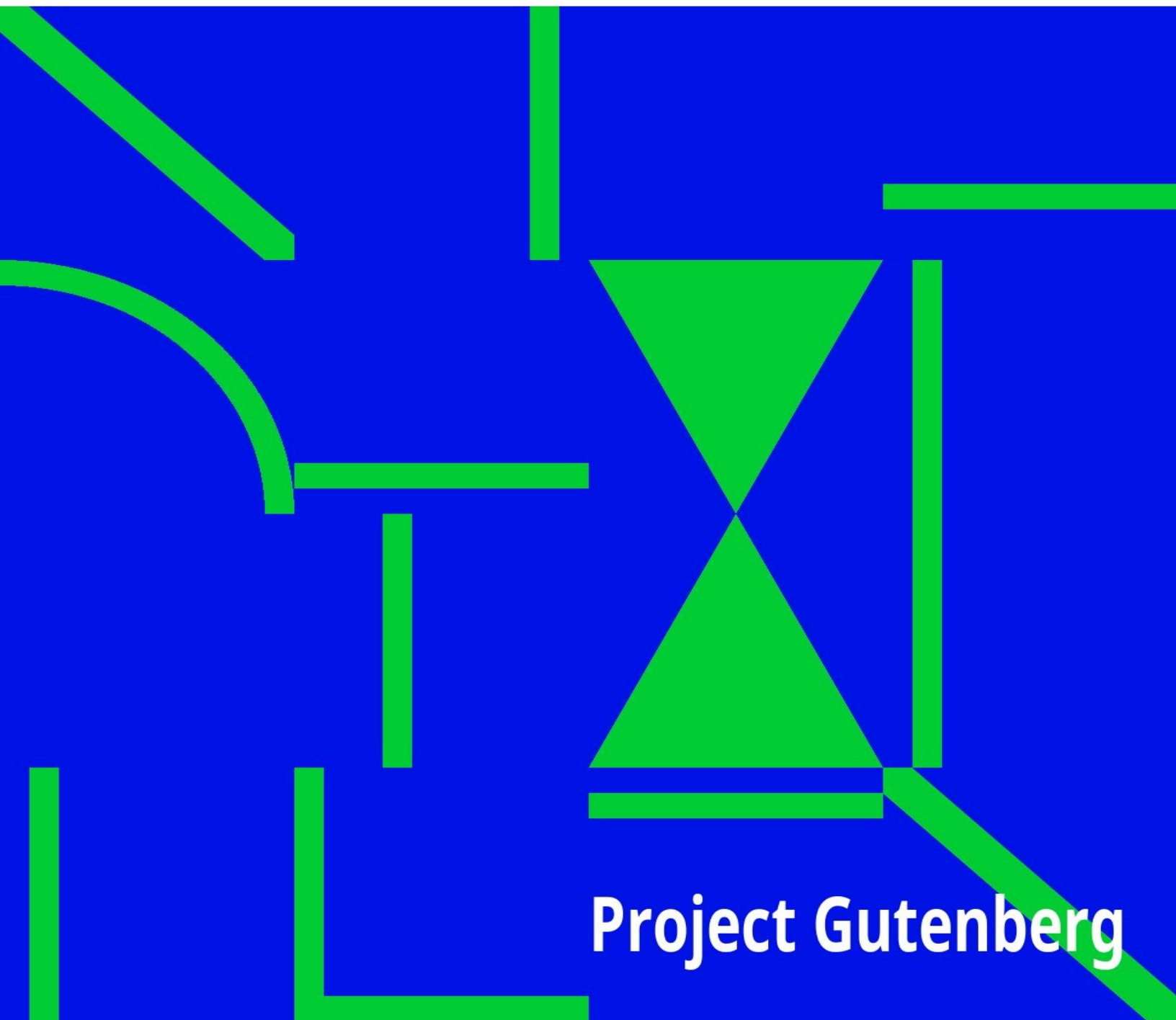


My First Battle

A Sergeant's Story

Adam Mickiewicz

An abstract geometric design featuring a solid blue background. Overlaid on this are various green shapes: a large green 'X' formed by two triangles meeting at a point in the center, several thick green lines of varying lengths and orientations (some horizontal, some vertical, some diagonal), and a green quarter-circle arc on the left side. The design is minimalist and modern.

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START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MY FIRST BATTLE

Adam Mickiewicz

MY FIRST BATTLE

A SERGEANT'S STORY

They envy Attila, who fought a thousand battles, and in the thousandth still felt that, which he called *gaudia certaminum*, that is, the delight in the slaughter. Oh, that old general was a lecher of blood. As far as I am concerned, holding the rank of light artillery sergeant, I confess, that I was truly in love with war, but only during the first week of my military career, and that only one single time I tasted Attila's delight. For this reason my honeymoon and first battle will never leave my memory.

The first battle has the most particular similarity to first love. How many hopes! how many illusions! before this ceremonial action, which resolves the fate of nations, any recruit feels obliged to play at least a role... as a hero of history or a romance.

It finally comes to the trial and you stand before it with impatience and a certain anxiety, experiencing once mortal terror, then again a crazed joy; now fear pierces you, now the pride of the triumphant picks you up.. In one hour you pass through crowds of emotions, and you collect keepsakes for your whole life! but in order to feel it in full force, you must have the heart of a virgin, the heart of a recruit.

Someone said that every man can compose a good romance, telling only the simple story of his first love. This insight encouraged me to describe the first battle, in which I was. You need to know that this battle is only an episode of a famous war, that in it we achieved a great victory, and that in its time it won us the admiration of the European people. Admittedly, these are times long past, because people have well forgotten both about our defeats and about our triumphs. In spite of this, the Polish soldier will never forget about the Battle of Stoczek.

After the revolution of the 29th of November¹, I decided to join the ranks, and I pondered, whether to the infantry, or to the cavalry? To make a definite choice, I ran through the streets of Warsaw, eyeing closely the uniforms of several regiments. I stopped ahead of a battalion of grenadiers, who marched in tight rows, silently, in order and seriously. Each moustachiod, with chevrons on his shoulders. These were the remains of the Napoleonic legions. As they passed,

they were yielded to with the utmost respect, and they were whispering in the crowd: "There are my soldiers! there are our defenders!" I envy them, I thought, it's a beautiful thing to be a grenadier! And I approached the division, and having taken the place beside the drummer, I marched in the grenadiers' step, singling out the commander, to whom I immediately wished to offer my services.

Suddenly, on the other side of the street, a new military meteor appeared to me. He was a Krakus² on a white horse, in a white *sukmana*³, in a red cap with a white feather, which cut like a swan through black waves of crowding townsfolk. He turned his horse beautifully; he welcomed pedestrians with a nod, with cavalrymen squeezed hands, and to beautiful ladies, standing in windows, sent grateful kisses. All eyes turned towards him; men clapped, women smiled in silence; and the beautiful Krakus became the god of the moment.

It came to my mind right away, that a Krakus' uniform at my age and height would suit me better, and so my true calling manifested itself: God had made me a Krakus!

So I turned in the direction of the cavalry barracks; but halfway across the road I fell into the immeasurable crowd who captured me into itself and bore towards the tollbooths. The people pressed to meet the newly approaching rows. A stranger figure rode at the front; it was it is an old Capuchin in habit and on a horse, in one hand a lance and the other blessing people with a cross, who kissed his legs. Behind the Capuchin followed a thousand archers from the Augustów forests. They had slung double-barrelled guns and badger skin bags with claws and bared teeth, whitening on green jackets. Another thousand villagers, armed with crooked scythes and axes, brought up the rear of the procession. Never had the entrance of the most beautiful regiments, even the entrance of Prince Józef at the head of victorious legions, aroused such enthusiasm, as this, with which the people of Warsaw greeted badger skin bags and bark clogs. Now there wasn't applause, or smiles, but shouts, thundering hurrah! and blessings, mixed with loud crying. Because the people, surprised by their own instincts, could seize the noble and beautiful side of the image. At the sight of these priests, of these farmers who had left monastic cells and their forests, in order to beat the enemies of the homeland, people understood the whole horror of danger, and also comprehended with complete trust that it was the only means of defense.

I was overcome by a sudden temptation to steal immediately behind the scythe or double-barrelled gun and to join the row with the peasants in order to share

with them the triumphant entry to the capital. But how to do it? how to fit myself in with the bold and taunting movements of Mazowian scythe-bearers, or the grim expressions and wild shooters from the Nieman? How to match them in the height and breadth of their backs? amongst these giants I would look like a rabbit among wolves. So what will I do with myself? Should I be a Krakus, or a grenadier! This uncertainty cost me dearly.

A colonel of my acquaintance met me in passing, and patting me on the shoulder, said: "I am in command of a guerrilla unit; some of my people have already left for the field, I myself am setting off today from Warsaw, I need gunners; perhaps you know where I can find them?"

"I know about one," I said, assuming a military posture; "you need a gunner, here you have him!"

"Agreed!" the colonel said, "put on a uniform and be at my place this evening at ten o'clock exactly, do you understand?"

Soldiers were being recruited in this manner during the uprising. That day at eleven at night I marched in uniform by the cannons. During the march we trained ourselves in the use of weapons, and I added so much urgency, that after three days I was appointed sergeant and a cannon was placed under my orders. The envious claimed that I had owed my rank to the colonel's peculiar considerations.

After all, I myself was surprised, confused and almost ashamed at such a sudden promotion. My head spun and only after a few hours of astonishment did I start to feel the influence of my new dignity. Involuntarily I adopted a martial and more serious face; having gravely stretched my right hand, I laid it on my property, on the muzzle of the cannon. This large piece of bronze, I thought to myself, will be a pillar in the temple of my fame; will be the first step in my knightly profession, or perhaps even lead me to the throne! A well aimed cannon often settles the fate of a war. And how did Napoleon get his start, if not as a gunner? Full of these dreams I fell in love with my bronze cannon as if with a young girl and from then on I was always beside her. I examined her defects and attributes, I debated character and got to know most precisely her entire composition and nature; physical as moral. She is so well engraved in my memory, that I could paint her portrait from memory. I knew sound of her voice so well that I could have recognised it amongst the roar of the liveliest

cannonade, even if it were Leipzig, or Ostrołęka. My beloved cannon! what happened to you? into whose hands did you fall? Certainly nobody will caress you as I did... Only that thought comforts me. She was admittedly a little eight pounder, but to me she was huge, as she was pregnant with my entire future. As well as well settled, simple to manoeuvre and with a strangely accurate shot. A whole day was barely enough for me in fulfilling my duties by the beloved cannon, and at night I didn't stop thinking about the object of my love. And so, one night I dreamed of battle, and who did I see opposite me? Field Marshall von Diebitsch! At once I take aim—poof! and my cannon ball cuts him in two. I took off, to tear off his head and carry it still warm to our Commander-in-Chief, Prince Radziwiłł; but the corpse of von Diebitsch was so heavily defended, that until I awoke completely into reality, instead of the head of the Muscovite leader, I held the head of the gunner sleeping opposite me. Another night a worse thing happened to me: I dreamed that the Muscovite cavalry fell on us unexpectedly; they killed me in advance, then cut down my gunners, and finally a Muscovite cuirassier mounted my cannon like a horse and started to plug it, looking at me with contemptuous eyes. Then I felt all the torments of the husband of Lucretia and the torments of the father of Virginia. Although I was already a cold and stiff corpse, nevertheless I gathered all my strength to give some sign of life and adjusting to myself, I managed at last to scream so strongly, that I both woke myself and alarmed the entire camp. Having jumped to my feet, and just as day was beginning to break, my eyes seek my cannon and I see with no little joy, that she's there, that she sits free and calm on her carriage.

Her open jaws seemed to draw the coolness of the morning, and the gleaming surface reflected the first rays of sunshine. I lay down again on the wet ground, but this time as a precaution I held on to a spoke.

So passed a whole week, my first week after marrying the beautiful eight pounder: the honeymoon of an artillery sergeant, the happiest week of my life! I kept busy every moment, in the belief that I had already achieved the purpose of my existence in world; my soul went completely into the beloved cannon.

Meanwhile we drew closer and closer to the banks of the Vistula; ice was already giving way in many places and here and there you could see water appearing. Our colonel, with a long pole in his hand, was first to go through the ice, wading in the water up to his knees, then he ordered us to follow him. Follow him with our cannons over such weak ice? At this order I went pale as death, because our entire military future could drown. In the end we passed

happily and we stopped on the opposite bank with the shout: Long live Poland!

That same evening saw the joining of the corps, with the front sent from Warsaw. They awaited us impatiently; because young soldiers have an elevated opinion of the power of artillery, and it worried them very much that on the eve of the expected battle they had no cannons. Having heard the rattle of cannon wheels, the whole camp lost possession of itself in joy: "our artillery approaches! Long live the artillery!" they called from all sides and ran to meet us, and placed us in the centre of the camp.

We also enthusiastically greeted our comrades. Until then marching in loneliness, now we were in a crowd of brave soldiers, whose number gave itself significance to the eye. That raised our confidence. Only altogether there weren't more than twelve squadrons, filling a wide area. Proudly we looked at a forest of stuck lances, on which new flags sparkled with colours, still not knowing blood or dust. After a cheerful and grand supper we lay down to sleep, swung with the sound of military music and the singing of the mazurka.

At dawn, when our corps entered the village, mixed shouts reached us. We pulled in; they sent for reconnaissance and it turned out that these were shouts of victory! The first triumph! You should have seen, how pleased we were with them. These Cossacks, bearded, disarmed, walked with heads lowered and with sour expressions. As they went by us, our young soldiers jeered at them, cursed or threatened. And I had a desire to do the same, but the duty attached to the rank didn't permit it, so severely reprimanding them, I said: "Poles! respect misfortune! The fate of war is often doubtful! Death to our enemies! Mercy to the conquered! Long live Poland!"

The soldiers calmed down, taken aback by the nobility of my emotions and sententious eloquence. For some time my attention turned to one old gunner, riding beside me, who constantly climbed in his stirrups, lifted his head, neck craned over the shoulders of his comrades.

"What are you looking at, Mateusz?"

"At those beasts, sergeant, may the hangman take them"... and pointed his finger at hills, which were ahead of us. I saw then, how something was blackening the hilltop. Where they bushes, or the caps of the Muscovite infantry? I didn't have time to look longer, because the officers came running,

calling with all their might: “Forward artillery! stand in position!” We moved, every horse jumping. A cannon shot and the ball, having killed one of our horses, rained earth on us and flew onwards, ricocheting. We occupied the hill, directly opposite the enemy, who doubled fire.

A wide plain, surrounded by bushes and forest, stretched before us. In the centre of it, on the hill, rolled a Muscovite battery of twelve heavy gauge cannons who powdered us with cannon balls and grenades. Behind the battery you could see thick ranks of cavalry, standing motionless. Our cavalry similarly stood calmly, leaving time for the operations of the artillery.

I noticed that soldiers of different weapons throughout the battle preserved the stance and the facial expression characteristic of themselves. And as the artilleryman has neither the cavalry's extravagance, nor the infantry's impatience, but attentive to command, fast and accurate amid all the commotion, appearing calm, though his eyes burned with the smoke, bloodshot, eyebrows furrowed, face pale, mouth clenched, speech short and hard, expressing fierce, suppressed and concentrated fury.

In the middle of this fire, even though death swept past their heads, they didn't stop making jokes; every time each cannon ball ricocheted, the young soldiers made a point of talking to it, and to give it advice. A ricocheting cannon ball can be seen from afar, as it jumps across the field, so if it was going to one side, to the left, they were calling to it: “Where are you going, blind man! get to the right!” and if it was going straight, they encouraged it: “good, good!” and so they spoke to it until it fell right in the middle of the enemy line and then they were applauding it.

I don't know now, how many hours that cannonade lasted. Although we passed each other feverishly beside the cannon, in the same way this play lasted too long, to not wish for nightfall. The Russian artillery had an obvious advantage over us, both in numbers, and in cannon gauge. They had already hit a few of our people, many were wounded, but everyone, although extremely tired, equally didn't sink in spirits and nobody even thought about retreat.

Suddenly from the left cannons roared horribly. The Muscovites had placed a new battery right there, which fired at us from the side. We turned two of our cannons against this new threat, with whom we needed to chat; but our position was becoming more and more unpleasant, because six field cannons to answer

twenty heavy gauge cannons is no small matter! Our soldiers, at the sight of this imbalance of power, seemed to be stirred. Now their movements weakened, now our shots happened less frequently, and what's more the anecdotes and jokes ceased completely.

It seems that our commander was waiting until the Muscovites separated their forces, in order to profit from that moment and strike them; I suppose, although they aren't tempting themselves to debate the battle plan. I only know that at the most critical moment we heard from the left a horse's hoofbeat, rushing at a gallop and a few minutes later that second battery went silent, when it was conquered.

Our commander turned around and dashed to the main strength of our troops, calling: "Forward at a trot! everyone forward!" And our entire cavalry, drawn up in two rows, moved out, passing our battery. "They're going to charge!" cried our gunners and at once we ceased firing. How did it look? The young lancers with eager gaze, fevered face, burst impatiently forward, but advised or unadvised they still needed to obey the strict orders of the commander, who still repeated: "Trot! forward! trot!" You could see from the movement of the flags, how feverishly the soldiers' hands were twitching. In the end the trumpets sounded, flags descended and now they kicked themselves off towards the enemy. "Forward! Gallop! everyone forward!"

They took off—we stayed by our cannons, doing nothing, and even thinking nothing. The artillery recently so busy and noisy, now seemed to be petrified. Our souls flew far and rested on the tips of the lances. Now the Muscovites are close! Already the Muscovite ranks are deploying, in order to receive them. The gunners climbed on the gun carriages, on the ammunition carts and stare into space, looking ahead with gaping mouths; it was so quiet that you could hear the flight of a fly. Each of us felt, that on this clash hung our fate, the fate of our army, perhaps even our homeland! It was a moment of expectation and terrible uncertainty, luckily lasting only a few minutes. Our cavalry clashed with the Muscovites on the high ground, both lines clashed with each other and mixed.

In the whole of this mass it boiled and the whole mass disappeared, like a dust cloud driven by the wind.

I don't know who, but someone among us shouted at the top of his lungs—that shout broke the deathly silence, because he proclaimed victory, however nobody

accompanied him. Because we, young soldiers, still we weren't understanding, nor guessing the outcome of this battle, but besides that we feared to yield to premature joy. "Wait!" someone or other said—"as yet there's nothing certain; nothing to be seen, everyone seems to have disappeared!"

Finally, the part of the mass that we could see, as it vanished from our sight, started to come towards us. By their colours we recognised our lancers and by the war cry: Poland Is Not Yet Lost.⁴

Now there's no doubt, victory is ours! The approaching mass presented a peculiar spectacle. In it you could see a lot of foot soldiers with diverse weapons, in addition wagons, ammunition carts, artillery pieces... There were Muscovite prisoners, captured with the artillery and the whole encampment.

I wouldn't be able to describe our joy, this frantic joy! How can it be! their whole artillery! this mighty artillery in our hands. We rushed headlong upon these cans, pressing them, caressing them, and I myself for a moment forgot about my love, the eight-pounder.

Beautiful they were, these Russian cannons, so huge, new, well mounted and stocked with everything.

"Look, sergeant" the gunner Mateusz called out "look at what red, shining cannons these cursed Muscovites⁵ have!"

I started with a delicate hand to stroke the polished bronze surface, and everyone repeated in chorus: "Oh, but how these muscovite cans do shine!" "and what a calibre" noticed one gunner, "that's the calibre for me!" "that's no peashooter!"

I started measuring the muzzle of the cannon, and the soldiers repeated: "those jaws are no joke!"

Then, when we started examining the harness, then again they called as a choir: "Oh, what sturdy straps those cursed Muscovites have!"

Nobody will guess in the end, what caused us the greatest joy; it was none other than ordinary oats, taken as spoils. Our cavalry didn't have any more fodder, but the Muscovites had it in ample amounts; their wagons, caissons, gun carriages even, were full of oats. Soldiers rushed on them hungrily, filling sacks with them, cartridge cases, pockets, and saying that they had never seen such

beautiful oats.

The leader rode up and at the sight of him a shout of enthusiasm and worship thundered. Perhaps he was very tired, because despite a cool day, sweat flowed from him in drops.

We surrounded him in a dense crowd. Amid the general commotion and bursts of joy, he alone was calm and silent, though visibly moved.

“My children,” he said to us, “I promised to lead you to the enemy; you promised to beat him—and so both you and I have kept our words.”

Such was our memorable day at Stoczek. With night falling stories began by the camp's bonfires, there were no listeners, because everyone spoke; everyone bravely acquitted themselves in battle, everyone had jokes—because everyone was happy.

If that blessed hour comes to me, that I can again fight for my country, to see the Muscovite army in panic, to seek out my beloved eight pounder and to hurl cannon balls from it at golden roofs of the Tsarist capital city, then I will call myself happy; but even then I wouldn't be able to feel that, which I experienced in the first battle, in the memorable Battle of Stoczek.

[1.](#)

1831.

[2.](#)

A soldier of the Cracovian cavalry. “*Krakus*” is an alternative name of *Krak*, the legendary founder of Cracow, and is used to refer to an inhabitant of the city.

[3.](#)

A type of tunic, of Turkish influence, typical of Cracow.

[4.](#)

The first line of “*Dąbrowski's Mazurka*”, now the National Anthem of

Poland.

[5.](#)

Untranslatable: Mateusz here uses the non-human form, echoing his earlier use of “beasts”

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