

## Guardians of the Public Good by Petra Hůlová

*Translated by lex Zucker*

*The narrator of Guardians of the Public Good (2010), Petra Hůlová's sixth novel, is a young girl who finds herself at odds with the rest of Czech society after the collapse of the East bloc in 1989, seeing it as a betrayal of the values of communism, which she wholeheartedly believes in. In this excerpt from the beginning of the novel, before the so-called Velvet Revolution, she describes how her family was chosen to live in a model worker's town, named after the Polish city of Krakow.*

Not everybody's wild about Krakow, my sister and I realized that a long time ago. Sometimes, when I was little, it even seemed weird to me. It was supposed to be this amazing place. But all that was left of those plans were some jokes people told, plus names like Swimming Street, which was supposed to have a big pool with a wading pool and a slide, and Leisure Park, where they were supposed to plant trees with benches for recreation, but all it was was some shrubs in concrete holes and the senior citizens were scared to set foot in there after dark. The playground never got finished either, and the tiles were all torn up in the fountains between the apartment blocks. They never sprayed once in my life. Instead of playing on the playground they never built, we played on the broken curbs and chunks of concrete out behind the buildings where there was supposed to be a woodland park but it looked more like some ancient Indian land in the Sahara, a bunch of wavy sand with a tuft of grass or two. Like in that movie *Treasure of Silver Lake*, except the dunes were just an embankment overgrown with dirty plants. At least you could use it for sledding. The treasure was pretty iffy too. Pierre Brice was no Indian and they shot it on location in Yugoslavia—we were raised on half-truths.

I remember the time our Uncle Libor came to see us, and my mom and dad were barking back and forth at him, and he wouldn't even go have a beer with my dad. He wouldn't go anywhere. He just sat at the kitchen table wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, and whatever we gave him he rinsed with water, even though it was clean. He petted me and my sister like we were puppies from the shelter, it was a new feeling for us. Feeling sorry for him. Feeling sorry for anyone. Milada and I made a sour face at each other and my dad yelled at us to get out. Uncle Libor was our family's future emigrant.

We lived in a prefab. A row of five five-story towers, side by side, with the same thing across from us and a concrete leisure zone in between, with dandelions sprouting up through the cracks. A lady from another block actually yelled at us once for pulling them up. In some spots it was almost decorative, that's probably what the lady thought. But that wasn't typical Krakow. Typical Krakow was sitting on a bench in the leisure zone with your butt on top of the backrest and your feet where your butt should be but it's not, because the middle slat is missing and your butt hangs out. That's the Krakow way to sit, and I've got *The Writings of*

*Klement Gottwald* open on my lap. I discovered it all by myself on the shelf in the living room. It had been so long since anyone opened it the pages were musty, even though it deserved to be read more than that women's rag, *Vlasta*, or my dad's favorite, *Stadium*, the volumes all bound together into a tome so fat Comrade Gottwald could only envy it. His book might not've been as fat, but it contained more interesting facts than there were pucks in the gloves of Czech goalies, or tips for fall road trips and crocheted purses in a special issue of *Vlasta*. Running my finger over the lines written by our country's first working-class president, sometimes the words would get stuck. Under my nails like the sand of the Sahara, grinding into my young, hungry heart.

Those words didn't give a hoot what the times were like, they were timeless, and the communism they talked about was a far cry from the one I knew. The ruining and pilfering. Not just of the benches, but entire playgrounds, bus stops, living facilities and grocery stores. Krakow in my childhood didn't belong to anyone.

I think what hooked my mom and dad was the talks about the new society. Even if people nowadays say anyone who joined the Party in the late '70s or early '80s did it because it was a shrewd move, not because they had any ideals, and they may be right, since my dad was no fool, he wanted only the best for us.

So when the men came to Louče, the little mudhole where we used to live, marching through town with their loudspeakers, drumming up new recruits, he paid close attention to what they were promising. Whether the worker's five-fingered red star had nothing but nice stories to tell or whether it also offered a little bacon for him to bring home. They said anyone interested should come visit the National Committee, that's what they called the town council, it wouldn't commit you to anything, and the loudspeakers roared so loud that half the grannies in Louče practically fell out their windows trying to see what it was.

At the Committee they served refreshments. Soon the whole village was going to meet there regularly. It went on for a couple of weeks, people got used to it. Go to the Committee on Saturday mornings, eat some food and listen to the talks that came with it. There was talk all over the place in those days, and most of the time there wasn't any free coffee and jellied eggs to go with it like they had at the Committee. My mom used to bring home the plastic cups the eggs came in, and stick them under the flowerpots as saucers.

My dad said they'd put together a crew of real enthusiasts. From the people who came to the talks about the new society. My mom couldn't have cared less, but my dad, I think, was one of those people who really caught the bug. The offers came fast and heavy, too. Good schools, good jobs, higher standard of living. He was a little bit fired up, a little bit drawn by the prospect of a place in the city, a little bit by the promised pay, and it was a little bit to spite Libor too. Libor, the grumpy older brother who dismissed our dad as a moron, was a pretty obnoxious ass himself, and denounced the whole thing right from the start. But how did he know, he never went to the Saturday talks even once. I think my dad wanted to prove to him he was wrong. Occasional distrust of the comrades was called for, but this wasn't just castles in the air like Libor used to scoff. And besides, until they started handing out binding applications, a lot of people in Louče saw it as a welcome distraction. At least there was something going on. Nothing ever went on in Louče.

What we didn't know at the time was we weren't the only ones. Lots of other Czech hicktowns had recruiters passing through. Dozens of communities, all over Czechoslovakia.

According to the 1973 secret session of the Central Committee. Anyone who wants can go and look it up in the archives. They were stamped top secret, the documents on new towns amid the people's republic's virgin forests, in meadows where cabbage butterflies frolicked with lizards and pheasants and Czechoslovak grass snakes.

The comrades from all the friendly states of the Warsaw Pact came together on this occasion and, like Indians pressing together their sliced wrists, sealed the pact with ballpoint pens. Comrade Husák was there on behalf of Czechoslovakia, but apart from the comrades there were also economic engineers, water resource managers, and scientists with PhDs. The top brass from the eight plus one countries negotiated the pact in the halls of Prague Castle, the one being the Union of Soviets, or, as it was known at the time, the Federative Republic of Buryat, Kalmyk, Altai and Other Autonomous Nations Under the Supervision of the Moscow Soviets. As the documents reveal, this initiative, surprising as it may be to some, didn't originate with Moscow. The idea for large-scale housing developments named after the friendly cities of the comradely states of the Warsaw Pact actually came from below, as they say today democratically, and in those days more or less democratically, since nobody ever stole the leadership of the Union of Soviets till the Velvet Revolution happened, but either way there definitely wasn't a knife to anyone's throat. You can tell from the signatures on the documents. From the firm strokes with no trace of shakiness. The leaders of the International agreed to adopt the friendly cities initiative over glasses of Czech mineral water, fully sober, in the castle's Spanish Hall. The fact that it was the slow season may have also played a role, plus the fact that it was communism's third and last, barely authentic, incarnation, before the ninth wave of '89 came crashing down, which even as late as '88 not one of the nosybodies in Krakow would've bet a nickel on.

The nation of Czechoslovaks, burdened with its highest birth rate since the end of World War II, had a need for new agglomerations, so that was that. Plus sort of an ur-Silicon Valley. To meet the need for something new, which whatever that was, was definitely not a new coal mining town. The needs of the people were changing, and even communism wanted to be flexible, though nobody knew that word yet, to satisfy the current requirements of the era. The death knell had rung for the golden age of heavy industry, along with its ideals, even the purest ones. And why shouldn't an unskilled worker have lunch with the head engineer, the company doctor, and the department manager, not just in the canteen but at a shared table under speakers with, if not marches, then at least folk songs wafting out of them? Why not?

In the language of the Hokama tribe, Si-li-con Val-ley means More Heads More Know, and our Krakow—combined with the new Czech Dresden, Minsk, Kharkov, and Debrecen—would make five heads put together, like a dragon right out of a Czech fairy tale.

The Newtowns were the last attempt before the final crash. An experiment responding to the demands of the times. The transfer of populations from unproductive regions and zones of excessive contamination, the need for dignified employment for a new generation of construction engineers, but also more sweet-sounding desires. New landscape features, for instance. A favorable environment for education and development. Was it right for a single district in the "steel heart of the republic" to have a monopoly on being the showcase of the new era?

Especially given that the fifteen millionth citizen of Czechoslovakia was expected to be born sometime in early '75. It could easily have been Milada, my sister, and maybe it was, but they showed somebody else on TV. Some lightweight from Pardubice who didn't weigh even

two kilos. They gave the mother a baby carriage and a one-year pass to the swimming pool, and the little girl got five kilos of rag diapers.

My mom got nothing, and my baby sister too, even though she was born the same day. But by the time word makes it from the foothills of Louče to the nation's capital, all the lead-soaked cherries in Prague have ripened and fallen off the trees.

We lived in ignorance of much of the Czechoslovak world. Some of the neighbors dismissed us as hicks. We kept a dog out by the shed. He got run over by a car a couple days before we moved, and the women in town would throttle a goose whenever they got the urge. My sister and I never got a chance, we left Louče too soon for that. My sister had just learned to walk and I wasn't even three yet.

Who knows what good fairies were standing over my sister's bed in the district hospital? An iron frame with icy slats and a tag that said Milada Komárková, 3.25 kg, 50 cm. They weren't singing her any songs of the people, that's for sure. That's why she was so against the people all her life. It was those old bags yapping black talk into that little ear of hers. Dark clouds, that's what I think. It wasn't her fault. Tiny throat wrapped round with the umbilical cord, they say she couldn't even breathe for a whole minute after birth. Her little hands and feet flailing like a beetle flipped on its back, that's how I remember her from the photo and in my invented memories. She wasn't born until almost two years after me, but soon she was just as tall and you couldn't tell which one of us was older. Maybe it was that cord that made her think the way she did. That minute without breathing kept her from being a good citizen.

My mom stopped going to the National Committee on Saturdays with my dad after her belly got big. Even when he brought her cups for her flowerpots she got mad. For setting it up without her. And later on. After we moved to Krakow and the dark side of things started to show through the bright side, like the ugly flowers on a tablecloth show through the plastic you put on top to make it easier to keep clean, like a future that started to spoil before the sun could come out and brighten it.

One day an architect came all the way from Prague to one of the Saturday meetings in Krakow. He showed everyone blueprints of the school and the nursery school and the swimming pool and the park and the people's art school, all the plans that ended up different, maybe different from what the architect himself even intended. Supposedly the comrades used threats to persuade the people from Louče to move. Like as little people from a small town in the foothills, they'd better think twice about whether they wanted to stand in the way of a plan that came from the center, and in fact they'd better not even bother, because the bulldozers were already plowing the foundations and they were going to live there, period. At the last minute, people started to balk. The promise of paradise was starting to look suspicious, and as we Czechs like to say, better a sparrow in the hand than a pigeon on the roof, and Louče was actually a pretty decent sparrow.

My dad wasn't in the rebel group of sudden objectors, though, so we were one of the first families to choose where we would live. Running their fingers over the blueprints of the future city—not my sister and me, we were too little, but our parents, my dad especially—discussing where our place would be. The most important thing for my mom was that it be near the daycare and the nursery school, so they assigned us block eight, apartment two, and to make sure all the citizens who had hesitated would be envious, my dad wrote “the

Komáreks” in cursive in the square on the sheet of paper that hung in the hallway of the Louče National Committee.

A few months later we went. The line of moving trucks stretched all the way through Louče, plus a good ways before and after the signs announcing the name of our town. People emptied their homes of chests, dressers, and cabinets filled with bedding, piling truck beds with transistor radios, mopeds and cutlery sets, until the professional people came and half the things had to be left behind. You’ll have everything you need in Krakow, the professional people overseeing the transfer sang in unison. They should know, people whispered, so everybody listened to them.

But it wasn’t the ’50s, or even the ’60s, so Uncle Libor openly laughed at us in front of the drivers of the trucks that were going to carry us into the future, wheezing now in a cluster by the side of the road. A few of the neighbors joined in, the little crew of envious who stayed in Louče not because of lack of trust in the project itself, but out of sheer laziness and fear of novelty. Now they were pacing back and forth, each in front of his own door, and our uncle’s laughter came in handy for them. Actually they were laughing their heads off. The little mudhole of Louče that had never been big enough to have its own post office or school, and now all that was left were some birdbrains and Uncle Libor the future emigrant, whose heart was always against the regime and who was never nice to my dad and made fun of him. Still, I waved good-bye to him. As if even then there was something telling me, he who laughs last . . .

In Krakow too. Because Louče sank into the ground, and the ones who didn’t leave voluntarily got much worse housing than ours. It literally sank. Into the pits chewed out by the explosions and bulldozer blades, into the earth’s subsurface like in a fairy tale.

All that remained of our village in the foothills was some furrowed earth with black puddles where heavy mining equipment whined through all my childhood years and my growing up in Krakow, and people with faces blackened with coal dust, who didn’t even know where they were, hauled out raw materials, which Czechoslovakia exchanged in return for hard currency.