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My Uncle's Polish Horse

I was born in Östersund in 1955. After seven years away, my family moved back and came to live within an hour's drive from my maternal grandfather. After that we could visit more often and spend Christmas Eve with grandfather who wanted as many of his ten children and their families around him at Christmas as he possibly could have. Uncle Gunnar, one year older than my mother, also lived there. The siblings usually sat in the same bench at school and my mother did all Gunnar's homework for him as he was not fond of books. He was slightly afraid of her. There was also an older sister, who was disabled after a stroke in her youth. She did indoors work and liked neither me nor horses.

Uncle Gunnar always had one horse, simply called Horse, as he would have nothing to do with engines. I have always loved horses to the point of madness. I have often been told that I, as a two-year-old, tried to persuade an Ardenner Horse in a field to crawl under the fence and come home with me. Uncle Gunnar drove to weddings, funerals and sometimes to church on Christmas Day. The only Christmas Day we slept over was so extremely cold that we could not go anyway. Somewhat later a new road that finally became the E12 was built, which made it impossible to access the church by horse.

Of course the horse had to be fed even on Christmas Eve, and I used to accompany uncle Gunnar to go about the horse and sit there until my uncle had done the evening milking and came for me and gave the horse some more water or hay. I used to sit motionless in its crib in the old-fashioned, low and dark timbered stable. A faint glimpse of light came in from the small window but I was never afraid of darkness and could sit motionless for hours. If I sat still enough and was lucky, uncle said, I just might see one of the "little people" coming to look after the horse. Our Santa was originally a small, elderly man in grey wool that checked on the animals if they were well kept and if a farm

had “little people” they would get along fine. I was sure I once saw one but never said a word to anybody, except uncle Gunnur. The rest of the family would have laughed. I don’t remember if it was more than one horse because with one exception only they were all North Swedish, dark brown, small and nice enough but nothing more.

Then uncle had a new horse. Not long ago I was told that uncle had bought a North Swedish horse from a horse dealer on the island of Frösön, the men of the family had been doing horse businesses there for generations. The horses uncle Gunnur usually bought were cheap and without papers, probably they were aimed for slaughter but the dealer, I was told, thought that there was enough left for very modest needs. Uncle was very pleased with his newly bought horse. But, as it turned out, that horse had been illegally traded. It was the property of the Armed Forces to be used in wartime. In peacetime such horses were out on loan, staying with local farmers but with duties to appear every other year at their regiment for service. These horses were somehow marked as not to be illegally traded. Uncle Gunnur then got a telephone call urging him to go with the horse out to the main road and deliver this horse and get another one instead. Of this incident I was never told at the time but heard that some mistake had happened. The exchange horse, the Polish horse, could have been living some time at the horse dealer’s rented farm. Today it’s against the law to sell a horse just like the one the owner has sold for slaughter. Perhaps it was so even in those days so that could have been why my uncle did not want to say who had sold it to him. All my uncle claimed he knew was that the horse in question was a Polish horse. It had no name but uncle called it Broken (Swedish *brokig* means ‘of many colours’). It looked like an enormous Indian pony, white with large brown patches just like uncle’s cows. A horse that could hide among the cows amused us all. Nobody had ever seen such a horse. I find it hard to believe that it had been stabled somewhere near the town of Östersund in County Jämtland. Living in the vicinity of the largest riding school in town and nobody had seen such a spectacular horse or seen him wandering about, no girl on a bicycle, nobody going near showing friends and relatives one of the town’s more famous attractions seeing such a horse? For that it had to have been stabled all the time – but such things happen.

Neither had anyone known a horse like that! The first thing he appeared to have done when he first arrived was to jump the fence to the very small paddock in which uncle used to keep a new horse so it would not escape. The fence was at least 1.60 metres high and there was not much space to perform the jump. Uncle Gunnur said he had never seen anything like that, but as the horse did not run away it did not need to be fenced in – nor could it be fenced, so uncle did not bother at first.

The horse was to do everything a horse did at a farm where there was no tractor. Uncle Gunnur used a four-wheel work wagon for fetching groceries in

a nearby larger village and to load hay or equipment on. There was also a fine church sledge for winter use with very fine brass lanterns for candles attached. When uncle drove people to weddings and funerals he borrowed a suitable carriage in a nearby village. I think Broken might have even once driven to a wedding but I don't know for sure. I think my uncle had some problems in driving at first but together with his older brother Erik they told the horse what to do and after that everything worked rather well. Like everything with this horse he did things in his own manner, or not at all. At first, all harnessing and such was too small, the leather could be extended but the hames of wood with one thin leather strap on top and one broader under the horse's neck could not be made to fit. New hames had to be fixed and very soon the horse was provided with suitable harnessing. But Broken had a problem standing still. He would not stand and wait for hours while uncle Gunnur shopped, chatted or went to visit someone. The horse had to be held or someone had to stand beside him.

Uncle Gunnur used to be Santa as well. Dressed up in the large old dog-skin furcoat with a woven belt around his waist and reindeer boots on his feet and Santa mask, first he gave his nephews presents and then took the sledge to ride to other families to give Christmas presents to their children. All under the pretext of milking the cows, whereupon Santa had come, so he missed him every year. On those occasions when he had other families on his list, Santa had come to the cowshed asking for help as his horse had suddenly become lame, lost a shoe or something else happened and so he borrowed uncle's horse. That was an excuse in the case someone had seen the sledge coming out of uncle's garage. I did not buy that but was sworn to secrecy and uncle and I had the horse in common, and he would gladly lie to mother that I had not been sitting anywhere in the stable in my Christmas clothes.

At Christmas, 1967 perhaps, my uncle had Broken and he could not stand still so someone had to accompany him and hold the horse. Uncle had a way to get his will, he only told mum either she or I had to help, just at the last moment, knowing father would never deny me anything to do with a horse. So I had no idea of it when we left home earlier that day but as it was very cold and the car was cold I had my reindeer shoes on, a woolen hat and double woolen gloves, the outer pair knitted black and white in an intricate inherited pattern. I had just finished them for myself and was very proud of them. The small children got their Christmas present, my one year younger cousin understood but he was not interested in horses so he said nothing. We disappeared and I was supposed to wear another similar furcoat but it seems that I could not wear it as I was too small. According to my aunt, I wore a white Army great coat lined with white sheepskin and uncle's everyday trousers of stamped grey wool. Uncle Gunnur wanted me to borrow similar fur gloves like the ones he had, but the gloves were too big and I had to hold on to the horse and not let go of him, so uncle let me have my own mittens.

We set out on the road beneath a full moon in the bitter cold winter night when nature held its breath. The moon shone and the stars glittered and it was brighter than during the day. It must have been near -25 degrees Celsius, but hardly -30 , or he would not have taken the horse out. We were trotting along nicely without any lights on. With the previous horses uncle had used torches but Broken was so afraid of fire that uncle had bought these fancy bronze lamps, but they had to be lit by a match and it could not be done before we left. I never asked how he found out, trial and error I suppose. So uncle decided not to frighten the horse unnecessarily and it was light enough and no sound of any car. When we were just by the small road, we were to take short cuts so as to avoid the centre of the village, we heard a car. "If we are quick," uncle said, "we should be on the side road and avoid meeting it so Broken set off at an even but lightning fast trot." As soon as we were safe, uncle slowed him down to walk slowly past the two houses.

Broken looked first at the porch lights and then through the windows as we passed, but nobody even came to the window. We could have had a bell collar with the church sledge, but why we did not use one I never thought to ask. Everyone with a nice sledge had a church collar but perhaps it was also one of those things the horse could not cope with. We were thus progressing silently towards a coppice in full shade and Broken hesitated looking right, then left, then left again as he tiptoed motionless forward. Suddenly he froze, seeing two eyes in the wood. "Only a fox," said uncle, but it was a cat, a black cat crossing our path. We carried on in a light trot as we came out into the moonshine again and suddenly there was the street and as it seemed all of them had put out their outdoor lights, only the windows were lit from inside. Uncle Gunnur said: "Oh, the family knows that Broken is afraid of fire, so they must have asked their neighbours not to have anything burning outside, but electric porch lights were not so scary, but how thoughtful!" But the relief did not last long, the house next to the family had torches lit in the garden, people were standing there, shouting and drinking from bottles on the porch and as we approached someone lighted some fireworks. Now fireworks are not a part of Swedish Christmas celebration. Nor was it of New Year either where I grew up!

Broken almost panicked and it took all of uncle's calm and I kept thinking "keep calm, keep calm." I had absolute confidence in my uncle and at that time I did not know how to be afraid for my own sake but I was really worried that Broken would feel bad or even hurt himself. We went past the houses and came to some trees at the end of the street where uncle left the sledge to hug and hid his horse's head in his arms thus calming him down. "You cannot hold him," he said, "Can you be Santa and be quick?" "Yes - I said - I was Santa at school and did alright." He briefed me on the two children, put the mask and red cap on me, warned me of the clever six year-old girl and we went back to the villa, this time with uncle standing with Broken's head almost inside his coat.

I went in, but could not read from the parcels without glasses so I ordered the father to do that. The girl was at the window, suddenly calling out in surprise: "Well, that's Broken! So Gunnar must be Santa, but this Santa is too small, I think it's a girl." The mother almost panicked but the girl did not care for her presents – all she wanted to do was to go out to see if Broken was doing fine even though the neighbours had lit torches in their garden. But Santa knows best, so I said, "Yes, it is Gunnar and Broken. I am learning how to be like the old Santa but he had to stop at Gunnar's because his horse had gone lame." So, the girl said that he will not be healed tomorrow so we can all go to meet Santa's horse. "Well – I said – it turned out to be only a shoe and we will be long gone by tomorrow. But we are so late and because of that we must hurry now – so many more children before dawn." And off I went, with her comments in my back: "I still think it's a girl but she's not from around here, she must be an elfin, those mittens are not human, I've never seen anything like this before," she continued after a pause. When we were leaving, the torches next door had blown out as a slight breeze came. I briefed uncle on our way home and he said: "Never wear those mittens in this area again!" But by next Christmas the family had moved away and I was never Santa with a horse again. When we were riding home, it was as if Broken could not forget what had happened, he trotted along listlessly, doing what he was supposed to, but I felt he was not there mentally.

In summer, people complained about the horse. He was loose and people feared that he would disturb the traffic and one driver was so busy looking at the strange horse that he even forgot the road. Nobody got hurt and the horse had not been on the road but still busybodies demanded a fence. So uncle fenced the stretch from the stables over one entrance road, continued beside the road over the other entrance road and attached it to the cowshed wall. On the other side of the cowshed and behind the house and the woodshed and the stable, there was the fence for the cows, reaching down to the lake where the cows and the horse drank water. Uncle made the fence low, about 60 centimetres high so the horse could jump it without hurting himself. Sometimes when Broken was grazing, people complained about the horse behaving strange and wondered whether horses really should do that?

There was a handle on either of the entrance roads. Anyone could easily see through 150 metres or so from the road bend to the house and thus see if the horse was at home. In those days it was common that farms were fenced in and a horse or some animal would wander around. In small villages the fence could reach over the road and a traveller opened and closed gates on either side. Some pieces of sugar would guarantee safe passing. In the late 1960s grandfather died and uncle's sister went to live in a flat of her own, so uncle lived alone. On such a day a salesman let himself and his car in and went to the door to knock but nobody answered. He is reported to have called out, but nobody answered and so he wanted to leave but he could not. Broken prevented his leaving and

hours later he still stood flat against the front door when uncle came home. The salesman was angry and demanded that uncle buy something off him for his trouble but uncle refused saying it was his own fault. He should have let himself in, the door was open, and made himself a cup of coffee. That was very peculiar indeed. The horse let people enter the house but he did not let them leave so people made sure they saw uncle or his bicycle, otherwise they did not dare letting themselves inside the fence.

One autumn evening we drove to uncle Gunnur. It was previously arranged as my mother was afraid of the horse. My brother was born in 1966, he was with us, but it must have been 1968, I think. The bicycle was at the entrance but uncle was not in. Mother phoned their other brother Erik in the same village, but he had no idea where Gunnar was. So we waited, had coffee and the buns mum had brought and waited again. I became bored so I went outside. Broken immediately came to the porch. I talked to him and he went off to graze behind the vegetable plot, closer to the road. When I tried to go there he showed me he didn't want anyone so near. The horses I was used to grazed happily whether children were on them, or on the ground beside them no matter how much noise and bicycles and things were around them so this was strange, but I went back to sit on the porch and just watched him. Then all of a sudden he started doing small circles at different paces, head high and a very slow gallop, sometimes he trotted to and fro but not like a trotter. He used only a small square for this and suddenly he jumped high in the air front legs straight out and hind legs straight out and he seemed to stay in the air for a long time. Then he started walking on his hinds, waving his front legs. He went at least ten steps. After that he stood on his front legs and kicked his hind legs so high that it looked like a person standing on his hands. When all was finished he started grazing again. I was stunned. I had never seen anything like that. Nor had I heard about anything of that sort. Obviously, nobody else had either. In that case they would have told uncle what the horse was doing. The horse was performing something similar to *The School in the Air* now performed by the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. But once it was trained and performed by Armed Forces from Italy to Russia – but never by any officer or dressage rider in Sweden. That was the first, but not the last performance Broken did for me. It always ended the same way with him coming up to the porch where he had ordered me to sit and having walked up the two or three steps with me under him, he took a sip of water from the bucket standing in the shade on the landing and backing down again the same way. The first time I did not dare to move, his hooves were enormous and the porch was old, worn and badly built, but on other occasions I knew I would not be hurt but it was a really strange experience.

Mother became impatient and wanted to go home so dad went out to open the car door for her. He always had a good hand with horses but she did not like

them. But this time dad was prevented from opening the car door. In a second the horse had gone from grazing to standing by the car and he was not looking friendly at all. Dad had to rescue himself as fast as he could, being stiff with rheumatism as he was. But the horse did not hurt him, only walked behind him as a jailor. So I had to step in. I told Broken we had to leave because the baby needed taken care of. I placed myself between my father and the horse so he could let mother in the car. She carried my brother in her arms. I then let my father in behind the steering wheel in the same manner. After which I walked after the car with the horse to one of the gates. Let the car and myself out and shut the gate wire. Before entering the car, I said thank you and goodbye to the horse. When uncle came home he saw our tyre tracks. It had totally slipped his mind that mother had called and asked if he would be at home. A friend had picked him up in his car, which was why the bicycle was at home. Finally, uncle said, he understood that I had been the one letting us out.

There was an incident which led to uncle fencing Broken in, with the low fence I spoke of. People had been complaining that the horse was on the new road. Sometimes Broken used to go visiting down the road, there was an old trotter riding horse and family there. Also some elderly people that loved to give him a treat. No incident was ever at hand and almost everybody seemed to have liked Broken. Except one man that uncle did not like either on the grounds that he drove too fast. Gravel hurts when hitting driver and horse at a speed. One day this driver was reported to have come at a speed through the bend, where he had a habit of driving too fast. Even my father feared meeting him. This time Broken was home alone and on seeing the driver that the horse had moved towards him in a threatening way walking on his hinds, waving his front hooves aggressively, as the driver later claimed. The man was so afraid that he missed the bend and ended down the slope with the front of the car over the ditch, thus on uncle's land. Someone called the police, and a policeman arrived at the scene and heard the cause of the accident, which he did not believe a word of. Instead he asked if the man had been drinking since horses do not walk on their hinds. The curious neighbours came and said that they had heard the crash but not seen the accident. The horse in question was happily grazing inside his fence, like any normal horse. The policeman asked the neighbours if the horse used to walk on his hinds, but the neighbours claimed not to know.

That was not the only strange thing Broken did. He was not overly enjoyed when he had to work so he tried to get away, as most work horses tend to do now and again. But Broken had an advantage in that he looked exactly like uncle's cows so all he had to do was to hold in his tail, lower his head, bend his legs slightly and there was another cow! But uncle used to count high: "Two lying down, one drinking, nine to go and ten are standing: Broken I can see you!" Then the horse had to come, but not until he had jumped a lying cow, the fence – twice as high and then the freight wagon. Ready to go, eyes bright and shining.

I think it was the next summer when we had gone to visit Erik in his village, but he was not at home, only his wife. But shortly after we had arrived, he arrived with Gunnar and Broken. They had been to a neighbour because he had promised to accompany them to a barn somewhere where there was a plough uncle had been given by someone. This plough was heavy and had to be lifted by two men but there had to be a third person to take care of Broken while they went inside the barn and fetched the plough and with us there they had just found the person. Mother said: "No, it will take the whole day, knowing you." Father said nothing but Gunnar said, "It is you or her." It was an extremely hot day so all I was wearing was a T-shirt, shorts and canvas shoes.

Uncle had a bucket of water and a towel to wipe Broken's head, for comfort, he said. "That is our mother's towel for crystal classes," mum cried out. "Well," said uncle, "I have no crystal and what could be more appropriate?" So we did set off into the woods. The towel was for mosquitoes, and the wet, boggy ground was full of them, but I tended to the horse as best I could. Freed his eyes and then he indicated by nose that I must take away under his belly as well, which I did, for hours! The uncles had found the plough under enormous masses of rubbish that they threw out. Then they rested and started telling stories while I only heard the "do you remember..." and laughter. No use calling them, they were both half deaf. At least I spent the afternoon in the shade with enormous amounts of mosquitoes and a horse without being much bitten myself, part depending on my keeping in constant motion and part because I did not appeal to mosquitoes. On our way home the uncles let me hold the reins, the only time I had anything to do with the steering was when Broken wanted to go home but we were in fact going to uncle Erik's, but if it was my driving or Gunnar's words that we are going to Erik, I do not know. But a very displeased mum instantly said that the horse would have brought them home without me. She also indicated that if they had drunk from the horse's water instead of from their own "water bottle" they would have been back hours ago. Wisely, I said nothing.

The last time I saw Broken, as I recall, would have been in 1974. I suppose mother and father went there when I was at school thus preventing any similar horse adventures. I was leaving for another part of Sweden and wanted to say a temporary goodbye. But as I had grown older so had they, and modern times and with it new regulations in farming and control of the same had come. Uncle could no longer keep horses in his old stable. It was too small and the wooden planks under the horse lay directly on earth and the horse's dung fell on earth. The door was too narrow and the roof was said to be close to falling down.

Uncle had believed every word and demanded no second opinion. He had had a new stable built, according to the inspection's requirements, at the end of the cow shed. But he had not built a box, because it would have been too much trouble to clean out. The walls were of some kind of board, shining white

and there was a window in front of the horse so all car lights of the increasing traffic shone him in the eyes all night. Broken was not his usual self. He was more jumpy than I remembered, and now he had company. Uncle had been prohibited from keeping him alone, which would be against regulations. He had been told to do so, but the regulations were, and still are, senseless with regard to my uncle's circumstances. He was at home and with his horse more than most people and in this way Broken had access to the cows for the whole grazing period and could have had in winter as well, but uncle believed what he had been told and had company ...but what a company it was. A big smelly pig! At first he had a calf, but it grew to be a bull and went to slaughter. The horse did not take that well so he had thrown in a piglet – aimed for Christmas, but then Broken would not part with it so it remained, huge, smelling and not the best of companions.

I tried to change what could not be changed. I have never been the one to buy what I've been told without investigation and demanded that uncle do the same – or at least put in a curtain so that Broken didn't have to have the lights flash in his eyes all nights. But I got nowhere, and dad had to rescue the whole situation by reminding me of a previous engagement and being pressed for time. When I said goodbye to Broken he didn't seem to care. I had been gone for too long, never knew when the voice of the horse stopped to matter. Suddenly "the little people" and my childhood seemed long gone and when I previously thought I would only be gone for the education, I then and there, decided never to move back again. Dad pleaded with me to stop listening to the voice of every horse as it would only give me pain. Yet, father lived long enough to approve of my buying my own horse and sharing my grief when she died.

Recently, I have learned that things had been even worse. Broken stretched his halter chain (replacing the rope he had in the old stable) so far back every night that one morning he had almost hung himself in it, all entangled. He got loose and got a heavy chain at the back of the stall with the only effect that he sat on it every morning, trying to get as far back as he could (from the window and the flashes of car lights?).

From the behaviour of this horse it now seems as though he had seemed to witness World War II, especially if we can be sure he was Polish. But how old could he have been and where had he been during all those years in between? Sweden and Poland had, during the time when the Armed Forces used warm bloods for lighter transport and riding, shared the same stock for hundreds of years. Poland traded some of their trained Army horses for work horses after World War II but those horses looked exactly like Swedish Army horses. They had the same size more like any riding school chestnut. The only difference was that those horses that came from Poland in the exchange were fully trained. They used to do Schools in the Air out grazing or in paddocks all of their own free will.

Now Broken looked just like a drum horse but if he had been a drum horse in World War II, he must have been born before 1944 and that would have made him more than 30 years old when I said goodbye to him in 1974. Another strange circumstance is that he must have come to Sweden as a riding horse, as Sweden had a ban on importing work horses of all kinds until 1965–1966. Uncle said that he must not be ridden and later on I heard that there had been a riding accident. Perhaps it was so that he ought not to be ridden by riders who thought they were skilled but were not. I have been told that horses that are truly accomplished have less against riders who just want to sit on them while they graze or go for a stroll and can be very fond of small children without ideas of their own. Perhaps we could have sat on him but Gunnar never let us. In the picture one can see that my cousin Ove has just been put on the horse, he did not ride it. In the end Broken was traded to a dealer in slaughter horses for a North Swedish horse. I do not remember that horse. Both the horse and the farm came to belong to my cousin that once sat on Broken.



Photo 1. The picture of Broken taken by my uncle Ove Bostrom picturing my cousin, his son, Mikael Bostrom. (From the archives of Inger Almström. Published by courtesy of Inger Almström and Ove Bostrom.)

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