The Silent Barricade

The town I grew up in is right on the border in a mountain pass, but the town itself is situated on a plain, so everyone rides around on bicycles.

You have to get started on a tricycle. With a bit of effort you work your way up to a kid's bike and then on to a Pioneer. The Pioneer came in red and blue, but if you wanted to stand out from the crowd and your dad was good with his hands, you'd have it repainted just for the hell of it, because in any case you'd soon be moving up to the three-quarter-size Eska, which they made in lots of colours and which had gears!

No wonder, then, that you struggled to part with it when your legs got too long and the time came to get yourself a Favourite. This was the high point of your development—not just because in those days there was nothing better to be had, but because with a bit of luck you'd have it for life.

My dad was a grown-up and a footballer, but he always rode a Ukraine and I never saw him on anything else. Its paintwork was chipped in many places, and it was rusty, too, but Dad never had it repainted; he said it got scratched

up on the barricades, which was nothing to be ashamed of. He always placed great emphasis on these words.

This very Ukraine had indeed been on the barricades, and as chance would have it, so had my tricycle.

It was a boiling-hot summer, which was why I had to bear the indignity of a child's sun hat on my head. Suddenly some big boys on red and blue Pioneers and three-quarter-size Eskas came racing up; wide-eyed, they explained that there were real tanks waiting on the other side of the border crossing. On hearing this, one of our neighbours slipped away, and a moment later we heard the sound of the engine of a large digger.

We stood there on the pavement, watching the machine dig up the road and tip the stones into a heap. Our frightened mothers came and dragged us home, but we carried on watching from the windows of our homes. As the heap grew, the road changed in appearance, and before long it was a great pit. It's safe to say that it would have been a big problem to ride your bike down it, even if that bike was a Favourite.

The dads went down into the cellars for old cupboards and tables of all shapes and sizes, which they pushed up on top of the heap of stones, making themselves really hot in the process. Someone brought along a wheelbarrow with a crate of beer in it. Each of the dads pulled out a bottle and took occasional swigs from it, but the lugging of the objects was not interrupted.

By the time it was dark there was a very large heap of stones under our window. The dads positioned themselves in front of it on the Polish side, drank their beer and chatted. Eventually some of them went for their bikes and

laid them on top of the heap from the front; this included Dad with his Ukraine.

I just couldn't get my head around it: Mum had told him to stay right where he was because he might get shot at, and there he was putting his bike on top of the heap. I didn't get it, really I didn't. Maybe, I thought, it was somebody else's bike that looked almost the same as his; there were lots of them about. I sneaked down to the cellar, but sure enough Dad's Ukraine was nowhere to be seen. The only bike in the pram room was my tricycle. I wheeled it out, clambered on and rode away to take a closer look at the mysterious goings-on.

I peddled up to the heap, got off my tricycle, and right there on top was Dad's bike, no doubt about it. Dad ran over and picked me up. Then he called something to the other men that I didn't really understand. But they treated me ever so nicely, which I liked, and Dad said I was his hero.

But then they put my tricycle up on top of the stones and I started to cry. Mum came rushing out, tore me away from my father, told him he was a lunatic, and carried me back home. She, too, was crying. A little while later Dad came home as well. He was in high spirits and told us there was nothing to worry about. He took every bottle of spirits and wine we had out of the bureau and pantry, explaining to Mum that he would be using these as firebombs, as they would be needing at least some kind of weapon. Then he carried the bottles away.

He came back again and took out of the wardrobe his number seven shirt, which he wore every Sunday and never entrusted to the laundry, preferring to have Mum take care of it. He played for several different clubs but always insisted

on having the number seven on his back and sleeve. He pulled the shirt over his head, then stood in front of the mirror and pulled on the captain's armband. He was quite happy now; he was not interested in who would have the numerical advantage and which weapons would be used. He was on the side of Good, and what's more he was its captain. It was all so magnificent that this time Mum made no attempt to hold him back.

It was almost dark now and the dads were sitting out there on the barricade. Although they had discovered that not a single man among them knew how to make an incendiary bomb, they were still not giving up. Every now and then one of them would stand up and wave the big banner they referred to as Our Flag. Then there was a great rumbling noise and the tanks I so much wanted to see surged over the border from Poland. But I didn't see much of them: the rumbling noise was so loud I had to bury my face in Mum's dress. The dress smelt lovely, the same as always, and this calmed me down. I was not disturbed by Mum's crying; I just sniffed at her dress for as long as it took for the booming noise to subside. The tanks had stopped.

For a long time the tanks stood right in front of the barricade without moving—at all. There was complete silence. From time to time Dad rose up in his invincible number-seven shirt, gave a quick wave of the banner in the direction of the tanks, then ducked back down again, so that he could strengthen team morale (as he liked to say) by putting the nearest incendiary bomb to his lips. Because he had to muster all his courage if he was to defy the loaded guns of the tanks with nothing but his bare hands. And because he was afraid, terribly afraid, of course.

It was dark now. So much had happened that day that I was tired, and that's all I can remember about it. The dads spent the night on the barricades all on their own; in the end all their supporters at the windows fell asleep. But the enemy remained vigilant. Every time there was the slightest sound from inside one of the tanks, the dads twitched into action and took sips from the incendiary bottles. Dad, as the captain, continued to jump up from time to time and give a menacing wave of the banner, but in the end they were all so drunk that almost half a litre of red wine—St Laurent, as it happens—got spilt on the white part of the flag. So that no one would notice this, the dads gave up on the waving, and as they no longer had anything to do, they soon fell asleep.

At some point during the night a figure crept towards the tanks and knocked on the turret of one of them. The turret opened, a head poked out and the figure spoke to the head in bad Russian. A moment later the figure climbed onto the tank and the rumbling noise resumed. Fumes billowed out from the tanks as the column went into reverse. But it hadn't reversed very far when the first tank stopped and began to move forwards again. It turned into a side street and was followed by the others.

The noise was not enough to wake the men on the barricade. Nor did they wake a few moments later when, behind them, the tanks rejoined the main road to Prague and vanished into the darkness on the way towards Hradec Králové.

Towards daybreak they were finally woken by rain. Apparently the whole town was still asleep. The men peered

cautiously through the early-morning gloom and saw no tanks in front of them. They staggered out in front of the barricade and wandered about in confusion: the tanks had disappeared without a trace. The dads whooped with delight. Dad jumped into the air with one arm high above his head as if he'd just scored a goal. Then they lifted the flag down from the barricade and set off through the town, waving the flag above their heads and singing the national anthem.

In their joy they failed to notice that several of the houses were flying the red flag of Russia. They whooped their way to the square and past the Tunnel pub, where Mr Pryl the landlord was just opening up. He opened every day at six a.m., to oblige the working class, as he liked to say. Anyway, Mr Pryl came out and shouted over to the heroes, "What are you yelling for, you idiots?" But by his tone you knew that he was touched and sad. And while the patriots were giving him a helter-skelter description of how they had beaten back the Russians with their bare hands, he took them into the side street, where the marks left by the tank tracks were clearly visible. And when they refused to believe their eyes he took them into the pub. They were just in time to hear the six o'clock radio news, which informed them that the tanks had reached Hradec Králové.

Their shoulders slumped; the patriots rolled up the banner and stood it in a corner. Then they sat down on the benches —or rather flopped down, as if their knees had given way— and without a word Mr Pryl placed in front of them the best tripe soup in the district, the very same tripe soup he used to make in the White Rose. And the patriots sat there looking into the soup, spooning it out then letting it drop.

No one ate until Mr Pryl said sharply, “Hey lads, I took the trouble to warm that soup up for you—so get it down you, eh?”

The patriots got stuck into the soup, and when it was eaten they sat on in silence. Then Mr Pryl said, “Budge up a bit, lads.” The patriots made room and the landlord sat down next to them, and they all sat there for a long time and no one said anything, until the clock struck seven, when Mr Pryl got up and went over to the radio. But someone muttered, “Don’t switch it on.” Mr Pryl let the familiar imperative pass, even though normally none of his customers were allowed to address him in such terms. According to Mr Pryl, too great a familiarity was irreconcilable with the ethos of his occupation. He would explain it thus: “If I let them get too familiar with me they’d start drinking here on credit, or they’d wreck the place. So I have to keep my distance. And maintain order. Every business needs order.”

This time he said nothing, but he didn’t switch on the radio either. He went off into the storeroom and came back with a big bottle of Scotch whisky. Then he locked the pub’s main door, put the bottle on the table and fetched some glasses. And so it came about that Mr Pryl got all the dads drunk without uttering a single word to them. And it’s no wonder, when you consider how much they’d already drunk and how little they’d eaten and slept. And when all the patriots were sleeping, every one with his head on the oak table, he said in a kindly voice, “It’s no moonshine, this. It won’t leave you feeling rough.”

Then he opened the door and proceeded to convey each of the patriots home in his cart, one after another. And all those people who had watched the progress of the singing,

standard-bearing patriots from behind their curtains were watching again as Mr Pryl delivered them to their wives.

Very soon afterwards, indeed before the revellers had slept it all off, thanks to the efforts of the powers that be, the barricade disappeared. But there were photographs of it, taken by one of the men who came with the diggers to demolish it. So it never quite disappeared altogether. Even though it was known which of the labourers had the photos, he kept hold of them.

Before the diggers could start work on dismantling the heap of stones, the labourers took down all the bicycles and with due reverence bore them away to the side of the road. The next day I started crying for my tricycle, and, sure enough, it was found among the bicycles. The only thing no one ever found out—even though it happened right there on the main street—was who showed the Russian tanks the way to go that night.

Later my tricycle was passed down to someone younger, then someone younger got my kid's bike, and before I knew it I was riding about on a Favourite. My father didn't have a Favourite. He bought one for me but for himself he kept the old Ukraine.

Every summer I used to visit my grandma, whose job it was to light the points at the station in Lysá. My bicycle would be sent on by train. It was borne away to the station and a label was attached to the handlebars. When I was still small and my bike was a Pioneer, it was Mum who would fill out this label. By the time I moved up to an Eska I was able to write, but it was still Mum who filled out the label. The first time I tried it for myself was when I got the Favourite. This was a wonderful experience. Absolutely amazing.

I rode to the station and got myself a label. I pulled out a pencil from my saddle-bag and took a good look at the little slip of paper. The lady at the baggage check-in was watching me. I filled out the columns: Sender: Steiner, M.; Address: 7 Mill Street; Station: Kostelec Central; (and this was the good bit!) Consignment: FAVOURITE BICYCLE. It was amazing. I never missed the chance to do it. Then I handed over the label to the baggage-check-in lady. After it was rubber-stamped I fastened it to the handlebars. And then I headed off home right through the middle of the main doors, in the manner of Dad on his way back to the dressing room after winning a match.

On the evening of the First of May we would always collect the abandoned flags—the Czech ones, anyway; the red Russian ones we left lying where they were. We would attach these Czech flags to our mudguards. Once I happened to be crossing the square when Mr Pryl was standing in the doorway of his pub. It crossed his mind that somewhere he still had the patriots' standard with the wine stain on it. He went off to take a look at it and noticed that the stain had faded into the white background so much that it no longer looked like a wine spill. It looked like a blood stain.