

Competitive artistic gymnastics demands talent, regular training, precision, concentration and discipline. I began doing gymnastics at the age of five. Back then, sport was a real opportunity to go "West". Two years later, in the new country, I soon found a club. For us, getting on with life as a family was closely linked to gymnastics. It allowed me to live in a way that would not have been as easily possible elsewhere. I received recognition, I was praised, and I won. In addition, this opened up opportunities for a new flat and citizenship. Gymnastics is a very fast sport - it's all over very quickly at a competition. The total time taken up by all exercises on apparatus - the vault, the asymmetric bars, the beam, the floor - is roughly four minutes and thirty seconds. It's all about brief climaxes, pushing for perfection. Horse vaulting, for example: you run up to the horse as fast as you can, across a distance of about thirty meters. Once you get to it, you jump as hard as you can on to a springboard, that converts the legs' running energy into the directional energy of the hands. The hands reach the horse and, with the aid of tension, convert the excess energy into the intended exercise. The amount of body energy left after the exercise should be enough to let you land on your feet without taking another step.

There are several problems that may occur during this process. Firstly: you run like crazy towards the horse, but you misjudge the run-up. The rule says that you've got three run-ups to hit the springboard without touching the apparatus. Secondly: you hit the board but the energy from your legs does not get transmitted properly to your arms, because you cannot keep the tension in your body, which causes the hands to buckle slightly so that there is not enough energy left to do what comes next. You do it anyway, because that was the plan, but you don't land on your feet but, if you're lucky, on all fours. Thirdly: if you've got too much momentum and you can't brake with your body, you land on your backside. Of course, you could get every conceivable combination of these factors. The more you trained, the more efficiently you were able to eliminate the factors. You practice a particular sequence a thousand times until it grows into your body and becomes a kind of breathing. Some exercises

remained an effort of will, and never reached this status.

The secret of success is to keep working constantly on body control. I trained an average of twelve hours a week. I practised emotional states over and over with my body. I was a tool of my body, but at the same time I could live emotions through my body. Concepts such as "balance" were synonymous with "notfalling off the beam"; "fear" was a question of how often you repeated an exercise; "bravery" was an incentive to receive praise, the "right" tension was a pirouette that lost its momentum after exactly 360 degrees. Every piece of an apparatus revealed special qualities. I learned to fall without hurting myself; to keep tension without seeming tense; to forget pain when I was concentrating on the exercise; to be brave, with the brief moment of happiness at having overcome fear.

I gave up this sport at seventeen. What remains are many cups and even more medals which I won at national and international contests. These trophies disappeared in the cellar for many years. My mother gave away a few cups. On 23/09/2011 I retrieved my sporting achievements out of a giant cardboard box, cleaning and polishing them, and counted sixty-seven medals and twenty cups, each representing a first place in artistic gymnastics.