier, an orderly of Karaś, entered the lane from the main street and called out:
- Sir, the Italian captain is already here!
- With the fox?
- Of course, with the fox, – answered the orderly.
- I’ll give him a fox, – muttered Karaś.

And he went away, dragging on a chain his wild foster-child. At the beginning, she was recalcitrant, digging in the snow all her four paws, but with the skilful use of the cadet’s stick, soon, on the best friendly terms, Baška, - as it was indeed she - ran in a heavy trot, affectionately rubbing against her master’s knees.

Only with their appearance among the strolling crowd they caused a lively interest, even something like a kind of sober enthusiasm. Soon here and there English pocket kodaks¹⁷ barked. A courageous American major bravely offered Baška a bar of chocolate, which she swallowed without thinking, along with the paper packaging and, as well, the major’s leather glove – as he somehow managed to rescue his hand from the bears jaws and from the glove which were just being swallowed.

The passers-by parted everywhere in front of the approaching cadet, making the lane, as if in front of a pair of newlyweds, returning from the altar. Baška, feeling that all this honor belongs to her, realized that she is the heroine of the day. So soaring with pride she began to walk on three legs only, barely touching the ground with the fourth one, with her tongue sliding for a good couple of inches on the side of her mouth, what gave it an appearance of being carried in her teeth. All this in the polar bear is a manifestation of very sophisticated manners. „Just think it over well, and you will see that it is so and not the other way” (as my older fellow writer, Sir Rudyard Kipling, used to say)¹⁸.

Among the human crowd, cramped up at their sides and at their back, they came to the house, where lived the perpetrator of all those Polish - Italian sighs and longings. The Italian has already taken the position. The lady of the two loving hearts, whose blond head was stuck through the open casement, fluttering her long lashes, was listening to what the Bersaglieri amorous captain, stepping over from foot to foot, as if he was not strong enough, or strongly shivering from cold, declaimed. Thus, one could conclude that he was there making his speech for a good couple of quarters. On a leash, attached to the captain’s coat’s button, there was a large fox - a beautiful specimen of the northern fauna – swelling with the gorgeous gray fur, in the tint of polished steel, which is typical for species of foxes named „blue”.

The fox sat at the feet of his master, leaning on straight front paws. His ears were vigilantly held up and pointed. His whiskered muzzle expressed such prudence that, it seemed the animal will start speaking not only in human voice, but also quite to the point. He placed his fluffy tail at his back and spread it solicitously over the entire width of the sidewalk.

At the sight of Baška the fox looked at her once, then again, and felt anxiety, which manifested on the outside in an immediate withdrawal of the tail from the back and laying it in front of him. The Italian kept chattering, shifting from foot to foot.

The cadet was already about a dozen steps away.

The Italian did not see the world, except for the opened casement. The blue fox changed the position and settled himself so that, just in case, between Baška and him were his master’s shapely calves. End of his fluffy tail was moving a little bit nervously. The cadet appeared in front of the window and made a polite bow to the lady. The lady, seeing the beast towed on a chain, cried “Ah!” and pushed the glass out of the window with her elbow. The raining splinters of glass fell on the raised head of the captain; thenceforth they rolled to the ground together with a monocle, which they knocked down.

Baška got closer to the fox in order to sniff his tail, intriguing her with its fluffy look. The Italian bent to lift his monocle, without which nothing could be done, since he was short-sighted.

The fox, being sniffed by the white beast, went mad with fear and ripped out the leash and the button to which it was attached. The pull so sudden, because of the ripping of the button, swept the captain off his feet, to the point in which he had to secure his fall with his hands, and landed on all fours.

Baška, enraged with the fox’s swift escape, saw the person that fell in front of her as a defiant gesture towards her, as a some sort of quadruped, who wanted to insult her with it. So she grabbed captain’s pants with her teeth and started pulling them with all her strength.

The scared Italian, with his velvety baritone, although not that velvety in this particular moment, let a very high F¹⁹ out of his lungs. Baška requited him with a mighty D²⁰, his pants still in her jaws. The cadet waved his iron stick with a whirr of air.

The lady watching from the window screamed to high heavens.

Almost the whole street came to see the event English kodaks clashed like unlocked rifles, getting ready to fire shots.

During the incident, from the nearby fish market, the blue fox suddenly appeared, still madly frightened, swept some of the bystanders off their feet while running. The weirdest thing was, he had already got rid of his leash, and in his scoundrel snout he held a big flounder. Before anyone could notice, the fox was gone: running in the middle of the street, with his mighty tail flowing on the wind. He disappeared behind the first corner, like he was the air. No one knew what happened with him back then, and later on.

After a longer quarrel, the Italian finally got out of bear's jaws, but it cost him a large portion of his pants, which Baška kept as her trophy²¹. Her victim put on a monocle, gave her a killer look, unbuttoned his coat, took out his wallet, found his card and gave it to the cadet. Karaś put the card in the pocket of his coat and said:

- We've known each other for a long time, captain. But it's still very nice of you. Good day, sir.

And he left, with Baška still holding the captain's pants in her mouth.

But the fate had one more quarrel to offer.

On that day, an English general was taking a walk. He was the chief commander of all the coalition forces in Murmań, and he was, at all times, accompanied by his bulldog. The general was approaching the crowd after Baška's encounter with the Italian. The bulldog was a few steps in front of his master. It was an old and fat dog, grouchy and snarly, blind in one eye, always with a nasty drool hanging from his warty dog lips, not fully closed, showing rows of rotten teeth.

The dog was famous because of his habit of getting out of the way only for civilians, never for military men – he knew he was a general's dog, and every man in an army uniform he passed by should salute to him and his master, and then get out of their way.

Milord – that was the dog's name – couldn't be bothered with familiarity with other ordinary dogs when walking down the street. His life span made him bored of regular dog frolics. Even in July, favourite dog's month, he wasn't getting any more playful. But this was just the beginning of February.

Anyway, seeing Baška's spotless white fur, he felt he must get to know her immediately. Making the long story short, Milord felt the need for some of dog's frolics.

So he jumped up, to Baška's surprise on his cheekiness, and introduced himself so harshly, that Baška howled in horror, seeing that old heart's courting. In defense of her maiden dignity, she slapped the dog across the muzzle with her paw.

Milord went straight into the air like from a slingshot and landed with his blooded head right on the pavement, with a crack in his apoplectic spine, and breathed out his nasty soul, before his master could arrive for rescue.

On the next day, cadet Karaś was called for a private conversation with the commander of the Polish Battalion, which later he described to his friends, visiting him during his custody.

- We had a very loud, face to face talk with our major, well, one of those faces was smashed...

After the embalment, Milord's body was sent by a grieving general to England on a special torpedo-boat. The cadet, without embalming, went to prison for ten days.

Baška under the daily order L. 33 § 8 got an assignment to the Polish Army Murmań Battalion with the appointment of "Daughter of the Regiment", with credits of board in the machine guns company.



- ¹ White Sea - a southern inlet of the Barents Sea located on the northwest coast of Russia, near the Kola Peninsula.
- ² Entente - Great Britain, France and Russia, which formed the core of the Entente, joined by a broad coalition of 25 countries, allied against Austria and Germany after the outbreak of World War I.
- ³ Deliberate - taken with a great consideration.
- ⁴ To make a gain like Mr Zablocki on the soap – gain noting, Polish proverb.
- ⁵ Indian mocassins - shoes worn by North America natives.
- ⁶ Bersaglieri - Italian shooters.
- ⁷ Maciejówka - Polish, a round, soft cap with a short hardened peak, part of traditional Polish folk attire, became part of military uniform the Polish Legions.
- ⁸ Vistula - river in Poland flowing through Warsaw.
- ⁹ Couché - French, lay down, dog's command.
- ¹⁰ Promenade - (mainly British) a public walk, esp at a seaside resort.
- ¹¹ Monocle - "half glasses" worn in one eye, held in position by the facial muscles.
- ¹² Canzonas and barcarolles - songs.
- ¹³ Husia-siusia - traditional part of Polish folk songs.
- ¹⁴ O cara Mia - O, my dear.
- ¹⁵ Donna - miss.
- ¹⁶ Samojed - name derives from the term Samoyed used in Russia for some indigenous peoples of Siberia.
- ¹⁷ Kodak - type of photo camera.
- ¹⁸ Kipling - English writer.
- ¹⁹ F - one of the musical notes.
- ²⁰ D - one of the musical notes.
- ²¹ Trophy - symbol of victory.



A GROUP OF THE MURMAŃ ARMY OFFICERS DURING THEIR TEMPORARY STAY IN THE MODLIN FORTRESS.



OUR MURMAŃ HEROES IN THE MODLIN MILITARY BARRACKS.
Washed up, shaven and, at last, warm, they rest after the difficulties of the journey.

IV.

Only then Baška's life came into its best period. Born under the dark Northern Star, she started her career under the sign of Mars¹.

Chosen for her caretaker was a corporal named Smorgoński. The corporal was a cobbler before the war, and Baška was the first live bear he ever saw. The choice of him was made on the account of an adjutant giving orders to the battalion, who, as a PhD, was used to the synthetic reasoning². In that case, he thought of Smorgoński's³ last name, which he found the best name for a bear-caretaker, not without a reason.

Corporal Smorgoński, up to that point, was training enrolled recruits, Poles who were scattered all over the vast Russian land, or those, living there since they were born. It was a strange species of Polish people, which compulsive military service forced to become born-again patriots. Among themselves they were speaking Russian more eagerly than Polish. Very often it was their catholic belief that was the last thing connecting them to their Polish identity. Because of that, they were called „catholics”. Smorgoński, born in the Minsk area, was actually one of them, but he already became a tough soldier, who had learnt the proper legion way of living - „drill⁴”, from German - from Galician legionnaires, which he met on Murmań. Drilling the recruits, he cursed crudely in his Minsk dialect, he also took a lot from rich and flowery vocabulary of the former tsarist's army officers, but when he wanted to completely humiliate a recruit, he'd spit through his teeth: „Eh, you, catholic!”

One day he was called to the fledgeling face of the adjutant's - the one that was used to the synthetic reasoning. The adjutant pointed at Baška and said:

- Corporal. From tomorrow you'll be drilling just her. In a fortnight she's supposed to know everything that a decent Polish Army bear should know. You're excused. I'm done.

- Yes sirrrrrr! - said the determined corporal, taking the chain on which Baška was held.

- Will you handle it by yourself? - the adjutant asked.

- And how, lieutenant! - the corporal answered. - I handled the whole platoon of the stupidest catholics, so what is one bear? A bear is not a catholic. No holds barred - with a recruit, you can't lay a finger on him, but a bear? You can beat him as much as you like. And if you beat him long enough, he'll learn to light fuses. It's a beast that easily learns with his hind mind, obviously.

And then the sour days for Baška came.

Her new mentor was more zealous than her mother bear back in the old days. Baška didn't get her teacher's intentions right away and wasn't too ambitious in completing her new education. On the other hand, Smorgoński was ambitious like hell. He decided that his student has to march on two feet, like a shooter, to the rhythm of the ceremonial march. And in the end he made it happen.

There's no use for us to describe ways he chose to accomplish that goal. Every military goal justifies all means used to reach it.

The corporal trained the bear with fire and iron. He turned multiple sticks to splinters on her back, and when, in the name of hurt personal dignity, she protested to loudly, he spoke to her in terms of endearment:

- Shut up, stupid! I'm doing this for your own good. No bear was ever taught the way you are...

Anyway, he loved her dearly and confided in her, engaging in long conversations in the evenings. They slept in the same bed, quarreled rarely, like a proper marriage.

He was the one to name her Baška. There was something mighty feminine in her, and yet something nicely savage, just like among many of Polish Baška's. A soldier far away from home tends to dream of idyll and locate his sentiments anywhere his heart tells him to...

The name, given to the bear by Smorgoński, was quickly picked up by the whole battalion, but one dawdler, one of those who are constantly unhappy and seeing the glass half empty, questioned Baška's gender.

The bear was such an important figure in the battalion, so the dawdler's question soon became the uppermost thing on everyone's mind. The battalion was divided between those "for" and those "against", both groups busting their brains every day. Even the officers discussed the matter furiously. There were quarrels, there were fights. Many specialists observed Baška, but opinions on the subject were differentiating. Truth, as it usually happens in such cases, was blurred in angry waves of passion and politics. And what made it even worse, was the atmosphere of sick excitement, connected with such delicate matters as this one.

Finally, the synthetically reasoning adjutant, realized what happened and in his daily orders he created such paragraph:

§ 69.

,In light of groundless claims in the battalion that Baška the bear is a member of both sexes at once - it is recommended that the battalion's doctor should inspect the case at once, describe the bear's gender once and for all, and later report in on paper, which will be attached by the Office to the bear's files, as a proof for future reference in similar situations'.

The day of doctor's expertise was a huge day for the battalion. Since early morning, huge money bets were made, which results depended on the doctor's conclusions. Excitement was in the air, like in a betting booth. During the doctor's examination, conducted in front of the whole battalion, all eyes were fixed on doctor's mouth, when he was supposed to determine the bear's sex.

There was dead silence in the air, interrupted only by three hundred heartbeats, waiting for the verdict.

Finally - the doctor, a young and handsome Varsovian, announced with much grandiose: Baška is a lady!

It was the Judgement Day. The side, contented with the doctor's opinion, expressed their happiness with a loud „hoorah”, three times. Those armed sent their bullets up and cheered. It was such a commotion, that English command alarmed the front, thinking that the enemy attacked from the behind.

The crowd surrounded Baška. She was gifted with all the food they had. And those who drank a bit, kept gluing themselves to her, sending tears to her snowy fur.

Only Baška remained calm, although the general melting feeling caught her by the throat and tickled her nostrils, which made her sneeze.

- Baška! By God, what a fine lady you are! - people cheered.

She looked them in the eyes, feeling as if they were a family, that she isn't a regular polar bear anymore, but now they're one race, one nation with all these soldiers, which loved her and took pride in her, that now she is becoming a living banner of their history of vagrancy through lands far away, of their valor and glory.

And her black eyes, in which the world reflected as in water, looked like she was trying to say:

- You're all good fellows. To live and die for...



¹ Mars - god of war in ancient Greece and Rome.

² Sythentic reasoning - *archaic*, generalizing, forming a general conclusion from details.

³ Smorgonskij rajon - region in Bielarus with the crest showing a domesticated bear in a collar standing on two legs.

⁴ Drill - strict and repetitious training.

V.

A steamboat was on the way to Gdańsk. Cold, coastal sun was shining up in the light blue skies. A small tail of smoke was following the chimney, and gave it a look of an enormous cigar, stuck in the middle of the deck. Behind the rudder there was a snowy-green, boiling trench, one could say: verses-long dragnet, filled up with squirming fish. The sea, vibrating with a short, flat wave, constantly seemed to rock thousands of mirrors, reflecting so much wet sun, that the shine cut your eyes like a whip made of rays.

Steel fittings on the board lightened up in moments like Bengal fires. Couple of soldiers without caps on their heads gathered on the ship's bow. Seagulls squealed happily right above them, almost touching soldiers' hair with their wings.

The gathering was rather loud, like a Bolshevik rally. There was laughter like a horse neigh and screams:

- Sing the Laments! We want the Laments!
- No, no! Better sing the White Rose! - some melancholic voice said.
- Shut your mouth, no one's asking you! - someone shouted from the crowd.
- Laments! Go on!

And so they sang a melody, a very old one. It was a favorite tune of people of Murmań: The Arctic Laments, which was back in the old days written by sadly deceased major Bolesław Szul.

Baška sat closely on a reel of ship ropes, listened to men singing. In more lyrical moments she roared, accompanying the voices, what made a tremendous effect.

Coproral Smorgoński sat with his back on her furry side, like on a comfy chair. They both felt really good.

The Murmań Squad was returning to the country after a year and a half of fighting in muds and woods of Northern Russia. Those men were no strangers to death, courageous until the very end, always a good company for a drink, well dancing, poorly praying. They have achieved eternal glory in the eyes of all expeditionary forces of Europe, British command called them The Lions of North. On their chests, couple of medals and crosses from France or England. They had some watches, jewels, or dimes earned honestly in bloody sweat, from enemies of human race and Homeland. It seemed like God himself blessed the Polish valor.

They were travelling from Murmań to Poland through England, where they were welcomed like kings, as heroes which would be a pride of Ancient Times.

Baška accompanied the squad everywhere, like a living banner. She was proud of her Poles, and they were also proud of her. The world was awestruck, looking at the exotic, wild beast, behaving like a pet dog.

- We also had a trained whale, but he died along the way, after he had eaten, by mistake, an old miss with fake teeth, hair and breasts!' - Polish soldiers joked happily to the English ship's crew.

The seamen heard from this bunch of Poles the whale joke so often, that it soon started to seem real. Thinking how lucky they were to have on board those Murmań half-devils, who, if only wanted, could catch and tame a legendary sea snake, if it only might be caught.

The ship's captain announced, that they are an hour away from a horizon of the Polish land.

Hearing the news, a wave of men spilled out of their stuffy cabins, where air full of cigarette smoke and alcohol was being breathed while playing cards for two days and nights straight, war and all forgotten and left behind.

Smorgoński, who have never been to Poland before (and still told everyone he's "returning"), said to his furry friend.

- See, Baška! What did I tell you? We're going back to Poland. Be happy, stupid! Do you even know what Poland is? It's a country, where there are no catholics, just native Poles. Everyone on the streets, everyone, speaks Jewish and Polish. It's our country, Baška, a very beautiful one ...

And overwhelmed with emotions, he would kiss her on her black nose, while she licked his face with her warm tongue.

In Gdańsk there were no unusual adventures while arriving, except one small incident in the evening in the harbor tavern, provoked by a few indecent „Grenzschutz” guards. The Murmań guys put that fire out by themselves in a fashion described by a famous song from Lviv, which goes like this:

“They say nothing to nobody, only beaten up their mugs, and so it was!”

Baška presented her bravery, fighting hand in hand with her brothers in arms, and it was her who swayed the pendulum of victory to their side. It was unheard of how intelligent this beast was, hating the Jerries² from the very start!

In the morning, the squad and Baška, with their luggage, went to Modlin for their rest.

- We're sick of this Polish Gdańsk - the Murmań soldiers confessed to one another.
- What a stinking kind of sea access. You've seen those Englishmen? They brought all of their monkey tins and "jam-plum³", soon Gdańsk will become the next Gibraltar.
Was it worth at all to bleed for them in Murmań!

- Right, especially you bled so much! - some ironic voice doubted.
- Stupid! It's a rhetorical saying. I have two dead bolsheviks on my list, not counting that Englishmen, who I took down by a missed shot, while he was on his post...
- Oh, really a big thing to be proud of, that... mistake. Anyway, this promised and caressed about English Gdańsk really stinks!

After a few weeks in Modlin, the squad with Baška went to Warsaw, to present themselves to the Chief of State.

It was a day to remember in the capital. So many people gathered in front of the Vienna Station to greet the soldiers, preceded by their war reputation, unheard of on

Polish soil since San Domingo.

Lead by music, three hundreds of feet walked on the pavement in the rhythm like a flail on the barn floor. There it was, the Murmań battalion marching to the Saski Square. That day of December was cloudy, but the smiles on soldiers' faces shined like the sun: they felt that they're famous and gallant, that everyone is impressed by them. They were filled with vanity, adequate to soldiers strutting with a marching band, surrounded by adoration of young women.

Baśka, feeling the gravity of the moment, walked next to Smorgoński, without turning her head or looking surprised, because at that time she was already a well behaving person.

Next to soldiers, flood of people was running down the street. They were tumbling, tripping over little children and dogs, crashing their knees, stumbling on trams and cars with their jaws dropped, falling down and getting back up again, as long as they kept the white bear in their sight. Her name had spread quickly and people murmured "Baśka, Baśka", sending electrifying waves around. Hearing her name spoken by thousands of lips, she got even tougher, and walked onward, not completely sure if she was guided on a leash, or if she was guiding those three hundred men.

Then they reached the Saski Square. A huge, orthodox church with onion-like domes, really impressed Baśka. She couldn't remember where, but she had already seen something similar. It reminded her of architecture of icy mountains, floating over the Arctic Ocean. Both those things looked really alike.

After a short military mass, and long speeches of generals and bishops, which Baśka listened to with much lenience, it was time for procession in front of the Chief of State. Baśka really liked him. She saw him for the first time, but from the very start, she figured that this tall man in a modest, gray coat, with bushy eyebrows and illustrious moustache, has to be the most important figure, even more important than the Squad's Commander, of whom Smorgoński was frightened, as much as Baśka was afraid of fire, even maybe more important than herself, the bear who turned all the heads! When the Chief, who was trying to stroke her fur, extended his arm, without much hesitation, she gave him his paw and shook his hand with a ceremonial curtsy, like a most sophisticated lady. After that they separated, both very happy with each other.

During the procession, Baśka inspired real enthusiasm in the crowd: it was a lovely view, seeing her walking on her back feet, as tall as Smorgoński, head to head with him and the rest of the Squad, and in the statutory moment, she turned her head to the Chief, saluting him briskly like a true soldier.

In that moment, she presented her quarter-cubit-long amaranth tongue, contrasting her snow white fur. By showing those vivid colors, she wanted to manifest - to the Chief and foreign guests accompanying him - her affiliation to the Polish Nation and its history.

A wave of applause was Baśka's reward for this political statement, presented so boldly, gracefully and with such class.



¹ Grenzschutz - German border guards.

² Jerries - Germans.

³ Jam-plum - fruit can.



BEFORE THE MARCH FROM MODLIN TO WARSAW.

The group of brave Murmań soldiers is waiting for the command to march to the train.



IN THE CAPITAL.

Ceremonial field mass service and troops overview by the commander in chief on the Saski Square. The picture shows the moment of blessing the hero soldiers by the military field bishop, Fr. Gall.

VI.

Two months following the procession on the Saski Square Baška spent in Modlin. She couldn't complain, maybe only about the government board, which was getting worse and worse everyday. Strangely enough, it didn't cause much harm to her, she even put on some weight. Then again, what difference does food make, when she was fed on her own glory - it's not always the flounders that bears live on. And Baška could feel that she was a military celebrity. Those, who remember her from those days, will most likely recollect her kindness in contacts with people, a sort of grand benignity, which was an attribute of only the most important generals, poets and other famous people, when suddenly their fame and popularity rises sky high against all suspicions. She rested on her laurels - to her own demise.

And it happened like this.

Each day, Baška was taken to the nearby Vistula river, so she could enjoy cold water. The river, in spite of winter, was not covered in ice. After a long thaw, frost was not returning, even though there was mighty snow every day. Only parts of ice floe appeared on the surface. The river ran with a wide, black strand, cutting through wonderfully white fields. On the opposite bank, much higher and steep, people have settled and created a village, exhaling blue bouquets of smoke from the snowy thatches. During one of those excursions, on which, except for Baška and Smorgoński, there were only a few soldiers, the sun was just settling far away from the river, on the snow-covered fields, where distant woods marked the blue border of the horizon.

Located below it, purple Vistula, sharp riverside and snowy fields, looked as if covered in flowing rows of pink and violet flowers, the blue stripe of the forest far away - they all suddenly became so familiar to Baška, something she yearned for, she missed: the river - the sea bay, where she used to learn to swim; craggy shore and fields bathed in vivid colors - the wall of glaciers, the blue forest - the ocean, humming somewhere afar off...

The calling of timeless nature, with the same strength in every corner of the earth, called for its lost child, strayed between human, to return.

And Baška, just like two years earlier, felt that great longing, a wild need of going, swimming forward, wherever the flow will take her, into the great big world, to the pathless sea.

She got of her leash, fell into the water like a storm, and roaring cheerfully, she swam across the dense floe to the opposite bank.

The soldiers, fearing for her, desperately looked for a boat.

Meanwhile, Baška was already on the other side, running towards the woods - to the imaginary ocean. But suddenly she changed direction to the village cabins. Her passionate longing has left, as instantly as it came to her. And Baška once again felt the need for human company, to be watched, worshipped, patted on her back. Even in a beast, devoid of understanding soul, there is a truly human need to "not absolve, but amaze the world".

Near the village's border, on the fields, Baška noticed black silhouettes, moving in contrast to the white snow - so she headed towards them. It was father Wawrzon, a decent

farmer, and his sons. They were throwing manure on the field. Wawrzon saw the bear getting closer to the cabins. Covering his eyes from the sun, he tried to figure what strange creature is heading there. He finally realized it had to be Baška, since he had heard of her.

- Look, boys - he said to his sons. - What a beautiful creature is coming here. People say that our army took her from Murmań, somewhere near America or elsewhere. They traveled long, through seas and deserts, for almost a year, to show it to the world. They say that even the English king himself couldn't believe it - when he saw her, his jaw fell down, and the queen treated her with marzipans from her own hand! In Warsaw, the Chief even shook her hand. Everyone honored her, that's how grand and rare she is, unheard of...

Baška was only a gunshot away.

Father Wawrzon stucked his pitchfork into a pile of warm manure and leaned on it with both his hands. In that position, during traditional activities of Polish serf, he had the majesty of ages in him, a dignity of sacred land, worked up with tears and sweat of people, making the long story short: "There was something of king Piast in him, and basta!". He watched the approaching bear for some time, and said:

- I think it would make a fine fur coat for Maryška, according to this French officer fashion in Warsaw...

- Sure thing, dad! - the sons agreed, splendid workers, all three, two of which just recently deserted from the military service.

And Baška was getting closer to them, happy to see people again, with her grand kindness for all, even for strangers. She trusted those pitchfork-wielding men. No one ever caused her any harm in this country, everyone greeted her with admiration and love.

When she was just a few steps away, father Wawrzon crossed himself, spat in his hand and told to his boys:

- Grab your pitchforks...now!

There was the commotion on the snowy field. Roars of four men slaughtering Baška lured people out of their houses. They all went to Wawrzon for backup, grabbing whatever they could use as weapons. Baška was so shocked by the unexpected attack, that she didn't even try to defend herself. She died under pitchforks without a hint of resistance, like a gentle roe.

People then started to skin her. Dogs from the area licked the blood, splattered over the snow.

And just then, Smorgoński appeared with his company. They almost drowned, crossing the floe on the river, but they still didn't make it in time to save Baška. Their astonishment and grief over what happened has cut them off their feet and made them so miserable, that they didn't even curse the peasants.

Smorgoński only said:

- Let your arms and legs be broken on a flat road for what you did to her. But it's God's will and what's done is done. At least return her to us the way she is now...

And he cried with heavy tears. But father Wawrzon, unphased and still skinning the bear with a knife, wiped his forehead with a bloody hand and said:

- You wish! Don't you know the law? She's mine now, I risked my life to hunt her, on my own ground. No way!

- Those local people seem really tough - replied Smorgoński desperately. - There's no thing else to do, boys... grab your weapons!

On that command, the soldiers momentarily took out railings from a nearby fence, since they didn't have their guns with them, and broke them furiously on the heads of father Wawrzon, his sons, his family and his neighbors - with an anger and force of a whole battalion attacking the enemy with raised bayonets. Their Murmań, the most sure and the most important, law of war spoke with action.

Afterwards, they retrieved Baška's body, put it on the same railings, used to defeat the peasants, and took her to the boat, all filled with regret and sadness, like on their sisters' funeral.

The same day, in his evening report, corporal Smorgoński informed Battalion's Commander, colonel Skokowski:

- Colonel, hereby I announce that local peasants lotted out Baška into pieces... let God punish them severely for our harm and loss!

And such was the life and innocent death of the White Murmań Bear. Her loving memory lives on in three hundred Murmań hearts and will not vanish until their very end, because it was a truly beautiful and beloved animal.

THE END





THE MURMAŃ SOLDIER.

A private of our heroic polar army with the equipment and in the full outfit adapted to the Arkhangelsk climate. In his face and eyes, the printed chronicle of superhuman hardships, epic camping in the snows and frosts, incomprehensible marches across snows and tundra.
Fot. Saryusz-Wolski.

Dear Reader,

Pages of the Modlin Fortress history are written down with many colorful stories. A lot of them are well known, other, despite of being equally interesting, are still waiting for their time. Undoubtedly one of such stories is the history of Baśka Murmańska, the white she-bear, which came to the Modlin Fortress from far Russian extremities together with the army. She got a unique chance to be personally introduced to the Chief of State, marshal Józef Piłsudski, and even, according to the legend, saluted in front of him.

How did it happen that the white bear came to the fortress? She was bought by the Polish soldier on the Russian market in 1919, as in this way he wanted to impress a woman, for whose favors he was competing with an Italian captain.

However the Polish soldier hadn't foreseen how far-reaching consequences could this happening have. Baśka dishonored the dog of the chief commander of coalition forces in Murmań. As a result she got assigned to the Polish battalion, (also called the Murmań battalion), as the "Daughter of the Regiment". There she was successfully drilled by one of the corporals, and as time passed, she became one of the soldiers, behaving similarly to them. She arrived with them on the steamship to Gdańsk, and from there she came to the Modlin Fortress. There she lived together with soldiers, taking her everyday bath in waters of the local river. Unfortunately, she ended up her full of adventures life quite sadly. You can read about it inside the brochure.

The history of Baśka was written up by Eugeniusz Malaczewski in his book "The history of Baśka Murmańska. The narrative of the white she-bear". It was first published in 1925, by Goebethner and Wolf publishing house, in seven cities: Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Wilno and Zakopane. To save this unusual history from the oblivion we publish it again, at efforts of town of Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki and the Three Rivers Local Tourist Organization.

Have a nice reading!



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