

# 1

## Two trunks

In St Petersburg's Hermitage, there is a basement where are stored numerous works of art and eclectic collections. For various reasons, basement works and collections rest there waiting an opportunity to be put on display. In 1958, two large wooden trunks were discovered when an inventory was made of art works stolen from the defeated Nazis by the Red Army; art works which themselves had been earlier stolen from private collections and overrun European museums. Though found wedged between the fruits of Hermann Goering's plundering and a wall, these trunks could not have belonged to that plundered treasure as reference to a 1921 inventory reveals the Hermitage's mention of the trunks: *Two Trunks – Wooden /Dimensions – 2m x 1m x 1m/Provenance – Unknown*. This leads to the conclusion that the trunks came to the Hermitage pre-1921; however, the inventory fails to make any mention of the trunks' contents. It is clear that between 1921 and 1958 the trunks remained undisturbed and unopened; what is unclear is whether they had ever been opened some time before 1921 but after their arrival to the Hermitage.

The trunks are identical in size and each bears on the lid an unknown crest under which is stencilled, in fading gold lettering, what is presumably a family name. The name is D'Olneque. If D'Olneque is a family name then the origin of the name is obscure and though it has the appearance of being French there is no record of it in the compendium of French family names. The closest geographic connection with France is the Walloon

municipality of Olne in the Belgian province of Liege. In that case it is conceivable that D'Olne may have been acquired as a family name to identify a person who had come from Olne. Some weight is added to this argument since the name D'Olne is registered as the name of a Dutch barony that has been extinct since about 1890. As for the longer name D'Olneque, it is conceivable that the ending *que* may have been added to D'Olne as an affectation or an attempt at frenchification.

Nothing is ever so straightforward for it is also plausible that the D'Olne part of the name D'Olneque may have been derived from a Slavic language where the word *dolny* or *dolni* when used in place names in a fashion equivalent to the English word Lower. So in English what we call Lower Silesia would be *Dolny Śląsk* in Polish, *Dolní Slezsko* in Czech and *Dolny Ślůnsk* in Silesian. On the other hand, the simplest explanation is that it is also possible that the name D'Olneque may have come from D'Olneck via the not unknown family name Olneck.

So for the origin of the name D'Olneque, take your pick. However, irrespective of the origin of the name D'Olneque, what was found in the trunks were designated in 1960 as The D'Olneque Collection. Apart from the trunks' listing in the 1921 and 1958 inventories, the trunks were of little interest and remained unopened until 1960. To date nothing is known about any D'Olneque family or about how the trunks and their contents came to be in the Hermitage's storage basement. This is a story about the provenance of this bizarre collection.

## 2

### The village

*Fishbone village under snow*

*Fishy business*

*Does anyone know*

*What goes on there?*

If planes existed in those days, then flying over the settlement in the depth of a northern winter would have revealed a snow-bound village that from the air looked like a fish's skeleton. The main street would be the fish's spine and the small tracks coming off at an angle would be its bones. Though to call it a main street, let alone a street, is too grandiose and perhaps it should be called a track and those tracks coming off at an angle should be called paths. I'm sure, of course, that your imagination pictures a fish's skeleton pattern with the side bones symmetrically and regularly veering off the spine. Not so; this is a damaged fish skeleton. The spine is curved, the side bones are few, irregularly spaced and of varying length. But in those days planes did not exist and you would have to have been a bird to see this damaged fish skeleton.

Sometime between the times of the great Catherine and the not so great Soviets, a migrating bird, perhaps a wild goose or a crane, would have seen that in the vastness of this land there was, at the edge of a forest, this flyspeck of a village where people lived. The people lived in shacks where in winter the roofs burdened

with snow struggled against collapse. They lived in a place where fence posts stood askew making sinusoidal fences sag under the weight of snowdrifts. They lived beneath the glass Damocles' icicles which threatened from the eaves and trees. In winter they lived in this place where the wind howled and the cold cut.

In summer, the environment was benign; summer days were mild; the forests scented the air with pine; plains of grasses waved in the light breezes and the lakes sparkled. And yet the village was a dreadful place. You see, though contrasting, the seasons had no bearing on the dreadfulness of that place. At the core of what made life in this village what it was, was its remoteness from everything that made civilised life bearable.

Remoteness made this village its own country, its own world and its own universe. Remoteness made many things possible. Remoteness allowed the villagers to believe in dog-headed men who preyed on the weak. Remoteness allowed the villagers to believe in hairy demons who took pleasure in flaying the unwary. In truth, in those parts, beyond a heartbeat's skip and an uncertain glimpse out of the corner of a cloudy eye of what may have been such creatures, neither dog-headed men nor hairy demons were ever met. So be content to accept that remoteness must have been the reason for all that happened in and around in a village that under snow resembled, from the air, a damaged fish skeleton.

At ground level a solitary tower was the only building that rose above the roofs of the village. The tower was known as Kolmogorov's Tower, but no one knew for what purpose it had been built. No one remembered who Kolmogorov had been and to have named it after someone called Kolmogorov was strange especially as Kolmogorov was not a name of these parts. All that the villagers knew was that it had always been known as Kolmogorov's Tower and it must have been built years before the birth of the great-great grandfather of the village's oldest inhabitant. That the

tower had been built to house a church's or school's bell can be quickly dismissed because this godless and ignorant place had never had either church or school.

The tower's original purpose had long been forgotten, but perhaps the hearth, in what should have been its belfry, suggested that it had been used as a point of reference. In long gone days if groups of villagers were expected to return at night from the forests, a fire would be lit in the tower's hearth and then it became Kolmogorov's Beacon. In the wintry days of mist in those long gone days, when the village floated in a sea of white, the tower's fires would have guided with a glow that dispersed like butter melting in barley soup. And on the long summer evenings, when the weakening sun was setting low only to soon rise again, the tower's fires must have challenged that setting sun. But what once had been a guide to travellers, the tower was now home to a flock of birds; birds that the villagers called the tower birds.

Not only had the villagers forgotten the original purpose for the tower, but also they had lost the will to maintain it. Who knows, perhaps in its original state it had been a handsome structure, but now the many years of neglect were made apparent by the missing side boards and the condition of the remaining boards. Of the remaining boards – some were now rotten and others flapped even in the softest of spring breezes and banged in the harshest winds of November. Inside the tower its wooden staircase was in just as poor a state as the remaining external boards and like the missing boards of the exterior there were missing steps on the stairs. If no care was taken, then a climb up those stairs to the hearth at the top could be just as hazardous as a winter's visit to the deepest parts of the forests; in both cases there being no guarantee of safe return.

### 3

## Agents of the Empire

**T**he Empire's long, long arm was able to extend so that the edge of the tip of its longest finger reached the village and it did so by the presence of Kudrin. Ilya Kudrin, that self-serving minor official; the same Kudrin who had as a younger man started his career in the capitol and by his dubious talents worked his way progressively down with banishment to smaller and smaller places. Each career step had taken him further and further from the centre; taken him to places of diminishing significance until he officiated in this the most insignificant speck of the Empire.

Kudrin's previous posting had been as a minor official in the provincial garrison to which the village bore some subservient connection. An indiscretion, that he successfully palmed off as poor record-keeping but which in truth had been the pilfering of pelts destined for official use, saw him out of the garrison.

Pilfering of government goods would have been considered unpardonable whereas poor-record keeping, though not good, was pardonable and so for that reason he was sent from the garrison and into exile to the village. The garrison commander, having a need to extend his influence as far as possible, and that included the hapless village, sweetened the exile by investing Kudrin with new duties and the invented title of Official Government Inspector of a Remote Region. In truth, beyond the garrison no permanent human habitation existed other than the insignificant village and so Kudrin's new title should have been

more accurately designated as Official Government Inspector of a Remote Insignificant Village.

Official Inspector of a Remote Region Kudrin? The irony of this appointment was that an habitual law-breaker, embezzler and pseudo poor keeper of records had been appointed to represent the Empire in a role that was an amalgam of policeman, tax collector and conveyer of official proclamations to a paltry collection of illiterate people of a remote village; perhaps an apt vocation for such a coarse man as Kudrin.

It was on the two-day ride from the garrison to the village that the exiled Kudrin had his epiphany. He realised that after a career of demotions he had been, in one move, elevated to the ultimate position. He would be neither less powerful nor less important than a tsar – where he was heading, he would be the tsar. His empire, though smaller, would be still his empire. It was in this village that he would not only represent the authority of the law but also be the law, as without interference he could interpret it whatever way he pleased. His ride to the village was not a ride into exile but a glorious coronation ride and as he rode he mouthed the words: *Tsar Ilya* and smiled. What joy; every plodding hoof-beat echoed *Tsar Ilya, Tsar Ilya, Tsar Ilya* in agreement.

Tsar Ilya did not ride alone. In his royal procession he had two petty criminals; two petty criminals, who on having been given by the garrison commander the choice between hanging and exile to the village chose the latter as the better option. To them the commander assigned the titles of Number One Assistant to the Official Government Inspector of a Remote Region (Without Pay) and Number Two Assistant to the Official Government Inspector of a Remote Region (Without Pay). Their duties would be to assist Kudrin in carrying out the Empire's work in the remote village. Kudrin decided that they should be known as Number One and Number Two and of them he

requested loyalty and that they refer to him as Tsar Ilya. That two scoundrels should agree to such an arrangement was not their acknowledgement of his superior breeding, but their awareness of his superior mastery of all shades of misappropriation and so they rode with a bizarre man who went into exile leading a pack horse carrying amongst other things a hip-bath.