

# Samažan

A short story by Mladen Bundalo

“Such the philosophy which our Plato of Oblomovka elaborated for the purpose of lulling himself to sleep amid the problems and the stern demands of duty and of destiny. He had been bred and nourished to play the part, not of a gladiator in the arena but of a peaceful onlooker at the struggle. Never could his diffident, lethargic spirit have faced either the raptures or the blows of life. Hence he expressed only one of its aspects, and had no mind either to succeed in it, or to change anything in it, or to repent of his decision.”

“Oblomov” by Ivan Goncharev

As I should do it much earlier, I started with some French lessons. The class takes place at a center gathering the community from East of Europe. It is free of any charge, and I find myself there.

I did not think about it before (or not in particular), but I am an immigrant. All that administrative processes you need to pass through, people and communities you meet, make you realize you can't simply be what you think you are. Firstly, you are a migrant, then comes the rest. I expected it will be fine I can still be an artist in the second place, but that turned to be naïve. The identity order corresponds more to this:

1. Migrant
2. Financial balance
3. The country you come from
4. The ethnic group you belong to
5. Gender
6. Age
7. A job you can immediately do
8. Profession

Among many interesting personalities, which are coming to the French class, there is one who provoked a particular curiosity at me. His name is Samažan.

Samažan is coming from Kazakhstan, and he seems to be on a slight distance with others, who are Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, and Chechens. He is a very calm person, and he has an obvious issue with hearing. He makes an effort even to speak in his maternal language, and with French, it's been a real challenge. The teacher skips him very often when there is something to practice, marking him as a sort of "the lost case". We all somehow felt sorry for him, because he had one more identity to overcome in order to achieve what he expects from life.

Samažan does not understand a word of English. We are communicating throughout drawings, explaining to each other where we are coming from and similar. After a while, we managed to arrive to speak about the things we do in our lives. Samažan is an international master in the chess game and he is playing piano professionally, which was a fascinating claim indeed, considering he had serious hearing problems.

The following language lessons, I'm there with a chess game and we play during a short break we have. He destroys me in the game! Like never before, I feel it is useless to think about what is the right idea to play, how to calculate position, or how to employ a tactic. We are not even reaching a mid-game, and I'm down a major piece. Russians seem to be proud of the fact that chess game is a national sport, similar to football for Brazilians, so the presence of the chessboard makes them instantly high. They do not miss a chance to challenge Samažan. In our group, there is one strong player, an elderly lady, an ethnic Russian from Kyrgyzstan, apparently holding a title of international master. They played against each other, Samažan won in an amazing, rook-sacrifice checkmate. One guy from Georgia, in a particularly positive, combat spirit, came to play against Samažan. He did not survive a move twenty. They stop further challenging him in a chess game. Confusion and silence spread around the class. We imagined Samažan as a poor, semi-handicapped Kazak boy, who got lost in Western Europe, but we were all stunned by how clever he is, and we all respected it deeply.

I continue to play chess against Samažan, losing the game after the game, but I'm always fascinated by the way he plays.

Today, we had a small exercise. We had to say in a short way, what we did before, what we do now, and what we wish to do in our lives. At first sight nothing special, but considering the context we are all in, every story is a thriller of its own kind. It is Samažan's turn to speak. He makes it first in Russian, asking colleagues to translate it in French. But, we have no opportunity to hear it back in French, because the rest of the crew becomes to argue about statements he just pronounced. Our teacher, a warm and welcoming Belgian stagiist with no understanding of Russian, had to react asking them for a translation. Samažan said that he was a chess master, that he is a philosopher now, and that he wants to hold a title of the academician of science, in future. People start to tease him. He, who has difficulties to follow the basic French class, wishes something such pretentious. Disturbing.

There are two guys who missed that chess game day, and they were especially loud. Samažan keeps cool, and he seems to be uninterested about the things they are discussing. The crew was divided. One elderly lady defended Samažan's enthusiasm, explaining to them that he proved us his intelligence in the chess game and that he is able to be that he wants. One guy, with his exposed and proud charm of constructing capabilities, responds by saying: "but after all how do you all know he is that good in a chess game, he still did not play against me?"

A figure and personality of Samažan somehow disturb the common, inner, migrant constellation. He is an offset, bringing uncertainty and imbalance into the patterns on which both social groups, migrants and locals operate. Two of us, we are part of the same meta-tribe.

Here are some photos of Samažan. There is one I especially like. He makes a drawing of me while taking photos around. He suggests me to paint it on a canvas afterward. However, I feel lazy to do it and would do it only as a gift, one day, maybe.







