The church service was led by the priest Mr František, and because the local boys served at the altar, so the boxer-shorts headed by Dýha, Páta and Karel always put themselves into the front rows, and while Mr František and the nun sisters were preoccupied with praying or stories of the saints and not watching over us, the boxer-shorts swapped gestures with the altar boys and showed their clenched fists.

The altar boys kept constantly close to the priest, because if left isolated amongst us somewhere in the church they would have got their faces slapped. The priest Mr František explained that love is the sweetness of the world and who has it not, has nothing. The sisters watched over us, breathing all the while upon their frozen fingers and we listened to Mr František, because we had to, and when he talked about love and being loving, the boys sniggered aloud, but after a while we had stopped nudging each other and grinning, we were freezing cold, because we had been snowballing each other outside the church and the damp spots on our bodies were growing chilly. Out of the local people in Sířem only the old women went to morning mass, who loved the holy singing of Šklíba and the other church singers from our ranks and engaged Šklíba's choristers for their funerals. I remembered some of these old biddies from the old times when the home was not yet The Home and the sisters were not yet ruling over it, and I thought the old women didn’t remember me anymore. But I was wrong about that.

I was also chosen once to accompany the funerals, but then it was decided that the funerals would only be accompanied by the Czech boys, because it looked better. Especially when they cried a lot, they got heaps of sweets and soup and other nice things to eat and always had to give up some portion to the boxer-shorts, who refused to cry at the villagers’ funerals, and accused the ones who got this bit of benefit out of the funerals of being cry-babies... but it wasn’t like that! The boxer-shorts weren’t wanted by anyone at the funerals, because they were obstinate, rude and defiant and stole everything that wasn’t nailed down, and no-one wanted me at funerals either and I never even got to do any singing... and I just didn’t care!

The singers called themselves the Chorister Group and they were led by Sister Eulálie, and Šklíba was their leading singer. But in winter the boys set their voices resounding only seldom. Even the priest’s teeth sometimes chattered with cold in the frosty weather just like ours, and then at mass he pushed the pace of production, as the old Sířem biddies said, who went along with us to early mass and gave us apples and nuts in front of the church, upon which the more senior of the long-shirts knocked out the last of their milk teeth, and anyone who knocked out that milk tooth became fit and old enough to be a boxer-short boy... And so I was cautious with the nuts, because I really didn’t want to be going off to the upper dormitory with Dýha, where they spent all their time wanking and jacking off or talking about it, and that didn’t interest me.

When we went to church in the morning, we always lined up, first in line we the long-shirts set off, because
we walked more slowly and wouldn’t be able to keep up with the boxer-shorts. But when there was frost and snow, it was the boxer-shorts who set off first, in order to trample down the path, and I remember nothing but cold frosty mornings, when the procession of us God’s children passed by the village pond and into the church, and the village was totally empty except for the dogs that barked at us… they didn’t know us yet, because we didn’t yet have our commander Vyžlata in charge, who would be hiring us out to the village people to do odd jobs. The dogs didn’t know us at all, and they barked at us, this procession of children muffled up to the ears in clothing and scarves and caps, which Czech children used to gift to us in parcels.

We returned back quite differently, because by then the village was alive, however much Mr František might have tried to push the pace of production. And there on the way back from the church to the pond clods of earth whistled past and snowballs with ice in them… but not as we passed the village green, there we formed rows again and the sisters walked at the edges and everyone sang: Nearer Lord to Thee, so that the village would hear us. But then further along the road, where there weren’t any more cottages, we closed ranks, the Siřem boys were waiting for us with clods of earth and stones, and now the boxer-shorts surrounded the smallest of the long-shirts and walked at the sides and cursed and swore and caught the clods and stones and also chucked them back and took care to stop the balls of ice smashing into the little heads of the long-shirts and directed them back at the mugs of the village boys. And the sisters could do absolutely nothing.

And you’re just a load of borstal boys and syphilitics, gypsies, diddicois, tar-boys and ruffians, roasted the Siřem boys at us. And you are just dimwits and ruffians, dungheap hobble-de-boys and pitchforks and shitters and dog-eaters, the boxer-shorts roared back, and Dýha, Chata and Karel and the other boxer-shorts paid no attention to the remonstrations of the sisters and drew sticks out of their trouser legs, which they had prepared for the village dogs which the locals sometimes set against us. This was all great fun and the height of amusement, despite the lumps on the head and bloody noses and lacerated ears. And although the road to church seemed to us endless in those frosty mornings, we found ourselves back in the Home through all that clamour of fighting and dodging of whistling clods and stones incredibly quickly.

And the sisters set about bandaging up our scratches and rubbed our lumps with iodine and on that day the youngest sister Eulálie sobbed, because a dog had torn the tip of her black robe, and terrified her. And on that day the oldest sister Leonýna denounced the people of Siřem as Philistines, comparing us to the holy children of the Crusades, and on that day the hero of the whole Home was Dýha, because his forehead was broken with a stone, and every boy was a hero who limped or had a bandaged arm, and we boasted of these injuries, and those who had none, pretended they had them, and we thought up traps and snares for the boys of Siřem and we roared and cursed and swore. And on that day sister Albrechta in the dining-room classroom cried out: “Shut your mouths!” And she slammed her ladle down on the floor.

[One of the gipsy boys immediately grabbed the ladle from the floor and licked it all over. Dýha kicked him, his other mates weren’t having that, not even coming from Dýha, and so to Dýha’s broken forehead was added a thigh cut with a fragment of plate. The big boys started fighting, and the long-shirts were running amongst them knocking each other over to the floor, and soon everyone was fighting, and those who had their tongues, roared..with those tongues and cursed and swore, in Czech as well.]

Sister Albrechta sat there on her chair with plates and cutlery flying over her head, and someone in the course of the fighting knocked over a jug of milk and knocked a tray of bread spread with butter to the floor, and Sister Albrechta lit a cigarette and in that clamour of fighting, tears and sobbing of long-shirts trampled underfoot she tapped the ash of her cigarette down onto the dirty greasy floor.
I got over to the bread, stuck one piece under my shirt and stuck it onto my tummy with the butter and managed to swallow another two, before Sister Leontýna rushed into the dining room with a broom, behind her Sisters Zdislava and Dolores with buckets of cold water, Sister Leontýna thumped the brawlers on the head and the other two sisters splashed water over them. Then Sister Leontýna paused in front of Sister Albrechta and slapped her one in the face, causing her cigarette to fall out of her mouth. Sister Leontýna said: “Forgive me, Sister, our nerves are fraying.”

And sister Albrechta said: “Why don’t they give us a policeman over the village?”

Because they are a load of heretical Hussites and godless ones, it’s a Communist community and a dark night has befallen us!” said Sister Leontýna.

We all heard her, because except for a bit of snivelling now and again peace once more reigned in the dining room.

The boxer-shorts were crowded round the overturned tables and benches, and some of the long-shirts were still rolling about the floor in various states of wretchedness.

Sister Dolores, who was almost leaning her back against the painted figure of Christ, exclaimed: “Oh what is to become of us, o Lord, what is to become of us! Sister Zdislava embraced Sister Dolores and said: “Calm yourself, sister, and remind yourself, what is to become of them, the little ones! And when Sister Dolores heard this, she cried out dreadfully and fell backwards against the wall, banged her head against it, and all of us yelped out almost in unison.

Then Dýha stepped out of one huddle, placed himself in front of Sister Leontýna, and although he was almost just as tall as she was, he stuck out his chin as well and he said: “I too am a Communist!” and sister Leontýna said to him: “In that case you are going to be sleeping in the cellar! And as for the rest of you, on account of all this fighting, you can all go straight to your beds today without any instruction, off with you now!”

“Sisters, please!” said Sister Leontýna clapping her hands, and the sisters lined us up by the doorway and they clapped their hands too and sang in time to the long-shirts as they went: “Left right, one and two, the mouse goes through, the eye of the Lord upon it laid, one or two grains hw forgave..., but it was different from all the other days after afternoon snack. A day without instruction became a midday rest after lunch, and all of us were bruised and bumped and wretched, and nobody got uppity anymore and nobody even spoke very much. Dýha remained standing there, he was angry, Sister Albrecha marched up to him, jingling the bundle of keys on her ring, she was always the one to lead away the disobedient boys to the cellar, because she had strength. Sister Dolores leaned against Christ on the wall and gabbled, Sister Leontýna stepped up to her and caught her by the arm, and the two of them and Sister Zdislava too knelt down in front of the Lord and prayed, which I saw and heard, when I was trailing out of the dining-room classroom last of all.

And then I was alone in the corridor outside our dormitory.
And through the doorway I heard the soothing voice of Sister Eulálie and Sister Emiliána. The whole home went quiet, as the boys sank into their slumbers and the sisters probably continued in prayer. I ran down the stairs and stood in front of the main front door of the Home, it was locked. I tried the door-handle into the kitchen, but it was also locked. And then I was standing by the stairs to the cellar, where it was almost totally dark. I heard a voice from below and set off down myself by the turn in the passage... I knew it was Dýha roaring out and singing and that he was alone in the cellar with the rats, and I suddenly thought I’d go and have a look at him. He’s behind bars, so if anything does happen, he still won’t be able to touch me.

translated from Czech by Jim Naughton
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