

8 Hus

(...) It has always seemed to me that this tranquillity facing extinction was something worth saving, something essential, like a ballast on the ship, keeping all human communities in balance.

What other thing could you possibly oppose to an increasing rush?

Jan Jozef Szczepanski, The Polar Bear Bay

A thin streak of light crept along an old floorboard in Hyttevika, a former trappers' hut on the northern coast of Hornsund. A ray of sunshine in the middle of the dark bowels of the hus. Why did we not notice that ray before? After a few minutes of 'investigation' and struggling through junk in our stock room, we knew.

'You see over there?' Szymon ('Sheemon') pointed at the hus wall. 'There is a small hole in the wooden plank. A knot may have fallen out or it could have been a former firing port. You know, one of those holes the trappers would cut out in the hus walls to make hunting easier.'

'How is it possible that we haven't seen it before? We've been already living here for a couple of days.' I tried to find a logical explanation for a sudden appearance of the patch of sunlight.

'Yeah, but we haven't been so careless yet to leave the door to the cold hallway and stock room wide open. We were careful not to chill the room that took so much effort to warm up,' Szymon's practical mind could not think of anything else.

We moved a huge chest with our food supplies out of the way. We did the same with a few old planks kept in the stock room, nobody knows what for. Now we could

easily peep out of our newly discovered 'window'. Just with one eye, but we could see quite a way away: a bit of the coastline and shore rocks in the background and in the foreground our intensely green moss 'lawn' in front of the hut. Quite an impressive panorama for a window only a couple of centimetres in diameter.

Some may be surprised at our reaction. Nothing important happened. A knot fell out of the board or somebody cut out a piece of wood. No big deal. A ray of sunshine got into the hut – that's normal too. No reason for such delight. Yes, that is all true. However, when you are living in the hus, far away from any civilisation, at the northern edge of the world, surrounded only by the sea, mountains and glaciers, then even the most trivial everyday activity may become a miracle, discovery or reason for joy. And no joy is banal. At the same time, it is a shame that in our ordinary everyday lives we do not notice how much joy is hidden in simple things because we always seem to be in such a hurry. We do not perceive the fact that we can enjoy even an ephemeral beam of light appearing on the dark floor. First we must notice it.

We came back to the warm 'living room.' The light beam was still there decorating the floor. In the sunlight we could clearly see how uneven the ancient floor made of tatty planks was. We had paid no attention to that shabby surface before. It was only then that we started to take in the fact that there was something more beneath our feet. We tried to read the history written in its cracks and scratches. There was a gap between the boards. It might have been widened by the ice freezing in the slit. After all, the changing of the floor into an 'ice rink' is common in the Arctic winter. A small but visible dent in one of the planks – maybe a mark left by some heavy object that fell down. The floor around the stove was much darker, blackened and bearing traces of soot. It was proof that all dwellers of the hut were persistently driving off the winter, warding it off with fire. There were many cuts and scars we could not decipher. The old floor preserved the memory of the old days, past events, former inhabitants. In the same way the wrinkles on your face preserve the traces of your own individual victories and defeats.

Hyttevika is a venerable old hut. It was built in the early twentieth century and has just celebrated its 100-year anniversary. The hus walls must have seen a thing or two during its life, big and small dramas, dilemmas, joys and successes. First, of the trappers who used to live there. The trappers who were waiting patiently for their game, planning carefully the network of their traps and snares. Their era is gone now. In 1973 a national park was established in this area of Spitsbergen and all hunting was forbidden. The majority of trappers' huts began to serve new inhabitants – the crowds of researchers who were pouring into the Arctic regions. The interiors of the huts, which used to smell of fresh game and tanned skins of Arctic foxes, bears and seals, were filled now with piles of books, notes, maps, measuring equipment and



Reindeer almost in the 'house garden'.

quite recently with cutting-edge technology, such as laptops, palmtops, GPSs and satellite phones. A modern version of hunting – not for animals, but for a scientific discovery or breakthrough.

The hus walls remember the hunters' happiness with their abundant take and successful hunting season, which allowed them not to worry about their survival. But within these walls there is also pain and rage of failure and the spectre of famine in the winter when the season was not satisfactory and there were too few pelts for sale. The hus beams preserve the joy of the researchers who successfully completed the season and were happy with performed measurements as well as collected samples and exhibits. But there is also sadness and disappointment when the research did not go well or the theories they strongly believed in proved erroneous.

Trappers' and researchers' successes and failures are not the only emotions built into these old overstrained walls of the hus. They include a much wider palette of casual feelings and activities:

'What shall we have for dinner today?'

'Any volunteers to make the fire? As usual, none. You're not too keen on that job.'

'Just look at the fantastic shapes of the ice blocks in the bay! They have only come this morning.'

'Oh, no! It's raining again. Does it ever stop here? We won't be on time with our field project...'

'Jasiu ('Yashiu') and Bartek ('Bhartek') haven't come back yet. They've been out for nine hours. They should be back by now. I'm starting to worry.'

'I'm putting the kettle on, anyone fancy some tea?'

For decades the hus has been filled with thousands of various, more or less important, matters that engage the human mind. Survival, work and leisure, solitude and cooperation. Conflicts you cannot avoid while living in such a tiny space along with a group of individuals. But also the utmost confidence and trust you have in somebody close to you with whom you share your dwelling. For over 100 years the hus walls echoed with some bad words or curses uttered in outrage or fury. But they also witnessed soft whispers of affection and trusting love. Even a baby was born here many years ago, in the trappers' time. It is just several square metres of wooden floor and low walls, but inside you have a whole new world, changing from year to year, from season to season, each time with the coming and going of its occupants. It is these stories from a close or distant past, fascinating or dull, that the hus wants to tell us with its creaking floor, with every beam in the wall, the permeating smell of smoke, wood burning in the stove and with every single item collected there. It is amazing that a tiny hut built somewhere at the end of the world can encompass such a number of artefacts.

We will never understand these stories fully. We will never meet the person whose hands hung a checked curtain in the hus window, constructed the wooden bunk bed, table and bench; the hands that put a big collection of Norwegian books onto the shelves, which look quite dog-eared now; the hands that hammered nails into the walls, serving now as hangers; the hands that did a lot of other small jobs to make the hus become a home. Our home now. After this house, which was built over a century ago, the whole bay got its name. Hyttevika – means no other thing than the Bay of the House or the Bay of the Hut – Home Bay. The very building has the same name because it really is a home bay for us, a warm and safe haven. During the first expeditions, however, the explorers used a far less romantic and affectionate name for this place. They used to call it the ‘sub-base’.

We sense the past around us. It comes up again and again in small items found in the hut. But the past is beyond us. And that’s the way it is. Now it is time for us to create our history of friendship with the hut. Now our feet tread on the wooden boards, leaving our traces. Maybe someone will notice them, some day in the future, in a ray of sunshine that will throw light on the hus interior and its mysteries. We are immersed in the extraordinary atmosphere of Hyttevika, which is full of the past. It surrounds us like the scent of smoke from the stove in our hair, skin and clothes. We are beginning to write a new chapter in the hut’s rich history. We have our share in it, which is not going to be recognised in the years to come and no one will attribute it to us. A new string and wood structure for drying clothes over the stove, a stone candlestick made from pebbles found on the shore, a renewed inscription, ‘Hyttevika’, above the entrance door, which was burnt into wood with a hot nail by Szymon. Brief moments recorded in small objects, remembrance of the time when we could call hus our home. A short interval – between those whose time in Hyttevika is over and those who will come after us.

The hus has been patiently collecting all stories and items. It is astonishing how many extraordinary treasures you can ferret out by searching every nook and cranny. There are countless cubby-holes and hiding places there. The huts had to be most functional as they provided accommodation for trappers for at least half a year in this inhospitable environment. For decades, people have brought many items that would secure them against danger or let them live in a self-sufficient way. With each subsequent season the number has grown. In our leisure time after work or during rainy days we go treasure hunting. Our discoveries are always surprising. We are astonished at the human resourcefulness that brought to this remote place almost anything you can think of. We find a stock of rusty nails that were forgotten a long time ago, two packets of old candles (why on earth did they send for the new ones now?), glass saucers and decanters, coasters cut out of some plastic whose purpose

remains more or less mysterious, a worn-out sleeping bag, a set of strings and ropes, a small box of safety pins and drawing pins, bandages yellowed with age and many other finds. With a bit of imagination and inventiveness you can build or construct almost everything that could be needed. There are stocks of food too. Some articles were left by the previous expeditions, and new teams always bring fresh supplies. It would be impossible to die of starvation here unless you are very particular about the expiry date. It turns out that bread in vacuum packages, tinned food or powdered soups, which are several years old, taste delicious, especially after a whole day of work in the wind or drizzle. Not to mention custard or jelly delicacies. Who would ever think of throwing them away, even if their sell-by date is three or four years past? It is strange that so many objects can be found in such a small space. Even stranger, you do not have the impression that the place is cramped. Oh no! Most of the 'treasures' are hidden out of sight, popping up now and then when a discovery is made.

The interior of the hut looks austere and severe as befits a decent Scandinavian house. It must be neat and functional. There is a wide bunk bed in the corner, a wooden bench along the wall, a bookshelf above it. At the other side of the room there is a small cast-iron stove with an intricate grating on the glass doors, just behind it a huge pile of wood cut into pieces. Next to it, you can see a cupboard equipped with a full set of pots and pans, mugs and plates – of different sizes, colours and origin. All of them rather the worse for wear but that does not matter much. There is also a table in front of the cupboard and two chairs, although they could be considered armchairs, being covered by soft animal skins. This is our living room. You go out of it into a hallway that serves different purposes depending on the demand. At one time it is a kitchen where we set up our cooking facilities, namely portable gas cookers. Then it turns into a bathroom where we place a bowl of hot water, which has been warmed up on the stove. From the hallway you enter another room. It is used as a depot now, but it can also serve as a bedroom if there are more people around. That's the whole hut, covered with tar paper on the roof. It is perched low, close to the rocky ground, as if its builders wanted it to put down roots. You can barely see it at a distance. Its dark silhouette blurs with the background, with surrounding rocks as well as the brown green and reddish colours of tundra.

In the vastness of the Arctic this inconspicuous building is our home and safe haven. This fact is difficult to comprehend when you are looking at this tiny little thing squeezed between the sea and the rocky slope of the Gullichsenfjellet mountain range. The hut was built on the strip of land in its narrowest section between the water and land. Polar bears going from the west to the east in their annual wandering had no other way but to walk in front of the hunter's windows. The bears always went down a treat with hunters. They were a real bargain. In Norwegian the Hornsund

shores are called 'Isbjørnpromenade', which means the Promenade of Polar Bears. Well, even today we take the consequences of this location being on the way and in the way of bears' wanderings. But now we are definitely less keen to meet the white king of the Arctic eye to eye.



Hyttevika is situated not only on the route of polar bears' wanderings but also on the way of polar explorers' excursions. The location between the Station of Polish Academy of Sciences and Werenhus makes it a comfortable stopover in a walk of a dozen or so kilometres. All the people walking along this simplest coastline 'road' drop in at Hyttevika hut. So one morning we were going to have guests. A few friends had called us on the radio and announced their visit the next day on their way back from Werenhus to the base. The guests were coming for tea. It is wonderful, meeting the people you know and like. Especially as for a couple of days we have not seen



A horse shoe at the entrance to Hyttevika – good luck for all the inhabitants and guests.

any living creatures apart from Arctic foxes, reindeer and innumerable birds. Except for brief messages sent through our shortwave radio, we were completely cut off from civilisation. It will be so nice to see familiar faces again and listen to the latest news and gossip from the wider world of Werenhus and the base. The instincts of the hostess stirred inside me. After all I had been the Lady of Hyttevika for over a week. I wanted to do my best and entertain our first guests in the best possible way, and there is nothing more important for the homemaker to hear than that the guests are feeling welcome in their house. I was happy that I could have some visitors. I wanted to look after those weary wanderers, to make them feel safe and comfy. Even ordinary tea has an extraordinary power when drunk together with others at the table. It signifies friendship between those who come and those who welcome them. The far North teaches us to appreciate the significance of open doors – leading to the cosy home with hot tea waiting on the table. It isn't much but it means a great deal. That is the reason I was so eager to play my role as a hus homemaker well.

On the very day of the expected visit I was woken up by loud shuffling on the gravel beach outside. I looked dazedly at my watch. It made my blood run cold.



Mother reindeer concerned that her youngster is following.

It's so early! And the guests have already arrived. We aren't ready yet!

The shuffling became even clearer. 'Well, let's face it, if I don't get up immediately I will have to open the doors wearing my pyjamas.' I got dressed in a jiffy, not wanting to welcome the visitors in this unbecoming way. The shuffling approached and sounded just outside the hus walls. As befits the hostess, I decided to go out and meet my guests on the doorstep. I struggled for a while with the sophisticated mechanism of the lock barring the door primarily against the bears. I poked my nose outside and was just about to walk out with a welcoming greeting when I saw our 'visitors.' Next to the hut, a couple of metres away from the entrance, there was a large polar bear. He was lying casually beside big rubbish bags and was fishing out all things potentially edible. The bags were supposed to have been taken by the Norwegians who had been renovating Hyttevika hut, but they hadn't done it yet. The bags' contents were scattered all over the beach, and the bear was cleaning it up. He was so absorbed in his activity that he took no notice of the noise made by the door. He enthusiastically kept on digging out treasures from the bag with his right paw while holding the sack with his left paw. If I was a trapper in the old days, I would definitely be delighted at such an opportunity. It would have been an easy catch, so the trappers would have probably got very excited about it. But I was not one of them. I slammed the door immediately, barred it inside, quickly and skilfully as never before.

'Szymon! There is a bear outside!' I rushed into the living room. I thanked God I was not alone to welcome such a 'guest', who in the meantime made himself comfortable in front of the entrance.

We came out of the hut after a few minutes, this time armed with pots and ladles. We were banging against them with all our strength. Such percussion, making that horrible clatter, was just unbearable. After a while we were totally deafened. And the bear? During the whole 'concert' performed by us with such zeal he raised his head only once and looked in our direction. Hmm, did it only appear to me, or did I really see a pitiful look in his eye? He was completely ignoring our presence as well as the infernal noise we were making. He went on rummaging the content of the bags. Our efforts were absolutely pointless. We returned to the hus and carefully barred the door. Szymon put his magnum gun on the table – just to be on the safe side. We had to go back to our usual household activities. And so half the day went by. The bear was still there, and only the shuffling on gravel pebbles made us aware of his presence. We did not disturb each other. It was an interesting experience. Not everybody can boast of having a bear in their backyard. We warned our real guests from Werenhus through the radio not to come too early. They only arrived at Hyttevika in the afternoon. By then, the bear had moved onto one of the nearby rocks. He was engaged with the food consumed at his litter feast and felt too heavy

to walk on. He stayed there until the next morning, then he disappeared and did not come back again.



On a daily basis we were surrounded by other, less exciting, animals. I got especially attached to the little auks that were swarming on the slopes just behind Hyttevika hut. These small Arctic ‘penguins’, that’s often what they’re called because of their black and white feathers, would not let us forget about their presence. Day or night, midnight or noon, we were constantly surrounded by their piercing screams. We woke up and went to sleep accompanied by the auks’ voices. These tiny winged beasts were never tired. Whole flocks would restlessly and relentlessly hover over our heads and make innumerable circles around us. The little auks were ubiquitous. Their presence became an inseparable element of our presence at Hyttevika. Their shrill hubbub and hustle and bustle accompanied our everyday life in the hus. Later, at the end of August, the auks left their Arctic dominion and flew south. When we were walking at the foot of the mountains, which had held their colonies, we missed their noisy and winged company. A calm set in. It was not disturbed by birds’ cries. Everything seemed lifeless. It was a certain harbinger of winter. But for most of our stay in Hyttevika the rocky slopes and the sky above us were full of life and commotion.

I really liked watching reindeer. Quite a lot of them were grazing nearby. They never came in herds, usually just small groups of two or three. We often saw females with their young, who never squandered the chance to suckle their mother’s milk. Some of the ‘babies’ still walked awkwardly on their disproportionately long legs. At other times, we came across lone males with antlers like the branches of a huge old tree. They must have been long in the tooth. Irrespective of their age, reindeers are all equally likeable. They are a bit smaller than their Siberian relatives, more stocky and have thicker fur. Thanks to that they are more resistant to cold. They seem very trusting and usually you can approach them very closely. They will look at you with their big dark eyes, as if surprised at the sight of you, and then will return to plucking their tundra treats. There is something hilarious and comforting at the same time in the way they run, throwing their lopsided legs apart.

Except for the little auks and reindeer, we also had other inseparable companions in the hus’ closest neighbourhood. They were Arctic foxes otherwise known as polar foxes. There were five of them, which were really friendly and came up close to the hut. Four had coats of tundra colours: brown, dark brown and beige, and one was completely different, all black. It is a bit of an exaggeration to say that they were tame,

but they certainly got used to our presence. Foxes have an extremely sociable and playful personality. It seemed to us that they were coming up just to show us how they played, fought and hunted, and whatever else their funny leaps could mean. They would hop and jump, prowl about, chase one another and coil themselves. They were cheering us up with their tricks and stunts. If it hadn't been for our duties, we could have been observing their habits and boisterous capering for hours. However, the way we got acquainted with Hytttevika foxes was quite a different story. It did not look so funny at the beginning.



In the morning, when the stove had gone cold in the night and there was no warm water, we used to go to the stream for a quick wash. The water temperature was 0.5°C, the fact of which was announced to us by the hydrogeologists who were conducting research in the area. But in the morning such fresh water coming from the ice resources from the ground was perfect to wake you up. Our 'washing post' or 'water drawing stand' was so compact that it could be used only by one person at a time.

'I left you the soap by the stream,' announced Szymon on his way back from our 'streamlined bathroom.'

'All right, thanks. I'll go there in a sec, must finish yesterday's notes,' I was doing my best not to lag behind with my diary notes.

Unfortunately, my scrupulousness was to blame for the loss of our only bar of soap. When after a couple of minutes I reached the stream, there was not a sign of the soap or a soap dish. But in the vicinity I could see a fox trotting up and down the place.

'Fox! It's you. You are the guilty one!' We ran after the rascal hoping to find our lost items. We followed the fox as he was the only suspect visible in the area.

'He must have taken them to play. They must be lying around here somewhere.'

Our search ended with a qualified success. We came across only the soap dish. The soap itself sank like a stone.

'It's just impossible that it vanished into thin air!'

'Maybe the fox gulped it down? We've already heard stories about the bear who was feasting on washing powder, why shouldn't the fox try some soap? This white thing with a peculiar smell might turn out to be a tasty morsel.'

'We'll have to keep an eye on the foxes in case one of them goes foamy...'

But none of them did. The puzzle remained unsolved and we were left with no soap at all.

'Well, we'll have to go to Werenhus, cap in hand, and beg for some.' But that had to be put off for later. First our day's field work had to be done. Just in case we left a note in the hus reading as follows: 'The foxes have devoured our soap. Help!' As if every Spitsbergen wanderer going past Hyttevika was carrying a bar of soap to spare.

To our surprise, when we came back home after a few good hours, we found an elegant brand new bar of soap on the table. Good spirits of Werenhus were not idle. Accidentally, Jasiu, the resident of Werenhus, was walking by Hyttevika hut while doing his field work, dropped in to make some tea and read our desperate plea for help. Then Czarek ('Tschaarek') and Bartek were coming from Werenhus to Hyttevika depot for fresh supplies as not everything had been carried to Werenhus yet. It was they who brought us the soap. We rejoiced over it! Such joy at a simple piece of soap. But that was not all. We were happy to have invisible helpers whose assistance was so tangible. We were delighted with their goodwill and selfless help. Even if it was just a trifle, it was something important to us.



Life in the hus reminds you of existence on a desert island. You must cope with various problems, but you are limited to the things you have around you. It also brings to mind a comparison to prehistoric times, with its distinct division into male and female roles.

'I'm going to chop some wood,' declared Szymon, and then for half the day you could hear the rhythmical beat of the axe blows. Small logs and spills were piling up against the house walls. We still had some supplies, which either had been brought by the Norwegians, or were of local origin: the driftwood we picked up on the shore. In this ice-and-rock world, where the trees do not grow higher than a couple of centimetres, we burnt wood from Siberian taiga. We brought chopped logs in buckets to the hus and stacked them by the stove and in the hallway. Just to have a reserve and also for those who would come here after us. This is the unwritten code of the hus. Everything that is superfluous or redundant, everything that you can easily get in the South after your return home – you leave for its future occupants. You never know under what circumstances someone may reach this place. You never know your luck, some day this heap of surplus wood may save someone's life.

During Szymon's manly struggle with the wood I took up traditionally female jobs. I went between the hut and the stream several times carrying buckets of water, patiently filling up a big pot on the stove. After a few hours the water would be boiling and ready to use for our evening meal, washing up the dishes and for a hot bath in a wooden tub. The tub is made up of several planks and a plastic sheet lining it inside.

I swept the floor. It turned out to be quite a hard task. If you take into consideration the number of cracks, slits and gaps in the wooden floor, you can imagine the amount of sand and filth that gets stuck in there. I cleaned the stove. I never thought this dirty work was going to please me so much. I looked at my accomplishment with immense satisfaction. But when you are in the North, you are no longer surprised at the fact that some values have been redefined. There is no time to complicate matters, which seems to be an inborn human inclination. It is the basic things that guarantee your survival here. How do you suppose you could make it in the Arctic without the stove being in a good working order?

Most of the days are spent on field work. Taking advantage of good weather, we worked for more than ten hours collecting research material. Then we carried out our household chores in the hus. Very late in the evening – if you can say so in relation to white nights full of sunshine – finally came the time for rest. We sat down on the wooden doorstep of the hut. Before us there was a narrow strip of colourful gravel beach. The sea had been polishing these rock chips for thousands of years, turning them into beautifully rounded pebbles. Further on there was the boundless waters of the Greenland Sea. The waves slightly changed the configuration of the beach chippings every time they came in. A magnificent spectacle that we watched every day from the threshold of our home.

Today we have a new attraction. The east wind has blown numerous icebergs from the further part of the fjord. After a few warm days the glaciers started to melt intensively and the glacier fronts began to break off. You shouldn't be surprised at such a big gathering of them in the sea. But we are astonished at the multitude of various forms and shapes, colours and shades, sizes, sounds and movements. They float majestically on the waters of the 'Home Bay' or freeze in their tracks – massive white giants and smaller crystal clear ice blocks, which broke off some glacier and have already melted considerably. Among them you can see light and dark blue lumps or blocks of ice reminding you of any figure or object your imagination can conjure up.

'Just look at this beautiful swan!'

'Come on, it's not a swan. It's a sailing boat, a real three-master. And next to it, look! A hippo.'

'Yeah, with open jaws. He is about to swallow this tiny ice duck in front of him.'

The game involving the icebergs and our imaginations could last a long time. We have similar fun while observing the clouds, which can be very changeable and in the strong Arctic wind may assume various fanciful shapes. Very often we do not say anything. We just sit on the doorstep of our hus. We gaze at the sea – in the middle of the night. The icebergs are lit by a low northern sun. Calm. Only untiring

little auks continue their shrill crying. But in some sense they are also an element of this Arctic peace and quiet. We are silent. There are no words to express such undisturbed tranquillity.



From the diary of my third stay in Spitsbergen:

Krzysiek ('Kshieshek') came by boat to Hyttevikā port to collect our luggage. The loading, talks and arrangements took quite a while – I decided to use that time to look inside the hut. I had not dropped in there even once that year. The present inhabitants of Hyttevikā, geologists from Cracow, had left the hut for a couple of days to do some field work. The shutters were closed on the windows and it was completely dark inside. I went in with a candle in my hand. I could not see anything at first. Gradually, the contours of objects came out of the darkness. I tried to recognise the items which I used when I lived there three years before. I came across familiar pots, the same old kettle with a fancifully curved long spout, the same small bowls and completely new mugs. To my dismay, I could not recollect the previous ones, the ones we had used before. Another unpleasant discovery was a new bigger coal stove installed by the Cracow people. A small pot-bellied stove with an intricate design on its grating, which I liked so much, was disconnected and put aside. There were also a lot of 'strange' belongings and luggage lying around. This was the property of other people who called Hyttevikā their home... My eyes slowly got accustomed to semi-darkness and the interior of Hyttevikā emerged from blackness – before my eyes and in my memories (...).



Hyttevika destroyed by a polar bear.



The Arctic can be very green and soft.



Hyttevika – the old trapper house; for me it is one of the most magical places in the world.



The Norwegian ice-breaker helped us to get through the barrier of the pack ice.



Above left: Who would dare to walk through the cracks and crevasses at the Hans Glacier front?

Above right and below: Dangerous manoeuvres among the floating ice.

