

The Long Plunge

by *Orazio Longo* © 2009 Translated by Adriana Tonon

Let's put it this way.

Let's say that nobody ever happened to pass by, through those mountains, up to the Mount Cross. Nobody, not even by chance. And Ataman was fully satisfied, that day. He had done a good job. And that pleased him. Also the sky had helped. The grey clouds of the night before, had given way to a radiant and unexpected sunny day with the shining green of the grass and the almost summery hot of the sunbeams still skewed. For this reason, Ataman was in a good mood. Rather unusual.

He had woken up early that morning, as he was used to, and worked for a couple of hours. Straight through, you might almost say. Without stopping a moment. At last he had it made, though. And he was now happy. He had polished that saddle so well that it seemed now almost brand new. 'Well – he was now thinking – it has been really worthwhile'. He was overjoyed, actually. Most unusual.

The saddle was old of course, but still useful. He knew. He had mounted it almost throughout Europe and had become attached to it: a special gift his grandpa Igor gave him before passing away. So he wouldn't ever have left it. He kept it as a relic. A question of pride, most of all. Therefore he would have shown it to Irma. Now.

All in all, it was also thanks to her that that job had been so well done. She had left him a can of *simu* (*cooked pork fat, in Ladin language [TN]*) on the counter that morning, before disappearing down in the valley, through the village. And he, without wasting time, had immediately used it to spruce the saddle and the horse up. Good job. No question about it. 'Absolutely no question about it, actually', he was now thinking, Ataman.

Let's say that there had been a long time since Ataman arrived at that mountain pasture in the Alps, up high, between Friuli (*area of the north-eastern Italian autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia [TN]*) and the Dolomites. Cold. He hadn't washed that saddle any longer. And the last time, he had simply used the water from the river. The same river he had left behind the day he had

decided to go away from the SS camp, the infamous one in the Balkans. He hadn't escaped, actually. He had simply left.

It was well known. Nobody ever happened to pass by, through those mountains, up to the Mount Cross. Nobody, not even by chance. But when Irma, many months before, had seen him popping up from the thick forest on horseback, her heart had missed a beat: and she would never have expected that. She saw him: handsome, proud, tired and all alone. With his beard unshaven and his pitch-black hair. Before that, every day Irma used to spend a long time watching towards east. Every day waiting for Gino who 'had been called to serve the country' she tried to explain to the youngest of her *bòcia* (*Italian dialect/Ladin term used in Veneto region to indicate 'child-children' [TN]*) she was still holding in her arm while Gino covered up to his hair by a woollen blanket was leaving. Gino had to leave, actually underlining *had*, mostly. They had called him up. He would have rather deserted, actually. As many others had. Lucky them. But he failed. And they had picked him up, carted him off, you might say, heading for the Russian front. Whereas Irma had stayed there, in that land, up in the Alps, full of green meadows and picturesque barns like the ones of her mountains in Comelico (*small area in the north-eastern Italian Dolomites [TN]*), with the cows to breed, the pig to feed and three *bocia* – yes, because she, who came to Carnia (*in Friuli [TN]*) from Veneto few years before, still called them *bocia*, her children – to look after. Irma was still waiting for him, Gino. But every day was another day stolen to life. Which vanished. Which ended. And this tormented her. More and more every day.

So she would have never expected such a man to come. After all, nobody ever happened to pass by, not even by chance. Everybody knew. Impossible when snowing; but surely even in Summer you must be brave enough to orient yourself in the depths of the wood. He must have been a man on the run, thought Irma watching him slowly approaching. She was intrigued. He was moving along, by no fits and starts, smoothly, on horseback, looking straight ahead. Self-confident. He was wearing a head gear, a few clothes quite dirty, a heavy cloak and a patched blanket tied on his shoulders. The tough-looking of a man left lonely. A defeated man who, in the eyes of Irma at least, didn't seem

to be a bad man, though. And she did really rely on her eyes. As when she saw Gino the first time.

She was now thinking, Irma. Slender. Blond. With delicate hands and watery eyes.

Good eyes. She had got it right that time either. When she was little more than a *riéda* too (*female for bòcia/riédu [TN]*) and had her long and curly blond hair in plaits, almost blond, actually – she had noticed him during a church service. She saw him kneeling. She was on the other side of the aisle. She was there by accident. She was there for that funeral. And she had made up her mind that she would have come again. Soon. For good. For him, who happened to be her cousin. Whom she had never met before. And whom she had loved at first sight. Ages ago, it now seemed. Since then. Gino hadn't been there, anymore. They had called him up. He hadn't had the time. While she was still there. She had stayed. In that alp. Alone. And she had been alone for a long time when that man on his horse popped up from nowhere, out of the depths of the wood wide spreading as far as the eye can see, all around the alp.

Ataman was tall and bulky. With sad and strained eyes. And his lips all cracked. He was bleeding. Maybe for this reason she immediately offered him hospitality. At least also for this. And he, in time, made himself useful. With the cows, with the pork. With the brushwood. Not so talkative. He spoke German. Mostly. An acquired German. Neither told he too much about himself, ever. About his family. About his job. Irma only knew that he was a foreigner. That he had suffered. And that he was now alone. Therefore he needed her. And she needed him too, actually. Let's put it this way.

It is well-known that nobody ever happened to pass by, through those mountains, up to the Mount Cross. Nobody, not even by chance. But Ataman could never sleep peacefully. He knew the time was up. He knew he would have paid the cost. Like the others. Maybe more. Because he hadn't got the strength to say no. Coward. Vile, perhaps. Accomplice. By force. You might say. But accomplice. And he couldn't forgive himself for this. This, above all, hurt him more. When he remembered it. More and more often, now. Everything kept being fixed on his mind. The mass murder. Saint Faustino's day. He had defended himself. He was now justifying himself; with himself mainly, who had

become the most relentless among his accusers. He was wrong. He knew. Torturers were the others. But he wasn't. Not him. Soldier. Of course. Idle. Maybe. Torturers, the SS. Torturers, the revolutionaries. 'Damned', he was now thinking. He had always thought that, actually. But just once. Long time before. Then, finally, he had escaped. Like his forefathers. From the Don River and The Ural Mountains. A people on the run. Still. Again. Stateless. Nomadic, but proud. And also he had been proud of being now become a sentry at the pass among the Alps.

The morning was over. It had all been spent under the sun. Of a radiant and unexpected spring day, with the shining green of the grass and the almost summery hot of the sunbeams still skewed. Ataman was now there. Waiting. For just a sign. But when Irma arrived she didn't congratulate him on the work he had done. She had a guess. At once. Therefore she went light-footed to the *stùà* (*Ladin term for 'living room' [TN]*) and saw the empty can on the table. It could have been useful for something else, you might say. They were poor in the house, at that time. Like everybody. And also the *sìmu*, could be useful for something else, then. Delicacies, almost, we may say. But Irma didn't say a word. She didn't even look at it, at the saddle. She didn't look at it, at the horse. She didn't look at him, at Ataman.

She simply went, quickly, towards the cows. The day was still long. And the hay had still to be bundled up.

She took long steps to the stable. Powerful steps. As powerful as she was. With her steady pace, more and more mannish, she had always had since she was a little girl. She didn't even turn. She didn't know that she wouldn't have ever seen him again. And Ataman watched her walking without ever taking his eye off. Until she disappeared. Inside the stable.

He didn't know that he wouldn't have ever seen her again.

Quite the opposite, he knew. Because it was just at that very instant that he decided to leave. It was told. It was known. Nobody ever happened to pass by, through those mountains, up to the Mount Cross. Nobody, not even by chance. But Ataman had immediately decided as soon as he knew. Time's up. He knew. He would have liked to say goodbye to her, to Irma, he had thought about it for a while,

to tell her that he was grateful to her. Maybe just a 'goodbye'. But he didn't do it. 'It's all for the best', he was now thinking. Because Ataman now hadn't got time to stay there any longer. He had to get a move on. He wouldn't have given up, anyway. It was sure. They wouldn't have found him. He had put his rags on again and his cloak too. He had left her his blanket, though. Meaning 'thanks'. Let's put it this way: the last goodbye to that woman who had welcome him friendly. 'Thanks', he thought again. And, as proudly as when he had arrived, he journeyed on.

A few hours walking, quick, lonely, wary, before joining up with the others, there, where the River Drave flows fast towards the Danube. Even the others had been told and had decided soon, consequently. They had been betrayed. They knew. That was to be expected. Maybe they had been taken in, at first. Perhaps they always had been, indeed. But not now, not anymore. It was all clear now, and inexorably useless. Lost. For good. But surely they wouldn't have given up. It was crystal clear. Nobody would have ever yielded. Not them. They had sworn. They had said so. And sanctioned. Since the first day. They had shared the same fate. It was told. And retold. It had to be so. Guilty. Sure. Mostly. Guilty. They knew. Soldiers. Yes. As well. Of a mass murder, though. Actually. With no exceptions. Unjustifiable. Indefensible. Unspeakable. Massive.

In very truth, a big bonfire, a dinner party, the last one, for the few ones still alive. With beef, two cats like rabbits and some stolen chickens too, stuck in other frugal, off the cuff skewers. Also some hay to the horses, stolen here and there. Just a few minutes for the last commitments of a by now settled and brief future. Inexorably. Just a knowing glance to keep them together. Strong, till the end.

The water is cold even though summer is just round the corner. But the snow, even though there's not too much left of it actually, is still visible on the sides of the streets because this winter has been one of the longest and coldest of the last years. The sky is clear and full of stars. From a distance, even from the alp, you can easily see a long procession winding its way down, slowly, towards the river. Straight. One after the other, the saddles stand out against the horses, bright, while sinking, little by little sucked by the black water. Ataman's saddle can be still spotted, with his rider on. It is the brightest. The clearest. The most shining.

And it is also the last one plunging and finally disappearing with his knight, slowly, in the darkness of the unfathomed deep¹.

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Note

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During the Second World War many Cossack refugees from Russia joined the Nazi against the Soviet Union and were assigned to Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht which were operative in Yugoslavia and northern Italy particularly in Carnia, in the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. It was a tough living together with the local community. Cossacks were accused of several crimes and absolute violence. But there had been also cases of integration. At the end of the war, many Cossacks escaped through the Mount Cross Pass (*Passo di Monte Croce Carnico- Plocken Pass, between Carnia and Austrian state of Carinthia [TN]*). Many of them chose to kill themselves, even by drowning themselves in the rivers rather than being taken by Stalin. Mass suicides. One of these was committed on the River Drave.

* The characters, names and incidents portrayed here are fictitious so any similarity to the name, character or history of any actual persons living or dead is entirely co-incidental and unintentional. Places are real.

** Picture “Up to the Mount Quaternà” by Stefano Zandonella Golin © 2010

