MY GREAT-GRAND-UNCLE'S BEQUEST

for my daughter Eva

Andrew Busza

Eccentrics, like poetry, are no longer in fashion. What Arnold told Clough in the middle of the last century is once again and perhaps much more literally true today: "Reflect too, as I cannot but do here more and more, in spite of all the nonsense some people talk, how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving — but *unpoetical*." Ours is an age of prose — of prose composed and recorded on magnetic tapes and discs. The narratologist brushes aside Blake's *Tyger* to play cat's cradle with *Wuthering Heights*; while the yuppies of Silicon Valley would find my great-grand-uncle Zaremba much odder and more puzzling than some one-eyed alien from *Star Trek*.

Space monsters, however frightening and ugly, are in the final analysis rather comforting creatures. They are deliciously and reassuringly predictable, sporting a perfect fit between signifier and signified. They look sinister and have thoroughly black hearts (except when they are inhumanly mechanized). Even their generic impurity has the easy slickness and lubricity of kitsch.

Now, my great-grand-uncle had dark penetrating eyes (two of them, like most people) and an impressive walrus moustache. He was tall and apparently very good-looking with a severe, dignified manner. As chief notary of the border-town of Kuty, he was universally respected and, indeed, feared. But in the surrounding countryside, among the Hutzul highlanders, the respect was more often mixed with affection. They called him the "Hutzul Notary." They sought his advice on legal as well as domestic matters. They turned to him when there were disputes to arbitrate and quarrels to settle. No district judge enjoyed such prestige and so much authority. All that, in spite of some of his singular ways. When he walked through the town-square he barely noticed people, dismissing the doctor, the priest, and the mayor with a supercilious nod, but on meeting a beggar or one of the poorer Hutzul shepherds, he took off his hat first, and bowed low and graciously. When asked why he behaved in this odd manner, he replied: "The first don't need my bows — it is the others who crave for respect."

Although Zaremba married and even had a son (not a great success, I am told), he was, by nature, a loner. After retiring at sixty, he spent more and more time wandering alone in the Carpathians. Once in a while, he would appear unannounced in his country home, stay a day or two, pay for his food and lodging, and then walk off back into the mountains as suddenly and unceremoniously as he had come. In his later years, as if afraid not to lose his independence and freedom, he became obsessively tight-fisted and miserly. Distrustful of banks and other financial institutions, he carried large sums of money inside a wide, padded leather belt, especially made for the purpose, which he wore under his shirt. Once, a servant, who had accompanied him on his treks for almost two years, vanished together with the belt and money after they had put up for the night at a mountain inn. Old Zaremba had a new belt made to order and from then on travelled alone, sometimes in the company of a stray dog.

Not to inconvenience or to feel beholden to anyone, he prepared his own burial many years ahead of time. He selected and bought a plot in a small country-churchyard on the outskirts of Kuty, refusing to be interred in the family tomb. He carefully supervised the making of an oak coffin with brass studs and handles. This coffin waited in the corner of his room for many years. It was covered with a black-white-and-red Hutzul rug, on top of which there stood a small Dresden china doll. Inside, neatly folded, lay an old-fashioned Polish gentry coat which buttoned up under the chin and had elaborate gold-thread trimming on the front. It was to be his last formal dress.

But there was nothing, strictly speaking, gothic about my great-grand-uncle (except perhaps for one characteristic); in fact, his official life, as structured and handed down by family tradition, bears the generic imprint of Polish Romantic narratives. It is a typical story played out against the landscape of historical events and rendered meaningful by the patterning of history.

Uncle Zaremba came from a distinguished gentry family whose roots can be traced back almost to the beginnings of the Polish state. One of his forebears was a thirteenth-century bishop of the ancient See of Poznan; another fought against the Teutonic knights at the battle of Grunwald in 1410; a third belonged to the infamous Confederation of Targowica, a group of Polish nobles who collaborated with the Russians at the time of the Second Partition. It was to expiate this inheritance of guilt and vindicate the family name and honour that Zaremba joined the uprising against the Russians in 1863.

His parents, not at all keen on the idea, first tried to dissuade the over-eager sixteen-year-old. He could serve his country more effectively when he was a little older, they argued. He could count on Polish history to provide him with another opportunity soon enough. Since, however, the boy did not seem to be amenable to persuasion, the parents resorted to coercive measures. He was placed under family house-arrest. A servant would guard him all day long. At night, he slept in an alcove separated from the rest of the house by a high-vaulted chamber, which served as a bedroom for his sisters and girl-cousins. It was felt that the young man's sense of propriety and respect for the feminine modesty of family guests would prevent him from escaping as effectively as stone walls and iron bars. And, indeed, my great-grand-uncle would not think of offending the pudency of my great-grand-cousins; indeed, one night, just as dawn was breaking, he climbed out of the alcove window onto a stone ledge, then onto an adjacent mulberry tree, and from there onto the gravel path that led to the stables. Within minutes he was cantering on his favourite mare Sophie into the misty darkness.

Two days later, one of the servants found a hurriedly scribbled note on the mantle-piece next to the silver-plated family coat of arms with its three knots and lion rampart. It read: "I've gone to pay back our great-grand-father's debt."

YOUNG ZAREMBA spent several months "in the forest," fighting with various partisan units. In the summer of 1863 he was in the south in the Holy Cross Mountains under the command of M. Heydenreich, alias the Raven. On August 8 he took part in the daring dawn attack on a Russian convoy escorting government mail from Warsaw to Lublin. The ambush, led jointly by the Raven and an Irish volunteer named O'Brien de Lacey, was a great success. By midday the Russian column had been virtually annihilated. The partisans, having captured a treature chest with a large consignment of money, intended for the border fortresses, disappeared into the forest well before the arrival of Cossack reinforcements. Uncle Zaremba galloped up the wooded hillside with only a scratch to his neck and cheek. A pine-tree branch had grazed him during the downhill charge.

But no more than a fortnight would pass before his entire troop were lying dead or dying on a sunlit clearing of a young forest east of Lublin. Zaremba had been shot in the chest, and having lost consciousness had fallen off his horse. The Cossacks, who were rounding up prisoners and killing off the more grievously wounded, left him for dead. At nightfall, some Gypsies, who were camping nearby, came to scavenge on the battlefield. They found the boy still alive and took him back to their camp and looked after him.

He stayed with the band several weeks, nursing his wound and regaining strength, and increasingly enjoying the freedom and truancy of life on the road. It was better than the summer holidays. He could sleep in till midday; sit by the camp-fire under the fluffy stars past midnight; and, best of all, there were no aunts nagging and fussing around him. With the eagerness of a schoolboy, he learnt about the ways, customs, and lore of the Romany people. Soon, like Pushkin's Aleko, he even fell in love with a bright-eyed Gypsy girl.

Uncle Zaremba's idyll of the road came to an abrupt end on a bridge on the Dniester, barely sixty kilometres from home. The Gypsies had agreed to take him to Sniatyn on their way to Moldavia. Their intrinsic kindness found reinforcement in the boy's often repeated assurances that his parents would reward them generously. However, as the band was crossing the river near Halicz, a troop of Hungarian hussars stopped the train and started searching the wagons. They found young Zaremba hiding under a pallet in one of the caravans. In later years he would say that a rival for the affections of bright-eyed Zemfira had informed against him.

There followed eighteen months of imprisonment in Kufstein, and then, after the amnesty, a two-year-long stay in Paris. It was there that he began to acquire the reputatiton of an original. He was seen daily, taking long solitary walks along the Boulevard St. Michel, dressed in a shabby military coat, with an insurgent cap on his head. In cafés where the émigrés congregrated to discuss politics and ways of making money, he would come up to strangers and offer to read their future from a pack of soiled tarot cards.

On his return to Galicia, he took a degree in Law at the University of Lemberg, married the daughter of one of the best families in the district, and served as the chief notary public of Kuty for almost forty years.

MUCH IN HIS LIFE had not turned out quite the way he had wished or planned. This was clearly the case with his funeral. He had always wanted to make a quiet, unobtrusive exit. He would say: "May the end — when it comes — be sudden and simple like the shutting of a window." Then, puffing on his long-stem pipe, he would add: "And remember, I don't want fanfare or ceremony. Let two tramps carry my coffin to the cemetery at dusk by the light of a single lantern."

In the event, however, his wishes were not fulfilled; or perhaps more accurately, they were only half-fulfilled. He died in November, at the time of the first snowfalls, and only a handful of his closest family could make it to Kuty. At least, that was the excuse they gave. The parish priest came — for obvious reasons. So did the Fire-chief, who knew old Zaremba from childhood and who, in the old days, played chess with him in the chequered shade of a sour-cherry tree. Though the two chess partners saw little of each other in later years, they knew that whoever died first, the other would go to his friend's funeral. But none of the other prominent citizens or town officials bothered to attend. The funeral procession, which nevertheless numbered well over two hundred persons, was made up mostly of Hutzul shepherds, village headmen, two or three Ruthenian priests, and a fairly large contingent of vagrants and church beggars. A stray dog closed the motley cortège.

And then there is one more fact concerning my great-grand-uncle. The chief notary of Kuty, it was said, had psychic powers. This is the story which made the rounds of the inns and taverns of the Prut Valley: One rainy Sunday afternoon, Zaremba was sitting with several regulars in the corner of Urumbein's restaurant in Kosow. They were smoking and sipping thick black coffee after their usual lunch of boiled beef in horseradish sauce, mashed potatoes, and brine-pickled cucumbers, while Zaremba reminisced about his Gypsy days. Then his eye fell on a black walking-stick with a large silver knob that was lying on a chair next to an empty table across the aisle. A few minutes earlier an elegant middle-aged man in a brown check suit of English cut, with a waxed moustache and beige spats on his patent leather shoes, had got up from that table and walked out of the restaurant. Zaremba leaned across the aisle and stretching out his hand reached for the walking-stick. "I'll tell you something about the owner," he said, touching his forehead with the heavy silver knob. For a while he sat in meditative concentration. Suddenly, he went pale and muttered almost inaudibly: "I see blood. A dark pool of blood on a Hutzul rug." The company froze, silent and aghast. Several minutes passed and no one said a word. Then Urumbein, who had joined them for coffee, spoke: "Ten years ago, a young woman was found dead in a hotel room in Kolomyja. There was an inquest. The coroner concluded that she had been bludgeoned to death by a prowler. Apparently, she had surprised him on returning to her room at night. But many people, including the girl's parents, weren't happy with the verdict. There were rumours that she was having an affair with her cousin, Baron Skarbek. Someone had even seen them quarrelling in a fiacre outside Sandler's millinery shop. But Baron Skarbek had a solid alibi, and, what's more, he was very influential in the district. With time the cloud of suspicion that surrounded the baron dissipated and people forgot the story." Urumbein stubbed his cigar on the marble ash-tray. After a long pause, he said: "The gentleman who lunched at that table was Baron Skarbek."

The incident, which became the talk of Kosow and the surrounding area for weeks, established and sealed Zaremba's reputation as a clairvoyant. It did not seem to occur to anyone at the time that my great-grand-uncle, like Urumbein, could easily have known the story of Baron Skarbek and his unfortunate cousin. But he might not have known it. What is certain, however, is that he enjoyed the reputation.

Apart from a century-old photograph, showing an elderly man with a splendid white moustache sitting in the middle of a family group consisting of five men and four women, I have nothing tangible left from my great-grand-uncle. He left me neither his insurgent cap, nor his walking-stick, nor his tarot pack. I have inherited neither his panache nor his psychic powers. All that he bequeathed me is his colourful, blatantly old-fashioned and slightly ambiguous personality and a story encrusted with the patina of a family's imagination. This may seem little — but it is really very much. In this tumbleweed world of ours in which homes are periodically abandoned, families disposed of, friendships dropped, loyalties betrayed; in which we suffer perhaps more than from anything else from what John Fowles calls the *nemo* — the sense and anguish of being nobody — it is truly comforting to have such an anchor in one's past even if the reality in which it is grounded has vanished for ever, even if it is in part shaped by the poetry of illusions.

CIRCUS

Jars Balan

"Circus / (for Tamarka and Katrusia)" [*Tsyrk, dlia Tarmarky i Katrusi*] is part of a larger work I call *Autobiographica.*

The text of the entire collection is composed of the cyrillic letter resembling a backwards R, pronounced like the German *ja.* As this cyrillic letter also represents the personal pronoun "I" the book can be seen as a kind of extended hymn to individuality, though that by no means adequately describes the subject matter of *Autobiographica.* The primary intent is to explore the pictographic possibilities of phonetic script — repressed for utilitarian reasons — by celebrating the expressive potential of single character. Hence, the letter is presented in a variety of interpretations (distortions), configurations, and graphic contexts, which I hope will rekindle a child-like sense of wonder about writing besides challenging readers' narrow assumptions about poetry. The particular cycle, "Circus," is done in a style I call "cartoonographic," but many of the other works in the collection are less representational.

There is long and rich tradition of visual poetry in Ukrainian literature, which I am attempting to extend, popularize, and develop through my creative work. It is a genre that is of specific and growing critical interest to me. Pattern poetry was very much in vogue in Ukraine during the baroque era, and graphic forms of writing were briefly revived by the Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1920s. I consciously draw on these and other non-Ukrainian sources in my efforts to perpetuate the use of visual forms, which I first began experimenting with in 1971, while a student at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

Although I also write visual poetry in English and expect to produce works in a number of other languages, for various political and aesthetic reasons I am working primarily in Ukrainian at the present time. Essentially, I want to establish that there are no "official" literary languages in Canada, only languages that Canadian writers adopt as their preferred means of communication. I further see my work in Ukrainian as a kind of gesture of defiance, contributing in a small way to the on-going struggle against the Russification and stultification of literary life in Soviet Ukraine.