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Dmytro Chub

SO THIS IS AUSTRALIA

The Adventures of a Ukrainian Migrant in Australia

BAYDA BOOKS

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Dmytro Chub, 1966.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dmytro Chub (pseud. of D. Nytczenko) was born in Ukraine in 1906, the son of a farmer. Since his late teens he was persecuted by the Soviet authorities because of his father's participation in the Ukrainian National Army during the Revolution, being expelled from school and dismissed from work, facing long periods of unemployment. But despite these setbacks, he finally graduated from the Kharkiv Pedagogical Institute, becoming a teacher of Russian and Ukrainian.

With the outbreak of WW2 he was mobilised to the front, but soon after was captured by the Germans. His knowledge of German enabled him to secure his release from the prisoner-of-war camp, where thousands died of hunger. Covering 900 kilometres in four weeks on foot, he returned to his home in Kharkiv. Subsequently he was evacuated with his family to West Germany, together with countless other refugees escaping the advancing Soviet front.

In the immediate post-war years he taught in Displaced Persons camps in Germany, emigrating to Australia in 1949. Completing his obligatory two year contract in Bandiana, he worked as a storeman for the State Electricity Commission in Melbourne until his retirement in 1972.

In his spare time after work Dmytro Nytczenko taught at Ukrainian Saturday schools, working for eight years (1954–62) as head of the Ukrainian School Council in Australia. He is a member of the Organisation of Ukrainian Writers in Exile, and a full member of the Shevchenko Scientific Society. A long-term contributor to many Ukrainian newspapers and magazines in the West, he also plays an active role in Ukrainian cultural life.

Dmytro Chub's first poem was published in 1925, and thereafter he became a regular contributor to various publications. His first collection of poetry (*Vault*, 1931) was followed shortly after by another, and also a book of short stories. Several of his poems were put to music.

Since arriving in Australia, Dmytro Chub has published 11 books in Ukrainian, including short stories of Australian life *Paths of Adventure*, and reminiscences of war *In The Forests Near Viazma*, a Ukrainian orthographic dictionary, and a travelogue *New Guinea Impressions*. He is also the compiler of a five-yearly almanac of Ukrainian emigre life in Australia, which has appeared regularly since 1954.

We present here his first book in English.

Yuri Tkach

FAREWELL POMPEII

On the evening of April 11th, 1949 we said our last goodbyes to exotic, yet impoverished Italy. The menacing form of Vesuvius rose proudly into the sky, bathed in the sun's final rays. Streaks of black lava, probably from the last eruption in 1944, painted the valleys of its slopes. We surveyed the ruins of Pompeii one final time. Only several days before our group of Displaced Persons had inspected the excavations of Pompeii, seeing undamaged houses still containing household effects, furniture and metal ornaments.

Only after twilight had obscured the horizon did we pass the rocky cliffs of the Isle of Capri with its fascinating blue grotto. The following day we saw Sicily and the town of Messina on its shores; further inland mountains rose to about a kilometre in height. Soon after our path was crossed by a peculiar ship: on its deck stood rail goods wagons three abreast. We learned the ship was transporting a whole train, which ran from Sicily to Italy.

Etna towered over Sicily proud and majestic, small white clouds clung to its snow-capped peaks. It reminded us of the pictures we had seen in geography books, but far too quickly the shore disappeared from sight . . . People on board began to get acquainted, telling each other about the Displaced Persons camps they had been in, about the war and various adventures they had lived through.

On April 14th the lights of Port Said twinkled in the distance. Drawing closer, the ship dropped anchor. Dozens of other ships, ablaze with lights, were berthed all around us. In the morning our ship was surrounded by bands of

Arab traders in small boats. They shouted to us, showing their wares and offering them for sale: leather bags, dates, oranges, shoes, etc. The ends of ropes to which were tied baskets containing ordered or bought goods landed on

deck. It looked as if our DPs would be buying nothing, for we had not received the fabled seven dollars which each DP was supposed to have received on the other ships. However trade became more lively, as some people had English pounds, American dollars or Italian lire. But the majority only looked on with curiosity, smiling at the fidgety dark Arabs displaying their goods with shouts of praise.

I too belonged to those who looked on, for I had only two English pounds in my pocket, which my wife received in the camp for a jewel box she had made; we were saving the money for a rainy day.

An Arab with a scrawny beard took out some paper money from a basket lowered down to him. We could clearly see the number three on it.

"What is it, lire?" the Pole beside me asked, and leaned over the rails.

The Arab turned the paper bill over and we could make out Lenin's portrait.

"It's Soviet money," several onlookers exclaimed together.

Seeing the picture of Lenin, the Arab took the bill in his right hand and rubbing it on the back of his pants, threw it back in the basket and waved his hand up. There was laughter on deck.

"Just shows you what the world thinks of the rouble," said a Byelorussian nearby.

The owner of the money, a Latvian, tried three times to buy things from other Arabs with this bill, but was unsuccessful each time.

That evening the ship was to continue its voyage, passing through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea. One grey old man who knew nothing about geography and misunderstood the canal's name, kept repeating anxiously:

"If we can only get through the Soviet Canal, God willing, the Russians won't be so frightening; they could still latch on to us here." He was finally placated after it was made clear to him that it was the Suez Canal, and not the Soviet Canal.

After passing countless smaller and larger craft, our *Mahomedi* entered the canal. From Port Said on, the searing heat progressively undressed us, and by Aden everyone was moving about as if they were dressed for the beach. The sun burnt fiercely and the nurse often warned people not to lie in the sun. Women and girls were particularly notorious for not taking her advice. The nurse warned one woman twice, and the third time came up and loudly slapped her on the back. The young woman blushed and throwing a towel over her shoulders, quickly disappeared.

* *
*

People became bored sitting and lying around on deck with nothing to do. To pass the time they sat about playing cards for cigarettes and sweets which were handed out on board. Some were learning English from various books.

Small flying-fish jumped from the water and flew away from the ship like dragon-flies. Staring into the distance one sometimes forgot there was water all the way to the horizon, for it sometimes resembled ploughed land with a light cover of snow.

In Suez we stopped far from the pier, where bare mountains stretched along the shore. Lighthouses winked at us out of the darkness. Canvas awnings were set up over the deck against the sun; the light breeze helped to make the oppressive heat more bearable too. There was a heavy swell, and the waves were striking the ship broadside, making it rock badly. People crowded around the captain's cabin to receive sea-sickness tablets, which had no effect, much to everyone's disappointment.

Port Aden was surrounded by porous-looking grey-black mountains, probably of volcanic origin. The passengers bought watermelons and bananas here, but the police, who were barefoot and dressed in shorts, held back the traders' boats. An unconscious Serb who had fallen into a hold and broken several ribs, was left behind in Aden.

We sailed on. Leaning over the side we watched the tireless dolphins somersault through the water. The waves had claimed many a hat, book, and watch dropped overboard accidentally. The children made paper windmills and pointed them into the wind.

After passing the equator, we noticed the temperature begin to drop, even though we were still in the tropics. People slowly began to wear more clothes again, and near Australia's shores we felt the cold breath of autumn and rugged up.

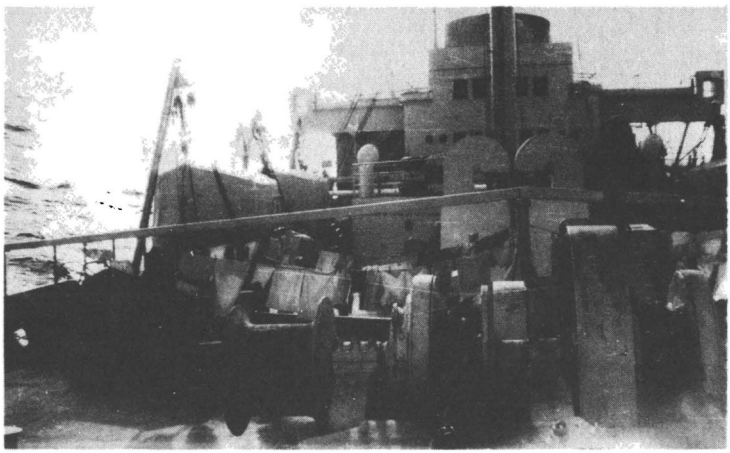
On the seventh of May the lights of Australian lighthouses came into view, and next morning, before the sun appeared, we sailed into Fremantle. Everyone surveyed the landscape of this strange new land, where fate had forced us to start a new life . . .

After taking on food and water, the ship continued on to our destination. A sharp wind whistled across the deck, and ahead and to the left distant shores appeared from the morning mist.

At last, late at night, we berthed in Melbourne, greeted by the thousands of lights of this New York of Australia. Small groups of people stood on the pier, waiting to meet friends or chance countrymen. Those with money bought sweets for the children. One young man on the pier bought several dozen chocolate bars and threw them up to some girls on the ship. Soon all who wished could board the ship. The passengers sought out people of their own nationality, quizzing them about jobs and conditions in this new land.

After a while we left the ship and boarded a train which had come up the pier and stopped alongside the ship.

1949



Migrant ship, 1949.

Capital Hill Migrant Hostel, Canberra. Refugee children. Centre, Alex Jesaulenko. 1952.

THE AUSTRALIAN BEAR

The night was dark and forbidding as the train carried us European refugees from Melbourne to the transit camp at Bonegilla. Lightning flashed in the distance and occasional raindrops spattered the windows of our small comfortable carriages. Some people were asleep, others were glued to the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the surrounding countryside.

The light from the windows forced back the darkness and revealed a strip of Australian bushland alongside the railway tracks. Though it was May, the last month of autumn, the ground was covered in grass and the trees still had leaves. Occasionally dead hulks of trees which seemed to emphasize the uncertainty of our situation swept past the windows.

At last about three in the morning we stopped at a poorly-lit siding where a dozen pale-blue buses were waiting for us. In the camp theatre we were assigned our accommodation, and soon after I entered one of the tin bungalows of the old army camp. A strong light illuminated the bungalows, which contained two rows of beds, on each of which were a mattress, four blankets, sheets, a pillow and towels. On the ceiling near the light bulb sat two enormous moths, looking like a pair of small birds.

The married men were assigned one set of bungalows, the wives and children another, and the single adult members of families yet another. Immediately people began to seek each other out. Husbands searched for their families.

The women's quarters were similar to the men's. There were no stoves, no dividing partitions, and the outside walls had a half-metre wide gap all the way around covered in wire netting. Tears filled the eyes of several well-bred ladies unaccustomed to such luxury. It was cold and miserable.

The sunny morning helped things a little . . . It dispelled the cold and created a more cheerful atmosphere. Only the children were crying. The youngest were obviously not used to dressing in such temperatures.

"Well, so this is sunny Australia!" someone remarked, and the men, who were hurriedly helping to dress their children, abused their wives (for who else was to blame?), for having left all the warm clothing behind in Germany.

Waiting for lunch.

A delicious breakfast helped quell some of the dissatisfaction: fried lamb floating in fat, porridge, marmalade, coffee and white bread . . . A feast possible perhaps only in the ministry back in the Soviet Union. The loudspeaker announced that we were to collect our

luggage which we had handed in at Melbourne.

"So this is Australia?" a four-year-old girl asked her parents.

And her father, heavy at heart, was not sure himself what kind of life awaited his child in this distant strange land, where the trees and birds were different, where one had to keep to the left side of the road, where even the frogs croaked differently to those in Ukraine . . .

However the worries of the day slowly replaced any unhappy thoughts. Once again (for the hundredth time) we had to go and see the doctor, to visit the employment office . . . But it's better to see the doctor than to be without him. Everyone hurried about their business. Someone unexpectedly bumped into a friend and there were yelps of joy, followed by lively reminiscences.

During lunch, when the children greedily snatched at the big golden oranges on the tables, there suddenly rose a thunderous roar, as if a fight was in progress. All heads turned in that direction and saw two young men struggling, as if trying to choke one another. But it turned out it was no fight, only the joyful reunion of two brothers, who had been separated in Poland during the war.

"Stepan! You devil!" They shouted, choking, and embraced and kissed each other. Eyes brimmed with tears. The brothers were so overcome by their emotions that Stepan, in his excessive sincerity, had badly scratched his brother's nose. We watched the scene and rejoiced with the brothers.

The following morning, as we sat down to breakfast, the 'wounded' brother grumbled:

"The blasted tiger . . . nearly tore off my nose."

The warm sunny day quickly did its work, cheering us up. It rushed into obscurity and we hurried after it. When we went to collect our passports, three boys from a neighbouring block, carrying sticks and a spade, crossed our path and made in the direction of the nearest hill. A small dog ran after them. And two hours later, on our way back, we met the same boys in the same spot. They were

Bonegilla Migrant Hostel, 1949.

carrying two rabbits and a metre long snake, which they dragged behind them on a string.

"We were looking for rabbits, but found this snake instead," they replied in answer to our questions.

In the evening, with the day's toils and worries over, people gathered in the bungalows, friends came round and struck up conversations. Mostly they talked about their jobs: who was being sent where to work; where the work was easier; who had signed up for cutting sugar-cane, and who had been appointed to the army in Sydney. At this time several excited children burst into the bungalow shouting:

"Come and look. There's a strange creature in the tree."

Everyone ran outside to take a look. Near the toilet block a grey animal the size of a cat was sitting in the lower branches of the tree. It had a furry black tail, a muzzle like a fox, and four short rat-like legs. One of the earlier arrivals said it was a possum.

"It kills snakes and lives in the hollows of trees. Anyone who kills a possum can be fined thirty pounds," he explained. Someone brought out some white bread and

held it out to the possum. The animal took the bread and climbed higher into the tree, while the curious people stood and watched.

"Where are these famous kangaroos?" someone asked. "We've read so much about them in geography books."

"Don't worry, we'll see the kangaroo too," someone replied.

It was growing colder outside. From beyond the wire enclosure came the bleating of sheep, which grazed day after day without seeing a pen.

Several minutes later the conversation in the bungalow had resumed. One of those present had come to Australia on the *Anna Salem*. He was recalling the big commotion that had occurred just before their departure from Italy. A rumour had swept the camp that the *Anna Salem* was in fact a Soviet liner called *Anna Stalin*, this supposedly being the name of Stalin's daughter. Those who believed the rumour avoided the *Anna Salem* for fear of getting on board the *Anna Stalin*, and went to the consul for an explanation. Here, of course, their fears were allayed by amazed officials . . .

A woman from a neighbouring block, renowned for her talkativeness and humour, entered the bungalow.

"I'll rest here a while," she said sitting down. "I'm in a bungalow where all I can hear is Russian. To think I travelled thousands of kilometres to escape their drawl, and all to no avail."

The conversation soon turned to more practical matters: how much one had to work to buy a block of land and build a shack on it. For the single and the childless, and for those families with working-age members it was much easier than for those with small children. For these it was extremely hard.

We went to bed late that night . . . In the morning my neighbour, an engineer with a gold tooth and greying hair, sat up on his bed and asked:

"Did you hear what happened to me during the night?"

All eyes were on him.

"Something jumped down on me. I moved and it jumped across onto my neighbour, who woke up too, but it scuttled off. We wanted to get up and switch on the light, but it was too cold. It was large and heavy," added the engineer, "maybe a big possum or an Australian bear."

The engineer spoke so seriously and with such conviction that no one even thought of challenging him. Everyone began to look at the windows and up at the roof, searching for the animal.

"Where could the creature have climbed in?" I wondered. I walked up to the trunks which stood against the wall by the door and looked behind them, but there was nothing there. I was about to look under the beds when a small black kitten appeared from under the bed closest to the engineer and mewed guiltily. It was greeted by a burst of rolling laughter.

"So this is your Australian bear, my friend?" asked one of the men.

Everyone was laughing. The embarrassed engineer was speechless.

Just then the bell rang, summoning us to breakfast.

1951

PURSUED BY DEATH

Having bought everything we needed in the small Australian town, my friend Mykola and I were returning home. This time we decided to walk rather than catch the bus.

"Let's take a closer look at this exotic scenery," I suggested.

It was a Saturday, one of our days off from work. Though it was still winter the day was sunny and warm. At first we walked along the bitumen. I had a briefcase in my hand, and Mykola a small parcel with a present for his young son. The flat open countryside was covered with grass and cockatoos flew screeching from the branches of the sparse gum-trees as we walked past. Speckled brown kookaburras filled the air with their laughter.

Looking at the hills in the distance I felt very much alone and dejected, but Mykola's face showed complete serenity. I mentioned this to him.

"You know," he replied after a long pause, "I've always loved solitude. I had a friend back home in Ukraine. We used to go fishing on the Dnipro River, or take a boat across to the Cossack island of Khortytsia. During the whole day we might speak barely half a dozen words. I liked that."

"What do you need friends for then?" I thought.

The highway passed through a swamp. We stopped on a small bridge to admire the scenery: two black water hens were feeding in the reeds and three black swans were swimming on a small lake in the centre of the swamp, dipping their long necks into the water. An elegant grey

heron striding along the bank must have been frightened by our presence and took off for the safety of a burnt-out tree trunk.

After another kilometre or so through untouched wilderness we turned off the road and took a short-cut. Occasionally we had to climb the low fences which divided the grassy fields where sheep and cattle grazed.

Exchanging several words now and then, reminiscing about our native country, we soon found ourselves in the midst of a large herd of cattle, which spread across the green expanse, feeding on the grass. As we walked past, the cows closest to us lifted their heads and stared, as if looking at some spectacle.

"Maybe they're wondering about my briefcase?" I thought.

"Did you know, Mykola," I said, "I've read that cows can sometimes get very nasty. And my foreman at work told me that the cattle around here are afraid of dogs and people on horseback."

"A calf probably scared you when you were a kid," my companion answered without smiling.

"I was walking along like this once with my son and sat him on my shoulders," he added a short time later. "The whole herd ran from us."

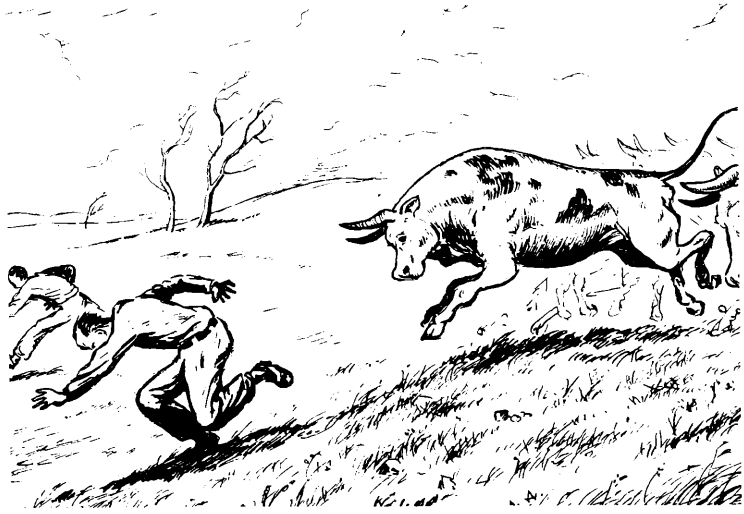
We came to the end of the herd when we noticed a huge bull standing proudly nearby, staring at us.

"Ha! Look what a hero he is!" Mykola jeered, looking at the bull, and taking off his hat, waved it in the bull's direction.

The horned giant stood still for an instant, and then as if sensing an insult or a challenge, shook his head about and started sharply towards us. Not wishing to view him at closer range, we set off quickly in the opposite direction. At the same time the bull let out a deep bellow and rushed after us. Dozens of cows lifted up their tails and lightly plodded after him, like a bunch of youngsters following the leader.

Our minds reeled at the horrible prospect of hanging from the bull's horns or being trampled by the disturbed

herd. Straining every muscle, we raced for the fence, our only salvation. The herd gained on us with every step. Luckily the bull was well-fed, otherwise it would have quickly caught up with us. At one point Mykola stumbled and fell, but then picked himself up with incredible agility and continued five paces behind me. Losing all



hope of making the fence in time, I ran up to a tree close by and dropping my briefcase, grabbed at the branches and scrambled up.

"Mykola, up here!" I shouted without looking back, and at that moment heard the abrupt barking of a dog behind me.

I turned and froze in horror: my friend Mykola was on the ground on all fours, facing the herd and barking fiercely. The bull and the front row of cows which had caught up to it, stopped suddenly in their tracks, only three yards from him, stunned by the unexpected sight. The cows further back stopped too. And when Mykola began barking even more ferociously and took a step forward, the bull and the cows staggered back, and a moment later had turned and were retreating with their tails in the air.

I was still in the tree when Mykola rose to his feet, placed his hand on his heart and closed his eyes. Breathing heavily, his face as white as chalk, he leaned against the tree trunk. Meanwhile the herd had stopped and was staring in our direction.

"We were pursued by death . . ." Mykola mumbled, after recovering his senses.

"And you chased it away, like a hero," I finished his sentence.

I picked up my briefcase, and we made for the fence, but then noticed that Mykola's package was missing. We hurried back and found it in the grass.

"How on earth did you think of that?" I asked him when the fence was safely behind us. "Another second and they would have torn you to shreds. You're incredible!"

Mykola was silent even now, and answered a little later:

"You're asking me? Why, you yourself told me that cattle are afraid of dogs and people on horseback." After another minute of silence, he added:

"I could have paid dearly for my theatrics and the exotic scenery."

1951

ABORIGINES LIVE NEAR US

Aboard ship on our way to Australia we were shown films about Australian Aborigines. We were struck by the fact that these really were wild, stone-age people. A black, almost naked woman was digging white grubs out of the ground and threw them into the open mouths of her children, who sat around like baby birds waiting to be fed. And they relished the food.

Later on in the film we saw Aborigines killing a snake, roasting it, and breaking it up into pieces – eating it. And we, who had not yet experienced Australian life, were disturbed by the prospect of having to live amongst these Aborigines.

But two months had passed now since our arrival in Australia, and we had not yet seen a single Aborigine. Everyone was curious to see these strange people at close range, to get to know their lifestyle. From our English teacher in the migrant hostel we learned that in 1788 when the first ship carrying white Europeans arrived in Australia there were some 300 thousand Aborigines living here. These resisted English colonisation, attacking the new settlements, shooting poison arrows, and burning the homesteads of the white settlers. In reply the white men shot them like rabbits whenever they chanced upon them. Even bounty hunters on horseback butchered the Aborigines, and thought they were doing useful and heroic deeds. Gradually many Aborigines were killed, and the rest driven into the deserts and the more inhospitable areas of Australia, where the whites could not survive. For this reason there were only fifty to sixty thousand of them

left. We listened to all of this with acute interest and astonishment.

After the first few months of life in the migrant hostels fate began to scatter us, dividing families and forcing chance acquaintences and countrymen to part and travel across the endless spaces of Australia, sometimes up to four thousand kilometres from one another. How I wanted to speak out then when the heartless Australian officials split up our families, and as if on purpose sent the father to one corner of the country, the older children elsewhere, and moved the mother and her infant children to a family camp. How many tears were shed then, how many appeals were made not to split families so cruelly, but the officials were cold and indifferent to the parents' hearts. And much income was wasted then on travelling at least once a month to see one's own family or parents.

Only with great difficulty did friends and acquaintances find each other again, in order to hear their native language spoken, to share their suffering or to relate working conditions, and to find out how the compulsory two year contract was going. The first Ukrainian newspaper to appear in Sydney then in 1949 was a great help in establishing broken contacts.

I received a letter from a good friend of mine, a farmer back in Ukraine, who was working a thousand kilometres away in the western part of South Australia. He wrote: 'I'm working in the bush in a railway gang. I can't say a word to anyone, for I can't speak English. I live in a hut, together with several Australians, workers, who have no other interests apart from beer, horse racing and cards. Jack, the fellow on the bed beside mine, brings back several bottles of beer each night and drinks so much that he sometimes wets his pants . . .'

'In the forest not far away from us live some blacks. Their dirty, lice-infested children occasionally come around to our hut. I heat up some water, wash their heads and feed them. One day a black girl of thirteen or more came around – her hair was stuck together with dirt. So I

heated up some water, poured it into a large vat and washed her hair. But I could see that her whole body was filthy, so I took off her dirty blouse and washed her to the waist. Though she was small, her breasts had swelled to the size of large oranges. So I soaped her breasts well and washed them too, and she didn't resist. When it's hot here they occasionally go about naked to the waist. I had wanted to wash her completely, but thought better of it. Meanwhile all the Australians had gathered outside and were laughing at me, scaring me with the police, saying that it was against the law to marry or even befriend an Aborigine.

'After washing the girl, I dried her nicely and combed her hair. Then I fed her some bread and sausage. I also made her a present of a comb. About two weeks later she returned again, stood before my door, but waited without knocking until I came out. The Australians began to make fun of me again:

'"Look, John, your girlfriend's come for a wash again."

'She smiled nicely at me and said nothing. I washed her and fed her on several occasions.

'I felt sorry for them. After all, they're people like us, but why has fate looked on them unkindly? Or perhaps it was the white people who drove them to such despair?

'One day I ventured into the forest to see how they lived. Earlier I had assumed that they had houses, or at least huts, but they lived straight under the bushes, having tied several tops together and covered them with a canopy of rags and grass. So the next time the girl came to visit me I gave her my old blanket, because it would get cold at night, and she was still a child . . .

'Such is life here,' my countryman finished his letter, 'and like a real miser, I'm hoarding penny upon penny, so that as soon as my two year contract is up, I can escape from this hole.'

Soon after I received a letter from Western Australia from a close friend, who wrote:

'You ask me if any blacks live near us. Not nearby.

But once over a hundred Aborigines passed through our railway station. They were being taken somewhere for the shooting of a film. As soon as the train stopped they left the carriages and started a large fire on some waste land. They were all boys no more than twenty years old, of slight build. Although I'd seen many blacks in Europe, never any like these. They were very black and their bodies seemed disproportionate. Their facial features were strange too, their noses being wide and short. They had all been dressed in new everyday clothes. Each was chewing gum which they had been given somewhere, and they kept taking it out of their mouths and putting it back in, as if it was a toy. Those we saw from close up grinned from ear to ear in greeting, flashing their white teeth and sending frosty shivers down one's spine . . . They probably weren't used to wiping their noses, for the snot had dried there and they looked worse than sheep.'

Letters I received from all parts of Australia painted a miserable picture of the life of these unfortunate Aborigines, and of our people also, who had been scattered higgledy-piggledy across the country. But gradually, through friends or the Ukrainian newspaper, we began to locate each other. One day I received a letter from the editor of the paper, which he had received addressed to me. It was my good friend whom I had known since our days together in the Displaced Persons' camps in Germany. In his letter he mentioned Aborigines too:

'When I first saw these black people, it made me very sad to think that people could still live like this in our time. I'm sure some of them have never had a wash in their whole lifetime. They're extremely dirty, won't cut their hair or comb it, and wear what they can scrounge from the rubbish tip or what people will give them. They live in the bush nearby and often come to our settlement for water and food, because they don't like to work. They have weapons – boomerangs, bows and arrows, and hunt wallaby and kangaroo and other smaller animals which form the mainstay of their diet.

'When young boys come to me begging for food, often I first give them an axe to chop some firewood, and then give them a feed. Some agree to the work, others don't. But if you feed them first, they won't do a scrap of work. But these blacks aren't really savages, even though they have a wild look in their eyes. The real native Aborigines live some eight hundred miles away, in the desert where it is very hot. They go about naked, and if they see a single white man they may kill him. But I haven't seen them. The blacks who live near us shoot like snipers: I take several shots before I can down a rabbit, but they can get him in one go with an arrow.'

My friend continued that the Aborigines were good at finding things, having a special knack for this.

'Some money was stolen one day from one of the workers' huts. The fellow called over a black and promised to pay him well if he found the money. The black agreed and three days later found the money a mile away, temporarily hidden under some rail sleepers.

'Another incident happened with one of our Ukrainians. He took a rifle, went into the forest to hunt, and did not return. Four days passed, and still he did not appear. The police were called in from four hundred miles away. They arrived with a black, to search for our missing friend. They set out with him leading the way, followed some two hundred metres behind by the policemen in a car. Three hours later our countryman was found in forest eighteen miles away. He was completely exhausted. He was given some rum straight away and taken to hospital. After he returned he told us how he had lost his way and wandered through the bush for four days without food or water. He would have roasted a rabbit, but he had no matches, so he tried drinking the blood of the rabbits he killed, to stay alive.'

He wrote that the blacks had no stable home, and kept many dogs. At their camp one man was always on guard, day and night. Some of them worked in the gold mines, while others worked in his railway gang. The men

would be washed, dressed, but after working for a month they would leave, only to return two or three weeks later, completely dirty, ready to work again.

One day I received a letter from my sixteen-year-old daughter who had been taken eight hundred miles north to Queensland to work in a hospital. She wrote that the Aborigines lived in shacks on the outskirts of their town. Sometimes they would visit the hospital, for there were several Aboriginal patients. When they slept in the wards they would always roll up into a ball. She had tried on several occasions to straighten them out, but nothing helped, they would roll up into a tight ball again. They must have grown accustomed to sleeping this way to guard against the cold, for they probably had nothing back home with which to cover themselves. They always smelled strongly of stale sweat. And in general, the Australians treated them badly.

1953

POSTSCRIPTUM

Now, thirty years later, the times and circumstances have changed. Now the Aborigines have full rights, they work farm machinery and own farms; houses, hospitals and schools have been built for them. They quite often attend school alongside white Australians. Special government agencies have been formed to deal with their problems. One Aborigine has already been elected as a senator in parliament, another, a pastor, was appointed governor of a state.

It is also thirty years since most Ukrainians arrived in Australia. The scattered families have been united, Ukrainian cultural life has developed – churches have been built, Ukrainian Halls, Saturday schools, theatres have been set up, newspapers, magazines and books are being published in Ukrainian, exhibitions of Ukrainian artists are being organised, literary evenings, and concerts. Slowly time is healing the wounds, those first injustices are being forgotten, life has achieved normality.

On a trip to Melbourne in 1950 to buy house blocks.

SNAKE ISLAND

On Friday night I arrived at the place where I was to begin my new job, and in the morning, having spent the night sound asleep in a tin hut, I was up inspecting my surroundings. I liked it better here than where I had worked before. I've always longed to stroll along with a rifle slung over my shoulder, through swamps, bush and mountains, overcoming difficulties and encountering danger.

But where could one encounter danger around here? Why, there weren't even any decent-sized animals in Australia. True, there were pythons and crocodiles, which could be dangerous, but they were found far to the north in Queensland where there were plenty of rain forests.

However I was pleased that there were some scrub-covered hills nearby, and in the valley at the base of the hills, hidden by reeds and trees, was a river with an abundance of wildlife. Besides, I was told that even kangaroos came here frequently.

As I came out through the gate on this morning I noticed four dead snakes hanging on a wire fence on the other side of the road underneath a bushy gum-tree. I came closer to get a better look. One of the snakes was black and about six feet long. The rest were smaller poisonous sandy-coloured tiger snakes.

As I was inspecting the snakes two kookaburras flew into the gum-tree and raised an enormous racket, as if a whole coop of hens had just laid their eggs and had begun to cackle all at once. The kookaburras seemed to be angry at me for coming near their prey.

Because of their loud laughter I did not hear a young lad approach me from behind; not until he said:

"Hi! Taking a look at my snakes?"

Turning, I saw a sun-tanned boy of thirteen. For some reason I thought I had seen him somewhere before, but before I could remember where, he exclaimed:

"Oh it's you! I remember you from Bagnoli, taking your little girl for walks. That's right, isn't it?"

I recalled Italy, the International Refugee Organisation camp and the boy called Vasylko.

Good God! Here was the same likeable Vasylko who had suffered so much because of his little white pup, which he had brought along with him from Germany. I remembered clearly how after seeing the Australian consul at the Bagnoli camp, he had stood with his brother near block 'R' with tears in his eyes, cuddling his pup Nayda, whom the consul would not allow into Australia.

"It's prohibited by law," the consul had told Vasylko.

Back then I had tried to cheer up the sad boy, but from what I had heard the case was only further complicated by the fact that at home he had to face another 'consul' in the form of his mother, who insisted that he leave the pup behind.

A few days later I had left the camp, not knowing the outcome of the story. Unwittingly I asked straight away:

"And what happened to Nayda? Left her behind in Italy, I suppose?"

Vasylko looked at me in a patronising way, as if he could hardly believe that even now I did not know what was common knowledge. He replied with a smile:

"Yeah! Did it look as if I would abandon my Nayda?" And he added quickly: "He's here with me!"

"What – here with you?" I exclaimed in surprise. "But the consul wouldn't let you take him."

Vasylko told me the story about how he had smuggled the pup aboard the ship in a small case, so that no one even noticed.

"But then new troubles developed," he went on. "Someone must have seen me feeding or bathing Nayda and notified the captain, because one day after we had passed through the Suez Canal it was announced on the public address system that the owner of a pup being kept illegally on board had to report immediately to the captain. Half an hour later a search was begun of the cabins on our side of the ship. I quickly put Nayda into a bucket, covered him with a towel and just had enough time to take him safely to the ship's cook, who was an Indian. I befriended the cook at the beginning of our voyage and now he looked after Nayda for me. For his service I paid him in cigarettes which my brother gave me.

"But I think my mother worried more than anyone," Vasylko continued. "She nagged at me the whole time: 'Here we are just trying to bring ourselves across safely, and you start smuggling dogs,' she would say. 'They'll send us all back to Germany because of you'.

"Even so, I brought Nayda to Australia and managed to get him safely ashore, despite the stringent customs control," he proudly finished his story.

The story did not amaze me one bit. Though Vasylko had done wrong by breaking Australia's laws, he seemed to me a shrewd boy, loyal to his dog.

Still smiling, Vasylko whacked the tree with a stick and told me of his adventures with snakes and kangaroos.

"If you work here a while, you'll see plenty of them," the boy assured me. "Just up there alone, beyond this hill, there's a whole colony of snakes."

He pointed in the direction and when we had returned to our huts, he added: "If you like, we can go for a wander down to the river after lunch today."

Before lunch I was busy moving into my new quarters, but later, when the sun's heat had subsided, my friend Vasylko knocked at the door.

"Well, shall we go?" he asked triumphantly, standing in full outfit in the doorway. Over his shoulder hung a pair of binoculars on a leather strap and he had heavy rubber boots on his feet.

"Ready to strike, I see?" I said and was soon ready to go, hoping Vasylko would show me a good spot for catching fish.

As I left the hut I saw a fairly large dog nearby. Vasylko called him and said:

"Nayda! Give the man your paw!" He dragged the dog nearer to me to introduce us. This was no longer the two-month-old pup which I had seen in Bagnoli. In one year it had grown into a big dog.

"Smart dog," I patted Nayda and we set off. Vasylko darted into his hut and brought out a pair of rubber boots for me. I had decided not to wear them, but Vasylko insisted: "It's dangerous by the river without them. You could step on a snake or get into some other trouble. We're going to Snake Island."

He then pulled out two strong pieces of wire, each about a metre in length, from underneath the hut and said:

"And these will be our weapons."

In about ten minutes we were nearing the river, hidden behind a wall of tall dense grass, reeds and trees.

As we turned left from the dam, Vasylko called Nayda and ordered him to follow us and not to run around.

Carefully we moved through the tall, waist-high grass, stepping over fallen logs and avoiding deep puddles. Through the scrub and reeds I saw that the river bristled with dead branches and even whole trees which rose from the water. Black burnt tree stumps, evidence of past bushfires, peered like devils over the tall grass.

Vasylko walked in front, I followed him and Nayda tagged behind, his tail curled up tightly.

"It's nice and sunny," I began, but at that very moment Vasylko lifted his left hand and stopped me.

"Look there," he said mysteriously, pointing at the grass to the side and added: "A snake crawled through here this morning. See?"

And really, the grass looked as if it had been parted by a thin winding track on the ground.

As we continued walking, Vasylko said:

"There are close on a hundred and twenty different types of smakes in Australia. The most dangerous here, down south, is the tiger snake, but in the north of Australia there is an even more dangerous kind called the taipan. It will attack people unprovoked and can even kill pythons."

"Where did you learn all this, Vasylko?" I asked in amazement.

"I read about it in an Australian book," the boy answered.

"So you know English quite well now?"

"Aw!" he drawled meaningfully. "Perfect! I'm the best in our class at high school."

"That's good," I praised him.

"I even keep a diary of all my experiences and adventures," Vasylko added proudly.

Falling in behind Vasylko I came closer to the river and suddenly saw a sandy-coloured snake resting on a pile of brushwood which the river had deposited under a tree. I swung my wire down, but the snake was too fast for me and slithered away into the water.

"They're very fast," shouted Vasylko, coming towards me. We continued together again, and he said in a low voice:

"I had quite an experience when we were working on a farm in Mildura. There were even more snakes there because of the bush nearby. One night I went for a stroll down the road. The moon was already in the sky, making it easy to see. On one side stood the forest, on the other was a clearing where there was a stack of logs. Coming to a bend in the road I suddenly noticed something swaying and moving up ahead. I stopped and looked more closely. It was a gathering of snakes. They were intertwined in twos and threes, their heads raised a foot or more, and they were rocking from side to side, as if dancing.

"At first I was frightened, but then I picked up a clod of earth and hurled it at them. It fell and broke up, but the snakes continued their swaying. Then I began throwing one clod after another at them. The snakes

immediately stopped their dancing and I noticed some of them lift their heads and start in my direction. I ran off as fast as I could and was home in a few minutes. Half an hour later, the farmer we worked for picked me up in his car and we set out again.

"As we approached the spot we could see the snakes swaying on the road like dry sticks in the wind. My boss accelerated his car right over them. They rustled under the wheels as we drove over them. When we came back we found fifteen squashed snakes which could not move, but were still writhing, twisting their heads and tails about.

"My boss told me that on bright, moonlit nights in summer the snakes often held these strange gatherings there. He had run over them with his car on several occasions. There were nests of them under the stacked logs. He said the snakes often lived in rabbit burrows too, and there are plenty of those at the foot of these hills."

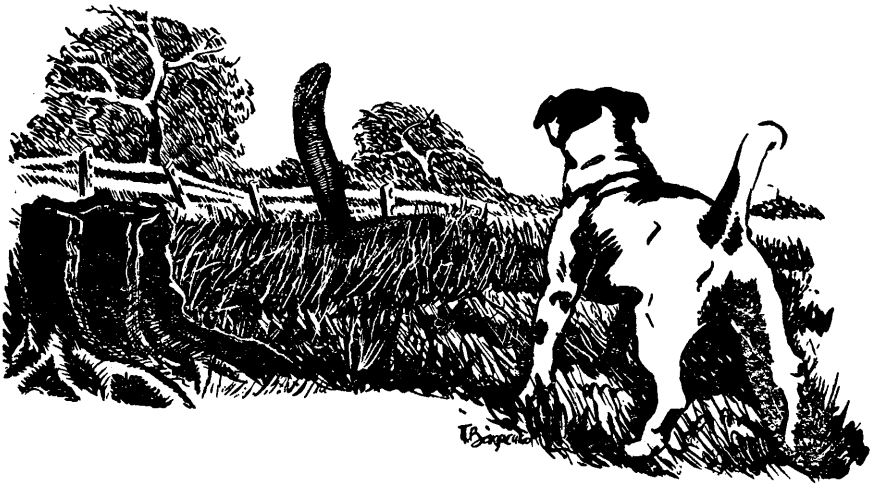
Suddenly Vasylko stopped and lifted his finger. He took out his binoculars and said:

"Here, take a look over there. Two snakes basking in the sun."

I took the binoculars and soon spotted the two snakes coiled up on a stump at the base of a tree. The tall grass hid them partly from view. Our progress was checked by swampy ground, so we tried to reach the stump by detouring around it. But as we approached, our strong wires at the ready, there was not a trace of the snakes left. They had probably heard us talking or maybe the crack of a twig under our feet had frightened them and they had disappeared into a hole under the tree.

"I've spotted them twice from a distance, yet I can never get close to them. They're so sensitive," said the boy in disappointment.

Just then Nayda's barking erupted some distance behind us. We turned and hurried towards the dog, whose head just showed from the grass. A minute later we witnessed a confrontation between a dog and a snake. Nayda was barking energetically, and not two metres from



him, near a burnt-out tree stump, lay a black snake with its head raised ominously, standing its ground even after we had come closer and stood behind the dog. Nayda was afraid to attack and seemed to be waiting for an order from his master.

"Stay!" Vasylko said decisively, like a commander giving orders to a soldier. He crept away like an experienced soldier, went around and approached from the direction of the stump. Bending low and hiding so the snake would not see him, he crept up quite close to it. Then in a flash he jumped up and lashed at the snake with his steel wire. As if chopped in two the snake twisted and coiled, writhing its black shiny body. A few more whacks and it was quite dead. Laying out the dead snake Vasylko measured it with his stick and said confidently, as if proclaiming sentence:

"It's a black snake – six and a half feet long."

Then he hooked the snake with the end of his wire and lay it on the stump.

"It was probably soaking up the sun when Nayda disturbed it," the boy said, as we headed back around the swamp.

We made our way towards the trunk of a gigantic tree

lying on the ground. Its girth was twice my height and I could have easily walked into the hollow of its trunk without bending.

"Don't go in there," Vasylko said, as I approached. "It's full of spiders, lizards and snakes."

But Vasylko wanted to climb on top of the gigantic tree and so we decided to get onto it from the thinner end. A narrow path ran alongside the fallen tree through the tall grass. Vasylko, who was walking in front, suddenly stopped and raised his hand. I looked at the spot he pointed to and we both lifted our wires. From under the thick grass hanging over the path we spied the strong tail of a snake. However the moment we lifted our wires the tail quickly disappeared into the grass. We both hit hard on the grass where we expected the snake to be.

But what was this? The thick mane of the grass shook suddenly and lifted towards us. With mouth agape, revealing tiny glittering teeth, a large goanna sprang up at us. This was a thick, strong-legged Australian lizard some two metres long.

The sudden appearance of this strange creature surprised us so much that Vasylko let out a scream and we jumped away in opposite directions without having time to lift our wires. The goanna rushed at Vasylko, who stumbled over a dry branch behind him and fell into the grass. The goanna bit into the toe of his rubber boot.

Nayda appeared from thin air and barking wildly sank his teeth into the goanna's fat, snake-like tail. As the goanna let go of Vasylko and turned to face Nayda, I rushed in and walloped it on its side with the end of my wire. The wire thumped ineffectually against it, as if it had struck a pillow. However our combined assault must have frightened the goanna, and it shot into the thick grass like a fish into water. The dog rushed after it but Vasylko rose to his feet again and called Nayda.

It all happened so quickly that we just stood there and looked at each other, grinning stupidly.

"That was a whole crocodile, Vasylko!" I exclaimed.

"Fancy something growing that big!"

But Vasylko took no notice of me and anxiously inspected his dog, which had run up, tail wagging triumphantly.

"I hope the goanna hasn't bitten Nayda. The wound it inflicts doesn't heal for a whole month, and even then it opens up and festers on the same day each year.

"Actually," Vasylko continued, "I've encountered a goanna once before, but it was nowhere near as big as this one. I climbed a tree looking for baby parrots. As I was about to poke my head into a hollow, a goanna came at me – almost bit my nose off. I screamed and almost fell out of the tree. I must have frightened it, for it disappeared inside the hollow," Vasylko finished his story. Then a minute later the boy added:

"We must have struck its tail for the goanna to have attacked us like that. If we had hit its head or back, it wouldn't have been so fierce."

After this incident the boy decided not to climb the fallen tree and instead we went towards the left leg of the river which wound around this piece of land. We found a tree that crossed over to the other bank. As we approached several frightened herons and wild ducks took off and flew to the marshes on the other side of the river. This side of the river, at the base of the hill and up along the slopes, appeared to be a haven for rabbits. Again and again they shot out almost from under our feet and disappeared into burrows under rocks or ran for their lives away from us. There was no tall grass for sheep occasionally grazed here.

"We haven't had much luck today," said Vasylko when we sat down on a flat grey stone to relax. "Sometimes I kill five or six snakes on my own. But today that horrible goanna nearly had me for lunch."

"What do they eat?" I asked.

"Eat? Bunnies, and baby birds. Also eggs, when they can find them. Smaller goannas often venture into burrows or tree hollows in their search for food. But I've yet to see one as big as the one we struck today," said the boy,

feeling the end of his rubber boot to check if it had been bitten right through. Nayda rubbed against his legs, and the boy stroked his head, with the words:

"Well, I didn't bring you to Australia for nothing, eh?"

While listening to Vasylko's story I noticed a white

spot appearing and disappearing on the steep slopes at the top of the hill.

"He's hunting up there for rabbits, which he does every day," my friend explained after he realised where I was looking. "That's the cat from the refugee camp. He always returns to the camp late at night."

The cat really was out stalking: he would freeze in one spot, or crouch behind rocks, awaiting his prey.

After we rested a while, I thought our little excursion had come to an end, but my young friend said we would still go off to the right around the base of the hill.

"There's a cave there, and a fern beside it that grows like a tree. I've even climbed it," Vasylko said.

As we walked around the base of the hill we saw piles of dry trees once uprooted during a storm, burnt stumps, bones of cattle and piles of white wool from sheep which had long since died.

As we approached a young pine plantation planted some ten years ago, we saw several Australians cutting away the lower branches.

They must have known Vasylko well, for they greeted him straight away and began to joke with him. One of them said:

"Vasylko, set your dog onto a kangaroo. There's some over there now," and he pointed with his hand.

They knew that the boy loved to chase kangaroos with his dog. Vasylko cheered up and after asking the men exactly where they had seen the kangaroos, hurried off. He probably wanted to show me this strange animal, and also to show off Nayda's deftness.

One of the Australians came with us too.

About two hundred metres away, past the bush which separated the plantation from the pastures and the river, grazed four kangaroos. We hid in the bushes and watched them. One of the animals had a small kangaroo in a pouch on its stomach. Occasionally it too crawled out and nibbled at the grass, returning again to the pouch and only showing its head. Two of the other animals were fighting

among themselves. This was a real boxing match. Standing on their hind legs, each holding one front paw against its chest, they tried to wallop each other with their other paw. They jumped away from each other so nimbly to evade the strikes, and attacked again, really lashing out, holding their heads proudly erect.

Watching this duel, I remembered the stories of my friend, Engineer Suvchynsky, who worked for a farmer in a remote area of Victoria, and often went hunting kangaroos, which destroyed the crops.

"The angry farmer would jump into his car," the engineer had told me, "I'd get in beside him with a rifle, and we'd drive off to pay the kangaroos back for the damage they had done. Whenever we saw a kangaroo we'd chase after it in the car, shoot it up and leave it in the fields without even skinning the animal. Some of them travelled along at fifty miles an hour, so that we could barely catch up to them. But they're smart creatures," the engineer had chuckled. "Occasionally when they can see that there is no escape, they'll run into a flock of sheep and sit down among them. Well, you can't shoot into the sheep. And to hop over a bush or a fence is nothing for them. They can jump up to ten feet high. We killed so many of them from the car. However the farmer did have two baby kangaroos in the back paddock, and they played with us like little lambs."

I knew that kangaroos were the most quaint and ingenious animals in the world. But, true, I had only read about them in books, and here they were before us, alive.

So as not to frighten them off, we walked along the plantation, hiding behind the bushes. When we were practically opposite them, the kangaroos stopped their duel and pricked up their ears – they must have sensed our approach.

"Just wait, I'll give them a fright," said Vasylko and let his Nayda go, having held him by the collar at his side. I wanted to stop him but it was too late: Nayda tore out of the strip of bush, and barking madly, rushed at the kangaroos.

We left our cover too, to see what was happening. The animals turned and slowly jumped away, without hurrying. They hopped off towards the river. The one with the small kangaroo in its pouch led the way, as if afraid for its baby. After crossing the river in a shallow spot, where it occasionally dried up completely, they paused for a moment, but the dog continued to chase them. We ran up to the river too. The animals hopped off some distance again, but the dog gave them no peace there either. Then the kangaroo which had been at the rear of the group stopped and turned towards the dog, as if ready to fight.

The dog stopped too, without ceasing its barking, but was afraid to come any closer to the animal.

Meanwhile the Australians from the plantation had come to see what all the barking was about. Some looked on in silence, others urged the dog on:

"Catch it, Nayda!" one of the men shouted, pointing at the kangaroo.

"Grab it! Sic it, boy!" another shouted from afar, not wanting to cross the shallow river.

And the dog charged the kangaroo with even greater gusto; the kangaroo stood on its hind legs, as if ready to box. Occasionally the animal even pressed a paw to its chest, like a professional boxer. It calmly watched its noisy attacker, and only rarely cocked its head or pressed its ears back.

I stood some distance away, having climbed onto a high burnt-out stump, in order to get a better view of this confrontation.

Vasylko stood at the river's edge and watched in silence, but his face showed uncertainty. He probably wanted Nayda to win and chase the kangaroos away, but he was obviously frightened for the dog.

I had leapt from the stump to tell Vasylko to call Nayda away, but Jack yelled out again:

"Grab it! Hold it, boy!"

Before I could utter a word to Vasylko, something happened which I had never expected: at the moment

the dog had rushed closer to the kangaroo, egged on by Jack, the calm and silent animal suddenly jumped forward and in a flash Nayda was in its embrace, pressed to its chest.

Then, just as slowly, the kangaroo turned to the right and hopped off, with Nayda awkwardly kicking his hind legs about and whining plaintively.

Vasylko, who stood beside me now, let out a scream and moaned, as if hit by an unexpected blow. He must have felt that he had lost something very near and dear to him at that moment . . .

"The dog's as good as dead," said one of the Australians who watched neutrally from behind. "The kangaroo will either choke it to death or drown it."

These words shattered the boy completely and he turned towards me, as if asking me to save the dog.

But this lasted only a moment.

"Come on, follow me!" I exclaimed suddenly and we raced off along the riverbank in the direction the insolent kangaroo had disappeared with Nayda.

The winding river, the branchy trees, stumps and rocks – all slowed us down. We often stopped, crawling over or going around fallen trees, while the undergrowth and tall weeds often hid the opposite bank from view, where the kangaroo should have been.

The river slowly turned towards the right, and we wanted to outdistance the kangaroo and get Nayda back by suddenly startling it. But for this we had to see it and keep it in sight.

Occasionally we paused to look at the opposite bank, but saw nothing, and couldn't even hear the dog's whining any more. We ran faster and faster.

Vasylko, slowed down a lot by his rubber boots, was already tired and out of breath.

Having run for some fifteen minutes or more, we slowed down. Besides, the river began to turn even more sharply to the right.

It was deeper here, and our bank was much higher and steeper.

But even here the kangaroo was nowhere to be seen, though the countryside was quite flat and open.

"What do we do now?" a breathless Vasylko asked. "Don't tell me . . ."

But I didn't let him finish, grabbing him firmly by the shoulder and squatting down: some thirty metres away the kangaroo was standing up to its waist in the river and was drowning Nayda. I didn't so much see what the

animal was doing, as guessed. Hugging the earth, sometimes crawling on all fours, we quickly moved forward and stopped only when we were opposite the heartless animal in the water.

Now we could see it clearly from close up, from the steep bank: it stood in the water before us like a person, holding Nayda submerged in the water with its front paws, perhaps even pinning the dog down with its hind legs. Occasionally Nayda's tail appeared from the water and bubbles of air shot to the surface.

We found several good-sized stones and launched an attack. The kangaroo had its back to us, expecting nothing, when a rock suddenly thumped painfully against its back; several others sailed past its head and splashed noisily into the water.

As if scalded, the animal left its prey behind and rushed out of the water, hopping off as fast as it could go, pursued by our screams.

I was still watching the kangaroo disappearing, but Vasylko had already dropped his binoculars onto the grass, slid down the high bank and waded into the river, which was almost up to his neck in places, reached the other side and rushed to the spot where the kangaroo had been standing. I noticed movement in the water there and then the dog's back broke the surface. He still showed signs of life, but couldn't swim and only struggled helplessly on the one spot. Vasylko rushed to his aid: he fished his poor friend out of the water and carried him out onto the sandy bank. The dog lay motionless, eyes closed, and only his sides filled out and collapsed again, showing that he was still alive. Water dripped onto the sand.

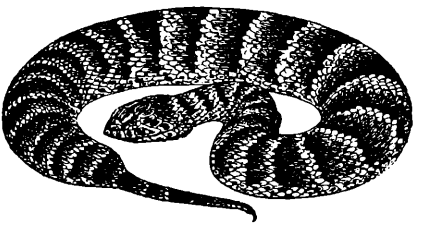
"Will he live?" we both asked each other at once.

After a few minutes the dog began to cough and splutter, and his whole body shuddered as he coughed up water; finally he raised his head and pulled his outstretched paws under himself.

Once Nayda had gotten to his feet, Vasylko picked him up and headed for home.

"Well, he'll live now! We'll even take him back with us to Ukraine!" I called out to Vasylko to cheer him up, and taking the binoculars, headed back towards the camp too.

1953



AN INCIDENT AT WORK

Some fifty men worked in the large depot belonging to the State Electricity Commission. They were all recent arrivals from Europe: Italians, Maltese, Greeks, and others. Some dug deep trenches, others laid cement drainage pipes or built reinforced roads with strong concrete edges to carry heavy trucks, still others spread gravel on the flat clayey ground alongside the road.

The large depot yard, surrounded by a high cyclone fence, was located in a suburb of Melbourne. Until recently the whole area had been just bushy scrub, weeds and thistles. But now the new settlers' houses were fast encroaching on the green wasteland, and railway lines raced off to distant suburbs. Not long ago some boys had flushed a fox from the scrub surrounding the SEC depot.

In the middle of the yard stood a coal crusher; each day trucks laden with coal would roll up to it, their chunky loads being milled and stored at the depot. A black column of dust continually rose above the crusher. At the back of the depot were piles of grey quarry stone used for road foundations.

At first we didn't realise that a family of hares lived in the recesses under the large rocks. But one day as we were moving some timber lying nearby, a small hare rushed out and darted into the rocks. Later, one of the Australian foremen told us that he had often seen hares grazing in the depot yard when he arrived at work early in the morning. Everyone left the hares in peace, and I even began to bring them a carrot or a piece of cabbage each day.

However one morning an interesting incident occurred: a young man on horseback came galloping along the outside of the depot fence behind a large pedigree dog in pursuit of a hare. All the workmen stopped work and watched the chase. When it seemed that the dog was about to catch the hare, the grey animal darted under the fence and into the depot yard. It hopped over a ditch and ran towards two groups of workers who were leaning on their shovels, mouths agape. As it dashed past them they raised such a din, as if they were being attacked by a wolf, and swung their shovels at it, but the hare was already out of reach near the coal crusher.

Meanwhile the horse and its rider rushed through the open gates, with the dog leading the way, and made straight for Vlodko and me. We were standing near the piles of rock at the time, working on one of the depot roads. He was blowing compressed air onto the reinforcing mesh of the road guttering, while I watered it down, preparing for the concreting.

Seeing that the fierce shaggy dog was after him again, the hare made straight down the road on which Vlodko and I were working, flying past us to disappear among the rocks which were his home. The dog was some ten metres behind the hare now. Feeling sorry for the hare we let it pass, and then let fly streams of compressed air and water into the dog's path. The column of dust and water created a sudden wall before the dog. Unable to stop, it was engulfed in the melee and stopped suddenly in confusion, covered in mud and dust. By this time the hare was safe.

The other workers laughed at our prank, while we rejoiced at having saved the grey creature. We thought the whole affair would end at that, but a short while later the works manager summoned us to his site office. The young gentleman hunter was standing outside the office, holding his chestnut horse by the reins, and the besmirched dog stood nearby, spattered with mud.

"Tell me, why did you attack this poor dog?" our boss asked. "Don't you know that this pedigree dog

costs at least 500 pounds? You could have injured the animal or blinded it . . ."

"For a start," I said, "we don't intend paying five hundred pounds for the dog. And secondly, we didn't go running after the animal. It dashed into our path as we were cleaning and wetting the formwork in preparation for concreting."

"Is there a law which gives anyone the right to hunt in our grounds?" Vlodko asked.

"I didn't send my dog inside on purpose," the young gentleman said in an angry voice, "but dogs have a hunting instinct. And they," he pointed at us angrily with his riding-crop, "intentionally spattered my dog with mud and may have ruined his eyesight . . ."

With a gleam in his eye, our boss said sternly:

"All right, I'll look into this . . . My apologies for what happened. But in future be a little bit more careful with your dog . . ."

The hunter could do nothing more than mount his horse and leave the yard. With laughter and back-slapping we returned to work.

1953

THOSE WHO GO ABOUT IN LAP-LAPS

When the sun set behind the eucalypt-covered slope, and the twilight thickened outside the windows of the small wooden house, Doctor S. began to tell me about the time he spent among the black-skinned natives of Micronesia. I recalled the book of Ukrainian explorer Myklukho-Maklay about his experiences in New Guinea and the nearby islands. But this was only for a moment, for an exotic ocean began to rock about me and I found myself in a motor boat, rising and falling as it made its way to Pak Island, which lay a black ribbon on the horizon. This time the sea was unsettled and fierce. From time to time it sent salty spray in my eyes, and splashed bucketfuls of water into the boat. But the coast was close now. A while longer and three people stepped onto the sandy shore: the doctor, accompanied by a medical nurse, and an islander – the medical orderly, Boono.

A narrow path ran into the tropical forest's embrace, which stood in a wall on both sides, stretching out branches of palms and other exotic trees. But death no longer lurked behind the rocks along the shore or in the dense undergrowth, natives no longer attacked from behind the thick trunks of trees with barrages of spears and poison arrows. No, the whites moved without any fear, despite the fact that the blacks disliked white people and many of them still remembered the taste of human flesh.

Birds called from the forest depths, wild pigs darted into the undergrowth from the path.

A few more minutes walk and the path emerged from

the forest. The doctor's gaze rested on strange huts and people milling around them. Seeing the white people, the short, naked black children rushed into the huts covered with palm leaves. Some of the huts were more modern, built on wooden stumps, and looked like large square beehives thatched with palm leaves. This was a Micronesian village. Several young and middle-aged people, black and almost completely naked, lounged about or stood beside the houses. Most wore just a lap-lap – a piece of fabric which hung off a string tied around their waist and barely reached their knees.

While the doctor and nurse watched some small black children playing with a domesticated piglet, the village elder approached them. He too wore only a yellow lap-lap and was barefoot, just like the rest of the villagers. The elder already knew the doctor and acted benevolently towards him because of his help in treating the sick.

"Doctor number one," the elder addressed the doctor," we have bad accident yesterday. Boys go fishing in sea and shark he grab Karol. All that left – blood and legs of boy. Him very good worker."

The elder spoke a mixture of English and his own dialect, but the doctor was able to understand him. He finished by inviting the white people to attend the funeral ceremony, which was to begin as soon as it became dark.

They didn't have long to wait – it soon grew dark and a fire was lit among the trees. The elder gave the visitors a reed each, told them to stick it into the bamboo wall of Karol's hut and then to break it off, leaving a piece in their hands. The doctor and his assistant did just this. Meanwhile all the men of the village had gathered in a large ring around the fire. Coming closer, the doctor saw that the village witch doctor, whom they called a *witcher,* was sitting in the middle of the ring. He was feared by all the natives, who believed he had contacts with the spirit world. He sat on the ground chanting something. Opposite him sat Karol's best friend, a young boy called Kiro, who was obviously acting as a medium. As it turned out,

Kiro hadn't been allowed to eat or drink for two days, which probably explained his haggard appearance. The *witcher* seemed to be hypnotising him. From time to time he called out Karol's name, took coals from the fire and threw them in all directions. Meanwhile Kiro slowly fell asleep. At last the *witcher* asked Kiro whether he was asleep, and not receiving a reply, repeated the question another six times. Still not getting a reply, he asked:

"Is your spirit among us now, Karol?"

"Yes," Kiro answered sleepily and faintly, "my spirit is among you, but my flesh is still suffering in the shark's stomach."

The village elder, who was standing next to the doctor, bent over and whispered into his ear that Kiro's voice had changed completely, and he was now speaking just like Karol. The doctor repeated all this to the nurse, who shook her head and wanted to say something in reply, but at that moment an old woman behind them touched her shoulder, letting her know that talking was forbidden.

There was dead silence. Everyone was standing in a circle observing what was happening. The tongues of flame which rose above the pile of coals lit up the strained and grim faces of the natives, making them look brassy. The doctor was struck by the robust figures of the men, their prominent jaws, tattooed backs and chests, pierced ears, the occasional flash of white teeth and the high mops of curly hair which stood erect on their heads. Only the tropical forest occasionally echoed the crash of twigs, the scream of a parrot or 'forest children' – dark-blue birds, whose call resembled the scream of overjoyed children.

The *witcher* continued:

"What bad thing did you do, that the evil spirit grabbed you?"

Kiro sat silently for some time, without moving, eyes closed, and then began to weep. The tears streamed from his eyes . . . Without opening them, Kiro wiped his face and nose with his hand, while the *witcher* raised his voice and asked a little more forcefully:

"What bad thing did you do, Karol?"

At last Karol's spirit replied with a stammer:

"Last year I stole the bicycle of the native policeman from Mokorain Village, and for this the evil spirit took me . . ."

An expression of surprise passed over the natives' faces – no one had known about this, or even expected it. Some even stirred, looking into their neighbour's face in amazement. The power of the *witcher* grew even stronger in their minds.

Then Karol's spirit asked that the bike be returned to its owner, so the spirit could exist in peace. The *witcher* promised to send the bicycle to Mokorain the following morning.

"Have you met the spirits of any of the dead from our village?" the *witcher* asked.

"No, I am still wandering," the same sleepy voice replied, "and I'm finding it very hard," Karol's spirit finished. Kiro burst into tears again and woke up, opening his eyes as if after a deep sleep.

Meanwhile Karol's beautiful young wife pushed her way into the ring of natives, holding her two-year-old child, and brought Kiro a small crock of *koolau* – the juice of a green coconut. Kiro accepted it with both hands and swallowed it greedily.

At about two in the morning the people began to disperse and the village elder informed them that the funeral would be held in the morning.

The coals left after the big bonfire began to die away. The moon disappeared behind a small cloud and everything became pitch-black. Strange lights hung on some of the forest trees. When he drew closer, the doctor saw that these were quite large fireflies, which had congregated on the branches, creating magical lanterns.

In the morning the funeral ceremony continued. Earlier that morning several young natives had gone off in a boat to Mokorain Village some forty miles away and returned the stolen bicycle. In return they brought back

a new yellow lap-lap from the owner of the bicycle, as a token of forgiveness. Meanwhile the natives had made a very beautiful coffin from palm and banana leaves, had dug a hole and prepared for the burial.

At nine that morning the funeral of Karol's legs began. The witch doctor again directed the ceremony, only this time he stood in front near the hole with a mace in his left hand. This was a stick over two metres long, its length a carved crocodile which had half swallowed a man. The top of the stick had a trident on it made from large fish bones. When the coffin was lowered into the hole, he took a sheaf of long *kooma-kooma* grass, and chanting, began to wave it about, sometimes swatting the coffin with it. Around him stood the whole male population of the village and several of the oldest women.

A ladder was lowered into the grave and Kiro was the first to climb down it. He spread a yellow lap-lap on the coffin. Six other friends followed suit. After this the dead man's grieving wife emerged. She was bald, having shaven her own hair and that of the child, and now held it wrapped in a rag. Tearfully descending the ladder, she lay Karol's lap-lap on the coffin and sprinkled part of the hair over the coffin. After this she lay all of Karol's things on the coffin – his mouth organ, a spoon, plate, cup and soap. Climbing out, the woman took a razor blade wrapped in paper from her belt, and continuing to cry bitterly, cut her face and temples as a sign of her love for Karol. The people's eyes were rivited to her face, many brimming with tears. The people broke into a sad, mournful melody. Several of the boys were already filling in the grave.

After a mound of earth had been built over the grave, Karol's wife scattered the rest of the hair over it. Some of the people went into the huts and brought out various dishes: roast piglets, bananas, fish and nuts, laying everything out on a carpet of palm leaves.

After the ceremony was over and the people had dispersed, the doctor's assistant asked the village elder, who was walking beside her:

"Why do they lay new lap-laps into the grave?"

"You see," replied the elder, "Karol is going off to God's threshold, and when he talks with God he must be clean and have something clean to change into for later."

"Why do you lay food on the grave?"

"That's for the spirits."

"But there are wild pigs here at night, they'll eat the food," said the nurse.

"That's all right," said the elder. "Every pig has inside it either a good or an evil spirit. If a good spirit eats the food, it is a good sign for Karol, and if an evil spirit eats it, it is good for us, because these evil spirits will be satiated for a while and will leave us in peace."

An hour later the two white people were leaving this exotic corner of the world inhabited by real children of Nature.

"They're strange and interesting people," the doctor said to his companion. "They have nothing, and don't dream of any riches in our sense of the meaning – their treasures are dog's teeth, which they wear in a necklace around their necks. Many of them have several wives which they buy, paying from five to twenty pounds for each, and yet they live together amicably and feed off the forest, the earth and the sea. Even their bread grows on trees. But ask them what day it is, what year, or how old any of them is – no one knows, not even the village elder."

"No," the nurse interjected, "I was told they've got one man here who can even read newspapers. Besides, there might even be more educated people on the other islands."

"Yet how original their language is," the nurse commented after a pause. "Almost sixty percent of their words consist of a single repeated syllable. For example, they call flowers *pur-pur*, a little is *lik-lik*, trade – *boom-boom*, to eat is *kay-kay*, potato is *kav-kav*, crocodiles are *pook-pook*, and there are countless other examples."

The doctor again told the nurse about the past of these people. Only forty years earlier the village of

Papitalay had been at war with the village of Lonio. The goal of the battle was to kill the village chief, and then the village would be subdued. Papitalay won. The dead chief from the enemy village was boiled on the sea shore at night. Even now all their festivals were celebrated at night. After boiling him up, they cut him into pieces and ate him, giving pieces of the ears and nose to the children, so they would be just as brave as the chief had been.

They passed the last houses, near which native youngsters were playing and followed the path which soon dived into the dense tropical undergrowth. Soon the rough waters of the sea glistened before them. The islander Buno was already waiting for them on the boat. A minute later Pak Island was left behind them. The waves broke against the boat's sides again, foaming and spraying the passengers, but the young native drove the boat skilfully forward. The stout and dignified doctor, who had seen much in his time even in his native Ukraine, still saw the bony face of the *witcher* before him, the boy Kiro, and the bloodied face of Karol's wife.

1954

Nomad warrior, Western Province, Papua New Guinea.

CONVERSATIONS WITH A PAPUAN

Tall palms rustled outside the windows of the small Samarai Island hospital. Sweeping across the ocean, a strong wind struck the island forests, bending the tree-tops and ruffling the flimsy native huts.

The wind, still carrying the echo of waves, brought with it the cool breath of the ocean, which dissipated the tropical heat.

The doctor standing at the open window listening to the rustle of the forest was disturbed by a knock on the hospital door. A dark-skinned medical orderly opened the door and a sturdy old Papuan was carried into the room in a woven coconut-palm basket. The sick man's face was as wrinkled as a baked apple and his hair had fallen out in places, leaving bald patches. His deep-sunken eyes, large and alert, reflected a hint of terror.

The doctor examined the patient. The old man, who was called Abooma Beniara Chidji Jaori Lima, was suffering from pneumonia. Every possible cure was tried on the old man, but there seemed little hope of saving him. The missionary priest, who looked after the spiritual well-being of the hospital patients, visited the old man and began preparing him for the long journey ahead . . . Sitting by his bed, the priest laid a hand on the sick native's forehead and whispered a prayer. He proceeded to talk about God's love, the native's imminent meeting with God and the Resurrection. The missionary priest gradually raised his voice until it filled the room with a deep resonance.

But Abooma Beniara seemed indifferent to the priest's words. Occasionally he would wave away a fly which had taken a liking to the tip of his nose. In the same indifferent manner he accepted the holy picture of a large angel which the priest offered him. The native rolled it up into a thin tube which he slid into a hole in his earlobe.

Obviously thinking that it would do the sick man no harm, the priest offered him a cigarette. A radiant smile passed over the native's face, but he did not light the cigarette and slid it into his other earlobe. As soon as the priest had left, the old man closed his eyes and dozed off.

The days flew like the salty ocean winds passing over Samarai, and after some time, thanks to his strong constitution and the effects of penicillin, the sick man quickly began to improve, much to the surprise of the doctor and the priest. In addition, despite his old age, the native rapidly gained weight and acquired an appetite larger than that of all the other patients much younger than him.

The missionary priest visited him every Sunday. They even became good friends.

One day the doctor, a stout, serious man, said to the priest:

"Father, you're creating stiff competition for me. The patients look forward to your cigarettes more than they do to my medicine."

But these remarks did not deter the untiring priest, who firmly believed in his mission among these previously cannibalistic natives. Cigarettes served as a bridge to unite him with the people and made them sympathetic towards him.

One Sunday after it had become obvious that Abooma Beniara had completely escaped death's embrace, the priest began to preach to him that it was God who had helped the doctor to cure him and therefore the old man should pray each day and thank God for His mercy. After listening to this advice the sick man nodded his head and turning to the doctor who had just entered,

asked whether he could get two helpings of rice and minced meat. The doctor called the medical orderly and instructed him to give the patient all the rice he wanted. Together with the doctor, the priest began to question the native about his past.

Abooma Beniara had a good memory and immediately started to tell the white men about his adventures while hunting crocodiles, about the tribal wars he had fought and survived.

"Only these two fingers are missing," he explained, holding up his right hand. "They were chopped off during an attack on Hulla Village."

The old man was given a second helping of rice which he ate ravenously. "What beautiful surroundings," the doctor said to the priest. "I've been around the islands recently and it's like eternal spring. And the people! There's no hate, intrigue or malice. The Papuans are clean, good-hearted and kind."

"True, doctor," agreed the priest, "but a great deal of this is due to the missionaries like myself. Had we not paved the way for you, you would never have dared poke your nose into these parts. After all, many a priest has been roasted and eaten at some time or other by these kind-hearted natives. But it was the priests who turned the people from cannibalism and converted them to Christianity. Now, doctor, you won't meet a single person here who can remember cannibalism without a feeling of disgust."

After Abooma Beniara had crammed the last handful of rice into his mouth, he excused himself humbly before the doctor and asked:

"Doctor, I would be grateful if you would permit me to smoke the cigarette which I will receive from the priest today."

The priest and the doctor burst out laughing.

"Perhaps you'd like some more rice?" the doctor grinned.

"Oh, I've had enough rice," replied the Papuan, "but I wouldn't mind some more meat. I love meat . . ."

While the doctor was considering whether to accede to the patient's request, the priest looked at the old man and suddenly asked him:

"Tell me the truth, have you ever eaten human flesh?"

This unexpected question left the old man somewhat perplexed. His eyes took on a strange gleam, and a shadow of doubt crossed his face. Finally he exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Do you take me for a child or a woman? Sure I've tried it, and more than once at that. I belong to the Guara-Bori tribe. I fought and ate my enemy on numerous occasions!"

"But this was a long time ago, right?"

"Yeah," came the drawn-out reply, "many Christmases have passed since then . . ."

The priest was not satisfied with this answer, besides the doctor would not relent with his smart remarks. The priest glanced at the floor and then asked again:

"But tell me this: would you eat human flesh, now that you've become a Christian and a believer."

"No, I couldn't eat it now," replied the native without stopping to think, and shook his head.

"And tell me, Abooma Beniara, why wouldn't you eat human flesh any more?" persisted the missionary priest after a pause.

"I thought you knew, father! I've got no teeth now!" the native replied in a bitter and surprised voice, opening his mouth to reveal his toothless gums.

1954

THIS HAPPENED IN AUSTRALIA

There was a surprise waiting for me when I returned home from work: there at the door I was met by Mykola, my old friend from Bonegilla. Having worked together in one place for several months, we, it seemed, had parted forever, being assigned work in different parts of the country. More than two years had elapsed since then – and now he was standing before me again. But he was no longer the same blond fellow with the delicate face – before me stood a slender man with a tanned face and a luxuriant shock of hair. He had just returned from cutting sugar cane in Queensland. But I had recognised him at once. It was with him that I had once escaped from a stampeding mob of cows, led by a bull. But that had been a long time ago, Mykola had been different then too – morose and uncommunicative, seeming to bear some pain from the past. Now he seemed more cheerful.

"Eh, two mountains never meet . . ." he said, smiling meekly and firmly grabbed my hand with his calloused, strong hands. "Well, still battling with pick and shovel in hand?" Mykola finished his greeting with a question.

Sitting at the table we took turns at asking questions and telling each other about our respective jobs, friends and wild existences.

Mykola reminisced about his native city of Zaporizhia, the Dnipro River and Khortytsia Island.

But we soon returned to talk of Australia, of work in the canefields and various experiences there.

"You know that experience we had with the cows," Mykola said, "that really was scary, but on the canefields

I had an even more horrific experience. It happened up North only four months ago. There was a heat wave then, so we didn't work between ten and three during the day. After such a break we would come out into the fields and split up into two groups: half the men worked at one end of the field, stacking and loading the cane, while the rest, including me, cut the sugar cane. Four of us did the cutting: a tall, thin Australian whom we called Skinny Jim, and three Ukrainians, one of whom was a compulsive sportsman who knew all the world champions in boxing and wrestling. Each day he would tell us about various well-known fights and daydream – his name was Petro. He was very fastidious and would even take a bucket of water and a towel with him to work, to wash away the streams of sweat. The other Ukrainian was called Roman. He had a German wife, who had to stay in a family camp in Cowra – about which we ribbed him every day. And finally there was me.

"So almost every day we were plagued by the heat, the mosquitoes and burning salty sweat. To clear away the snakes which sometimes even wound themselves around the sticks of cane, we would first burn off a plot of cane, and then start to cut it. On this occasion the cane stood like a wall before us, with softly rustling burnt leaves and smelling strongly of smoke. Tired, we sat down for a smoke-o on the piles of cut cane. Skinny Jim stood nearby rolling a cigarette too. Only our sportsman didn't smoke. He had taken off his shirt and having wetted his towel in a bucket of water, proceeded to wipe down his sweaty body, gazing at the nearby forest.

"At this same moment Jim, was who was looking down the length of the cane, suddenly shouted:

" 'Snake! Python!' And knelt over and picked up his machete. We jumped from our places, as if stung by these magical words, and grabbed our machetes too.

"Because of the lectures we had received during our first days in the canefields, we knew how to deal with various dangerous situations. But it was too late for

thinking. Panic-stricken, we saw the giant python crawling towards us, head raised.

"Seeing that some of us had become very agitated, the Australian whispered to everyone not to move and to raise their arms. The enormous slithery serpent had already reached us. I could hear the grass rustle as its rubbery body moved closer.

"We knew," Mykola continued, "that pythons normally lived in trees, falling on their prey, entwining it and crushing it to death. But this was different. The snake crawled up to us slowly, as if it was tired from its long journey or positive that we would not escape.

"Just imagine us standing there with our arms in the air, all holding machetes. Three of us stood almost in a row, while Petro was off to one side opposite me. I was reminded of prisoners who had surrendered, looking into the barrels of enemy pistols or rifles. But I'm sure we were much more frightened than any soldier was when he was surrendering. Each of us was trembling, which could be best seen by the quivering tips of the machetes. The main thing was that none of us had ever experienced anything like this, and didn't know what the outcome would be. Therefore, everyone's hopes were pinned on Jim. However even Skinny Jim's machete wavered like a blade of grass in the wind.

"The python, on the other hand, seemed more sure of itself than ever. It crawled up to Jim, raised its flat ugly head even higher, and slowly smelt him all over, then fell to the ground and crawled over to Roman, who stood on my left. Having done the same with him, it crawled up to me. Its head rose above my waist, and I froze.

"I felt as if only my head and eyes remained alive. The blood was thumping away at my temples and I saw before me the micaceous eyes of the glistening hideous animal, which I saw for the first time in my life.

"I can still picture the scene even now. This procedure seemed to drag on for an eternity, as if the snake was deciding who to claim as its victim. I saw it touch my grey work-shirt and snort several times. After this it turned its head in Petro's direction, fell to the ground and slowly slid off towards him."

Mykola was such a good story-teller, that it seemed all this had happened only an hour ago, and his anxiety was slowly passed on to me. I sat beside him and listened as if he was telling me a fairy story. He waved his hands

about and continued his story:

"After the python moved away from me I heaved a sigh of relief. Now all our attention was focused at our sportsman, Petro, and the merciless snake, which was now raising its head. Had we all attacked the python then, it probably wouldn't have gotten away alive. But everyone stood in silence, without making the slightest movement, as if some secret force had taken control of us. All eyes were on Petro and the python; everyone knew we had to act fast, for in the wilds of other continents pythons attacked even tigers and jaguars, and it was difficult to pierce a python's skin even with a sword. And the slightest noise or movement made them aggressive. Therefore everyone waited in silence for an order or an opportune moment.

"Meanwhile, having smelt Petro, the python began to wind itself around him very slowly, beginning at the knees. I saw Petro turn even more pale, and the tip of his machete traced heiroglyphics in the air. He stood apart from us and without a shirt, as if specially chosen to die. When the python reached Petro's waist I became filled with horror. Another minute, it seemed, and the python would tighten its deathly embrace on our sportsman, his bones would crack and he would fall to the ground in convulsions. Agitated, I looked at Jim, but he had his eyes peeled to Petro.

"Exactly at the instant when the python's head seemed to pause a moment, having reached Petro's chest, the Australian broke the silence:

" 'Now!' he said softly but decisively, and at that moment his sharp machete came down like lightning on the python's head. A moment later the grey-brown embroidered spirals of the snake slipped to the ground and I fell back with a scream onto a pile of cane. At the instant it had been struck, the python had whipped out its tail and hit me on the legs as if with a rubber truncheon. Roman and Jim rushed up to Petro with shouts of joy,

and caught him as he fell, lifting him away from the still-writhing coils of the snake.

"Examining my legs, I rose to my feet and hobbled over to Petro, who had been taken aside and now sat on a pile of cane. A red flower graced his chest – it was the blood which had spurted from the cut python's head.

"In a few minutes our whole brigade was at the scene of the drama. The python was still writhing on the ground, but the boys were already measuring it. It turned out to be twenty-four feet long.

" 'Well, Petro's earned a few pounds on the snake skin!' they laughed, but Petro was still dazed from all that had happened so suddenly. There was so much chatter around him too. The boys asked him how it had all happened, I showed them the bruises which had appeared on my legs, and Jim said he remembered a similar incident which had happened some ten years earlier. This time, he said, the python must have been either very hungry, or it had been on its way to the river, for all the streams in the forest had dried up . . .

"Two days later Petro was back at work.

" 'You know,' he said, 'I've lived through all sorts of things in my life: Stalin's pythons stood me against a tree to be shot, but I don't think that even then I was as frightened as I was in that canefield then . . .'

"The men continued to talk about the incident for ages, and about the groups of hunters who hunted snakes and pythons in Queensland. And Petro kept joking: 'It was my own fault that the python chose to attack me. I had just washed and was clean, while you all smelt horribly!'

"Actually we often thought the same thing," said Mykola. "Perhaps it left us alone and chose Petro for that very reason . . ."

After dinner we talked late into the night. In the end Mykola again talked about his native Zaporizhia and Khortytsia Island, on which he assured me there were still small pythons.

It was after eleven when we went to bed. The Australian wind again raised a din outside and a light shower pattered on the roof, but all I could see in my sleep were the deathly spirals of the python.

1952

THE BABY CROCODILE

This incident happened in a clearing near a sandy beach. Vasylko and lean Jack were netting fish. Going out far to sea, with the ends of a sweep-net attached to hooks on their boats, Jack and Vasylko laboriously worked their oars and slowly dragged the net back to shore.

Meanwhile the dog Nayda ran about on the shore and barked excitedly, awaiting Vasylko. He also had wanted to go out to sea with his master, but he had been refused this time, and this annoyed him.

As soon as the bows of the boats dug into the sandy shore, the fishermen jumped out onto the sand and began pulling the sweep-net in. Here and there glistened the odd fish, caught in the net by its gills. Slowly they pulled out the butt-end of the sweep-net.

"Hey," Vasylko called out to Jack, "we'll get a sackful of fish out of this one!"

Jack began to shake out the fish, helped by the boy. Sensing there would be food for them too, birds began to appear from the bush, which grew right up to the sandy shore.

"How do they all know that we've just caught these fish?" Vasylko asked Jack. "All of them couldn't have seen what we were doing!"

"Don't you know that birds have their own language?" Jack replied. "One bird sees what's happening, calls out to the others, and they all flock to the beach."

Meanwhile Nayda wagged his tail about joyously and ran amongst them. He was hungry, but was afraid to grab a fish without first being given one. The fish jumped about

on the sand, flicking their tails, glittering silver and gold in the sunshine, as if spiting the hungry dog.

Suddenly Nayda jumped into the air as if scalded and raced away from the sweep-net: two fish appeared to have shot out of the silvery pile of fish and quickly headed for the trees. A minute later the dog had regained his senses and ran off after the escapees, who had already disappeared into the undergrowth. Vasylko was just as surprised by all this as Nayda: he dropped the sweep-net and called out to Jack:

"Look, two fish have run away!"

Jack burst out laughing and said slowly, as if nothing had happened:

"They were baby crocodiles. Couldn't you see?"

Without wasting any time, Vasylko slipped on his rubber boots and hurried off after Nayda. He wanted to take a look at the baby crocodiles. He had seen both live and dead crocodiles before, but never any so small; besides he had never imagined they could run so fast. He knew they could swim in water at speeds of up to forty miles an hour, and could travel as fast as people on land.

The boy had already disappeared into the thick scrub, trying to work out where the dog's barking was coming from. But what was this? The dog's barking suddenly became interrupted yelping. Vasylko became anxious. He was worried that a large crocodile might grab Nayda here in the forest, for it was here that they laid their eggs, and from here the youngsters ran to the water immediately upon hatching. And later both old and younger crocodiles visited the forest, seeking food or seclusion. Jack had even told Vasylko of the time he and ten other men from a neighbouring town had come upon an enormous sleeping crocodile, which was basking in the sun in a bush clearing. Unfortunately none of them was carrying a rifle at the time, so they each found themselves a sturdy stick and then set the grass alight. The crocodile began to scurry about as the grass burned around him in an ever narrower semi-circle. Where there was no fire, stood the men with

their sticks. Occasionally they rushed up to hit the crocodile, but their blows had no effect on its thick hide. Then the crocodile suddenly made a rush at the flames and disappeared into the undergrowth. Probably made for the beach.

Vasylko listened intently and thought perhaps Nayda had injured his leg or had been bitten by a snake, or perhaps become entangled in a heap of branches and logs. Hearing Nayda's yelp again, he hurried off in that direction, jumping over rotten stumps and fallen trees. The clutching thorny bushes grabbed at his clothes, scratching his arms and face, slowing him down. At last, climbing over one more obstacle, Vasylko saw his Nayda, who seemed to be holding something in his teeth, backing away and lunging forward, yelping plaintively. Only when he came closer did the boy see that it wasn't the dog holding something between his teeth, but the baby crocodile had sunk his needle-sharp teeth into Nayda's lower lip, and now kicked about in the air, its tail brushing the ground. Vasylko realised the trouble Nayda had gotten himself into: there was no way the dog could tear itself away from this wriggler, for each movement and all attempts at dislodging the animal tore painfully at his lip, which was already dripping blood.

Vasylko had at first wanted to crush the small crocodile with his foot, but immediately changed his mind and grabbing a strong branch lying nearby, pressed the crocodile's tail to the ground. Feeling pain, it let go of Nayda and swivelled around to bite the stick which held its tail.

Angry for Nayda, the boy squashed the crocodile with one stamp of his boot. Nayda attacked it too, grabbing it by the neck and dragging it about. The enemy had been destroyed and Vasylko and Nayda made their way back to the beach. Vasylko realised now how Nayda had been caught. The dog must have caught up to the crocodile and grabbed it by the tail, whereupon it swung around and bit into the dog's lip. After his unsuccessful

fight with the kangaroo, this was Nayda's second painful defeat.

* *
*

Vasylko told me this story exactly a year after it happened. When I came to see him, we revisited all the places where they had shaken out the fish from the sweep-net and where he had saved Nayda from the baby crocodile.

"My, you are cruel, Vasylko," I said after he finished his account. "After all, the crocodile was only trying to defend itself, and you killed it. Vasyl looked at me as if testing whether I was joking or serious, and said with a hint of remorse:

"I felt sorry for it too . . . but crocodiles grab so many people in Australia and New Guinea each year, both children and adults, and even domestic animals. Only last year a crocodile grabbed a young aboriginal girl as she was crossing a river with her brother on horseback. The animal first grabbed the horse by the leg, but it broke free and reared. At this instant the girl lost her grip and fell into the river, where the crocodile grabbed her. Fortunately their father was waiting for them on the far bank: he jumped into the water and gouged out the crocodile's eyes.

"Perhaps you don't believe me," Vasylko added, sighing as if in sympathy with the girl, "then ask Jack. He'll tell you quite a few stories about crocodiles," my young friend finished his story as we emerged from the bush.

Before us stretched the boundless expanse of the sea, glittering in the sun, sending foamy white waves towards the shore, and behind us whispered the equally boundless and no less mysterious bush of Northern Australia, where many a surprise still awaited Vasylko and me.

1974

ALLA

Another few moments of clamour and the seven hundred students of the Australian high school were in their classes. In form two there was a geography lecture in progress. The teacher was talking about agriculture in Russia, running his ruler from the Black Sea to the Far North of the Soviet Union.

A round-faced girl raised her hand:

"Do you want to ask a question or to say something?" the teacher addressed her.

"Where you've just been pointing, from the Black Sea and north for a thousand miles, there is no Russia. It's Ukraine. The area is inhabited by fifty million Ukrainians. Ukraine is a member country of the United Nations . . . and you've called it Russia."

The teacher turned a bright red, becoming a little embarrassed, and meanwhile the students watched intently to see what would happen.

"Maybe you're right," he said sullenly, "but I'm using textbooks approved by the Education Department. I'll check on it later and give you an answer to that."

Later that day the school principal summoned Alla to his office.

"What's going on, are you starting to teach our teachers?" he asked in a dissatisfied tone. "You could have brought it up with your teacher after the lesson, instead of demonstrating your knowledge in front of the other students."

"But, sir," the thirteen-year-old girl replied

emotionally, "ever since I was a child I've been taught at home and at school to always speak the truth, and I did just that. Why is the teacher telling the whole class lies? He can't teach us using ancient books and maps dating back to when the land was still under tsarist rule. Every map, even the Soviet ones, clearly shows where Ukraine is, where the other Soviet republics are, and where Russia is located . . ."

"Isn't the Ukrainian language the same as Russian?" the principal asked more peacably.

"If it was they wouldn't need to print Ukrainian-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian dictionaries."

"Well, we'll leave it at that," the principal said, hearing the lesson bell. "Go off to your lessons, and come to see me tomorrow."

The following day Alla brought from home the dictionaries she had mentioned, and also an English encyclopeadia containing a large section on the history, language and literature of Ukraine.

The principal looked through the books and smiled warmly: his formality of the previous day had disappeared. He had already been in touch with the Education Department, and had verified what she had told him. He looked up and said:

"You were right. From today every form in this school will know where Ukraine is, and where Russia is – and that Ukrainians aren't Russians."

About a month later Alla decided to wear her Ukrainian national costume to school: she put on a bright red necklace and tied her hair back with colourful ribbons.

"Where are you off to?" her father asked. "You look like you're decked out for a wedding."

"I'm going to school," the daughter said with cheerful assuredness. "I'm giving a fifteen minute talk on Ukraine today."

The principal came to listen to her too. Both the teacher and the principal liked Alla's talk. And there were many questions later from the class. During recess one of

the boys wanted to make fun of Alla's clothes:

"What's this you're wearing then?" he scoffed and tugged at her bodice. The other students surrounded the them in a circle. Alla was not lost for words:

"It's a Ukrainian national costume. And what have you got on? An Australian costume?"

Everyone burst into guffaws, while the impertinent student stood lost for words.

Another two years passed. Alla passed each year with flying colours. Both her teachers and her classmates thought highly of her. She worked hard, amazing everyone with her involvement in school activities.

But there was more unpleasantness ahead. Alla even wrote about the incident in her diary, to which she entrusted all the secrets of her teenage heart, all her suffering and joy. A new English teacher was assigned to their school, an English woman. Tall, thin, she turned up at the first lesson wearing a pince-nez, but neither her eyes nor her face showed any warmth towards the children. All of the forty students studied her warily and listened to her first words, for she already had a bad reputation among the other students for being petty and aloof.

Opening the class roll, she called out the students' names, to become acquainted with them. The top student in the class was the daughter of Dutch migrants. After calling out her name, the teacher eyed the girl who had stood up. The slightly unusual surname showed that she was not an Australian. The teacher asked:

"What nationality are you?"

Ingrid replied that she was born in Australia.

"And your parents?"

"They're Dutch, miss."

"Then you were born a migrant child and you'll die one," the English woman said coldly. Wiping away tears, Ingrid sat down again, very hurt. Finally Alla's turn came. The teacher began to pronounce her name: "Ola, Ela . . ." she struggled. The girl decided to help her and raised her hand. Though the teacher pretended to

ignore her, Alla excused herself and said:

"My name's Alla."

"What nationality are you?" the teacher asked her too.

"I was born in Australia, and my parents are Ukrainians."

The teacher looked at the girl one more time and announced just as coldly as before:

"Then you were born a migrant child and you'll die one . . ."

Unable to stand such indelicacy, Alla replied:

"So what of it? You were born a Pommie and you'll die one too."

As if on cue the whole form exploded in loud guffaws and shouts of 'Good on you, Alla!'

The teacher had not expected such a reaction. Her face immediately turned a deep crimson, and malicious sparks flashed through her eyes. She surveyed the class through her pince-nez one more time, and grabbing her books, stormed out of the classroom. Five minutes later Alla was called to the principal's office. He began in a severe tone:

"Starting a rebellion again?!"

Bursting into tears, Alla told him everything as it had happened, finishing with the words:

"I raised no rebellion at all, I only know that discrimination is against the law in Australia," and a wave of bitterness welled inside the girl as she wiped away unbidden tears.

"I believe you, I believe you," the director repeated, and added more gently: "Calm down . . . If everything you've told me is true, then you won't see this teacher in school any more. I'll make some more inquiries . . ."

"Only please don't transfer me to another school," Alla begged tearfully. "All my friends are here . . ."

"What ever gave you the idea that I want to transfer you? Go back to your class. Only do it quietly, so there's no more rioting . . ."

The form greeted Alla like a heroine, congratulating her on her pluckiness and witty reply. Everyone was extremely proud of her. Only after this incident some of the teachers acted more coolly towards her and weren't as generous with their marks.

1976

Dancing group at the Ukrainian Saturday School in Newport, 1952.

A NOCTURNAL ENCOUNTER

In the evening, after the Ukrainian scouts had finished working on their new swimming pool and the buildings of the Ukrainian Scout camp, a neighbouring Australian farmer, Ron, dropped in. He felt lonely on his farm at times and came to the camp to talk and joke with the scouts. Sometimes he'd bring some apples or pears with him, or potatoes, or milk. The scouts had grown used to him, and he to them.

"Come round to my place," he said this time, "we'll watch some television."

Chatting with him a while longer, Michael and George decided to wander across to Ron's place. After watching television and having tea, they talked again about various things, about how work was progressing at the camp, the price of land in the area, and finally about kangaroos, which often damaged Ron's crops, and occasionally visited the scout camp, where the grass was lush.

"Now," said the Australian, "there are many young kangaroos about, they're good eating . . ."

"But it seems such a pity to shoot them," George replied, "they're such beautiful, furry animals."

"They may seem nice to you, but they can be quite a pest: either they trample the vegetables and eat them, or they get into the orchard after the apples."

"Why, do they like apples?" asked Michael.

"It wouldn't be so bad perhaps if the damned things ate them, but they knock down more than they eat," Ron said. "Late one evening I lay down on some hay in the orchard to rest. Looking up, I saw two of them fly

over the wire fence. The apples were just beginning to ripen. So they hopped up to the apple trees, which are quite tall, and I thought they wouldn't reach. But no, they must have enjoyed themselves: they'd leap up two metres and knock an apple to the ground, taking it in turns."

The scouts listened with interest to Ron's account, and he continued:

"They're champions at jumping! You can be driving through the bush and the things will jump clear over your car. It's as if they wait specially for you to come past. At least the wild pigs don't bother me any more. They're worse than the kangaroos."

"Why, are there wild pigs in the bush here?" Michael asked.

"No, not close by, but drive thirty miles or so and you'll see herds of them. They're not true wild pigs, but domestic pigs that have grown wild living in the bush."

Michael and George returned to the scout camp late that evening. Dense bush surrounded the parade ground. Michael decided to try his luck at hunting kangaroos. Taking his rifle along, he walked down to the swimming pool, past piles of fresh earth, and approached the forest which stretched up the slope to his left. Suddenly a kangaroo appeared from the trees.

'This is my lucky day today,' he thought, and moving another five metres closer, fired. The kangaroo reeled, but remained upright and did not bound away.

'Don't tell me I missed?' he thought incredulously. He fired a second time, and the animal fell to the ground. But as he approached to pick up the dead kangaroo it sprang to its feet to escape. Throwing his rifle aside, Michael rushed at the wounded animal, grabbing it from behind before it could get away. But the kangaroo still had plenty of fight left in it and tried to break loose, lunging in all directions, trying to hop off, while Michael held onto its neck for all he was worth.

After five minutes he was bathed in sweat from the exertion, but refused to let go. 'If I let go, it'll disembowel

me on the spot,' he thought. He had heard stories of wounded kangaroos attacking hunters, ripping open leather coats and occasionally even crippling the men.

And he summoned his last strength not to let go. But the kangaroo wouldn't relent, thrashing about, snorting, lunging in all directions.

His hands scratched and bloodied, Michael cursed himself for having gone hunting. Ten minutes more and he gave up, letting go of the kangaroo. Fortunately, the animal didn't turn on him, but hopped off into the bush.

Michael saw its front paw hanging limply by its side. He called out to George and Lou, who were standing in the middle of the parade ground, waiting for Michael to appear with his trophy. When the boys ran up, they all began to look for tracks to follow and catch the kangaroo, and found traces of blood on the grass and leaves. After two miles or so they lost track of the animal and returned empty-handed.

"Look," said Michael, rolling up his sleeves and lifting up his shirt, which had worked its way out of his pants. Only now did the boys notice that all of Michael's clothes were creased and torn, smeared with blood and dirt, and his body was covered with scratches and small wounds.

Ron arrived, having heard the shots and the commotion. Learning what had happened, he said:

"Never go hunting kangaroo alone. I once pumped seven bullets into a kanga's head, and when I came closer it was still waving its paws about, trying to scratch me."

The evening finished with talk about kangaroos and Michael's unsuccessful hunt. The boys had been looking forward to some delicious kangaroo-tail soup that evening, but had to be content with buttered toast.

1960

The Australian Possum.

IN THE BUSH

This year I was holidaying at Mr Zawadsky's farm in Boddington, about 100 kilometres from Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. The hills surrounding the farm were green with forests, in which seemed to lurk many secrets.

One morning my host and I set out on a hike into the forest. Youko and Mary, the farmer's two dogs, accompanied us, running playfully ahead, then rushing back to join us. I had long yearned to see the Australian bush in its primeval state.

Passing herds of sheep and cattle which were grazing away to our right in a paddock which stretched down to the creek, we steered left, moving along the edge of the forest. Here and there through the trees we saw slabs of bare rock, and occasionally whole rocky outcrops.

"We'll enter from the right side," said my host, "so that we can traverse the forest from end to end. I haven't been there for over sixteen years myself."

"What animals have you got in your forest?" I asked.

"There isn't much: a few kangaroos, some foxes, hares and a few other things."

"Do any of them give you trouble?"

"Before, yes. I used to have seventeen turkeys, well the blasted foxes left me only two, killing the rest. And it wasn't as if they were hungry. They'd bite off the heads and leave the birds behind."

"Are there that many foxes?"

"It's hard to say. But once as I was walking along the edge of the forest I saw a pack of eleven foxes running

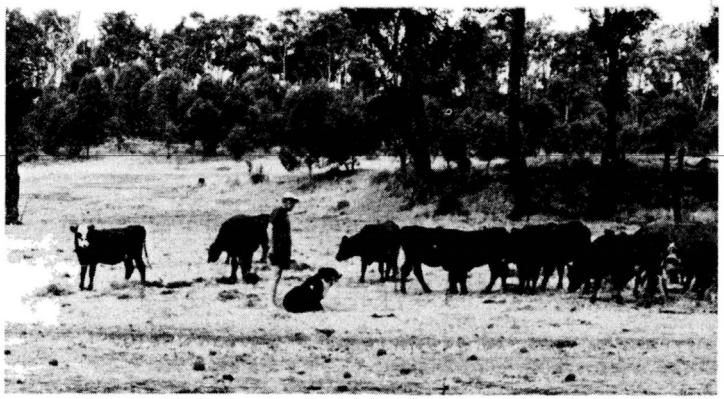
towards me. I hid behind a tree so as not to frighten them away. They stopped some five metres short of the tree and began to rummage around, sniffing the earth, without even realising that I was there. But when I stepped out and waved my hand, they bolted and raced off into the forest."

"What about wild pigs?"

"I haven't seen any here, but deeper into the forest there are plenty of them. One Ukrainian farmer had three hundred. First he caught a few, and then they bred."

"How did he catch them?"

"With dogs. The dogs give chase and surround the pig from all sides, and then you simply grab the animal by its hind leg, tie it up, and hoist it into the back of the utility."



Engrossed in conversation, we entered the depths of the forest. New types of tree appeared on our path, strange bushes with prickly leaves which scratched our hands, burnt stumps and fallen trees. Mary kept running ahead, but the farmer checked her, calling out to her to stay behind us with Youko. She looked obediently and guiltily at the farmer, returning behind us, but several minutes later forgot everything and dashed forward.

The farmer stopped in one place: before him lay a large half-metre-long lizard. It opened its mouth and hissed

menacingly at us, but the farmer deftly picked it up by its thick neck.

"These short-tailed lizards are very slow and inactive; we call them 'bobtails' here," my companion said. "Their bite, however, is as bad as a goanna's – when they bite you, the wound won't heal for up to a year."

He placed the lizard back on the ground and we moved forward, clambering over fallen trees and fighting our way through the undergrowth. At every step we saw rabbit and fox holes, kangaroo tracks and old bird nests.

Suddenly a fox dashed out from under a bush and raced off. The dogs ran off after it. But ahead lay a large log whose inside had completely rotted away. It was some seven metres long and hollow from one end to the other. The fox slipped into the hollow log. Youko rushed in after it, with Mary scurrying in after him and barking loudly. We rushed to the far end of the log to block the fox's exit. Squatting, we peered in, but the sly fox had outwitted us all: it had shot out through a hole in the trunk's side, and we saw it disappear into some bushes quite some distance away. The dogs hurried after it, but soon returned.

As we continued on our way we kept coming across neat little mounds about half a metre high, which looked like strewn caps.

"What are these, anthills?" I asked. "Where are the ants then?"

"They're termite nests," the farmer said. "They've got an underground passage to the nearest tree and slowly eat it out from the inside until it dries up and falls to the ground."

He kicked one such mound with his shoe. A piece of mud wall broke off and we saw tiny insects inside. I remembered that there were several thousand species of termite in the world, some of them growing up to 14 centimetres in length, their nests rising to fifteen metres in height.

Hardly had we taken a dozen or so steps, when the farmer exclaimed:

"Look, two kangaroos hopping away!"

I looked in the direction my host was pointing and saw two kangaroos. They quickly disappeared into the forest undergrowth.

"They come here each night to graze, and come right out into the open. During the day they rest under the trees."

Soon we came upon whole areas of exposed yellow sand and white pebbles where they lounged about on the ground. When we finally reached a fence, the farmer stopped and said:

"There's poison grass over there. My sheep wandered in there once and about a hundred and thirty of the darlings died of poisoning."

"How many have you got on the farm now?" I asked.

"Five hundred sheep, and there are also one hundred and twenty head of cattle."

"You talk about the sheep as if they were people."

"Well they're no worse than people," the farmer said. "They don't cause me any trouble, they're obedient, just like these dogs who help me to graze the sheep and cattle. After you've lived here a while you'll see how useful these dogs are."

We reached a large tree which had fallen in a storm a long time ago and sat down on it to rest.

"I told you that to reach the end of my forest we'd need a bag of food," my host said, and pulled several apples and biscuits from a haversack. After our snack, we proceeded to the left down the hill, making straight for the house, as it was close to lunchtime.

"We're lucky it's still cold," the farmer said. "When it warms up all the snakes come out from their nooks and crannies, and then you really have to watch your step."

The terrain became uneven: there were gullies washed out by water, and small hills covered in scrub. Mary rushed ahead once more.

When we came near some dense scrub a kangaroo came bounding out from the bushes and hopped right past

us, clearing stumps, fallen trees and bushes. We watched it go and clapped our hands.

Then we climbed to the highest hill, whose slopes sported exposed slabs of rock. Beyond it the ground began to fall away and through the trees we could see the distant strip of the creek. A little further to the right stood the simple small cement-sheet farmhouse.

Surveying the panorama before us, the farmer said to me:

"I went to work in the forest one time to clear some scrub and trees and forgot to take my matches with me. So I got a piece of paper and wrote on it for my wife to give me some matches, and shoved the note between Youko's teeth, telling him to go home to Tetiana and to bring back the matches. He already knew what matches were, and I pointed towards the farmhouse. And what do you think happened? Five minutes later my Youko brought me the matches wrapped in a handkerchief."

As we descended down the slope I kept glancing at my friend: he was seventy-one, tall, round-faced, his hair starting to turn grey. He had put a lot of work into the farm, building sheds, stockyards, enclosures. Mr Zawadsky had arrived here twenty-two years earlier and bought these seven hundred acres of land, borrowing half the money from the bank. Then this place had been overgrown with scrub, littered with fallen trees, branches and rocks. And he had cleared it all with his own hands, so that his stock had somewhere to graze. He had started off with thirty sheep and ten cattle, but now had several flocks of sheep and a large herd of cattle, two horses, a tractor and a seeder. But it had not always been so easy: even the last winter thirty-five newly-born lambs had died on a freezing-cold night.

We walked for some time without saying a word. When we reached the cattle-sheds, he stopped, remembering another interesting incident:

"One cold morning I was on my way to milk the cows. It was winter and the puddles were iced over. Just

here I was about to open the gate to the enclosure, when I heard something squealing thinly. I thought it might have been a baby, and looked around, but saw nothing. Then I heard the squealing again. I looked down – it was a frog. The poor thing must have been very cold: it kept raising one leg and letting out a plaintive 'pee-ee', then raising the other and letting out a similar noise. And it was all puffed up like a potato. I picked it up, lay it on my hand and covered it with the other. It became quiet. Bringing it home, I dipped a rag in some warm water and wrapped the frog up in it to warm it up. When the sun appeared, I took the frog outside and let it go in the garden."

A few minutes later we reached the house, Youko and Mary frolicking before us.

1975

YOUKO

After our long stroll about the farm we were a little tired. And that evening, after all the work had been done and the two orphaned lambs fed warm milk, my host and I sat down to read the papers and to chat. The back door was ajar and Mr Zawadsky's dog Youko entered the house. He loved to come inside every evening to be with his master and to receive attention. He had already grown used to me. Seeing that his master was thoroughly engrossed in a newspaper, he trotted up to me, wagged his tail affably and rested his head on my knees. I patted his head and back, while he stood there, eyes closed in contentment.

Noticing Youko, the farmer remembered his promise and started to tell me about his intelligent dog:

"I used to have another dog called Fayda, but he found himself some bitch several kilometres away and used to disappear every night to play up with her. On his way home one morning he came across some poison bait, ate it and died on the spot.

"Soon after I learned that a neighbouring farmer had pups for sale. I went over there and bought myself a pitiful little black puppy for two dollars. It had a white 'collar' and white socks on its front paws. Its eyes were all misted over. I had to wash it first, for it was infested with fleas. Then I prepared a box for it and my wife made it a warm woollen mattress. She was the one who named it Youko."

"Where did she find such a strange name?" I asked out of interest.

"She lived for a short while in Paris, and so she made up this noble French name for it.

"So, our Youko grew and grew," the farmer continued, "becoming bigger and smarter: he'd drag out all my shoes which I kept in the workshop and played with them till he was bone tired, collapsing among his 'toys' in a heap, fast asleep. But six months later he was already helping me pen sheep, chasing roosters apart whenever they fought, sending the sheep and cows running if they wandered into the vegetable patch or among the fruit trees.

"In those early days I used to go out into the bush to work almost every day. I'd take something to eat and a canteen of water. The canteen had straps and Youko always begged me to let him carry it. He'd hold it in his teeth by one of the straps and walked beside me, pleased that he was helping me. After we arrived at the place where I was clearing the forest, I'd put the bag of food and the canteen under a tree, and Youko lay beside them, on guard. Whenever I was thirsty I called out to him to bring me the canteen. He was always very eager to do so, and even brought me the food, when I asked him. Then he'd take it all back and lay it in the same place, stretching out beside it. Having nothing else to do, he became bored and would begin to bring the canteen every half hour or so, until I scolded him. Youko always carried the canteen home in the evening too. One day a rabbit dashed out in front of us. Youko dropped the canteen and raced after it. I continued on my way. When I reached home, Youko came bounding up, but without the canteen.

" 'Where's the canteen?' I asked him.

"With his tail between his legs the dog raced off guiltily into the forest, and returned with the canteen a while later, though I was some distance from the house, looking at the sheep. He wagged his tail smugly and his eyes seemed to say: 'Look, I've brought it back.' "

"He really is quite a smart, interesting dog," I commented to the farmer.

"I can tell you more about him," the farmer continued. "Youko loves going for walks into the forest with me, but there were times when I had to work for several days at a stretch around the house, and the dog longed for the forest. Then he'd go off to the workshop and bring the empty canteen to me. He'd rub against my leg, and then walked towards the door, looking back, as if calling me. I'd laugh, slap him on the back and tell him to take the canteen back.

"One day I noticed that he wasn't spending the nights on the farm. It was probably mating time, I thought. I was worried that he might come across some poison bait or a trap, for he liked to crawl into rabbit holes, though I've never seen him catch or kill a rabbit. And one day he didn't return. Midday passed, and then evening, and still he had not returned. Early the next day I set out to look for him. I searched everywhere, and returned home empty-handed, tired and hungry. After having lunch, I went off again. By nightfall I'd combed all the surrounding bush, and hills and gullies, continually calling out his name. But I heard or saw nothing. Even though I was tired, I slept badly that night. And the next morning I went off to search for him at the crack of dawn. I spent the whole day clambering over boulders, crawling through scrub and climbing hills, but returned home empty-handed again, losing all hope of ever finding my trusty friend."

The farmer was telling his story with such feeling that I too was moved by the suffering in his voice. And only the fact that the story's hero lay beside me led me to expect a happy ending.

"You know, he used to bring the cow to the shed every morning, ready for milking. When I came out in the morning, he would be standing at the gate, almost seeming to say, 'Look, I've already brought the cow.'

"I announced a reward of a hundred dollars for the return of the dog. On the third day I was cycling to Boddington, still thinking about Youko. There was a steep hill on the right, near the township, and I remembered that

I hadn't looked there yet. I scaled fences, dragging my bike along too and anxiously made my way around boulders, fallen trees and through scrub, calling out his name every so often. I scaled the top of the hill and slowly made my way down the other side, sad and depressed. To my left was a deep gully, and beyond it enormous boulders, which looked as if they had been strewn there on purpose. I looked about and called out: 'Youkie! Youkie!' Suddenly, I couldn't believe my ears: I heard his plaintive whine, and straining my eyes, saw his head poking out from among the boulders. I called him, but he only whined, baring his teeth in joy, obviously unable to move."

As the farmer told the story he relived all the suffering of his dog's predicament. I looked at this tall, slender, round-faced man and saw a tear rolling down his cheek.

"Quickly I crossed the gully and reached Youko. His foot was caught in a trap which had become lodged in a crevice between the rocks. No sooner had I freed him, than he was all over me, licking my hands, whimpering with joy and pain, like a crazed dog, almost jumping onto my head. He had forgotten all about his leg; the trap had cut into his paw to the bone and it was all swollen. I was ecstatic at having found my faithful friend too."

"How did you get him home?" I asked.

"Half an hour later we were in Boddington," the farmer continued his story. The first thing I did was go to the butcher's and there I bought him two pounds of good meat, because he hadn't eaten a thing for three days. On our way back home he hopped along, holding his wounded leg up in the air, unable to step on it. A neighbour's wife pulled up and offered to give us both a lift home, but I thanked her and said the exercise would do him a world of good after his three days of captivity.

"When I came home my wife wept with joy and took Youko under her wing. In two months the leg had healed, but he still limped on it. The wife then took him to the vet, and after an operation, Youko was completely recovered in three weeks."

The following morning, after we had finished breakfast and the farmer had fed his orphaned lambs and milked the cow which Youko had brought into the milking shed, we went for a walk down by the river. Behind the house, in a field of lucerne, lay a large overturned eucalypt, its roots bleached and straining towards the sky; almost all its branches lay broken off in the grass around it.

"What's happened here? How did the gum-tree fall over?" I asked the farmer.

"Two months ago there was a bad storm which uprooted several trees on my farm, and this giant went too."

As we approached the gum-tree the farmer remembered something else about Youko.

"It was a beautfiul, quiet morning, the kookaburras did not dare disturb the silence with their guffaws. The sun had just appeared over the hills and was not yet hot. I was walking with Youko towards the river. I happened to look up and saw a rabbit heading towards us like a tumbleweed. Something must have scared the daylights out of it. Or maybe it was partially blind. The rabbit stopped about thirty metres short of us, then dashed off to the right. Youko bounded off after it and grabbed it by the back. It must have been the first time he'd caught a rabbit. I kept going, so as not to see him killing it and tearing it apart. But then my curiosity got the better of me and I turned around to witness a strange scene: Youko had run up to this large eucalypt, and still holding the rabbit in his teeth, began to dig a hole at the base of the tree. The soil's sandy around here, so he made fast work of it, and then dropped the rabbit into the hole. Stunned, it lay motionless while Youko filled the hole, covering it completely. He knew that rabbits lived in the ground, and had probably decided to return it there. I never saw him eat or kill rabbits. Before Youko had run twenty metres towards me, the rabbit hopped out of the hole and scampered off. Youko made no effort at all to go after it. And I thought, what a generous dog he was."

Walking alongside the sluggish river a while, we

managed to scare a few wild ducks into flight from the tall rushes, and then returned home. After lunch I asked the farmer:

"When does your mail come?"

"I've got my own postman," he said and we went outside.

"Youko!" he called to the dog. "Get the paper!"

The letter box was some half a kilometre away, outside the farm gate. The dog raced off towards the gate which was barely discernible among the trees. I put on my glasses and watched.

Youko ran up to the gate, jumped through the wire strands of the fence, picked something up off the ground and hurried back. A few minutes later the paper was in the farmer's hands.

"See, I told you my postman would get the paper for me," he said with a proud smile, patting his trusty friend.

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HOP-HOP, THE DOMESTICATED KANGAROO

Hearing that the Dobrowolsky brothers had a tame kangaroo on their farm, I went off to visit them and to see this interesting animal from close up. The car sped us along a winding road, past tree-covered mountains. I kept admiring the green walls of the dense forest, which in places bordered the roadside.

Making one final turn left and travelling a short distance along the track, we stopped in the yard of these Ukrainian farmers. There were no pigs wandering about the yard here, like in the villages back in Ukraine, and there were no chickens. We were met by a large, ferocious-looking dog, black and hairy as a sheep. He barked several times, but seeing that we were accompanied by his master, grew quiet. His name was Booby.

Behind the plain farmhouse stood a large gum-tree, towering over it like a sentry. To one side lay expanses of pasture land, beyond that came the forests. A large kangaroo lay under the gum-tree. Mr Dobrowolsky brought out several pieces of white bread from the house and we approached the kangaroo which they had named Hop-Hop.

"You've chosen a very appropriate name for it," I said to Mr Dobrowolsky, who handed me a piece of bread to feed to the animal.

"It likes white bread," said the farmer, and then turned to his fourteen-year-old grandson, Stepan:

"Stepanko, try and take a good photograph of our guest feeding the kangaroo."

Slowly I approached the animal, which stood up

when it saw the bread in my hand. I patted its back with my right hand, and fed it bread with my left. Hop-Hop cautiously nibbled small pieces of bread and chewed on them, while Stepan clicked away with his camera. Several times the kangaroo backed away, probably afraid of me. When I patted its back I could feel its body trembling slightly. Suddenly, having eaten its fill, or having grown tired of my presence, it hopped off, clearing a high fence with ease, and rested on the grass, eyeing us from afar. Booby raced after him, and slipping through the wire strand fence, touched noses with the kangaroo, as if they were old friends. Then licking him, he lay down beside him.

Back in the house I asked Mr Dobrowolsky:

"Where did you get Hop-Hop?"

"It was like this," the farmer began. "We sowed several acres with oats on one of the paddocks bordering the bush. The oats were good, but every evening, as the sun set in the hills, kangaroos emerged from the forest, jumped over the fence and grazed on the oats – though they trampled more than they ate. They did so much damage that I decided to shoot some of them to keep the rest away from my crop."

"Are you allowed to shoot kangaroos?" I asked.

"Not usually. But I asked at the police station, and they said it was all right if they were a nuisance. Ten or more of them would get into the oats at a time. So just before sunset I hid in the bushes, and fired on them when they hopped into my oats to begin their games."

"Didn't you feel bad, shooting such beautiful animals?"

"Sure I felt bad," the farmer replied, "but there was nothing else I could do: I sowed the oats to have something to fatten my stock on, because they grow sick of fresh grass."

"How many of them did you shoot?"

"Twelve. Four of them had joeys* in their pouches,

Joey – a baby kangaroo.

but they all died except for this one."

"What did you feed it?"

"Milk, at first. But their stomachs couldn't handle cow's milk, and three died. So I went to the zoo in Perth and got some drops to add to the milk, and this saved the joey."

"Where did you keep it when it was small?"

"At first it slept in the house in a box lined with warm blankets. It always slept upside down, the way they sleep in their mother's pouch. It loved warmth. My wife often cuddled it, and it always crawled under her jumper. It stayed in the house for about six months. But it would wake up each night and run about the house, soiling the floor and waking us up. Finally we took it outside, and hung up a warm sack on the fence with a hole in the side. It crawled inside there and slept, and then followed us about everywhere. One warm summer night we left the window open in our bedroom, and it jumped straight through the window and onto the wife's bed. Frightened the wits out of her. In the morning it would come up to the window sometimes, stand on its hind legs and peer inside, occasionally even knocking. That meant it was hungry. Sometimes it would want something in the middle of the night and would come knocking on the window . . ."

"How did it make friends with Booby."

"They've been close friends for a long time now. They frolick together and sleep together too. When Stepan goes off to school in the morning they both see him to the bus, which stops out the front of our farm."

"Is Hop-Hop much of a pest outside?"

"My word, he is! Especially earlier on. The wife would hang the washing out on the line and our Hop-Hop would begin his games pulling it all down and rolling it about in the dust. The wife attacked him with a stick several times, and even wanted him shot. But I couldn't, I was so attached to him. And Stepan loves the animal too. Still, it's a very interesting creature, and it's become so attached to us, that even though the forests around

here abound with wild kangaroos, it doesn't run off to join them. One time it disappeared for two days and we thought it had returned to the wild, but it came back and hasn't left since. Probably wasn't accepted by the other kangaroos."

"And does he lay here all day under this gum tree?"

"No," replied the farmer, "when we go out into the paddocks or the forest to do some work, he and Booby set out with us. We light a fire and go about our work, and he'll lie near the fire. But when a strange dog appears, he becomes angry and emits an irritable 'hoo-hoo'!"

"What do you feed him?"

"Bread, vegetables, grapes. When he's hungry he sometimes knocks on the door, or goes inside himself, if the door's open. He loves to be scratched under the chin. To amuse himself he'll often begin all kinds of exercises: he'll jump round and round, then jump up, grab hold of a eucalyptus branch and swing about. But we don't always appreciate his antics. One time we had mown the hay, baled it and stacked it into fives to dry out. Well, he came along and hopped onto them, so that they all fell to the ground. Once the wife wanted to lock him in the shed, so he wouldn't touch her washing, but he wouldn't budge, shaking his head about in protest. You can housetrain a dog," the farmer stressed, "but never a kangaroo: you can hit it and do all you like, but it will continue to soil the floor. Though it doesn't touch the washing any more, thank heavens."

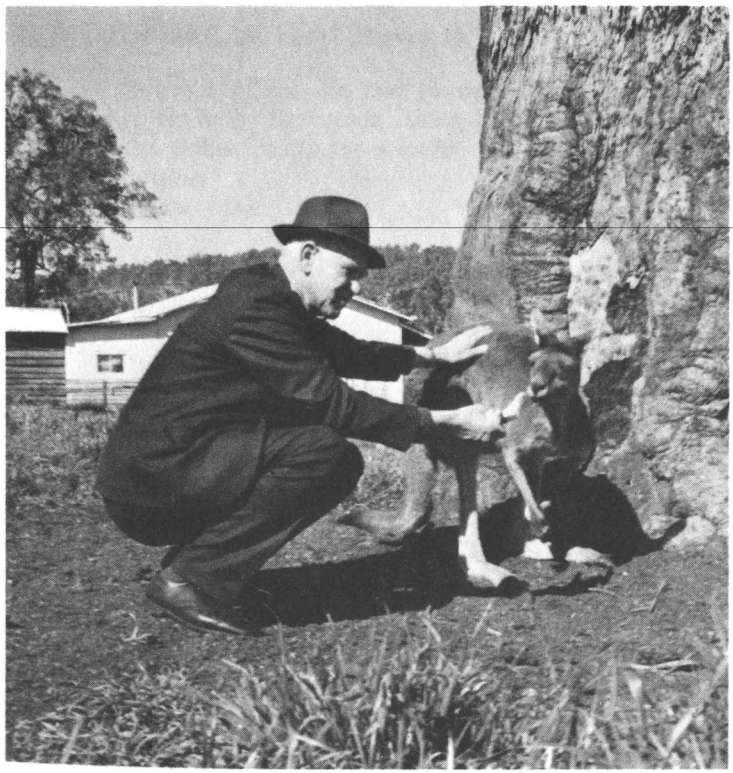
Thanking the farmer for his hospitality and the chance to meet his unusual pet, we headed back home. Scattered flocks of sheep, cattle, and the occasional farmhouse rushed past us. Back at Mr Zawadsky's place we were met by his two dogs, Youko and Mary, who sat at the gate like two faithful sentries, awaiting their master.

In the evening Mr Zawadsky again fed his two orphaned lambs some milk. Three times a day they came up to the house and reminded him that it was feeding time with their bleating. At about eleven that night, as we were

preparing to go to bed, a barking, whimpering sound reached us from the forest. The dogs immediately began to bark.

"Hear that?" the farmer asked. "Foxes calling from the edge of the forest. But there aren't any more turkeys here to feed them: they took fifteen of them, and the last two ended up on our own plates."

1975



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