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Not Just For Kicks

The match-up between Makabi and Inter did not attract many spectators. The weather was likely the only factor at play, since that Saturday in November was extremely nasty. That was because the game was held not in Haifa or even Milan, but in the Warsaw district of Mokotów. To be precise, on a small but well-kept field lined with artificial turf in the so-called Jordan's Garden. The game, lasting fifty minutes including the break, was not especially fierce, and ended with Inter's confident victory 5–1.

Eighth edition, twelve teams, approximately one hundred and fifty participating players from over thirty countries, eight consecutive Saturdays in October and November, games from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, a total of thirty-nine points to win – such is a brief profile of the Etnoliga. Numbers, however, are not the most important issue. "These people meet regularly, simply to get to know each other, chat, and make friends. Our true focus is to encourage participants to be open to the unfamiliar," says Krzysztof Jarymowicz, the initiator and coordinator of the league.

Football games that promote racial equality are organized throughout Europe. In Italy, there is the *Mondiali Antirazzisti*, a huge annual event, which lasts two days and attracts teams from around the world. But even compared to that, the Warsaw Etnoliga is special.

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First of all, the teams are mixed. The organizers discourage national segregation: there must be players from at least three countries on each team. That is why FC Saturn, consisting mainly of Ukrainian and Belarusian students, has a Libyan winger. The squad of the Iranian King of Persia is complete with two girls, one Ukrainian and one Dutch. That is the second rule of the Etnoliga: women play too; every team must have at least one female player in each game. Apparently, even the Italians were surprised when they learned about it.

Anyone can take part in the games. On the field, you can see refugees and corporate directors, primary school graduates and university professors. The dominant group are students, but players in their fifties are not unheard of. News about the Etnoliga travels best by word of mouth. "Actually, in every round we have someone completely new join us," says Krzysztof. "He walks up to me and says he's here alone and doesn't know anybody, but he heard he could play some football here. Recently, we met a Ukrainian, and a group of Libyans two weeks ago. They didn't speak a word of Polish and just a few of English, so in the beginning we found it hard to communicate. But then it turned out that one of our players spoke Arabic. Anyway, there's no need to explain how to play football, everybody knows the rules. Everything's all right now, the guys got really into it, they come regularly every week and they are getting better at talking to others. They are happy and smiling and that's what matters."

Although Etnoliga players are not professionals and the prizes are only symbolic, everyone gives it their best. At times, the referee needs to make use of his red rectangle. Some attach more importance to scores and rankings than others. The Persians and Chechens in particular are known for their serious attitude. They always make an effort, come to practice in large groups, and if they are not doing too well, they actively look for new players to join their squad. They do have fun playing, but making the top three in the ranking is a priority.

Farzam Rokni (Iran), *King of Persia*

In the beginning, I had problems adjusting to the low temperatures here. The winter especially was unbearable. But you can get used to everything eventually. I've lived in Poland for eight years now. I had left my hometown, Ahwaz, many years before that. I was in the first grade of primary school when my father decided to move to London. In England, he finished his doctoral studies and immediately got a job offer from the University of Warsaw. They asked him to teach Persian at the Oriental

Studies Department. That was how I found my way here, via London, with my father, brother and mother.

I have a lot of friends who major in Iranian Studies. We often party together. We always get together to celebrate the Iranian New Year. The nearest Nowruz – that’s what our holiday is called – will be on 20 March, just like the first day of spring in Poland. It’s not like your New Year’s Eve, you know, we won’t stay up until midnight. Nowruz always starts at a specific time, for example thirty-five seconds after 15:40, as the one we’ll celebrate in four months. Except it is moveable; some years, we welcome the New Year in the middle of the night.

There are some customs we observe. For example, on the table for the New Year’s feast, there must be seven objects whose names begin with the letter “s,” such as money – sekje in Persian. Another possibility is sip, an apple. Of course, everything has its symbolic meaning. Money means wealth in the coming year. A watch (saat) means that you will have a lot of free time.

No, the initial letter never changes, it’s always “s.” But why “s,” frankly, I cannot explain. It’s an Iranian tradition, passed down from father to son for hundreds of years.

What else can I say? My greatest passion is chess. I practice about two hours a day; I analyse all games previously played. Soon, on 19 December, I’m going to Wrocław to take part in the European Championships. Keep your fingers crossed for me!

* * *

We have all sorts of teams taking part. The Lions were formerly a team of African refugees, but were recently joined by a substantial group of Poles. Like the Chrzyszczyki, they take part in every edition of the tournament. Entre Amigos mostly consists of players from South America, and the captain is from Brazil. There is also the Scottish-Polish-Hungarian Wszystko Jedno, and the Usłyszeć Afrykę Foundation team.

Makabi, who are taking part in the Etnoliga for the first time, are the descendants of a noble tradition. Makabi Warsaw, one of the most distinguished Jewish clubs in interwar Poland, up until 1939 played their home games on a field in Zieleniecka Avenue – roughly the site of today’s towering National Stadium.

“It’s the club’s 100th anniversary next year, since Makabi was founded in 1915,” says Bartek, one of the players wearing black shirts with the Star of David on the chest. “We hope to celebrate by taking part in the senior Polish Cup next season. We know we’re amateurs, and not all of us are twenty years old, so we won’t be able to do a lot on a full-size field. But even if we lose thirty goals, it won’t matter. It’s about taking part!”

Inter is an exceptionally diverse team, even by Etnoliga standards. Aside from several Poles, its members include Khasan from Ingushetia, Cristian from Chile, Lash from Georgia, and Wais from Afghanistan. There was also a guy from Africa, but he has not been coming to practice lately. What is the reason behind this mix of nationalities?

“It just so happens that I meet foreigners every day, and most of those playing for Inter are my former or current clients,” says Dawid, the team captain. “I work in the association, helping people from abroad resolve a variety of legal issues, such as legalizing their stay in Poland, arranging a transnational marriage, these sorts of things. Whenever someone comes to see me, I ask what they are doing on the weekend and whether they’d like to come and play football with us. Some people eventually leave Poland for various reasons, but new ones arrive, so there is a large rotation. As I remember, we had a professional player from Togo on our team in the first edition. I must hand it to him, he really made a difference on the field.”

TiM Warsaw is one of the Etnoliga star teams. With two games to the end, the team were third in the ranking, just three points behind the leader. Twenty-six-year-old Giorgi, a sworn translator of Georgian living in Warsaw, refuses to reveal the origin of the team’s mysterious name. Darek, the team captain, overhears my question and joins in to say:

“Why TiM? That’s a secret! Were you planning to publish this? No way! If you stay on the team longer, Gio, you might find out. But you’ve got to earn it!”

The core of Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie is made of Belarusians, some of whom are political refugees. “After the elections in 2010, fifty thousand people went out into the streets to protest,” recalls Sergei, who came to Warsaw to work for the independent European Radio for Belarus. “We really have potential. The problem is that the people are afraid. There is Lukashenko... and that’s about it. Opposition parties or any kind of political diversity at all is pure abstraction at this moment.”

Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie meets in derby matches with Saturn, whose players are students from Belarus and Ukraine. Then there are the Tigers. At first, the team mainly consisted of young Haitians who arrived in Poland after the earthquake of 2010. Last year, however, they graduated and moved to different corners of the world. At present, the squad is made up of Iraqis and Ukrainians. But, as Krzysztof remarks, sometimes it is difficult to put labels on the ethnicity of all team members:

“There is a guy on the Tigers, for example, whose father is Hungarian, his mother is Ukrainian, and he himself lives in Poland. What nationality is he? I’m not qualified to say.”

Cristian Lobos Levy (Chile), *Inter Wawa*

Honestly? I have no idea how many goals I've scored so far in the Etnoliga. I never counted. I find a good dribble much more rewarding than scoring a goal. Maybe it's irrational, but that's how I am.

My main problem is that I tend to use my heart more than my head. I met a Pole, a student of Iberian Studies, when she was in Chile on a student exchange. I fell head over heels for her. When her scholarship ran out, we went to Argentina together and lived there for a year. When we were in Buenos Aires, my girlfriend became pregnant. And can you imagine? At that point, she said: "I'm going back to Poland, to Warsaw."

At first, I yelled: "Are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere!" And she said "I am!" I was not keen on going to Europe. What would I do there? I still don't speak English even today, and at the time, I only knew a couple of words in Polish... but what was I to do? I could not leave her and the baby! I thought, "Cristian, pull yourself together, you're a professional masseur, you do not need to know the language to earn a living!"

At first, it was a complete culture shock. I discovered that Poland and Chile had nothing in common! The greatest difference? In my opinion, people in South America are more open and direct than Europeans.

I found out about the Etnoliga soon afterwards, through Dawid, the captain of Inter. There was a time when his association helped me greatly, for which I am grateful to this day. It's a long story; I had some serious difficulties legalizing my stay in Poland. It was all because of the fact that my partner and I never legalized our relationship, so in the eyes of the law, we are not married.

But as you can see, everything turned out all right in the end. My daughter feels Polish, like her mother. If you asked her, she'd never admit she is part Chilean. But I don't mind.

The last time I was in Chile was two years ago. Sure, I'd love to go see my family and friends. There's just one problem... Are you aware of the cost of an airline ticket to South America? For me, this is unimaginable money at the moment. The more so because we must prepare for some serious expenses in the future. If everything goes well, in two weeks, we'll welcome another baby!

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The whole Etnoliga is Krzysztof's original idea. "I always meant for it to be more than just a tournament embellished with noble slogans that look good in the media," he says. "I knew we needed something to bring together people from different cultures and backgrounds. Football has

really become a tool for us to reach the many people who live in immigrant accommodation centres, who are often socially isolated. Their reality is not rosy: they live in poor conditions in the suburbs, usually they do not speak the language. If they come across a problem, they don't even know where to turn for help."

A few years ago, Krzysztof visited one of these centres in Warsaw. He presented his idea to the manager, and she took to the project immediately and found potential players. Soon afterwards, the first tournament was held, in which teams of Warsaw high school students and university students competed against three teams of refugees. What were the results? "We played football, we had fun, and the Chechens and Africans said they wanted to do it again," says Krzysztof.

Of course, it all took time. It was four years before in 2010 a one-day event turned into organized league games, lasting two or three months. For a long time, the biggest problem was money. Krzysztof had absolutely no experience raising funds for this type of project.

Today, the Etnoliga is more than just Saturday football games. The Foundation for Freedom, patron of the games, has set up a football school for children. Those from the poorest families can attend free of charge. There are Polish language classes for refugee children, and whenever money allows, excursions. "I've known some of those children for a long time. It's nice to see the little rascals grow into such great kids," says Krzysztof.

"Sure, there is an element of excitement and rivalry, but the Etnoliga is also a meeting place and an information exchange platform," explains Giorgi from TiM, who found out about the Etnoliga from his Somalian friend. "The foreigners who come here can learn how to look for work in Poland, or how to obtain legal assistance if they run into any trouble."

Since the first edition, a lot has changed in the sports hall. Krzysztof used to know each player personally. Today, he cannot name all the people on the field. "Not to mention the names of foreign players, which I often find quite difficult to remember," he adds.

Mariola Kornacka (Poland), *Chrzyszczyki*

Our history is totally awesome! We started out as a typical all-girl team. In the beginning, we held practice on a dirt area under the Siekierkowski Bridge, you know, all hills and valleys. We played wherever we could, wherever we found a patch of ground. And yet, in the first edition of the Etnoliga, we were six girls holding their own on the field against all those jocks.

I remember playing against the Chechens. Before the game, they gave each of us a rose. It may seem ambiguous, like they were trying to say, “you’re the weaker sex, so keep this as consolation,” but it was not like that... They really played fair. Maybe they focused more on technique than brute strength, but they were not gentle with us. They approached that game just like any other.

These days, with so many things to deal with, good time management is a must. The Etnoliga, where we compete as a mixed team, sometimes interferes with our Women’s Football Academy project, where we seek out young players. What for? So the Chrzqszczyki can go on and on and on! And because we are playing on two fronts: in addition to the Etnoliga, we also compete in the Women’s Amateur League.

No, there are no Chrzqszczyki scarves to buy yet. But we have t-shirts: yellow, with a black beetle in the centre. We need to pay for all that stuff ourselves; the away events and rent for the sports hall are financed from our own private funds. Even so, we organize at least one or two women’s tournaments each year, and then we have to manage everything ourselves. Sponsors? The Polish Football Association? Man, you have no idea of the world we are living in!

Wherever you turn, it’s the same: we come up against a wall and there is no response. Last year, we won the “Third Sector,” we were voted the best non-government initiative in Warsaw. You’d think it would have made a difference. I wish! We still cannot break through. We designed our shirts ourselves. In the winter, we must suspend practice, since we can’t afford to rent an indoor hall.

So you want to know the origin of our name? We were once invited to a tournament in Germany. It was the early days, the team was not even named yet. We needed to come up with something on the spot. One of us suggested, “How about Chrzqszczyki, just to mess with German reporters?” And you know what, that turned out to be a great idea! Some people really got their tongues in a twist trying to pronounce Chrzqszczyki.

* * *

“I’ve played football for three years. In the Netherlands, I sometimes play a game with the guys. It’s a pity that our women’s team is no match for the men’s...” says Inge from the Hague, staying in Warsaw for one semester under the Erasmus Programme. She found an ad for the Etnoliga on Facebook when the King of Persia were urgently seeking a girl for their squad. She learnt more about the initiative and liked it, so she decided to try out.

The “Persian team” has no reason to complain. Its both female members – Inge and Aleksandra from Ukraine – give it their all on the field. However, not everything goes perfectly every time. Although it is increasingly rare, there are still situations when one of the players spends the whole game in her penalty area, not once touching the ball.

“We try to send the girls to the Women’s Football Academy to nurture their talents and help them catch the football bug. Besides, we are thinking about introducing a system to further motivate the other players to engage the girls. Maybe we could make a goal scored by a woman count as two? We won’t resort to that, but an additional classification or a special fair-play award might be in order...” wonders Krzysztof.

A few editions ago, a team of orthodox Jews applied. They wanted to join the competition, but they started by saying they would not attend the Etnoliga on Saturdays, because it was the Sabbath, and besides, they were not going to play against women. They were told that while something might be done so that the games were held on Sundays, excluding the girls was not an option.

When I asked the Ukrainian captain of Saturn how he liked having a mixed team, he just laughed:

“What do you mean? It’s just like any other team!”

That fit in well with what Krzysztof had said earlier:

“In the beginning, the Chechens swore they were not allowed to touch a woman who was not their wife, and what the hell was I thinking. Others were also incredulous: ‘What? We are to play with girls?’ Today, no one considers it unusual any more. Sometimes, aside from the Etnoliga, we organize additional charity tournaments. Naturally, the requirement to include at least one female player on each team does not apply to those events. And there were situations where just before the game a team approached me to protest: ‘Hello, something’s not right here! There are no girls playing against us!’ This may sound lofty, and maybe you’d better not write it, but I think women have become a permanent part of the Etnoliga landscape.”

Although it might initially seem that way, a female player does not have to be a team’s weakness. On the contrary! The tiny Tosia from Makabi, in her usual blue woollen cap with a pompom, flawlessly took over a ground cross and surely delivered the ball into Saturn’s goal, past the helpless keeper. In the last round, Maggie from Wszystko Jedno did a hat trick on the Chrząszczyki. Her teammate, the Scotsman Doug, summed it up briefly as “a good job.”

Aliaksandr Atroshchankau (Belarus), *Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie*

I am a political refugee. You can give my real name, of course, I don’t make a secret of it. Anyway, it only takes a few clicks to find me through Google. In 2010, during the presidential elections, I worked as a spokesman for the opposition candidate Andrei

Sannikov. We were both arrested by the KGB and transported to a prison in Vitebsk. Sannikov was sentenced to five years, I got four. There was pressure from abroad, mainly from Amnesty International, to reduce my sentence; eventually they brought it down to nine months.

Once I was out, I tried to find a job, work it all out somehow, but there was nothing for it – I had to flee. I took my wife and son with me and we came to Poland. We've been here for two years now. At the moment, there is no way I could return to Belarus. I would be arrested the moment I crossed the border.

It makes me a little sad that here in Poland, in Europe, there is so little talk about Belarus; a brief mention once a month, if ever. At this time, such publicity, such media attention, is very much needed.

You want to know about my life in prison? That's no problem, I'm happy to tell you. I had to have a job, I was told to sew gloves. I could not technically refuse. But in practice, I would not lift a finger for them. They could do nothing to me. All that time, I made maybe three pairs in total. I spent more time playing football. There was a prison league of a kind, similar to this one. We didn't do badly, my team took fourth place. We could have done even better, but I had my standards and I accepted no rapists or murderers on my squad. Well, except for the goalkeeper, but he only stabbed his wife because she cheated on him.

The centre-back had issues as well. He was a good guy, it's just that he had a bit of an amphetamine problem, and he would sometimes pass out during the game. Thank God we didn't make him the goalkeeper. Now that I think of it, that fourth place was probably the limit of our abilities...

* * *

During an interval between matches, at one o'clock, a meeting of all the team captains was held in a small building off the field, holding a changing room and toilets. Whenever there is a problem in the Etnoliga, the people concerned come together to talk, and so it was this time. Three teams – Wszystko Jedno, Saturn, and Inter – had failed to do their duty and prepare a presentation.

Saturn had basically nothing to say in their defence. The delegate from Wszystko Jedno adopted a different tack and repented: "I admit, we goofed up, we had nothing prepared. Afterwards, we felt terribly foolish, so the following week, we brought cake to make up for that. We never expected it would earn us two extra points in the ranking."

Inter, in turn, had prepared nothing but refreshments. "There was some misunderstanding. I was all because our captain, Dawid, was accosted by a journalist," said an Inter player, trying to justify his team's failing. "As far as I know, there was an agreement with the organizers that the newspaper interview would count as a presentation."

From the outset, one of the Etnoliga rules has been that each team must prepare a short presentation and refreshments for all the other participants. This task is generally treated seriously, because it can earn the team up to six additional points in the ranking.

It was a little easier when the games were held in an indoor sports centre with access to a multimedia projector and kitchen facilities. Every Saturday, a different team hosted the round and delivered their presentation. However, since the Etnoliga has been playing outside, all that has had to be condensed into one day.

After the alleged culprits made their excuses, a turbulent discussion ensued:

“This agreement is news to me! Dawid came in late, when it was over and done with, the journalist happened to be there, so he talked to her.”

“Why don’t we just upload our multimedia presentation to the Internet, can we get at least one point for that?”

“This is pure madness! Are you suggesting that if I make a cake next week, you’ll give my team two extra points?”

“But note that Wszystko Jedno bought that cake, even though we agreed to make everything ourselves. Store-bought is not okay.”

Basically, the only limit for presentations is the imagination of the teams. Most just say a few words about why they came to Poland, what they do here, where they work. But some teams show pictures, hold little performances, exhibitions, or short concerts. Sometimes, the players dress up in their national costumes. This year, the Chrząszczyki prepared a multimedia presentation showing the milestones of their team’s history.

“Sometimes someone approaches me and asks if they can be excused from delivering a presentation,” says Krzysztof. “They don’t know how to go about it, they can’t do it, they have no idea where to start. I just say: ‘Why should you get special treatment? If everyone else can prepare, why shouldn’t you? What’s your excuse?’ Then we sit down, turn on the computer, we search the Internet together for information, and we try to come up with something.”

After a long and lively discussion, a vote was held. The decision was made almost unanimously. Saturn had to make do with nothing, while Inter and Wszystko Jedno received two points each. The importance of the presentation became clear two weeks later. Had Inter prepared for the meeting as they should, they would not have forfeited four points for nothing, and they would be the Etnoliga vice-champions. As it was, they did not make it onto the podium.

Douglas Angelosonto (Scotland), *Wszystko Jedno*

I am learning Polish but it is really... What's the word for difficult? Anyway, aren't we here to talk about football?

*Yes, I agree, a good goalkeeper must be a bit of a madman. Otherwise it's hard to control what is happening on the field. It's true that I shout a lot during the game, I give directions to the defenders, I tell them what to do, who to cover, but I am in no way the brain of *Wszystko Jedno*. As a team, we are one body. We can't have one player think he is more important than the others. Even the keeper. We must all stick together.*

*Which team has the most challenging strikers? It's a difficult question... The Iranians from the King of Persia have tried my patience a few times. What's more, last week we played against the *Entre Amigos*, whose players are mainly from South America. That match was another difficult test.*

My greatest idols are Peter Schmeichel and Petr Čech. I consider them the two best goalkeepers of all time. I could also mention Manuel Neuer. This guy is amazing, simply out of this world. And I think he still hasn't reached his full potential.

I came to Warsaw three years ago. I work as an English teacher at a language school. This is a friendly place, the people are usually all right, although... can I be honest? I think you Poles should work on your mentality. There is no doubt you are still struggling with your racism and sexism. On the other hand, your society is changing, you are developing, and there is no doubt about it. I'm glad to I have the opportunity to watch this process – from the outside, as an independent observer. So where does Poland belong? Eastern or Western Europe? From the point of view of geography, you are Central Europe. I've never seen the Polish countryside, never visited your small towns; it's probably different there. But the big cities, it seems, are slowly becoming more Western.

Celtic or Rangers? This may come as a surprise, but neither. Both those teams are from Glasgow, while I'm from Edinburgh. My team is the Heart of Midlothian.

* * *

“You may think it's ironic, but I feel that the longer I've worked organizing these events, the more difficulties I encounter,” Krzysztof says. “I always like to complain whenever I talk to a journalist because I have this naive belief that it might bring some change to my situation, however slight. I'm just kidding now, but the truth is that I cannot count on great support from the city authorities.”

There have been all kinds of reactions. Some officials appreciate the initiative and try to help. Others want to know why they should subsidize a project whose basic premise is “black guys kicking the ball in the field.”

The organizers of Etnoliga events are confronted with such attitudes all too often.

At the lower levels, such as schools or district offices, the callousness is even greater. “The problem is that no one recognizes the Etnoliga as a potential promotional tool, a chance to engage the local community in an interesting project. They don’t notice how open we are to everyone, and that we never charge entry fees,” says Krzysztof. “Money is all they think about. The only thing that matters is how much they can charge us to rent the field. When looking for a place to play, I feel so inadequate. I often hear: ‘Do you really have to organize your tournament in our district?’”

There have been some nice exceptions, however. The manager of the Jordan’s Garden where this year’s games are held answered Krzysztof’s e-mail on the very same day. She congratulated him on the idea, cordially invited him to see her, and promised him the use of the football field free of charge. Formalities were reduced to the absolute minimum.

“Sadly, that rarely happens. Sometimes I get seemingly inflated invoices, which I have to explain later at settlement. I come across really unpleasant situations. I need to provide a receipt for literally every penny. Some officials agree to finance our purchases but not the plastic bags they came in, while no one seems interested in the outcome of the project, whether we managed to do something worthwhile or create a bond between the participants.”

There was one edition when a sponsor financed uniforms for all the players. Now, unfortunately, there are no funds for that. The teams buy their own t-shirts or just wear reflective tags.

“Finding an available indoor sports hall is a matter for another day,” says Krzysztof. “The climate in Poland makes it impossible to play outdoors for several months of every year. Meanwhile, sports centres are built using public funds, they should be affordable for the average citizen. But in reality, the halls are rented by huge companies to hold their internal events. For an international concern, the cost of renting it for a few hours is negligible. When I look through the schedule, it’s always booked by some Danone or other. Now what? How can the Etnoliga outbid Colgate or Sony? Consider this: in Germany, a similar organization was allowed to manage their own sports centre.”

Mohamed Ezzat (Egypt),
TiM Warsaw

What paper is this for? Oh, I see, you’re not a professional journalist. So this is for a contest? What is the theme? Who gets carried away by Europe? I must hand it to you, you could not have found a better topic than the Etnoliga.

I've been here for a while now. I first came to Poland in 2012 to help organize the European Football Championships. I met a Polish girl then who later became my wife.

Am I going to apply for Polish citizenship? Dude, it's not that simple! The fact that my wife is Polish doesn't change anything. The procedure is long and complicated, it takes at least five years, usually more. You need to submit all kinds of permits, certificates, permanent residence cards, write a letter to the President... Not to mention the Polish language exam. What a hassle!

Yes, I recently signed up for a Polish language class but I can't hold a conversation yet, I only know some basic expressions like "please," "thank you," "there was no foul," and "pass it to me!" My wife is learning Arabic. Note that it was her own decision. I said, "Do what you want, I won't pressure you." She is writing her Master's thesis now, she is about to graduate in Iberian Studies, so she has her own things to do. She dreams of working as a Spanish translator. She has a talent for languages in general: she's also fluent in Italian and French.

I have no clue how many Egyptians there are in Warsaw. Honestly, I don't feel the need to be part of their community. You want to know why? I don't feel like it, I just don't! I have my Polish wife, my friends from TiM, and the Iranians from the King of Persia, who seem to be all right so far. I don't need anyone else.

Is there anything here I find annoying? Perhaps Legia Warsaw and its fans. I can't stomach people who think they are flawless and better and stronger than others. Especially if they are wrong. And that's what Legia's fans do. I don't even support any Egyptian teams. For me, there is only AC Milan.

Is that all, really? No more questions you want to ask me? I expected a detailed interrogation, my picture taken... Oh, I'm joking, you can do as you like. Just don't forget to let me approve this interview when you're done writing!

* * *

Three days before the last round, it started snowing in Warsaw. By Saturday, the snow had melted but the last few games were played in sub-zero temperatures. That did not make it any less exciting – the three highest-ranking teams went neck and neck, with twenty-eight points each. The Tigers were ahead of TiM Warsaw and the King of Persia only by a favourable goal difference. TiM, however, still had an overdue game to play, which made them a strong favourite.

On the last day, it rained goals. During the eight games, the keepers retrieved the ball from the net exactly seventy-five times. But there were no surprises. "Well, sure, we've made it," said Giorgi when I saw him in the locker room after they vanquished Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie 14–1. "Our current score is thirty-one. Now we only have to draw against FC Lions and the league is ours!"

But there was no draw. In the following game, TiM wiped out their opponents 7–0.

Although the players were running on the field in thick tracksuits and those who had played their games earlier watched from the sidelines bundled up in warm jackets, the final match proceeded in a balmy atmosphere. Just before the game began, Khasan spotted me, beamed from ear to ear and asked about my health. Mohamed looked pleased with himself, walking unhurriedly down the end line, humming *We Are the Champions*.

After the final whistle, a simple ceremony began promptly at four o'clock. At this time of day in late November, dusk starts to fall over Warsaw. The award table held only commemorative medals for all participants and twelve foil-wrapped footballs – one for each team. The prizes are another recurring problem. Recalling his journeys from one institution to another, Krzysztof said:

“It is a rare thing to hear ‘Hey, how about we support you, would you like us to get some medals for you? Or we could help arrange for an interesting person, or a football celebrity, to come and say a few words at the end.’”

But no one seemed to mind too much. The organizers were surrounded by a half-circle of the most tenacious players. There were no long speeches or big words. Why should there be? The main part started right away.

“Me! Me! Me too!” Three boys of seven or eight rushed toward the table, eager to decorate the participants. They were very thorough, and no one was forgotten, even the volunteers helping with the event and the referee were decorated. No one left empty-handed. Well, almost no one... The formidable Aliaksandr from Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie, even when he doubled over, was still too tall for any child to reach his neck.

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Note

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