

Piotr Masztalerz

Kingdom Of Dust

A sad story about
happiness

K i n g d o m
o f D u s t

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happiness**



**Wrocław Aikikai
Self-published title**

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This story is about the forming of a teacher-student relationship. The story of creating a place that becomes a home for many people, a place of maturing, becoming a human being, one that is perhaps a little more self-aware and kind to others. This place still exists and works, and by supporting us you become part of this amazing international community of madmen who follow their passion.

You will receive this book if you pay us a monthly training fee. You don't pay for the book—you pay for the classes—the book is free.

I still have a hope that someday I will come to the dojo in the morning and someone will be waiting outside the front door. Sat on a backpack, freezing, with a copy of the book worn out from reading.

He will look at me and say: "I don't know you, but I've read it and I know this is my place..."

This book was published with the financial help of many people around the world.

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Without you all, this book would not exist. Thank you very much.

“I was in Wrocław as an uchideshi¹ for six months. I lived in the dojo,² and during this time I spent 700 hours training. Apart from Aikido,³ weapons, Iaido,⁴ and Zazen,⁵ I had to practise Brazilian Jujitsu,⁶ Krav Maga,⁷ yoga and Karate. My nose was broken twice, my elbow and knees were damaged, every day new bruises appeared; I had a few concussions. For many days I had difficulty moving due to the all-pervading pain. Sensei made me do cryotherapy—I walked half-naked around a room in which the temperature was -125°C. We fasted for four days, drinking only water. Because Sensei knew about my fear of heights, he ordered me to climb in rope parks between trees, many metres above the ground. He left me in other cities so that I had to find my way back by myself. I was in England, France, Germany, and the Czech Republic—I went to some of those countries illegally, as my visa had already expired. Once, Polish nationalists mistook me for an Arab and threatened me with death. Never in my life I have been so tired and terrified. Never have I suffered so much, hated so much, or been so happy, and never I have felt more alive. It was the worst and the most beautiful time of my life. And I want more.”

~ Diego (Chile), six months as uchideshi in Poland

¹ Uchideshi (lit. ‘inside disciple’) is a student who lives in the *dojo* and is devoted only to the training.

² *Dojo* (lit. ‘place of the Way’) is a place for practice; a room, or a whole building.

³ Aikido is a Japanese martial art created by M. Ueshiba (1883–1969).

⁴ Iaido is the art of drawing the sword.

⁵ Zazen is the practice of meditation.

⁶ Jujitsu is a sport version of Japanese Jujutsu developed in Brazil.

⁷ Krav Maga is an Israeli system of self-defense.

Introduction

First Murashige⁸ Sensei died; two years later, it was Chiba⁹ Sensei. I told a story to one of my students and confused the place, time, and people who were there with me. Time tangles everything, enhances memories. I was scared I was going to lose it all, and that is how it started—from writing down a few important stories, conversations.

This is not to be a book about Aikido. Nor is it to be a book about Chiba Sensei. I have no right to write about Aikido because it is different for each one of us. Neither is it possible to describe Chiba, because this man spent almost 60 years on the mat, his life itself is a great book, a volume full of stories and of the thousands of people he encountered along the way. There were many who knew him as a teacher better than I did, and there were those who went through more with him, their experience being more intense, more beautiful, and much more terrifying. This is a subjective story about what 30 years on the mat did to me. A story about trying to follow one's passions as strongly as possible. But most of all it is a story about what happens when on the road in front of you stands a real teacher.

I started by describing what I had learnt with Chiba Sensei. I used to sit down at an internet café with a cup of coffee and write. The words flowed out themselves. The story would unfold for a few pages and then die. The end. The coffee and the

⁸ M. Murashige *shihan* (1945–2013) 6 *dan*, Japanese Aikido teacher, assistant instructor at San Diego Aikikai.

⁹ T. K. Chiba *shihan* (1940–2015) 8 *dan*, Japanese Aikido teacher, chief instructor of San Diego Aikikai and founder of Birankai International.

memories both finished. I had allowed myself to write organically, and this is how many stories came alive. After some time, I re-read them and realised that, for a person who does not understand the context, they made no sense. It was as if I were describing the peak of a mountain without the story of the weeks spent climbing it. This is how I came to understand that I must write about myself.

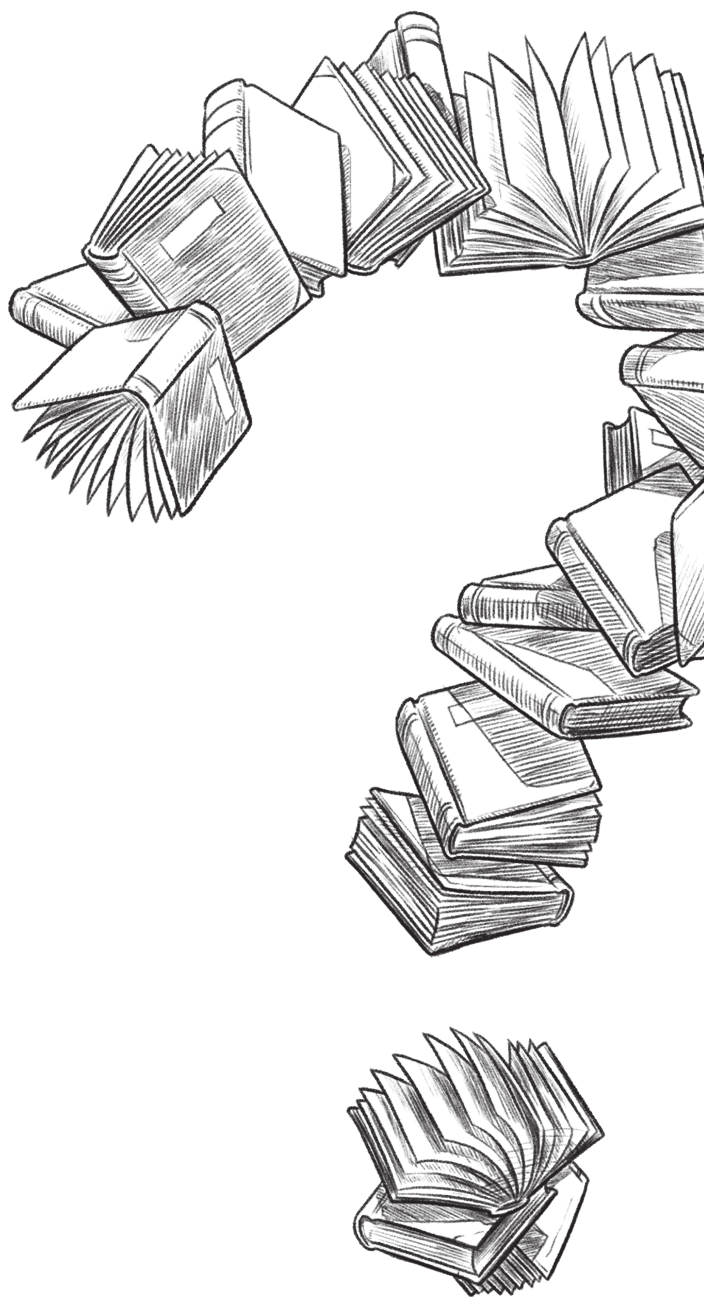
I had tried to shield myself against this kind of exhibitionism as much as I could, but without it the stories about being a teacher would completely lose their meaning and strength. Progress is a confrontation with one's own weaknesses, or at least acknowledging them. This is how you must study yourself—calmly and with no mercy.

The moment of simple childlike understanding can come from reading an ancient manuscript as much as it can appear in a drill instruction manual. This is the reason that the motto that underlies each one of the following chapters are so varied. But this is not important as long as they compel the reader into even a moment of reflection.

I am using initials to refer to certain people because what we went through was a personal journey and I have no right to share real names and surnames. The world of martial arts is a world of ambitions, passions, and emotions. I apologise to everyone who could be offended by my words. Many people can receive the same experience totally differently. We may look the same and do the same things, but we feel and see something different, filtering everything through our upbringing, values, religion. Most of what happened exists more in my head than in reality. But this is how it is.

Chapter one

Before



Why?



I look over my books. Some time ago I realised that the majority of them are memoirs by insurgents, descriptions of wars, accounts from extermination camps, and biographies of the greatest scumbags in history. All are about people who have been put up against a wall and forced to make ultimate decisions. All are about the determined or defeated. All are about times that are both distinct and terrible. It is as if I have been unconsciously searching for the answers to questions which I cannot put to rest, which haunt me.

What happens to a person who fights, not for love, for a new car, or even for their motherland, but for a single breath? What happens in the head of a mother whose child is pulled from her arms? What happens inside you when you are paralysed with fear, when the worst horrors, ones you have only met in your nightmares, become true? Does blood really have a metallic taste, and can you choke on it?

Do I have the strength within myself to jump from a train that races through hundreds of kilometres of frozen forest¹⁰? Or will I be sitting in the corner of the carriage whining and

¹⁰ Russian and Soviet authorities exiled many Poles to Siberia from the 17th to 20th centuries.

squealing in fear about what is to come? Waiting like a pig to slaughter.

I do not know.

Me and my own. We are the first generation orphaned after the war. We are the first generation free from such hardship—without blood, tragedy, exile, conspiracy, *filipinki*,¹¹ barricades. We are people who have not been told by life whether they will be a hero or a traitor. Do we have the strength to sacrifice ourselves, or would the fear of pain and hunger change us into a shadow of a person trembling in the corner?

They even took compulsory military service from us, thereby creating a legion of aged children who cannot, by any means, now be dragged to adulthood. We caught the end of martial law, and with wild enthusiasm we ran to the streets. It turned out that the worst thing that could happen out there was a kick up the arse, and even then, most of what was happening we exaggerated in our heads. For a while we had an enemy; he was bad, and we were good.

Imbued with Katyń,¹² Hussars,¹³ coats of arms, Lwów's children,¹⁴ we spend our whole lives searching for our time—our distinct time—the time of black and white. The years go by and everything is grey. No one is entirely bad or entirely good. Somewhere inside we feel like wild animals. We are waiting for

¹¹ A *filipinka* was a homemade hand grenade produced for the Armia Krajowa in occupied Poland during World War II.

¹² The Katyń massacre was a series of mass executions of nearly 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia carried out by the Soviet Union.

¹³ The Polish heavy Hussars of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth formed about 1500.

¹⁴ Lwów Eaglets (Polish: *Orlęta Lwowskie*) is a term of affection applied to the Polish teenagers who defended the city of Lwów (Ukrainian: L'viv), in eastern Galicia, during the Polish-Ukrainian War (1918–1919).

this time as if it were our destiny, but it never comes. Instead of blood and grieving widows, we have new mortgages and cars. The wimps who would be crushed by the first breath of war now live with their mothers or are our bosses in banks, corporations, or insurance agencies. Who knows whether a hundred years ago I would have drowned in a clay pit behind a barn? Or maybe I would have been eaten by a goat, or killed by scurvy or tuberculosis. Either way, canals¹⁵ and petrol bombs have been replaced by mindless hours spent gaping at a screen and eating junk food. We are warm in winter and cold in summer. We have air conditioning in our brand-new cars and internet in every place possible. Wolves that chew mouthfuls of grass pretending they are cows. Or maybe they are not wolves—maybe they are, and will be, sheep.

War, suffering, and fear are evil. Then why am I both fascinated and haunted by them? Why can't I stop thinking about them? Why do I dig inside myself looking for remnants of fear? Why, when I am asked to present my ticket on the tram, am I overtaken with guilt even when I do in fact have a valid ticket? I am scared of ZUS,¹⁶ the tax office, and official letters. Am I a wolf or a rabbit? I want to know who I am and how much I am worth. I want to believe in myself and trust in myself. Only then will I free myself from such tenacious uncertainty. Then I will be free.

Maybe this journey is a therapeutic trial to put myself in a position where I can no longer hide. It was not a conscious choice, but ultimately, looking back I can see that this would

¹⁵ During the Warsaw uprising in 1944, members of the Armia Krajowa and civilians used sewage canals to escape. *Kanał* is also the title of a 1957 film by Andrzej Wajda.

¹⁶ ZUS is the Polish Social Insurance Institution, a government agency.

explain everything that has happened to me in the last 30 years. The fact that I stumbled upon Aikido was just a coincidence. Perhaps it, too, became a victim of this therapy. The poor thing fitted perfectly to who I was then and what I was looking for; it went along with the list of my complexes and my dreams.

It impossible to understand my whole story without a few words about the place I started my journey from. I am nobody special and I have not achieved anything particularly extraordinary, but my journey is all I have. I was born and raised in a different Poland. It was much simpler—grey and crude. Everything was done slower and the results were never as you wished. Without cell phones, without cars, every kilometre had to be paid for with pain in your feet and with perpetual boredom. Every decision had to be thought through multiple times and cost a long trip to the nearest city: one kilometre through a field and an hour by tram.

Winter was harsh and summer was hot; relief was brought only by a cool dip in the clay pit. When the cold came, we burned coal—as soon as I could carry a bucket, I carried coal to the cellar with my mother. In the cold mornings I bartered with my bladder for every minute I could spend longer under the quilt. We had no phone and on our block there was just one landline. This was not important, however, as we had no one to call. Everyone lived close by.

We grew up in packs of kids, running around the neighbourhood. There was everything: secret hiding places, football matches on the street, runny noses, nicking baskets of strawberries, broken arms, throwing cherry pips at passing cars, fishing for sticklebacks... The first time I went abroad was at Agricultural College. It was 1986, and we went to the GDR,¹⁷

¹⁷ The GDR, or East Germany, officially the German Democratic Republic,

where Secretary Honecker¹⁸ was still king. Our job was to sort the rotten potatoes from the factory conveyor belt. In front of me hung a portrait of the secretary spattered with fly shit. For us it was like touching a different world. Shops were full of sweets and colourful cans of fizzy drinks. We took kilograms of gelatine and coffee grinders back to Poland. We also had space heaters, but I cannot remember if we were buying or selling them. The Spetsnaz army was stationed in the village next to ours. I can remember hanging out with the soldiers. They sat with us in our rooms, showing us pictures of them breaking burning bricks with their heads. It is hard to explain the repressions of my generation to the young, and the old need no explanation at all.

A generation raised in grey stability. Where, even with the obvious lack of colourful perspective, there were reliable certainties: education guarantees work, the country provides for a minimum of your basic needs, you won't die of starvation, it's not worth it to stand out, don't let yourself dream too much because it's ridiculous.

In every family there was a drunk, a priest, or both. No one was too rich or too poor. I know that what I write only applies to me. Inside my head I had built a cage made from my complexes, insecurities, lack of self-confidence. This was the result of those times and of those people. There were many of us like this and many of us remained like this—even though in the meantime everything around us changed completely. Or perhaps it was just me?

We lived in the villagelike suburbs of Wrocław. Out there in the city there were elegant people with cars and clean flats.

was a country that existed from 1949 to 1990.

¹⁸ Erich Ernst Paul Honecker was a German politician who was the general secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

In the post-Soviet blocks, they built a life for themselves in flats with straight walls and nice furniture. They dressed their kids in smart uniforms and drove around in Fiat 126p's.¹⁹ We, on the contrary, had nothing straight or clean.

Life in Poland is safe. Nothing is going to eat you. When it isn't winter you can sleep in the forest; it's hard to die of starvation here or become lost in the wilderness. You can just walk a few hours in a straight line and you will reach some people or a bus stop. To survive here, you do not need the skills of a Bedouin in the desert or of Dersu Uzala²⁰ in Siberia. This safe mediocrity pours into us and makes us soft. Of course, we have drunks, poverty, and severity; we had opponents; we had occupiers, thieves, and informers. All of those, however, are internal enemies. Each Pole has inside of himself a hero, a drunk, and a traitor. Such seeds are planted deep inside, but upbringing is that which waters and nurtures them into something specific. At least, I have to believe in that. This greyness is my curse and my strength. The little scared-Pole was, is, and will always be living inside of us.

Each September I ask the kids where they went on holiday. A seven-year-old boy tells me: "Tarnobrzeg²¹ or Turkey, I can't remember." I can remember each day I spent in the GDR when I was sixteen. Each journey I make now is experienced by the hungry seven-year-old within me. My heart is made of post-communist dust and it will never have enough. I praise Tony Halik²² and his silly stories. Thanks to him the

¹⁹ The Fiat 126p – a four-passenger car with a rear engine, was the most popular car in postwar Poland.

²⁰ Dersu Uzala was a Russian hunter portrayed in a 1975 Soviet-Japanese film of the same name directed by Akira Kurosawa.

²¹ Tarnobrzeg is a small city in south-eastern Poland.

²² Toni Halik is a Polish-Argentinian film operator, documentary filmmaker,

hunger of the journey lives within me. I deeply believe that even though I have seen most of the world, the power that carries me through and gives me passion is this greyness and the ashes of the childhood in which I grew up.

Niuniek

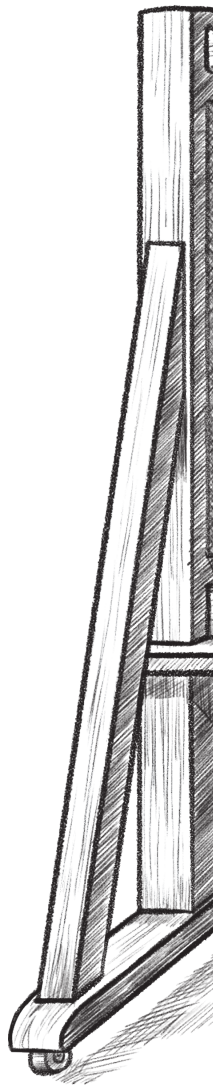
*"It is better not to learn at all
than to learn from a bad teacher."*

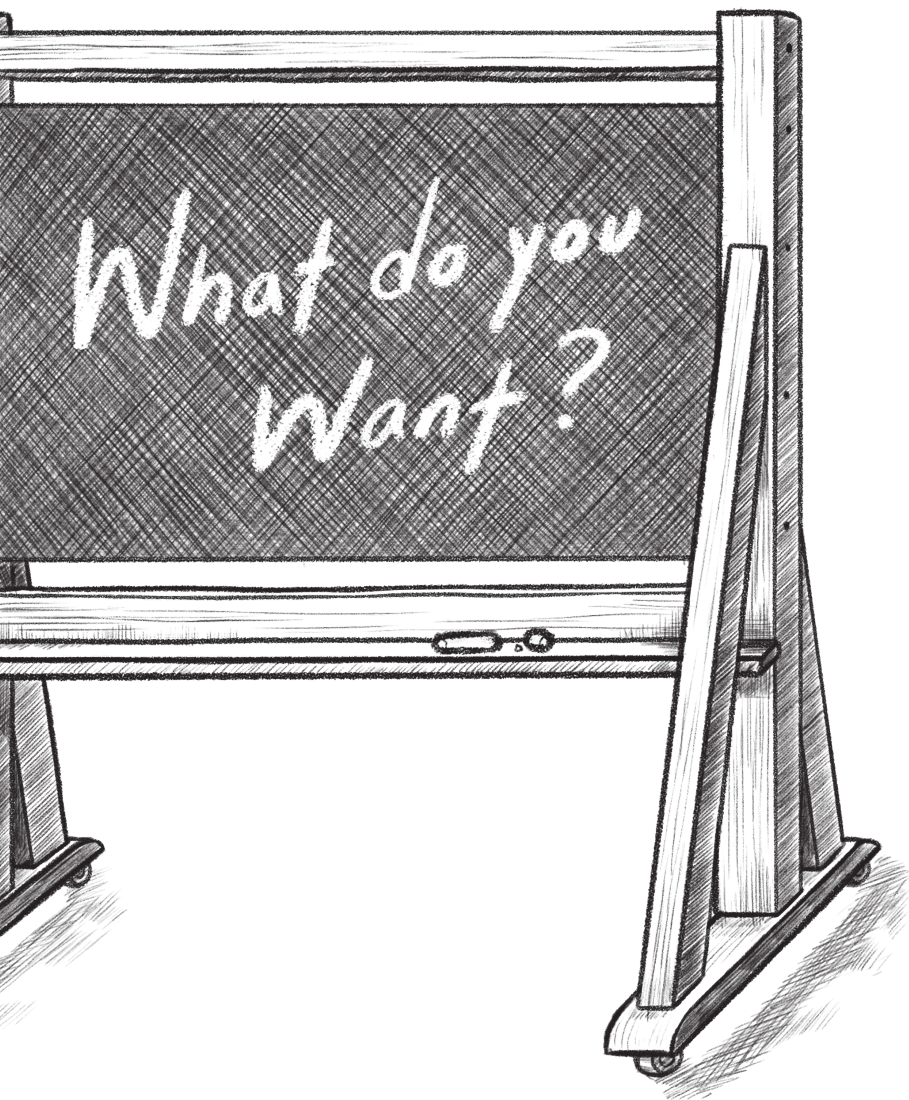
~ T.K. Chiba

I cannot remember much. Part of a building in Wrocław that was once a school, now houses a huge testing centre. In the mid '80s it was home to a Technical Agricultural College. It smelt of machinery grease, and scattered around were the remains of old Soviet tractors.

The buildings were neglected, occupied by hundreds of teenagers hanging around dressed in knock-off jeans. The majority were boys from surrounding villages. Kids, rustic like dry bread with brawn. There were also a few boys like me from Wrocław who would never get into a normal college or whose parents didn't care either way.

That was a different time and a different world. We were growing up in Communism, quietly accepting the greyness and powerlessness. In education we saw nothing other than an extension of childhood. You had to go to secondary school, and you applied to go to university to avoid going to military service. Everything was simplified and controlled. We were studying just enough to pass, and good grades brought more shame than pride. Learning a language was not





useful and, as a subject, was no more important than learning the intricacies of emptying a cesspool. In this whole rusted world of hillside ploughs, manure spreaders, and internships in the PGR (State Agricultural Farms), it was Niuniek that we feared the most.

I do not remember his full name; everyone just called him Niuniek. A prefect even once came to the class to deliver a register to 'Professor Niuniek'. He was a history teacher, located on the first floor, and we knew about him from the first day of school. In the world of blacksmiths, tractor-driving instructors, and turnery teachers, he was the most terrifying. Physically he reminded me of a young Marek Kondrat in *Playing with the Devil*.²³

His homosexuality was unquestionable. His character was so strong that even in this austere, agrarian world, where acceptance was unheard of, it was never talked about. There were rumours that he brought his boyfriend on school trips. I do not know, as I never witnessed that, but for me it fit his character. He hung around with female teachers drinking filtered coffee from a tall glass and carried with himself a leather handbag-like satchel. His effeminate gestures and high-pitched voice did not fit into our system. For most of us he was the first homosexual we had ever seen.

He would inspect our badges and the cleanliness of our uniforms before we entered the class. After an initial test, according to the marks, he divided our class.²⁴ Those with sec-

²³ *Playing with the Devil* was a 1979 TV and theatrical production by J. Drda. It was very popular in Poland.

²⁴ The Polish grading system in higher education was based on the 5 to 2 scale, where 5 is the best mark and 2 is the worst. Moreover, students can also be marked with additional signs of + and -.

onds—the lowest of the group—sat on the left; those with thirds and fourths, opposite him. The higher fourths and fifths sat in the row on the right-hand side. The best of us were called experts and sat in the corner behind one of the huge old maps which hung from the walls—blessed with the privilege to sit in their place and do what they wanted. There was only one condition—if, during one of the terror-filled classes, someone did not know the answer, Niuniek would suddenly strike the map with his stick and shout, “Expert answer!” If the expert in question failed the professor three times, then he lost his place.

I had a strong four; the position of the expert was beyond my reach. After each test we swapped places again. Establishing the first division of the class, Niuniek spoke to the seconds and the weak thirds: “I’m telling you for the last time. There is no possibility of you passing this class, so I won’t waste this nightingale’s voice on you.” He turned his back on them and never looked in that direction again. He led the classes facing the other students. At the beginning of each class, he selected five students to undergo an oral test. The prefect was excused, as he was preparing maps for the class. Niuniek would open the register and run his finger up and down the list of names, “Perhaps the seafood menu today? Oh, I haven’t seen this person at La Scala restaurant in quite a while...” Here he would call out a surname, then a second, then a fourth and a fifth. Four of them were asked to write the answers to the questions on the board, whilst the fifth had to answer orally next to Niuniek’s desk.

Niuniek was ruthless and malicious. His sense of humour was phenomenal, perverse, and merciless. At the time of black-and-white communism an intelligent man, ground down by the system for his obvious, discernible homosexuality, was either consumed by ruin or turned to bitterness. His salva-

tion was teaching and his passion for history. He knew that he had ended up in a shabby school where no one cared for his subject, but within it he had created his own small, fully controlled world. We were still kids, and for us, such charisma and strength were equally fascinating and frightening. Even the roughest, hardest boys from the state villages feared him.

Niuniek divided the community that was our class into simple groups and then went on to berate certain individuals. He knew about his aura of fascination in regard to men and the awkwardness that accompanied it for us, but he managed to disarm it by making fun of himself. He ordered us to clean up, brush our hair, look smart. For those who were already blessed with facial hair, the expectation was to come to his classes cleanly shaven. One of us was always, regardless of his grade, named the most beautiful boy of the class. Looking back on it now I can see that amongst the sea of anonymous faces, hundreds learning in overcrowded classes, he was the only one that built a living relationship. Perhaps it was ridiculous and toxic, but at least it was personal and consistent.

“What does it mean?” a student was landed with this question during his ritual morning questioning.

“What does what mean, Professor?”

“You said, idiot, that your name is Lichtenstein?”

“Yes...”

“What does it mean? In Polish, what does Lichtenstein mean?”

“I don't know, it's just my surname.”

I remember that Niuniek threw him out of the class, demanding that he find out immediately. It was a time of no cell phones, so the student had to run to the telephone box and call his parents to find out the answer.

“Bright stone!” he exclaimed as he ran into the class, panting.

Another time a friend named Paweł who arrived to class unshaven was sent back to his dorm. He returned with his face covered in small bits of bloody tissue.

Many of us had nicknames. I remember almost none of them. In second grade I became 'Anteater', I do not know why. Maybe it was because of my big nose, which I had a habit of picking.

In third grade, during one of the lessons, Niuniek addressed me.

"Anteater, for the next class I would like a letter from your mother confirming that she is aware that for three years you have come to your history classes with your hair uncombed."

In my house, children had to be clean enough for our parents to tell them apart. They did not have high aesthetic expectations—in this field I am and always will be a cross between a wild pig and a badger. I was surprised by this command and I assumed it was a joke. The next class he immediately asked me about the letter and consequently threw me out. After this happened for the third time, I went to my parents who, more through laughter than from embarrassment, wrote the letter for me.

Why am I writing all of this? Personally, I did not have a great bond with Niuniek. I liked the subject that he taught, but for him I wasn't particularly special. He did not show an extraordinary liking toward me, but he was the reason I went on to study history and, subsequently, became a teacher. I do not know if he would care. My friends told me, a few years after I left the school, that he died of AIDS.

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wroclawaikikai.pl

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