

INTRODUCTION

I.

Gregor von Rezzori was the first writer I got to know by sight, but that wasn't due to his fame as an author so much as it was to an Austrian TV show called *Jolly Joker* that ran in the early 1980s. The program offered glimpses of the international jet-set and typically featured fast cars or aristocrats, or more often than not aristocrats with fast cars, along with movie stars who lived in Monaco or the south of France. It was an endearing show, without a hint of malice, in love with a vaguely antiquated idea of luxury and grand style—a series of charming, well-meaning, and inconsequential episodes that demonstrated how beautiful life could be for a few lucky souls. The single most impressive thing about it, however, was the moderator: an elegant, suntanned gentleman getting on in years who seemed to radiate health, sophistication, and wit, and who always appeared remarkably relaxed. He was often filmed standing on a beach or atop a hill, occasionally at the steering wheel of a fast car, and he always spoke with a soft accent that had just a hint of nasal elegance and was impossible to place. Later I learned that it was half that of an Austrian aristocrat and half the peculiar German of his native Bucovina.

This was the famous author Gregor von Rezzori. I could hardly believe it. Novelists didn't do that kind of thing, I thought: they didn't host TV programs about aristocrats and movie stars, and in the rare event they did pick up a microphone it was to warn against some nefarious political development or to help launch their latest book. But then as well as now, Rezzori's public persona hardly fit the

accepted image of the distinguished writer. He had something of the grand seigneur and something of the rake; he was half aristocratic chronicler in the mold of Chateaubriand and half the enchanting trickster. As he himself put it (because even when it came to skeptical comments about himself he could put it better than anyone), he belonged to a dying breed spawned by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, “a typical, albeit anachronistic mix of high aristocrat and casino croupier.”

He began early on as a writer of popular literature and serial novels for newspapers, and even after he was established he continued to write entertainingly playful books for the mass market on the side, as well as miscellaneous travel guides for German tourists and even an *Idiot's Guide to German Society*. He did this openly and mockingly and without being ashamed of the breadth of his writing; he was also fully aware of his own skill, and rightly so, for no reader of any judgment could doubt that the author of *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* or *An Ermine in Czernopol* was one of the great writers of his time.

2.

Czernopol is of course Czernowitz, the capital of Bucovina and under the Hapsburgs a multiethnic center, a meeting place of Eastern and Western Europe, where Jews, Romanians, Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, and others lived together surprisingly peacefully. After the First World War the city was absorbed into the Kingdom of Romania; later, during the German occupation, the Jewish population was largely destroyed, and what was left of the old Austrian culture lived on only in literature—the poems of Paul Celan and the novels of Joseph Roth or Rezzori.

An Ermine in Czernopol takes place between the two world wars; it begins after the downfall of the monarchy and concludes shortly before the final catastrophe, the Nazi occupation, which forever ended the culture and way of life Rezzori describes. We are spared a depiction of the violence that followed, but we cannot read this book without feeling the history that haunts it: even in the wittiest mo-

ments of this truly witty novel we cannot forget the tragedy. Nor should we.

So why the camouflage, why change Czernowitz to Czernopol? Perhaps precisely to underscore the fact that the setting of the novel has nothing to do with the real Czernowitz, since the city Rezzori depicts has disappeared entirely into the realm of memory and fantasy. This is all the more important because Czernowitz is hardly an indifferent or coincidental location for this book. This story could happen nowhere else but in that place of diverse ethnicities, amid the constantly shifting loyalties that marked the ongoing political upheaval of the 1920s and '30s.

The concept of loyalty is crucial to *An Ermine in Czernopol*, a novel in the manner of *Don Quixote*, about a knight clinging to the outmoded code of honor of the former Austrian Empire. Major Tildy—the “ermine”—refuses to accept the new reality; he is unable to comprehend that everything in the world has become relative, and it is this staunch adherence to absolutes that leads to his ruin, when he steadfastly defends the honor of his sister-in-law, challenging everyone who insults her to a duel. His actions are all the more grotesque because this sister-in-law no longer has any honor to defend, though that hardly matters to Tildy, whose rigid code takes no account of reality—or of life and death.

Little of this, though, was clear to the narrator, who was still a child as Tildy's story unfolded, sheltered in his parents' home, where only a distant echo of events reached him. Who in fact is the narrator? Throughout the first half of the book he appears in the guise of an amorphous “we”—an atypical formal device Rezzori's novel shares with Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily” and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*. Only later does a young man emerge from this childhood collective, and as this happens, we realize that the book is in significant part autobiographical. Yet from the start, the language of the book is not the language of the child but rather that of the mature narrator he will become, and who will look back on his childhood. From the start it is the language of the brilliant ironic stylist Gregor von Rezzori at the pinnacle of his form.

More than anything, however, the story of Major Tildy's fight for

the honor of his dishonorable sister-in-law is the occasion for countless digressions, the stage for a constant stream of marginal figures and minor characters whose appearances, however brief, invariably leave a lasting impression. These include the fruit delivery man Kunzelmann, whose constant mangling of children's verses doesn't disturb him in the least but torments his listeners; or Widow Morar, who never tires of telling the story of her husband's suicide, which she watched through a keyhole; or—at the other end of the social spectrum—the worldly prefect Tarangolian, whose intelligence is only matched by his cynicism. In this way the novel captures voices from every stratum of a now vanished society, and the effect is both vital and eerie. It also preserves a no-less-vanished variety of Central European wit. In fact, Major Tildy is the only character who completely lacks a sense of humor, the only one who refuses to acknowledge and laugh at the dark side of existence. He is the only tragic figure, which is exactly why, for all his dignity, he is so ridiculous—because nothing is funnier than humorlessness.

At one point Major Tildy challenges the writer Năstase to a duel, and the latter comes up with several comical arguments for why a smart man would refuse to submit to such a contest. At the end of this speech, Năstase compliments the resolute Don Quixote for his Teutonic seriousness:

“And last but not least, gentlemen, please convey my compliments to Major Tildy for his understanding and steadfastness of character. It's well known that his compatriots, the Germans, have to call an assembly in order to understand a joke. He, however, abandoned the attempt from the start. That compels a certain respect from me.”

That itself was a joke for which the sober Germans of the 1950s had little appreciation. Nevertheless, the German critics had high praise for Rezzori's novel: in 1959, *Der Spiegel* ran a portrait of the author on its cover, and the book was awarded the coveted Fontane Prize. Equally important was the subsequent translation into numerous languages, as that ensured that the novel would not be restricted

to German readers alone. Because despite his success, in the isolated and often very provincial milieu of the *Bundesrepublik*, Rezzori always remained a bit foreign, a bit suspect. The German literary establishment, it could be said, had abandoned Rezzori from the start. And *that* compels a certain respect.

3.

Speaking of Major Tildy, Prefect Tarangolian relates: “He himself supposedly said he knows only two types of response: the *witty* one and the *just* one.” The prefect’s clever turn of phrase may also be applied to Rezzori’s writing. He didn’t intend his work to be “just,” in other words clear and well-balanced, with no fluctuation in quality; he wanted his writing to be “witty”—erratic, unpredictable, enjoyable, and shimmering. He wanted to live well and make money, act in films, travel the world, be a friend of the rich and famous and a great writer on top of that. In all of this he succeeded, and because he cared so little for the just response and so much for the witty solution to things, he personified the trickster, the capricious conjurer, able to mix low vernacular and high tone like few others. Like all good novels, *An Ermine in Czernopol* is also a portrait of its maker: mischievous and fun, wise and unjust, impossible to reduce to a single formula, extraordinarily intelligent, and marked with a humor that reaches deeply into the darkness of things.

—DANIEL KEHLMANN
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