



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation. In this second of a two-part series, Wussow writes on her visit back to Latvia.

In the publication *Jurmala*, author Indra Wussow travelled down memory lane with her friend Ojars, capturing childhood memories of summers near Riga in Latvia. Being right here in the snow of Jurmala they might be able to find a new beginning that overcomes all the losses suffered by their families. An extract, translated from the German by Maren Bodenstern, follows.

V

It's difficult to believe that this snowy landscape has had, and always will have, a sweet summer face. Even the monumental Soviet style architecture that had tried to make its unmistakable mark, could never really force itself onto this place. In this lovely new paradise, prominent members of the Soviet Union spent their summer vacations in sanatoria built for the workers. (Even here one seeks in vain for equality.)

For Ojars' parents these sanatoria were unknown territory. In nearby Riga, they dreamed of holidays at the sea that were only possible for party members and union bosses. But they knew their beloved ocean was close by and even if they seldom got to see it they continued to feel its power and strength.

When Stalin wanted to break the Latvian resistance, Ojars's grandmother Agathe, like many others, was deported to desolate Kazakhstan. In all those years, far away in a dirty cave in Karanga, she dreamt of her Baltic sea. It was this longing that helped her to survive, and after many years of deprivation, brought her back home.

Ojars himself spent many summers in the Komsomol holiday camp in Kemer. Despite his grandmother and parents' envy, he did not enjoy himself at all. The deprivations of the previous generations had made him soft and vulnerable. Having to prove that a better life was possible and that all the suffering was worth it, he was not allowed to show anything. So he kept quiet and joined the exuberant Soviet youths at the sea. He marched and learnt all the Socialist aphorisms. If you spoke in Latvian you were immediately chided – so the

majority of young people spoke Russian. Anything that was not understood was immediately interpreted as dissent.

My friend does not have any memories of romantic kisses on the white beach. Instead his memories are of estrangement and rejection. Being close to nature hadn't dissolved this loneliness. Instead, it made it worse.

'And do you know that when we were young we were not allowed to swim in the sea? It was poisoned by the pollution from the factories.'

I can see the 15-year-old boy standing on the beach staring at the dead ocean, his innocence lost to the Four Year Plans of the Soviet economy. Maybe the destruction of the environment was the sad and final ending to the romantic idyll of summer vacations.

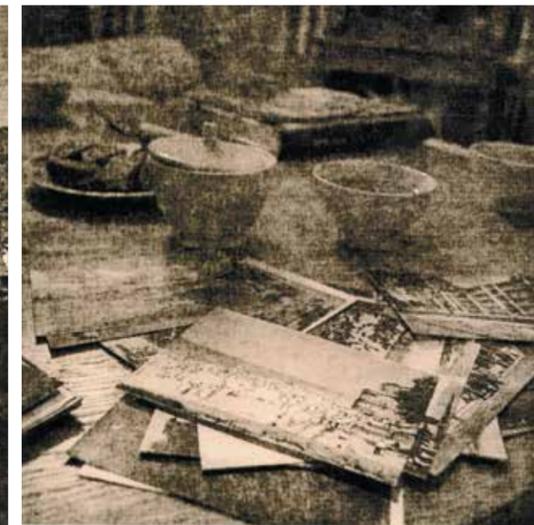
Or maybe it was not?

VI

Now we stand in front of one of those empty sanatoria where no one wants to have a holiday anymore. It seems as if they couldn't find an investor to help sanitize this collapsing monstrosity and, overtaken by history, even demolition was too expensive. The snow lends a touching beauty to this solid block, this late memorial to the Soviet era – and covered in coy white it looks almost embarrassed at its own ugliness. I can't help thinking of all the dreams and hopes of those who built this monstrosity.

But Ojars doesn't want to hear all this. All he sees is the tatty backdrop to a helplessness he had hoped to have left behind.

Pulled towards the dilapidated sanatorium I imagine the Stachanow workers from the Siberian Taifa living here, celebrating, dancing. After having secured the electrification of the mighty Soviet Union, and experiencing the sea for the first time, they solemnly dip their Siberian feet in the water. The Baltic must have been as strange to them as flying about in space was for Leica the dog.



My romantic notions of Soviet summer vacations don't find any resonance in Ojars, and I sense that even in old age he will not be able to get rid of his youth.

VII

Back at the seashore the blanket of snow crunches beneath our feet and I let my thoughts drift – this sea landscape has shrugged us off so many times, has loaded the losses of several generations onto our shoulders; and now, sharing all these memories and stories of loss seems to create in us an unquenchable longing to merge with a place that carries so much meaning. Being right here in the snow of Jurmala we might be able to find a new beginning that overcomes all the losses suffered by our families. Standing in this place it feels as if fate has brought me here. After all, the expulsion of my family from Latvia does not seem to have been the end of a story – it was merely a pause. And now it can continue with Ojars's and my story. In this windy white landscape with its blurred contours, the stories of our families weave into a whole written for this very moment.

Would Oma Bella's panic stricken flight from occupied Riga have been any easier if she had known that I am standing here today? That there still is a future despite her feelings that all was lost? While she was still alive she was convinced that there never would be as beautiful a place as the one she had created for herself in Jurmala. And this dream of her summer idyll accompanied her all her life. She decided never to drive back to her beloved Jurmala. She would not have recognised the place anyhow – this she was clear about.

Today I see the surviving fragments of the backdrop to Oma Bella's holiday dreams. After the fall of the Soviet Union, they are waking up from their Sleeping Beauty slumber. While next door the Soviet monstrosities crumble, new owners

are innocently creating their own summer dreams. History repeats itself but under different circumstances.

And among the ruins and the wrecked dreams of his unhappy youth, and in the intimacy of the refuge my family once found here, Ojars too has a glimpse of the happier aspects of his story. My enthusiasm seems to have transferred itself to him.

'Do you still remember where your grandmother's house is?' he asks. 'Just imagine if you could live in this house? Do you think you would feel your family's presence?'

But these questions are hypothetical because I don't know which of these white villas belonged to my family. And exactly because I don't know, I feel at home in these pine alleys and move through Jurmala as if it has always been a part of my real life, as if it had embedded itself into my being since childhood, had nestled itself ineluctably into my brain.

VIII

The wind drives us through the snowstorm back to the station. There is nothing more to say. You take my hand. And I take it as more than a proof of love – it is the reassurance of a journey that we have taken together, a journey in which we feasted on the past. A journey that has found its fulfilment in Jurmala, a place that has conquered its past and thereby has given us strength. **CF**

