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THE FUNCTION OF THE BEAR IN BORIS POLEVOI'S STORY ABOUT A REAL MAN

The notion of a defeated bear as a symbol for the victory of civilisation over the wilderness of nature exists in the West as well as in the East. In Berne, the capital of Switzerland, for instance, there exists the tradition of holding bears in dens in the middle of the city. According to the legend, the bear was the first wild animal the founder of the city killed at the place that should later on become Berne. In the East, we find hints at a similar imagery in Boris Polevoi's novel *Story about a Real Man* (Повесть о настоящем человеке, 1946) [14]. This classic of Russian Socialist Realism captivated generations of readers, who were fascinated by its combination of an adventure story with the Stalinist ideal of a man who survives natural and other adversities by pure willpower [22, p. 416; 23, p. 119]. Polevoi drew on the experiences of the Soviet pilot Aleksei Mares'ev (1916—2001) during the Second World War. In his novel, Polevoi uses a name for his main protagonist that is almost identical with the one of this real person, changing just one letter (MEres'ev). The author thus underlines the reference to the experiences Mares'ev had.

Studies on Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man* do not tend to highlight or analyse the function of the bear in this work, even though a considerable body of literature was dedicated to this classic of Socialist Realism. The reason for this gap might be that reviewers preferred drawing attention to the heroic deed of the main protagonist, who symbolized progress and willpower. By addressing the topic of the bear the reviewers would have focussed on a figure that represents those aspects that the new political order meant to overcome, i. e. absence of civilisation. The studies on *Story about a Real Man* that were inspired by Soviet ideology were mainly concerned with the question to what extent this work was based on facts and how much of it was fiction. Virtually all of these studies emphasised Polevoi's activity as a wartime reporter and claimed that his notebooks and diaries of that time served him as a basis for his works, thus stressing the alleged validity of the events described. In the 1940s, when *Story about a Real Man* first appeared, some studies included critical analyses of this work. One reviewer, for instance, pointed to weaknesses such as technical inaccuracies on the topic of aviation, strong similarities to Jack London's works, in particular to his short story „Love of Life“, or to the somewhat static description of the main character's inner life [4]. Other studies of Polevoi's works, especially those that appeared later, did not include critical analyses, but glorified this work and the circumstances of its genesis, i. e. Polevoi's experiences as a wartime

reporter. Often, *Story about a Real Man* was compared to Western literature that had a similar topic, yet was without the Soviet ideological background [1 — 9, 13].

The work became an inherent part of the Socialist Realism canon and a means for ideological indoctrination. Schools that organized readings on this book were particularly well seen with the Socialist regime, as Catriona Kelly has argued. Kelly further mentions that comparisons between this work and Jack London's were frequent and that they intended to point to „the superiority of the traits of the Soviet person“. [23, p. 540 – 541]. Katerina Clark's study on the Soviet novel explains how *Story about a Real Man* corresponded to the typical Stalinist literary motive of man's struggle with nature, in particular with water and ice. Clark further mentions how this novel had many elements in common with London's famous adventure stories that are set in the wilderness of North America during the gold rush era. In Russia, London's novels were very popular during the first half of the twentieth century. It seems that Lenin himself was an avid reader of London's works and that he was particularly fascinated by the short story „Love of Life“. Clark mentions this work by London as a source of inspiration for Polevoi's novel, where the figure of the wolf is replaced by a bear. [21, p. 100 – 106].

In works on Russian culture that appeared in the West the bear is a frequently used symbol to signify distance to civilisation, as a considerable number of studies on this topic have shown (<http://cens.ivanovo.ac.ru/russianbear.html>). These studies suggest that Western media often used the symbol of a bear to refer to Russia, thus stressing the seemingly irrational character of its inhabitants. The metaphor of the bear also helped to create a feeling of shared European identity that contrasted to the allegedly less civilised Russian nation [11]. This attitude began to manifest itself in caricatures that appeared abroad several centuries ago [12, 15]. After the fall of the socialist regime, Western media often attributed features of a bear to the first president of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin. Later on, they used the metaphor of the bear to refer to Russia during the war with Georgia [10, 16]. From the beginning of the new millennium the Russians began to reconceptualise the symbol of the bear: They appropriated it to create a new image of Russians, stressing their distinction to the West and linking it to features of strength and masculinity [17, 18]. Eventually, the symbol of the bear began to conquer the market of consumer goods, especially of strong alcohol [19, 20].

In this article I will try to demonstrate how the figure of the bear in Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man* serves both as a symbol for the wilderness that Soviet politics set out to overcome as well as for the adversities of the Second World War. I will support my argument by a close textual analysis of Polevoi's novel and by a comparison of this work with London's short story of a similar topic. Unlike the Soviet tradition, the intention of my comparison between these two works is not to play off one type of regime against the other, but rather to bring out the function of the figure of the

bear in Polevoi's novel. In the further course of my discussion I will first briefly summarize the content of Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man*, then I will analyse the development of manifestations of the bear in this work. I will then contrast this work with London's short story «Love of Life». I will outline its plot and then point out similarities in and differences between the two works, paying particular attention to the meaning of the symbol of the bear in Polevoi's work as it emerges from the comparison.

Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man* narrates the experiences of a Russian fighter pilot, Aleksei Meres'ev, during the Second World War. The novel is divided into four parts; however, for this article, the first part will be most relevant. This first part narrates how Meres'ev's airplane, shot down by the Germans, crashes in a dense and largely unpopulated forest approximately thirty-five kilometers west of the front-line. Meres'ev injures his feet during the crash but nevertheless manages to drag himself through the forest, defying icy weather and starvation. After eighteen days he gets to a Russian settlement where he is eventually rescued. The other three parts of the novel relate how Meres'ev recovers in hospital and, even though his feet had to be amputated, learns to walk with artificial limbs. He manages to train as a pilot again and eventually returns to the combat zone, where he proves himself once more to be a successful fighter pilot. In a postscript the author, who is also a journalist, describes two meetings with the pilot, thereby conveying to the reader an impression of authenticity of the described events.

The notion of the bear mainly appears in the first part of the novel, which opens with a description of the landscape where Meres'ev's plane is crashing. The noise of the crash has woken up a bear from its hibernation. Hungry and angry, it approaches the wounded Meres'ev. When hearing steps near him, Meres'ev fears that a German might attack him, but when he sees a bear through his half-closed eyes, he shoots it at the very moment the bear is about to kill him. In a gesture of superiority Meres'ev sits on top of the bear's dead body and considers what to do next. This scene is so symbolic that the editors of one Czech literature textbook have chosen it as representative for the spirit of the entire book [27, p. 11 – 14]. By killing the bear Meres'ev ostensibly seems to have overcome one of the greatest dangers lurking at the place where he crashed, the bear symbolizing the wilderness whose natural order the war has disturbed. However, this impression is misleading. In the further course of the novel's first part the bear reappears, yet in a different shape: Meres'ev himself seems to gradually turn into a bear, as I will demonstrate below. The image of Meres'ev transforming into a bear — like being is paralleled by his regression from a grown-up man into a helpless creature akin a baby.

I will first look at Meres'ev's regression into a state that bears resemblance to a baby's. This transformation manifests itself to a great extent in his way of moving, which proceeds through the

following stages: First he walks unstably on his two injured feet, then he uses two sticks to support him, then he rests his chin on the fork of a small tree, which he has cut off, to lift the weight from his feet, then he crawls like an animal, and eventually he rolls [14, p. 20, 24, 29, 36, 46]. When learning to walk, a baby goes through the same stages, yet in reversed order: rolling, crawling, walking with help and eventually without help. Images comparing Meres'ev's state to the one of a baby persist in the continuation of the story, which describes how he is being rescued: an old man lifts him without any difficulty, wraps him up in a coat and places him on the sleigh like a new-born baby [14, p. 53]. The old man bathes him as if he was a baby, and when a friend of Meres'ev, another fighter pilot, gets to see him, he lifts him up from the bed as if his body was a feeble infant's. Twice in this part of the novel is he called a „foundling“ [14, p. 60, 70, 75, 77].

These depictions of Meres'ev's state after his ordeal in the forest, which evoke images of a baby, serve the following purpose: they add to the impression that Meres'ev's accident separated him from the sophisticated position he used to occupy as a Soviet fighter pilot who steered a machine equipped with cutting edge technology. This dissociation becomes even more evident when we observe how Meres'ev does not just turn into a helpless baby, but also into an animal-like creature resembling a bear. His transformation manifests itself on several levels. I have already mentioned that Meres'ev is at some point getting so weak that he has to crawl on his hands and knees, which does not only bear similarities with a baby's way of moving forward, but also, of course, an animal's. Meres'ev's transformation into an animal-like creature can also be seen in the way in which his instincts are sharpened during his stay in the wilderness. Akin an animal, he starts to feel danger before he can hear or see it:

Продолжать ползти? Но инстинкт, выработавшийся в нем за дни лесной жизни, настораживал его. Он не видел, нет, он по-звериному чувствовал, что кто-то внимательно и неотрывно следит за ним [14, p. 47, further examples see also p. 26, 27].

Should he crawl on? The instinct that he had cultivated during these days of life in the forest put him on the alert. He did not see but felt that somebody was closely and relentlessly watching him [26, p. 95, see also p. 59, 60 – 61].

Another manifestation of his transformation into an animal-like creature can be found in the ways in which Meres'ev fights death from starvation. First, he manages to feed upon meat from a tin he had found in an abandoned battlefield, and thanks to a lighter he can make a fire. However, once these remnants of civilisation are gone, he starts to rely more and more on the nourishment from the forest, such as barks, buds and moss. He even imitates squirrels when shelling fir-cones and eating their tiny little seeds [14, p. 30]. Some day he discovers cranberries. At that time he is not able to

walk upright anymore, but drags himself along on his hands and knees, and it is in this position that he starts eating the cranberries: he picks them with his lips directly from the plants like a bear:

Он елозил по кочкам и, уже приноровившись, как медведь, языком и губами собирал кисло-сладкие ароматные ягоды [14, p. 37].

He wriggled from clump to clump and, like a bear, picked the sweet and sour berries with his tongue and lips [26, p. 77].

Meres'ev's diet becomes more and more animalistic. When he comes across a hedgehog that has been hibernating under some fallen leaves he kills it with his knife, skins it and gorges its warm meat including the small bones [14, p. 38]. Later on he discovers an ant-hill, and he again and again sticks his hand into it and greedily licks off the tiny animals [14, p. 43].

Hints at Meres'ev's transformation into an animal-like creature can also be found in descriptions where his track in the snow is compared to a wounded animal's [14, p. 20]. When he, crawling, discovers a bench in abandoned settlement he fails to sit on it, as he cannot keep his body upright anymore, so eventually he lies down on the snow like a tired animal [14, p. 40]. Meres'ev metamorphosis from an unspecific animal-like creature into one resembling a bear manifests itself at the moment when two boys spot him in the forest and he is rolling to his side to move forward. They wonder if this was a bear or a human being or something else:

Там они его и увидели. Ага, что за чудо за такое? Сперва им, значит, медведь померещился — дескать, подстреленный и катится этак-то. Они было тягу, да любопытство их повернуло: что за медведь за такой, почему катится? Ага! Не так? Смотрят, значит, катится и стонет [14, p. 72].

That's how they found him. „Aha! What's that funny thing over there?“ At first they thought it was a wounded bear rolling over and over and took to their heels at once. But curiosity got the better of them and they went back. „What kind of a bear is it? Why is it rolling? There's something funny about this!“ They went back and saw this thing rolling over and over and groaning“ [26, p. 139].

Meres'ev has become indistinguishable from a bear, admittedly a strange, wounded one. Nature has claimed him back, he has become a part of the dense forest. This state stands in sharp contrast to Meres'ev's previous occupation as a fighter pilot, where he used to be at a great distance to the earth, flying miles above it in his high-tech machine and shooting enemy airplanes in the air. Meres'ev's way back into civilisation, his recovery and ensuing efforts to become a fighter pilot again despite his artificial limbs thus seem even more admirable. We should pay particular attention to the fact that he turned into a creature akin to a *bear*, and not any other animal: The bear serves as a symbol for the threat to the progress the Soviets had attempted to make to modernize the country and

mold it according to their political convictions. This feature emerges when we consider that this novel can be regarded as a Russian version of London's short story „Love of Life“, which has a similar plot, yet where the main protagonist eventually has to fight a wolf [3]. Polevoi himself hints at London at the end of the novel's first part, when a physician is telling Meres'ev that his survival in the wilderness bore similarities to Jack London's stories:

Про ваши приключения друзья рассказывают что-то такое совершенно невероятное, джек-лондоновское. [...] «Что-то джек-лондоновское!» — подумал Мересьев. И в памяти возникло далекое воспоминание детства — рассказ о человеке, который с обмороженными ногами движется через пустыню, преследуемый больным и голодным зверем [14, p. 87].

«Your friends tell things about your adventures that are simply incredible, something like a Jack London story. [...]» «Something like a Jack London story», thought Meresyev and remote recollections of his boyhood came to his mind, the story of a man with frozen legs crawling through the desert followed by a sick and hungry wolf [26, p. 164 – 165].

Polevoi's hint is most probably at London's short story «Love of Life», which is about a gold digger who survives several days on his own in the wilderness of northern Canada. He was deserted by his fellow after he has sprained his ankle, and now he is dragging himself along and suffering immense hunger. At some stage a sick wolf starts to walk next to him, waiting for him to die first so it could feed on him. In a deathly duel, he eventually kills the animal by claspng it and biting it into its throat. He manages to get himself near the shore of the Arctic Ocean, where sailors and scientific men on a whale-ship spot and rescue him.

The parallels to Polevoi's novel are many. Both protagonists suffer foot injuries, try to survive in an unpopulated and hostile area, their injuries and state of exhaustion eventually force them to crawl and even to twist themselves on the ground in order to move forward. Also, both protagonists try to appease their excruciating hunger by eating berries that have hardly any nutritional value (cranberries in the Russian, muskeg berries in the American), plants (moss, buds, and fir-cone seeds; rush-grass and weed), small animals (hedge-hog and ants; ptarmigan chicks and minnows), and, for a while at least, water heated in a tin over a fire.

The similarities between the two plots become even more visible when we look at specific text passages. One of them is the scene where physical exhaustion forces the respective protagonists to crawl:

When he started to collect dry moss, he found he could not rise to his feet. He tried again and again, then contented himself with crawling about on hands and knees [25, p. 935].

Хуже было другое: расцепив отекавшие руки, он почувствовал, что не может встать. Сделав несколько безуспешных попыток, он сломал свою палку с рогаткой и, как куль, рухнул на землю. [...] Он поднялся на четвереньки и по-звериному пополз на восток... [14, p. 35, 36].

But something worse happened. Unclasping his numbed hands, he found that he could not get up. After several attempts to rise he broke his forked staff and collapsed to the ground like a sack. [...] He got up on his hands and knees and ambled on like an animal... [26, p. 74, 75].

As mentioned above, Meres'ev at some point starts eating berries right from the bush like a bear while crawling on his hands and knees [14, p. 37]. London's main protagonist eats rush-grass in the same position, and he also resembles an animal (even though not a bear, as Meres'ev does — an important difference):

He threw off his pack and went into the rush-grass on hands and knees, crunching and munching, like some bovine creature [25, p. 927].

Another parallel can be found in the animalistic way of eating to which starvation drives the protagonists in both works. In London's, the protagonist is so desperate for food that he even eats newly hatched chicks alive, „crunching them like egg-shells“ [25, p. 930]. This scene bears similarities with the way Meres'ev devoured the hedge-hog after having killed it with his dirk, especially how he even swallowed its small bones [14, p. 38].

In Polevoi's novel, Meres'ev one night senses an animal near him. In the morning it turns out that a fox has been creeping around him, as Meres'ev can guess from the tracks in the snow. The fox, Meres'ev remembers, is said to sense a human being's near end [14, p. 37 – 38]. The scene reminds of the sick wolf in London's story that is waiting for the effebled protagonist to die first so it could feed on him [25, p. 935 – 938].

The figure of the bear also makes a short appearance in London's "Love of Life". This scene to some extent resembles Meres'ev's encounter with the bear at the beginning of the novel:

He rubbed his eyes savagely to clear his vision and beheld, not a horse, but a great brown bear. The animal was studying him with bellicose curiosity. The man had his gun halfway to his shoulder before he realized. He lowered it and drew his hunting—knife from its beaded sheath at his hip. Before him was meat and life. The point was sharp. He would fling himself upon the bear and kill it. But his heart began its warning thump, thump, thump. Then followed the wild upward leap and tattoo of flutters, the pressing as of an iron band about his forehead, the creeping of the dizziness into his brain. His desperate courage was

evicted by a great surge of fear. In his weakness, what if the animal attacked him? [25, p. 932]

Не меняя позы, медленно, очень медленно Алексей приоткрыл глаза и сквозь опущенные ресницы увидел перед собой вместо немца бурое мохнатое пятно. Приоткрыл глаз шире и тотчас же плотно зажмурил: перед ним на задних лапах сидел большой, тощий, ободранный медведь. Тихо, как умеют только звери, медведь сидел возле неподвижной человеческой фигуры, едва видневшейся из синевато сверкающего на солнце сугроба [14, p. 14].

Without changing his position, Alexei opened his eyes slowly, and through his lowered lashes saw not a German, but a brown, shaggy patch. He opened his eyes wider and at once shut them tight again: a big, lean, shaggy bear was squatting on its haunches in front of him. Silent as only a wild animal can be, the bear squatted near the motionless human figure that barely protruded from the bluish snow glittering in the sun [26, p. 38].

In both works the protagonist encounters a bear and at first remains motionless to avoid provoking the bear. Meres'ev eventually manages to kill it, whereas London's hero is too weak to attack it and therefore just waits until the bear loses interest.

I would like to mention two more text passages similar in topic and style in both works. One of them is the scene where London's protagonist is looking into a puddle and is horrified by his own reflection:

He came to a pool of water. Stooping over in quest of minnows, he jerked his head back as though he had been stung. He had caught sight of his reflected face. So horrible was it that sensibility awoke long enough to be shocked [25, p. 936].

In Polevoi's novel, we find a similar scene, yet this description is more detailed, as it mentions Meres'ev's skeleton-like head, his overgrowing beard, unkempt hair and big, wild eyes:

Захотелось пить. Между кочками Алексей заметил небольшую лужицу бурой лесной воды и наклонился над ней. Наклонился — и тотчас же отпрянул: из темного водного зеркала на фоне голубого неба смотрело на него страшное, незнакомое лицо. Оно напоминало обтянутый темной кожей череп, обросший неопрятной, уже курчавившейся щетиной. Из темных впадин смотрели большие, круглые, дико блестящие глаза, свалывшиеся волосы сосульками падали на лоб [14, p. 43].

He felt thirsty. Among the clumps he saw a small puddle of brownish forest water and stretched out to drink, but at once recoiled — out of the dark water, against the background of the blue sky reflected in it, a strange horrible face had peered at him. It was the face of a skeleton covered with a dark skin and overgrown with untidy, already curling bristle. Large,

round, wildly shining eyes stared out of the deep sockets, and unkempt hair hung down on the forehead in bedraggled strands. "Is that me?" Alexei asked himself, and fearing to look again he did not drink the water but put some snow into his mouth instead and crawled on eastward, ... [26, p. 88 – 89].

Meres'ev here starts looking more and more like a bear, as this descriptions could suggest. Toward the end of each of the relative plots, either protagonist has lost his human features to such extent that the people who find them are unable to tell what precisely this creature was. In London's story, he is compared to a strange object and to an enormous worm that is rolling on the ground, and the people who find him are scientific men who should in principle be well versed in the distinction of animals, but have never come across one like this:

There were some members of a scientific expedition on the whale-ship *Bedford*. From the deck they remarked a strange object on the shore. It was moving down the beach toward the water. They were unable to classify it, and, being scientific men, they climbed into the whale-boat alongside and went ashore to see. And they saw something that was alive but which could hardly be called a man. It was blind, unconscious. It squirmed along the ground like some monstrous worm. Most of its efforts were ineffectual, but it was persistent, and it writhed and twisted and went ahead perhaps a score of feet an hour [25, p. 938].

In Polevoi's work, the people who detect the protagonist are two boys. Just as in London's story, they are unable to classify this strange, rolling creature, wondering if this was a human being at all, or maybe an injured bear, as my quotation above has shown [14, p. 72]. Meres'ev's fight for survival in the forest's wilderness has turned him into a bear-like creature; the bear being the very animal he had initially succeeded in killing after his airplane has crashed in the forest.

When we look at the meaning of the figure of the bear as it emerges from the comparison between the two works, we notice the following things. In London's "Love of Life" the protagonist after a while transforms himself into a wolf-like creature, eating small animals alive and eventually killing another wolf by sinking his teeth into its throat. Polevoi's hero, on the other hand, gradually starts behaving and looking like a (wounded) bear. In London's "Love of Life", the episode with the wolf is a relatively long and important element of the story, the wolf being a memorable figure of this work, whereas the bear makes only a short appearance. In Polevoi's novel, by contrast, the scene of Meres'ev's fight with the bear is given particular weight, as it stands at the very beginning and thus opens his quest for survival in the wilderness. Meres'ev heroically manages to kill the bear, whereas London's protagonist is too exhausted for this. London's main protagonist turns into a ridiculous creature at the end: He resemble an enormous worm when the scientific people detect him.

Meres'ev, on the other hand, even though he is moving forward in a similar way as London's protagonist, i. e. by rolling, resembles an injured bear, which is a more appealing image.

It is easy to understand how comparisons between London's and Polevoi's works lent themselves to propaganda purposes during socialism. The main protagonist in "Love of Life" cuts a bad figure when contrasted to his Soviet counterpart, as it was his greed for gold that drove him into the wilderness in the first place, and not a noble cause, as Polevoi's battle with the Germans suggests. Also, London's protagonist is being smiled on by the sailors once he is on the ship as he cannot help storing lots of food in his bunk: just as he had been greedy for gold, his ordeal in the wilderness has made him greedy for food now. Meres'ev, on the other hand, is presented as someone who shows gratitude for the sacrifices the people who have rescued him make and who suffer from dearth themselves. While the plot of London's story does not go much beyond the moment when sailors and scientific men have rescued the exhausted man, Polevoi continues his novel in the spirit of the Socialist Realist novel by detailing how Meres'ev trained himself to become a successful fighter pilot again.

Towards the end of his novel's first part, Polevoi elaborates on the conflict between the wilderness of the Russian forests and the Soviet people during the Second World War. The people who eventually rescue Meres'ev also in a way had to revert to nature again, just as he had transformed himself into a bear-like creature: Forced by the war with the Germans, they had to abandon the settlements the Socialist regime has helped them to build, and they now have to live in dug-outs in the forest [14, p. 50 – 52, p. 57 – 58]. Without the war, the novel seems to suggest, the Soviet people's belief in progress would have enabled them to modernize the country and to reclaim land from the wilderness of the forest, where they would be safe from the attacks of its wild animals. The bear would remain in its den where it belongs.

In the further course of Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man* the bear is not only a symbol for wilderness; there are also a few hints at positive features of this animal. A bear might be a big, strong carnivore that can easily kill a human being, yet we also associate this animal with lovable clumsiness, with a childlike preference for sweet honey, and with a wonderfully thick bearskin that keeps warm in rough winters. In modern children's stories, such as Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, the bear becomes one of the best friends of the protagonist, a little boy, protecting him when need is [24]. The idea of the bear as a strong, clumsy, amiable friend emerges in Polevoi's novel at the moment when a good friend of Meres'ev, also a fighter pilot, comes to the dug-out where the inhabitants of a forest village are trying to nurse him back to health. Some of the features with which the friend is presented apply to the looks of a bear too. The friend is described as big, with broad shoulders and a good-natured face [14, p. 69]. With his strong, bear-like hands he joyfully presses

Meres'ev so strongly to his breast that the women present jump to «save» him from this embrace while he is bursting out:

— Да что ты! Лешка! Бисов сын!

Варя и медсестра Лена старались вырвать из его крепких медвежьих лап полуживое тело [1, p. 70].

„Yes, it's you! Lyoshka! You son of the devil!“

Varya and the nurse tried to tear the weak body out of his powerful, bearlike grasp [26, p. 137].

The similarities between the friend and a bear emerge from the comparison of his hands with a bear's paws and with his clumsiness, being unable to assess his own force. In the further course of the novel, the figure of the bear also makes an appearance in the harmless shape of a teddy bear. This happens in the second part of the novel, where Meres'ev is lying in hospital. After his feet have been amputated, he struggles to see his purpose in life, as he believes that he could never serve as a pilot again. His good spirits return only once another patient in the hospital room is slipping him an article about a pilot who learned to fly again even though one of his feet had been amputated. This news is so precious for Meres'ev that he is hiding the article under his pillow in a similar way he used to hide his plush teddy bear when he was a child:

На ночь Алексей сунул журнал под подушку, сунул и вспомнил, что в детстве, забираясь на ночь на полати, где спал с братьями, клал он так под подушку уродливого корноухого медведя, сшитого ему матерью из старой плюшевой кофты. И он засмеялся этому своему воспоминанию, засмеялся на всю комнату [14, p. 124].

That night Alexei put the magazine under his pillow and remembered that in childhood, when he climbed into the bunk he shared with his brothers, he used to hide in much the same way an ugly little Teddy bear his mother had made for him out of an old plush jacket. He laughed loudly at this recollection [26, p. 230].

The contrasting worlds of the Russian forest, epitomised by the figure of the bear, and the modern world again come to the fore in the third part of the novel, where Meres'ev is spending time in a sanatorium and hoping to be accepted for the pilot training school again. His fears that he might not succeed manifest themselves in a nightmare, where a bear is pressing him to the icy ground while other pilots are flying in airplanes or are passing by him in busses without noticing him [14, p. 203 – 204].

The appearance of the figure of the bear goes through several stages in Polevoi's novel: First, it is an aggressive carnivore, then it transforms itself into a hybrid between human and bear, then it

becomes a friendly, good-natured human being with a bear's clumsy features, then a harmless cuddly toy before reappearing as a wild animal in a nightmare.

The presence of the bear in *Story of a Real Man* does not end here though. In the postscript there is a final hint at this figure. When Mares'ev, the pilot from real life who is said to have inspired Polevoi for his work, meets the journalist and author of the novel a few years after the war there seems to be something bear-like in the pilot's way of walking:

А через несколько часов, быстрый, веселый, все такой же деятельный, своей медвежеватой, чуть-чуть с развальцем походкой, он уже входил ко мне [14, p. 325].

A few hours later Alexei Maresyev walked into my room with his bearlike, slightly rolling gait, brisk, cheerful and efficient-looking as ever [26, p. 572].

Even though this survivor of an airplane crash might have transformed himself back into a human being, and into a successful Soviet fighter pilot of high-tech airplanes at that, he has nevertheless retained a piece of the wilderness where Russian bears live.

My contribution has tried to show how the bear serves as a symbol for the wilderness of the dense Russian forests in Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man*, and how the author contrasts the world of high-tech fighter airplanes the main protagonist would usually inhabit with the uncivilised nature he is forced to live in after his crash. Further, I have suggested that Polevoi's *Story about a Real Man* probably to a great extent draws on London's «Love of Life», even though Polevoi might have taken his main inspiration from the event in the life of a real person, the pilot Aleksei Mares'ev. It was not my intention to contest the authenticity of Mares'ev's deed, yet I would argue that Polevoi, when writing a novel about Mares'ev's astonishing experience, used London's story with a similar topic to fill in the gaps Mares'ev's account might have had. As a result, Polevoi created a Soviet version of London's famous adventure story, in which the figure of the bear occupies a prominent place.

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