



A Subdued Palette of Subversion

Anna Romanovska
Ryerson University



Figure 1. The War Horse. With cloud painting by Pēteris Kundziņš. Anna Romanovska (2019).



Figure 2. Blinding Fear. With painting by Pēteris Kundziņš. Anna Romanovska (2019).



Figure 3. Fractured Landscape. With cloud painting by Pēteris Kundziņš. Anna Romanovska

Artist Statement

How do people cope in an environment of oppression and censorship? And what is the impact on personal, cultural and national identity? I explore these issues in words and illustrations for my arts-informed PhD thesis, *A Subdued Palette of Subversion: Artistic Expression, Creativity, and Family Coping Strategies in Soviet Latvia*. The artwork is intended as the emotional amplifier of the written text. In many of my renderings, I incorporate cloud details from the paintings by my grandfather, Pēteris Kundziņš. His presence in my artwork adds layered meaning and deepens the visual dialogue of my life-history research.

When remembering the past, I sometimes wallowed in sorrow or laughed out loud; at other times, I was filled with blinding anger. I express those emotions in every illustration. Moreover, I have witnessed how, during the process of creating the illustrations, the visual rendering of the written text elevates and transforms the story into a symbolic metaphor.

For example, I was captivated by a participant's story about a Latvian peasant who, during the last days of World War 2, finds an injured German warhorse and nurses it to health. I immediately wanted to render the scene—it sounds tragic and very human (see Figure 1). The illustration “War Horse” tells about the peasant's love for their homestead, for raising children and teaching them how to take care of the land despite the war. The drawing gradually became a metaphor for war. A warhorse cannot be tamed or taught how to plow. It is indifferent to the human condition. The little boy is the symbol of humanity. The child loses his ground as the horse lifts its head. The red line in all of my illustrations symbolizes threat—real or imagined. In this illustration, it symbolizes the chain of the Soviet soldiers approaching the homestead. The peasant does not consider them a threat. The soldiers arrest him, leaving the horse and the child in the field.

The illustration “Blinding Fear” (see Figure 2) reveals intergenerational trauma. My grandfather's painting of a lone locomotive, painted in 1949, looms behind the KGB interrogator as a reminder of two major Soviet mass deportations, in 1941 and 1949, of more than 50,000 people living in the territories along the Baltic Sea. Families with children and the elderly were deported in freight trains to remote gulag camps, mostly in Siberia. Horror stories about the arrests of friends and loved ones were passed on to children and grandchildren. During my questioning at the KGB headquarters, in the 80s, the interrogator offered me a cup of tea in a beautiful antique porcelain cup. At that moment, the teacup acted like the trigger of uncontrollable blinding fear because it looked just like a teacup from my grandmother's china collection. All the stories that Grandmother had told me about people disappearing came back in an instant. Never before in my life had I been so exposed, powerless and humiliated. As I reflected on that episode in my life, I was reminded that experiences of trauma have lasting impacts, and they play out in our minds, affecting our beliefs, our assumptions about life, our behaviour and our decision making.

“Fractured Landscape” (see Figure 3) renders the moment during the war in Germany in October 1944 when my grandmother and her brother saw each other for the last time. My grandmother's family decided to return home to Soviet Latvia, risking potential arrest and death. However, her brother's family refused to return to the occupied territories, with the hope that Latvia would eventually regain independence. The magnificent clouds, painted by my grandfather, symbolize the siblings' love and longing for each other and the fractured bond that would ultimately lead to the distancing between their families. The red vertical stripe represents their exhaustion and excruciating sorrow, as well as the realization that they might not see each other ever again.