

A Dream Called Europe

Chapter 1

OLENA

It is a relatively cold March night. The time is almost eleven o'clock and there is no end to the shouting, hustle, and confusion in Dorohusk. The neighbourhood is wide awake, the lights are still on in many houses and the residents, waiting for fresh news, do not take their eyes off their televisions. It is noisiest at the border crossing. It is there, in a place where everything should be under control, that painful events are unfolding for hundreds of thousands of people. While it is possible to control the people and their flow, who should go where, when, with whom and with what, it is impossible to control their emotions, the overwhelming fear for their own future, the stress associated with the question "What next?". In the crowd you can see many young people in their teens. They used to have joy, energy and the usual exuberance of their age. Today, all that is visible on their faces is sadness, grief and anger - feelings that they have to keep inside because they simply no longer have the strength to shout them out. Mothers with children are also downcast. They have no idea how they will take care of their children, which must be a paralysing experience for them. But what is the source of the pandemonium? The answer is one word, a word that says everything – WAR!

There is a little creature pushing through the crowd. She has beautiful shoulder-length blonde hair which is slightly disheveled in the unpleasant wind. Her slightly freckled face is reddened. She is wearing a winter jacket, sweatpants, and cute, girly winter boots. Her eyes are the most beautiful: big, green and charming, seemingly not fully aware of what is happening. From her general appearance, movements and facial expressions, you can tell that she is about ten to twelve years old. She is alone, breaking through the crowd and all she sees are her compatriots' legs, tired and bloodied. Slightly lisping she says 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' trying to get to the front of the crowd. Unfortunately, she speaks too softly for anyone to hear. It scares her that nobody notices her, and she may never forget the fear. Suddenly she bumps into a stranger - a border guard who saw some papers in the child's jacket pocket.

The girl is Olena Ivanov, the daughter of Matviy Ivanov and Magdalena Jabłońska-Ivanow. A handwritten note in her pocket says she is going to her grandparents who live near the border in a place called Kolemczyce. The guard leads the little refugee to the nearest volunteer post. The volunteers have the task of taking the refugees to the homes of local people who agreed to save them

from danger and take them under their roof. Olena is lucky to have a place to go to, not to complete strangers but to her immediate family.

One of the activists comes up to her and asks, 'What's your name?'

'Olena', the girl replies shyly.

'I'm Simon. Come on, I'll take you to a safe place'.

'No, I don't want to!' the girl cries desperately and bursts into tears. 'I want to go home. I want mummy!'

The boy offers his hand to the girl, but she refuses to take it so without hesitation he takes in his arms. The child sobs but feeling the warmth radiating from the young Pole's arms she seems to slowly calm down. When they reach a silver car, he puts her inside, buckles her seatbelt and closes the door. Then he himself gets behind the wheel and sets off.

Szymon's friend, Konrad, who is sitting in the passenger seat asks, 'Where are we going now?'

'Kolemcyce' replies Szymon. 'Set the navigation,' replies Szymon.

'Do you know where exactly we have to take her?'

'Yes, I have the address here,' he says showing a piece of paper torn from a notebook he received from the border guard. 'We are taking her to her grandparents. Her mother is Polish and her family live here.'

'It's good that she's not doomed to be on her own,' says Konrad replied.

'Right...'

They fall silent not knowing what else to say. The whole situation is too emotional for them. Olena sits quietly, feeling uneasy in the company of strangers. Every now and then the driver glances in the mirror looking at what she is doing. She sits staring blankly but then the silence in the moving car lulls her to sleep. Unfortunately, she can't sleep for long as they soon arrive at their destination. When Konrad opens the car door for her, she comes out stooping and looks around. They are in a nice, well-kept courtyard. In the in summer, it may have been full of flowers and shrubs in bloom but now everything was hidden under a thick layer of snow, and it seems as if nothing would ever want to come out from under it. While she is still looking around like this, an elderly couple came out of the main door of the house and with a quick step approach the visitors. They invite the arrivals warmly, thank the boys for taking care of Olena and take their granddaughter inside.

Chapter 2

A Little Person, Big Dreams

‘If five per cent of the number one hundred and twenty is six, then ten per cent of the same number is twelve?’

‘Exactly.’

The exchange is between an eleven-year-old girl and a man who is much older than her. He is Wojciech Jabłoński, Olena’s grandfather. It is a year since Olena has been living with the Jablonski family, a couple in their late fifties with thirty years of married life. Wojciech and his wife Agnieszka are extremely well-read people, in fact they run their own book publishing business. It is for this reason that Mr. Wojciech, who enjoys refreshing his knowledge, often does homework with Olena in his spare time.

‘And now Polish’ says Olena opening a thick, colourful textbook.

‘Grandpa, the teacher asked us to explain one word. What is Europeanism?’

‘Hmm... Europeanism is certain traits, customs, behaviours that indicate belonging to European culture. Do you understand? They are traits that distinguish you from, for example, people from Latin American or Indian cultural backgrounds. Europeanism is simply a lifestyle and the appreciation of similar values.’

‘What values?’

‘My dear, I don’t want to mislead you here, because I’m not an expert in this field,’ says slightly confused but even more surprised Wojciech, who did not expect that such a young child might want to discuss such a topic.

‘It seems to me, however, that the assumption of the politicians was to create a single, well-structured, international body that would control the laws in all member countries while giving them a certain amount of autonomy and sovereignty. We Europeans, on the other hand, should cultivate values such as respect for human rights, tolerance, healthy living, self-development and so on,’ concludes the grandfather stoically, while sipping his cooling tea.

‘It sounds rather lofty,’ says Olena, fascinated by her grandfather’s words.

‘For great deeds you need lofty ideas. Such was also the founding of the European Union. The construction of this community began as early as the early 1950s. There was a desire to level the economic playing field after the devastation of the Second World War’ explains Wojciech.

‘I would like my country to be like the rest of Europe’

‘It will be,’ says her grandfather assuringly and pats Olena on the shoulder. ‘Who knows, maybe you will contribute to it?’

'I seriously doubt it. The situation a year ago, my parents' death and everything else showed me how little I mean in this big world, how little I know and can do,' says the girl resignedly.

'And you're wrong here' interrupts the grandma, who unexpectedly appeared by the kitchen table.

'Look, it is just like grandpa said, I know, because I've been eavesdropping for a while. The European Union was created after the war, that is, at a time when people's moods were as fractured as yours are now. Rome was not built in a day - first the ECSC, then the EEC and then our EU. Little steps to the goal. There have always been problems and there will always be, but life is about solving them. You just have to believe in yourself. Try, take risks and don't be afraid to dream'.

'Yes, but in order to do anything you have to learn,' Grandpa laughed gently. 'Well, Olena, finish your homework'.

Olena returned to her textbooks. Her grandparents lifted her spirits a little, although she was still mired in apathy and sadness, for she had learned five months before of the deaths of her beloved parents. Her mother was an internal medicine doctor who treated wounded soldiers in a field hospital. One she had to tend to her own husband but tragically Matviy died of deep gunshot wounds in the heart area. Magdalena herself soon became a casualty of the war when the hospital where she worked was bombed by the enemy. Olena knew that she had to act in such a way that would have made her parents proud of her.

Mr. and Mrs. Jablonski constantly supported their granddaughter, took care of her education, upbringing, and mental condition. The teenager did not cause her guardians any problems and every year she was more than successful in her studies.

Chapter 3

From the Diary of an Embassy Volunteer

February 24th, 2032

Two days ago I attended a conference of the Council of the European Union. As I represented my country, it was quite a stress for me. First, there were many greetings, handshakes, hearty smiles but also a few disapproving glances. I had to take a chill pill before speaking. I must have looked panicked, after all everyone's eyes were going to be on me! To my surprise, after the first few sentences of my perfectly prepared speech, the stress left me for good. I talked about my childhood in Ukraine, my youthful fascinations, my family. As I spoke, I imagined a picture of my homeland: a carefree land filled to the brim with golden fields and emerald forests. I was reminded of all my childhood hiking trails that I used to walk along with other children playing tag. I could hear their laughter and screams. We spent hours in green meadows, in the harvest dust, among autumn mounds of leaves and playing wildly in the snow. And it was in that one winter that time stopped. Everything changed its course. White turned black. All the children, including me, had to mature very quickly leaving their fairytale world behind.

In the rest of my speech, I touched on a number of different issues, both political and non-political ones. When I finished, I was faced with a wave of questions that I can no longer quote. There was so much excess emotion. Anyway, I am satisfied with how the events unfolded I am looking forward to Europe's decision.

Having written her entry Olena Ivanov closed the diary and took a few deep breaths. As she said, she is positive about the future decision concerning her homeland joining the European Union. As always, she is hopeful. What Olena has noticed recently is that too little attention is paid to making people aware of human rights. She herself was once unaware that many of her basic, unconditionally owed rights were violated and tarnished. She would therefore like to use her prerogative and educate Europeans. It is enough to have the will.

Epilogue

April 4th, 2050

'Life is about solving problems....'

Over the last few years, Europe has overcome several of them. Firstly, the notion of a glass ceiling. Now it is just a phrase you find in history books. Relatively recently, women were seen by some as overly emotional and oversensitive - thus unfit for senior, managerial positions. Fortunately, this stereotype is fading away and more and more companies are providing flexible working hours for us women to reconcile career and family life. Consequently, crèches are being set up right next to places of employment to keep the child close to the mother. In addition, architecture is becoming more human-centered, focusing on ergonomics while being environmentally friendly. There is not a country on the map of Europe that does not have 'green cities'. This used to be just a project, today it is a reality. I feel the beneficial effects of this omnipresent greenery on my well-being and health. The statistics bear this out. Carbon dioxide emissions have decreased by as much as forty-five per cent over the past three decades.

It may all sound rather idyllic, but it is the reality. I will also remember with emotion the moment my beloved homeland was accepted into the European Union. I remember the stress, anxiety, fear and later elation and joy after the long-awaited decision was made. Today, we have cleared the debris and are growing stronger. My Closer to the People campaign is gaining ground and I feel fulfilled because, as Albert Camus said: 'The greatness of man lies in his resolve to be stronger than the conditions of time and life.'