

The Snows of Yesteryear

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As he tells us in his *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, Gregor von Rezzori hails from “an almost astronomically remote province in southeastern Europe.”¹ This is Bukovina, one of those tiny, historically convoluted and culturally variegated lands of East Central Europe that has nurtured a disproportionate number of geniuses, some forgotten and some still celebrated. Among the celebrated are Paul Celan, Mihai Eminescu and Olha Kobylianska, major voices in German, Romanian, and Ukrainian literature respectively. Rezzori is understating the case somewhat when he writes of Bukovina’s “half a dozen nationalities” and “half a dozen religions” (36).² The bulk of the population (about two-thirds at the beginning of this century) was of the Orthodox faith and fairly evenly divided between the Ukrainian and Romanian nationalities. But there was also a substantial German minority who were Roman Catholics and Lutherans. There were about as many Jews as Germans, and on the outskirts of Bukovina’s capital one could find the luxurious court of the famous Hassidic rabbi of Sadagura. There were Russians, the so-called Lippovianians, who were Old Believers. They played a distinguished role in the modern history of the Old Belief because it was they who revived the Old Believer hierarchy in their settlement at Bila Krynytsia in 1846; to this day the Bila Krynytsia hierarchy presides over the majority of Old Believers in the Soviet Union. There were Armenians, Polish-speaking and Uniate in the north, Kipchak-speaking and Apostolic in the south. There were Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Polish Roman Catholics as well as a small population of Hungarian Calvinists. All this diversity—the product, of course, of a tangled but absorbing history—was to be found in a small land in the Carpathians, just a little more than ten thousand square kilometers in area and with a population barely exceeding eight hundred thousand when Rezzori was born in 1914.

In his latest volume of autobiography, *The Snows of Yesteryear*, as in his earlier *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* and indeed as in most of his fiction, Rezzori has a lot to say about his native province. Although the main concern of his autobiographical writings is psychological portraiture, Bukovina figures in them as much more than exotic background. Rezzori often feels that Bukovinian situations form his charac-

ters in a profound way. The lives and personalities of his father, mother, and sister, to each of whom he devotes a chapter of *The Snows of Yesteryear*, are terribly flawed because Bukovina passed from Austrian to Romanian rule in 1918–1919. His books are peopled by specimens of humanity improbable outside of Bukovina or other parts of what Karl Emil Franzos termed *Halb-Asien*, such as the Lippovian who suddenly leaps out of an apple tree in *The Snows of Yesteryear* (252) or the Sephardic Jewess raised as an Armenian Uniate in *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*.³ Rezzori's attitude toward his Carpathian homeland is ambivalent, to be sure, but above all it is obsessive.

Rezzori is obsessed with Bukovina the place—his hometown of Czernowitz and the forests where his father hunted—but much, much more so with Bukovina the congeries of peoples. In *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* Jews figure most prominently; in *The Snows of Yesteryear* Germans (or should we call them Austrians?) occupy center stage. In both books Rezzori also speaks of an ardent attraction to the Romanians and their culture, although Romanian characters do not stand out in either. In *The Snows of Yesteryear* one of the chapters, the first, is devoted to a Ukrainian, and references to that character reappear in later chapters. I find the treatment of this particular Ukrainian and of all people and things Ukrainian in this book disturbing and worthy of more extended commentary.

The first of the five “portraits” offered by Rezzori in *The Snows of Yesteryear* is that of his nursemaid, called Cassandra. He describes her in a most singular manner. In the very first sentence introducing her, Rezzori tells us that when she came to his family household, she was “hardly more than a beast” (5). Later on, too, she was perceived to be “not fully human” (14). Rezzori remembers her as akin to his dog, his magpie, his rabbit, his stuffed bear, and his toy elephant (23–24). He thinks of her mainly as an animal, although he cannot seem to decide precisely what kind. Most of the time he describes her as “simian.” She is “a female gorilla” (12) with “simian ugliness” (14), a “chimpanzee face” (22), “monkey’s eyes” (35) and “monkey teeth” (46), “wrinkled simian cheeks” (47), and “long simian arms” (43). At other times she is compared to a dog (13, 48, 247–248). In one memorable passage Cassandra is caught “romping with the dogs . . . bare-assed, a beast among beasts” (22). Yet at still other times Rezzori likens her to a sow (14, 19). (When Rezzori compares his mother to an animal, it is to a swan [30]). At times he recognizes Cassandra’s humanity, but it is of a “primitive” and “savage” sort. She is a “Stone Age female” (50), a “Cro-Magnon female” (53); she is an Eskimo (47, 52), a Samoyed (47).

This Cassandra, as Rezzori remembers her, spoke a “higgledy-piggledy garble of incomprehensible foreign idioms” (14); more precisely, she “spoke no language correctly, [but] expressed herself in snatches of Romanian, Ruthenian, Polish and Hungarian, as well as Turkish and Yiddish, assisted by a grotesque, grimacing mimicry and a primitive, graphic body language” (8); or even more precisely, “the main component [of her language] was a German, never learned correctly or completely,

the gaps in which were filled with words and phrases from all the other tongues spoken in the Bukovina—so that each second or third word was either Ruthenian, Romanian, Polish, Russian, Armenian or Yiddish, not to forget Hungarian and Turkish” (44).⁴ As a young man, encouraged by his former governess, a German from Pomerania, Rezzori imitated Cassandra’s “linguistic blossoms” to amuse some visitors; thus he “entertained an audience who knew how to appreciate them: well-educated Jews seem to me to have a remarkable feel for language” (263). The reader, unfortunately, is not let in on the full joke. When Rezzori actually quotes examples of Cassandra’s speech (51–52), these are much tamer than he describes—merely German sentences with a Ukrainian word tossed in.

Rezzori’s Cassandra is not just any kind of Ukrainian, but a Hutsul (43), that is, a representative of the distinctive Ukrainian mountain folk. Hutsuls and their folkways have often been romanticized, such as in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, both Serhii Paradzhanov’s film and Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky’s novel,⁵ and in the work of the Polish anthropologist and litterateur Stanisław Vincenz.⁶ But Rezzori doesn’t romanticize the Hutsuls. No, to him they are “dim-witted” (33), barely touched by the hand of progress. Their noses have been eroded by syphilis. And, in contrast to Rezzori’s father, who hunts, they poach (222–223).

Almost until the end of the book Rezzori refers to the Ukrainians not by their modern name but by their former designation, “Ruthenian,” as in “an old Ruthenian hag, Mrs. Daniljuk” (121). By the interwar era, however, the term “Ruthenian” was already an anachronism in Bukovina, and it carried a certain connotation of condescension. Also almost until the end of the book (and the same is true of *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*), the Ukraine does not exist in Rezzori’s geography. There is Romania on one side of the border and “Russia” on the other (17, 136, 175). When a Bukovinian, not an American, exhibits this sort of geographical conceptualization, it is not a case of ignorance or convenience but one of refusing to recognize that Ukrainians constitute a nation.

In the epilogue to *The Snows of Yesteryear* Rezzori returns to his hometown after more than half a century’s absence. He tells us that the town’s name “underwent several changes—from Czernowitz to Cernăuți to the present Chernovtsy” (275). The Ukrainian name of the city, Chernivtsi, does not figure in Rezzori’s list. But Ukrainians, finally called such, do figure in Rezzori’s account. What he has to say about them is worth quoting at length:

What now moved through the streets before my confused and astonished eyes was utterly uniform and obviously homogeneous, nothing provoking any particularizing pride. . . . The faces were—as the saying goes—all of the same stamp: of Slavic broadness and angularity with coarse skin and light-colored hair. These were Ukrainians. In the old days we called them Ruthenians, one of the many minorities in a place where there was no majority. . . . Now they were

the only ones left, those people's comrades of the Soviet Republic of the Ukraine, which, as the former "Little Russia" enlarged by the annexation of Galicia and the northern Bukovina, now accounts for more than half the European territory of the Soviet Union. Nor were these people different from other Russians. The women were almost without exception plump, the men stocky and puffy, a people of cabbage eaters, not in dire want, not dissatisfied but inclined to submit resignedly to God's will, serious and well behaved. (284)

These are very strange impressions for 1989, the year when Rezzori visited Chernivtsi. In that year much of the world press was writing about the Ukrainian nation's distinctiveness, in connection with the founding congress of the Popular Movement of the Ukraine (Rukh). But Rezzori could only see a people no different from "other Russians." In that same year Chernivtsi itself was host to Chervona Ruta, a huge Ukrainian rock and folk music festival in which hundreds of bands participated. I can just imagine the *metalisty* nibbling on cabbage as their electric guitars blasted the Carpathians.

So what does all this mean and why do I bring it up? For one thing, I find Rezzori's view of Ukrainians to be historically quite resonant. Polish landlords and Austrian officials in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently thought of the Ukrainian peasants as beasts.⁷ Could Rezzori have inherited this view of Ukrainians from his father, who had served as an Austrian state official? The view of Slavs in general and Ukrainians in particular as in some sense subhuman and at best extremely primitive was quite common in virulent forms of German chauvinism, not just in the Nazi variety. Could Rezzori also have picked this up from the family milieu? His father, as Rezzori points out time and again, was convinced of the Germans' innate superiority to all the other peoples of Bukovina, particularly to the Jews, whom he despised.

Rezzori pays special attention to the Jews. He dwells on them lovingly in *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, and all the Jews in *The Snows of Yesteryear* are positive and colorful characters. Yet we know from the *Memoirs* that Rezzori had once been an anti-Semite, quite unthinkingly, simply because his father and so many others of his place and station were. In the end Rezzori overcame this particular set of prejudices, and the *Memoirs* can be understood at least in part as a chronicle of how his attitudes toward Jews evolved. It seems, however, that the ethnic prejudices in Rezzori's milieu extended beyond the Jews to the Ukrainians, but that Rezzori has not yet worked out that set of prejudices. Anti-Semitism is a notorious and easily diagnosed mental disease; anti-Ukrainian prejudice often escapes attention, but I think it can be diagnosed clearly in Rezzori's writing.

In raising these points, my intent is not to single out Rezzori for censure. Rather, I seek to call attention to the existence of an ethnic prejudice that seems to be fairly easily tolerated by otherwise cultured and sensitive people. I doubt very much

that any other reviewer will be bothered by the image Rezzori projects of Ukrainians as dim-witted talkers of gibberish or just another species of dull Russian—“stolid cabbage-eating Ukrainians,” as one of Rezzori’s previous reviewers has called them.⁸ Yet could a white American author write about blacks the way Rezzori does about Ukrainians without provoking indignation? I think not.

Rezzori is very sad that “the only ones left” in Bukovina are Ukrainians. Although he mixes his deplorable prejudices in with this sentiment, I have to agree with the main point he is making. Bukovina was once a land of crosscurrents, a lush garden of cultures. It was the commingling of German and Jew, Romanian and Ukrainian, Armenian and Pole that produced this little land’s cultural geniuses, including Rezzori. But this cross-cultural world has well nigh vanished, like the snows of yesteryear. The first blows came down on it in the interwar period, when the extreme nationalisms deliberately barred the way to cross-fertilization. The Second World War removed the political and even biological bases for cultural interaction. The borders were redrawn so that largely Ukrainian northern Bukovina was incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR, whereas the largely Romanian south remained part of Romania. By mutual agreement of Hitler and Stalin the German population of Bukovina was evacuated. Most of Bukovina’s Jews were murdered by the Nazis.⁹ This once multilingual, multicultural region was reduced to a largely Ukrainian-Russian, *Soviet* homogeneity in the north (and a largely Romanian homogeneity in the south).¹⁰ The Soviet government has until recently done all in its power to isolate Ukrainian culture in Bukovina from its traditional East, Central, and West European influences and to substitute for this cosmopolitan context a strictly enforced Russian orientation. The crossroads of East and West has been, as Rezzori feared, swallowed by the East. We have all been somewhat impoverished as a result.

Notes

1. Gregor von Rezzori, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 1.
2. Page numbers in parentheses refer to Gregor von Rezzori, *The Snows of Yesteryear: Portraits for an Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).
3. This was Miss Bianca Alvaro, born in neighboring Bessarabia, not in Bukovina, who figures in the chapter “Löwinger’s Rooming House.”
4. Rezzori himself is said to write “im Bukowiner Idiom, Deutsch mit rumänischen, ukrainischen und jiddischen Ausdrücken vermengt.” Amy Colin, “An den Schnittpunkten der Traditionen—Deutsch in der Bukowina u.a.,” *Neue deutsche Hefte* 30, no. 4 (180): 764–765. This article is an excellent introduction to Bukovina’s cultural legacy.
5. The novel is available in an English translation by Marco Carynyk (Littleton, Colo.: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1981).
6. *On the High Uplands: Sagas, Songs, Tales and Legends of the Carpathians* (New York: Roy Publishers, n.d.).

7. In fact, about Hutsuls in particular one official said that in their case “those features that distinguish people from animals are but little developed.” John-Paul Himka, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 14.

8. Michael Ignatieff, “The Old Country,” *New York Review of Books*, February 15, 1990, 4.

9. Chernivtsi was once an important center of Jewish, particularly Yiddish, culture. In 1908, for example, the city hosted an international Yiddish conference that sought to make Yiddish the exclusive Jewish national language. But by 1985 there was only one Yiddish writer left in Chernivtsi.

10. In 1970 the population of Chernivtsi Oblast, which includes part of the former Bessarabia as well as northern Bukovina, was 69 percent Ukrainian, 19 percent Romanian and Moldavian, and 6 percent Russian, with Jews and others accounting for the remaining 6 percent.