The Breaking of Eggs

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Extract

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I suppose that Madame Lefèvre was the catalyst for most of what happened next. This is surprising, since I doubt that Madame Lefèvre has otherwise been the catalyst for anything in her entire life. Even now I look at the words 'catalyst' and 'Madame Lefèvre' and wonder how they came to cohabit the same sentence.

'It's always good to be at home when you're ill, Monsieur Zhukovski.'

That was the first of two remarks which set in motion a chain of events that transformed my life in a way I would have found unimaginable at the time. It is hard to think of a more commonplace remark, a more unremarkable remark, yet it had such profound consequences.

'If you don't mind my saying so, Monsieur Zhukovski, you're getting a bit too old for all this running around. You should slow down, if you ask me.'

That was the second remark. At the time, I did mind her saying so, especially as I had not asked her, but it is hard to take offence when you are laid up in bed with a raging temperature and your self-appointed nurse chooses to offer unsought advice. So I probably said 'I expect you are right, Madame Lefèvre' and left it at that before receiving the sacrament of the latest parcel of medicines that she had procured at inordinate expense at the pharmacy across the street.

Both remarks were made on the same day: 1st January 1991. That made no impression on me at the time. I am not one to attach significance to such coincidences, or to any other superstitions or hocus-pocus, but now even I must admit that the date was appropriate. I had started to feel unwell on Christmas Eve and had thought nothing of it. Apart from the occasional cold, my health has always been good. I do not make a fuss about it. I do not announce the arrival of the flu the first time I blow my nose. As far as I can remember, I had never previously suffered the flu. Nor can I recall being ill in bed before.

To start with, I thought I was run down. 1990 had been a demanding year with a great deal of travel. I had needed to work harder and more rapidly than for a long time and I am sure it took a lot out of me. October and November had been especially difficult months. So when I started to feel unwell, in a way I was glad for the respite. Christmas is not my favourite time of year. I abhor the absurdities of religion. I have no family on whom to bestow unwanted presents. The handful of acquaintances who can normally be relied upon to help me prop up a bar in the evening all go to stay with relatives they detest. Paris closes down for a fortnight. There is nothing to do. Even without being ill, home is the best place to be; in fact the only place to be.

But I had never considered my apartment to be home, which is why Madame Lefèvre's remark made such a strong impression on me. It was not that I considered anywhere else to be home. I simply had no concept of home. I am not sure I had considered the question. There I was, a settled and comfortably-off man approaching his 61st birthday, who had lived in the same apartment for 36 years, and who was yet homeless. And the more I thought about that simple word 'home', the more complicated it became for me. I realised it was not a word I used. When I returned from my travels each autumn, I did not think

to myself 'I am going home'. When I put on my coat in some bar at the end of an evening, I did not say to my companions 'time to go home'. No. I would think 'I am going to Paris now', or say 'back to the apartment for me'. Home was not a word I used.

Perhaps this would have remained idle speculation but for Madame Lefèvre's second remark about being too old for all the running around. For the previous 36 years I had lived a life that others would perhaps call unusual and interesting, but which for me had long since become routine. In 1955 I started a small travel guide to the countries of eastern Europe. Like many things that turn out to be important in one's life, it began almost by accident. I found myself out of work and needing to do something quickly. I was interested in travel. Particularly, I was interested in eastern Europe. At the time I was a member of the French Communist Party and the idea of explaining communist societies objectively to others appealed to me. It is true that there were relatively few tourists to eastern Europe at that time, but there were some and no French travel guides were catering for them.

So I started the *Guide Jaune*. It was a modest publication initially. There was a section on every country within the Soviet bloc, each containing a brief commentary on the country, a description of principal cities and places of interest, and a list of hotels and restaurants. It had expanded over the years so that by 1991 it had become a sizeable volume. It sold steadily in independent bookshops in France. Later, German and English editions followed. Sales were never huge, but they were reliable and I managed to acquire a life that many people would envy: independent, varied and, if not exactly prosperous, then at least comfortable.

There were no staff. I was able to update the *Guide* quite easily myself, aided of course by helpful information from the tourist bureaux and government agencies in the various

countries. My old friend Benoît Picard had printing works in Paris and he looked after the sales and distribution for me. Everything worked smoothly.

For all that time, I spent more than seven months each year travelling, setting out metronomically on 1st March and returning in early October, living out of a suitcase in the meantime. I made sure I visited each country and each major city at least once every two years. Some places – Moscow, Leningrad, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest – I would visit annually. Another pattern followed my return to Paris each autumn. October was always a feverish month, in which I made the corrections and additions to the publication. The *Guide* was printed in the second half of November, so that the new edition could be in bookshops before Christmas, in time for people to plan their holidays for the following year. And this was how things continued for 36 years.

I must have known that at some point it would have to end, but I do not remember spending much time thinking about how or when it would happen, or what I would do with my life afterwards. But, even before Madame Lefèvre's remark, I had the sense that events were pressing in on me. It had started in 1989, of course. I still find the events of that year utterly bewildering. It would be fair to say that my own attachment to communism was already weaker by then. I had ceased to be a Party member in 1968. But I remained, in principle, a supporter of what the Soviet system sought to achieve and I had no doubt about the permanence of that system in eastern Europe, even if I no longer anticipated its triumph elsewhere. So, when the Soviet bloc collapsed like a pack of cards within a few months, I was astounded. I could not believe it was happening. It felt as if the entire edifice of my life was being torn down in front of me.

It was ironic, but the immediate effect of this on the *Guide* was most beneficial. Suddenly there was this new interest in

tourism to eastern Europe and mine was one of the few guides available. But I did not need to be a clairvoyant to know there would be many other consequential changes that would be less comfortable for me.

This became apparent during my travels in 1990. Everywhere I went, I encountered vast change. In less than a year, the situation had been transformed. All the old familiarities were evaporating. I found myself wondering whether more had not changed in a single year than in all the previous 35 put together. Naturally I cannot pretend that I thought most of this change had been for the better. I found the effect altogether unwholesome. It had also created severe pressure in my working life. Whereas previously it had been easy for me to update the *Guide* single-handedly, I could now see this was becoming impossible.

It was also becoming expensive. Perhaps I was stupid not to anticipate the personal greed that would follow such events. In March 1990 I had gone first to Prague, where I stayed in the same hotel as for many years. When I left, I was surprised to be presented with a bill. I assumed that the new manager could not have been informed of the arrangements but, when I summoned him, I was told bluntly that there no longer were any arrangements. I encountered the same situation elsewhere, to the extent that upon arrival anywhere I now needed first to check the financial status of my visit. I did not find this approach sympathetic. In fact it represented everything I loathed about the opening of eastern Europe to capitalism.

So the entire summer of 1990 had been problematical in one way or another. Everything took longer than it had before. Everything cost more. I found myself in Warsaw at the end of September, torn between the imperative of visiting Berlin on my way back to Paris and the equal imperative of beginning the amendments to the 1991 edition immediately, as there were

so many to make and so little time available. In the end I did not go to Berlin, although that may have owed something to my reluctance to be in the city on 3rd October, when East and West Germany were reunited. In any event, it was a major omission in the circumstances. I would be producing a guide for people to use in 1991 that had no first-hand account of the effects of the demolition of the Wall two years earlier. It was not good enough.

In spite of all this, I had no immediate intention of stopping the *Guide*. When, in October, I had received a letter from an American publisher asking if I might be interested in selling the title, I did not even bother to reply. I was in no mood to sell the *Guide* to anyone, and certainly not to some avaricious American firm. It was a temporary upheaval, I told myself: a lot of hard work for the time being and then everything would settle down again. Besides which, perhaps the eastern Europeans – once they had sampled the unfairness of their new system – would decide they had not been so badly off after all.

The illness changed my attitude; the illness and Madame Lefèvre's remarks. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps I was getting too old for all this running around. Perhaps I had taken more out of myself in 1990 than I had realised. Perhaps it was time to think of retirement. But what would happen to the *Guide*? And to where would I retire? Where did people retire? They retired to home. And where was home?

I came to this apartment at the same time as I started the *Guide*. October 1955: the last time there were major changes in my life. I had been staying with the Picards previously, above the printing works in St Germain. That was where the idea for the *Guide* first came about as a matter of fact, in discussions with Benoît Picard in those rooms. I think the Picards were rather afraid I would stay for ever. When a few orders for the first edition started to come in, old man Picard gently suggested

I might like to look for a place of my own and offered to advance me the money for the rent deposit.

I saw several apartments that I liked but was not offered. Maybe they did not want a foreigner. Maybe they did not like what I was doing. They all asked what my line of work was, of course, and when I told them I could see the disapproval in their faces. One or two asked me if I was a communist and they liked the answer to that question even less.

At first Madame Lefèvre promised to be no different. She owned 22 Avenue Secrétan in the 19th *arrondissement*, a scruffy district of Paris, but a house and a street that have a certain shabby nobility. Her own apartment is on one half of the second floor and she was looking for a tenant for the neighbouring apartment. The rest of the building was already let. She asked the usual questions. I gave the usual answers and expected the usual rebuff. In this case I did not get it. I was certain that Madame Lefèvre had no more sympathy for my politics than the other prospective landladies. When she offered me the rooms, I concluded it was only because it suited her to have a tenant next door who was both single and absent for a large part of the year.

The apartment comprised a large sitting room at the front, overlooking the street, and a smaller bedroom at the back, with a separate kitchen and bathroom. The furnishings were hardly smart or contemporary, but at the time they did not seem dated. The rooms were full of heavy *bourgeois* furniture, with slightly threadbare carpets, nondescript coverings and the odd mirror on the wall. It was perfectly comfortable. Madame Lefèvre was not someone to spend money unnecessarily and, since I had demanded no alterations subsequently, she had made none. I suppose a visitor would have said the apartment was now hopelessly old-fashioned, some relic of a 1950s time warp. They might have said the same of me. I do not know. I do not think I had ever had a visitor. For

myself, I liked it the way it was and had become used to its little eccentricities. I had never seen a particular need to make changes myself. It was not as if it were my home.

If the apartment had changed little over the years, neither had Madame Lefèvre. She had struck me as middle-aged when I first saw her and she has struck me as middle-aged ever since. As I was young when I moved in and am now getting on for being old, how she has managed to be consistently middle-aged for 36 years I could not say. I suppose she must have been about 40 in 1955 and, at that time, it was easy to be middle-aged at 40 if one wanted to be. I do not know why she wanted to be. She could have been very pretty when she was younger. The striking thing about her has always been her abnormally long hair. Most of the time it is worn like a ball of string on the back of her head, held in place by a minor ironmongery. But at times I have seen it unsecured, and it is extraordinarily long and actually very beautiful.

Madame Lefèvre's clothes belonged to the same ordered world as the rest of her. After a while I noticed that she had a different dress for each day of the week: seven dresses for seven days. The best dress was of course for Sundays. If I forgot what day it was, I merely needed to see which dress she was wearing. At first I thought that these dresses never changed, that she had discovered some magical fabric that never wore out or discoloured. Then I noticed subtle changes to the cut and realised that the truth was even more peculiar: that every few years she replaced an old dress with one made from an identical fabric, cut slightly differently to make a token, barely perceptible nod towards fashion. Where did she get them from? Was there some *costumier* in Paris with an inexhaustible supply of timeless fabrics? But I suppose she might have looked at me and thought the same.

I never saw a visitor come to her door either. I think we established at some early point that neither of us had any

family. I do not know what she did with her time. One might have thought the two of us would use some of it talking to each other, but we never did. It would have been easy enough. Although I was away so much and always working hard in October and November, I still had my three rest months of the year – December, January and February. You would think we would have talked then. But we did not. Right up until January 1991, until the time I am writing about, I did not even know her first name. She would have known mine, but never used it.

Why was this? Well, I cannot speak for Madame Lefèvre of course, but for my part I think it was a number of things. I am a reserved person, on the whole. I keep myself to myself and do not go much out of my way to make new friends. Then, Madame Lefèvre represented a class that I despised. I had nothing against her personally; she seemed a reasonable enough woman; but I do not have much time for the *bourgeoisie* in general, and for *les petites rentières* less still. And what would we have talked about? We could not discuss politics. She knew mine from the beginning and I had no difficulty guessing hers. Every so often she would find a subtle way of making her opinions plain. If there had been some big election in France while I was away, she would be sure to leave a little parcel of literature for me from conspicuously right-wing candidates, together with a helpful note saying she hoped I would find it interesting. So we could not talk about politics. We could not talk about my work, although there was plenty to talk about, because that involved politics too, certainly as far as she was concerned and also for me. In fact, as I had always said, everything involved politics in the end. Life was political.

We could have talked about the weather, and needless to say we did, and about small uncontroversial changes in the neighbourhood. Those conversations filled the odd few minutes on the second-floor landing, but hardly constituted

a friendship. To me this was neither surprising nor unwelcome. The surprise was that after 36 years, by which time I was by far the longest-standing tenant in the building, things suddenly changed. The surprise was that it was Madame Lefèvre who became the catalyst for all the other changes in my life. The surprise was also, I suppose, that I chose to respond.

When I was first ill I wanted to eat nothing. After a couple of days, with womanly concern, Madame Lefèvre appeared in my apartment with a bowl of soup and some bread. She had the key to my apartment, of course, and for all I know had frequently inspected its contents while I was away. Indeed she could have been reletting the rooms for six months of every year. I would not have known. I had no reciprocal knowledge of her apartment; in fact I had never been inside it. But I had always imagined this cauldron of soup simmering on her hob, constantly replenished, never entirely depleted, bubbling away over the decades. I had speculated what would be revealed if this soup was subjected to carbon dating. I suspected it would show trace elements of every year since Madame Lefèvre had acquired the building, whenever that had been.

Now she was knocking at my bedroom door and offering me a real bowl of this imagined soup, a bowl that perhaps contained minute particles of a cabbage harvested at the Liberation, a bowl that offered me the opportunity to eat our shared history. As the days went by and I became stronger, other offerings emerged from across the landing: omelettes, cheeses, a *fricassée* of chicken. Few words were exchanged, apart from those two significant remarks, but I must admit that a certain pressure built up to commence a conversation, to express something more than polite appreciation for her care. Perhaps that was why she did it. Maybe she was lonely. Maybe I was.

It still took me well into January to summon the nerve and to find the words to say. In the end I think I said: 'Madame

Lefèvre, we have known each other for a long time. I think it would be appropriate for you to call me Feliks.'

'Thank you Monsieur Zhukovski, I mean Feliks,' she said. There was a pause while she summoned equal nerve. 'And do please call me Sandrine, if you would care to.'

'Thank you, Sandrine,' I said. And then neither of us knew what to say, so we smiled at each other and no doubt both thought how ridiculous it was not to have said those few words many years before.

Madame Lefèvre was the first to recover from our mutual embarrassment and she did it by plunging into the previously taboo subject of politics.

'Have you heard what's happening in Lithuania?' she demanded.

I had heard. It had been on the radio that morning. Soviet troops were storming Vilnius in an attempt to prevent Lithuanian independence.

'It won't do them any good,' she said. 'It's far too late for that sort of thing now.'

'I dare say you are right,' I replied. Then, feeling that this sounded like a terminal remark to a conversation that had barely started, I wondered what else I could say. 'For me it is a funny thing to think of Lithuanian independence,' I said. 'I was not brought up to think of Lithuania as an independent country.'

'Really?' she said. 'Well that's communism for you.'

'It was not communism actually, Sandrine. I grew up in Poland before the war, before communism.'

'I always wondered if you might be Polish.'

'Yes I am. By birth anyway. And of course for many centuries Lithuania was part of Poland, as I am sure you know.' Madame Lefèvre did not know. She seemed to have little intrinsic interest in the history of Lithuania. I did not have much myself, as a matter of fact. I think she felt the conversation had strayed

from its original starting point, namely her great satisfaction at the collapse of communism.

'I'm surprised at you being a communist, Feliks, especially with you being Polish.'

'Not so much a communist,' I said. 'I have always described myself as a leftist.'

The distinction did not impress Madame Lefèvre. 'Same difference,' she said.

I did not know myself why I insisted on the distinction. I used to tell myself it was to do with accuracy and precision, but of course 'leftist' is a less precise term. It could describe anyone from a hard-line Marxist to a moderate Social Democrat. So was I trying to conceal something? No, I do not think so. I never hid my opinions from anyone. Perhaps I had an abhorrence of labels, of being put in a box neatly labelled 'communist'. Perhaps it was a simple declaration of independence. As time went by, the qualification came closer to the truth. By 1991, I did not know whether I was any longer a communist or not, and it was ceasing to matter. But I did know I was still very much a leftist.

'When did you leave Poland?' By now it was clear that neither the history of Poland nor the precise ideological distinctions of the left would deter Madame Lefèvre from finding out more about me after 36 years.

'In 1939,' I said. 'My brother and I were sent to stay with an aunt in Switzerland.'

'The war again.'

'I do not think so. I believe it was something else.'

'What else could it have been?'

'Oh, personal things,' I said.

'Were there problems at home?'

Well, really! Not a word for 36 years, and then this sudden inquisition into the most private family matters.

'It was a long time ago,' I said. 'A great deal has changed since then.'

'And a great deal is changing now,' she said, accepting my return of the conversation to less personal matters. 'It must be disappointing for you.' The last remark may have suggested sympathy, but did not convey it.

'Yes, it is disappointing for me,' I said. 'It is not what I hoped would happen. I do not like a lot of the changes that are taking place in eastern Europe. I do not expect they will prove to be changes for the better. I preferred things as they were before, when everything was settled and everyone knew where they were.'

'If I may say so, Feliks, I find it strange that someone who wanted to change everything should find himself regretting change.'

'And if I may say so, Sandrine, I find it strange that someone who wanted to change nothing should find herself welcoming it.'

She had no answer to that. Indeed, there was no answer. It depended on what sort of change one was looking for, if any. It was in fact a long time since I had sought change of any kind, in the world or in my own life. As a young man, in the years after the war, I was fearless for change. I wanted everything to change and believed that it would. But at some point, and I cannot now remember when it was, I came to accept things the way they were, to accept my own life the way it was. After that, I no longer looked for change. An ideological split divided Europe. I accepted that. I worked on one side of the divide, where my heart was or where I thought it was, and the rest of the time I lived behind enemy lines. I accepted that too.

I found myself telling Madame Lefèvre about my travels the previous summer and what I had discovered. I did not know if it interested her. I doubted she had set foot outside France.

Perhaps she had never set foot outside Paris. Certainly, everywhere else was foreign and where I went was communist foreign, or had been, which was worse still.

'How much longer will you do it for?'

'I do not know,' I said. For the previous week, restless in a slowly improving illness, I had thought of little else. I had reached no conclusions.

'Is there someone who could take it over?'

'I do not think so,' I said. 'I mean, the only other person involved is the printer and I do not think he could do it or would want to.'

'Could you sell it?'

'I do not know. Perhaps.' I remembered the approach I had received three months earlier from the American firm. 'Actually, someone did contact me recently about it.'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing. I did not reply. I was not interested.'

'Why not?'

That was an easy question, but I was reluctant to admit to the honest answer. There were of course any number of reasons why the enquiry might have led to nothing, but only one reason why I did not even want to discuss it. In the end, I did give the honest answer.

'It was from an American company.'

'So?'

'Sandrine, it is probably hard for you to understand, but I do not want to sell my *Guide* to the Americans. It goes against everything I have believed my entire life, everything I have done. It would be a complete betrayal.'

Madame Lefèvre shrugged her shoulders. 'Well, I don't know,' she said. 'It's your business. But I can't see what harm it would do to talk to them. Still, if you want to cut your nose off to spite your face, that's up to you.'

'It is important to me.'

'Still?'

'Yes. I do not know how to explain it to you. It is not just a question of what I believe. It is also . . . well, I suppose that for a great deal of my life the Communist Party was my family. And you do not turn your back on family.'

'Perhaps not,' said Madame Lefèvre. 'But sometimes family turns its back on you.' And I still recall the sourness with which she spoke those words.

That concluded our belated foray into the art of conversation. I did not doubt that others would follow assuming I remained in Paris, in that apartment. Would I? I spent the rest of the day thinking about the *Guide* and its future, my future. I still did not want to sell to the Americans, but no one else had expressed an interest. What was I saying? That I refused to sell the *Guide* to a capitalist company? That was tantamount to saying I refused to sell it to anybody. Would it be a better epitaph for the *Guide* if it subsided to nothing, accompanying me sickly through my declining years? I was forced to admit that, actually, it would be rather appropriate, but it was not what I wanted.

Then there was the question of money. It had never been my first priority, nor needed to be, but it could not be ignored. I was not rich. I had some savings, but they were not huge. Pension provisions in France were generous, but they would not enable me to stay in this apartment indefinitely, assuming that I wanted to. There was no one to look after me if I became ill, apart from Madame Lefèvre, and she was a good deal older than I was. Conscience was all very well, but if I did not assume responsibility for my own life, who would? If I were living in a different society, maybe things would be different, but I was not.

Sandrine Lefèvre was right. There was no harm in having the conversation. I hauled myself out of bed and rummaged in my desk for the discarded letter. Eventually I found it. It was

from a Mike Martins, who styled himself the European Vice-President of a New York firm called Bergelson & King. I decided that, as soon as I was well enough, I would telephone Mike Martins and see if he was still interested.