

Little Heaven

Brygida Helbig

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Little Heaven is a story woven from family histories. There is a continuing distinct overtone of nostalgia, but the narrator's voice is well controlled throughout the book. It brims with warmth and the confident dexterity with which the author constructs her narrative — a mosaic which comes together into a simple, intelligible whole. The beginnings of this family history are noble, almost biblical. Father “came into the world in the mythical region of Galicia, where his progenitors settled in 1783, having made their way from the banks of the Rhine in a dozen or so wagons in search of a livelihood. German colonists. [...] There were twelve settlers, like the twelve apostles of an unknown God.”

The crux of the book lies in the unusual genealogy of the family described in it. The principal characters, the author's parents and grandparents — there is no doubt *Little Heaven* describes Brygida Helbig's own family history — are Polish Germans. Or else German Poles, as “daddy”, the central character, “no longer knew whether he was a German or a Pole.”

Waldek, once known as Willi, (or else “who was really called Willi”) is one of those fathers who brushes difficult issues aside with a shrug. The twists and turns of fate are hidden behind the immediate realities of life, behind the levelling, deceptive ordinariness of family life in a socialist housing block, in a “tiny flat fit for dwarves on the third floor of a building made of prefabricated concrete slabs”. It is the narrator's voice which shows this situation to be problematic and pushes for further revelations, gently but persistently aiming to reconstruct a cohesive thread. She does this in defiance of the views expressed by her father, who says: “It wasn't a mask at all. At that point I already felt I was Polish. I didn't think about my roots. I was born in Poland, wasn't I? Stop talking nonsense.”

Yet this type of duality, which relates to one of the most taboo elements in Polish history, has its effect on the family's fortunes, in terms of both subconscious, emotional development and in terms of real, external events. The father's career in the socialist Polish army is abruptly terminated once his superiors discover his family background. In Poland concealing “questionable origins” is more commonly associated with Jews. Which is worse for the author's generation, the second post-war generation: to be the symbolic heirs of the victims or the oppressors? German descent, which was outwardly transparent and already completely absorbed into the landscape of the regained territories, into their post-war stabilisation, citizenship and language, only stops being a burden in the second generation when it finds a literary form, which restores order and the right to exist. The narrator's voice displays a genuinely soothing quality, a capable dexterity inherited from her German grandmothers and the will and ability to manage her own small patch. This voice is both meticulous — no detail of the family stories is lost, and economical — the text is cohesive, cut to just the right size.

The secondary thread in *Little Heaven* is the story of Basia, Willi/Waldek's wife. Just as in a primer there is “mummy and daddy”. That is the title of one of the chapters. The female family line, on the mother's side, shows artistic talents, cultivated for domestic purposes. Basia plays the mandolin. She enjoys hiding away in the attic at home with her daughters and granddaughter and playing just for them. Alongside the title, which refers to an old outdoor children's game, this homely scene of creativity within the family is in some sense a key theme of the book. Its message relates to the caring concern and relief brought by telling a story despite the paternal demand to “stop talking nonsense”.

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