mai - juin 1985

SUZANNE RENAUD

BOHUSLAV REYNEK

Maison Stendhal
Grenoble

SUZANNE RENAUD AND BOHUSLAV REYNEK[1]

The Czech engraver Bohuslav Reynek and Suzanne Renaud, a poet from the Dauphiné region in the French Alps, were married in 1926. For the next ten years, they spent their winters in Grenoble and summers in Bohemia. In 1936, the couple definitively settled in Petrkov, the village where Bohuslav was born. Shortly afterwards, the nightmare years began: Hitler, the war, the 1948 Prague coup. Then, silence.

Suzanne was never able to return to France. She died in 1964, Bohuslav in 1971. They rest in the cemetery of Svatý Kříž, whose church inspired one of Bohuslav's works illustrating *Victimae laudes,* Suzanne's 1939 collection of poems.

The two artists left us their poems and engravings – works that command admiration in Czechoslovakia but are little known in France.



Photo © Daniel Reynek
Private collection, France

[1] Text published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Suzanne Renaud-Bohuslav Reynek*, Grenoble, Maison Stendhal, May-June 1985.

1889 – 1926
SUZANNE RENAUD'S YOUTH

Suzanne Renaud was born in Lyon on September 30, 1889. Her mother, Félicie Tartari, a native of the Dauphiné region, was raised in the Sainte-Marie d'en Haut convent in Grenoble. She was later married off by her brothers, one of whom, Charles Tartari, became dean of the University of Grenoble's school of law. Born into a farming family in Franche-Comté, Suzanne's father, Abel Renaud, became an artillery commander. In 1898, when required to take sides in the Dreyfus case, Abel bravely asserted his independence by refusing to take a stand. For this act of defiance, he was temporarily transferred to Héricourt in Franche-Comté.

Around 1904, Suzanne's parents moved to Grenoble, living at 9 rue Lesdiguières. Félicie gave Suzanne and her sister Marcelle[2] an upbringing that was almost ahead of its time. Marcelle enrolled in the School of Fine Arts. A bright student, Suzanne was the first girl to graduate from what is now the Lycée Stendhal. After the First World War, the liberal arts college in Grenoble hired her as a lecturer in French literature. Both daughters travelled with their mother to Normandy, Switzerland and England.



Félicie Renaud and her daughters
Private collection, France

Suzanne's earliest poems attest to her firm grasp of English verse[3]. Verlaine, Baudelaire and Valéry are among the French poets she looked up to.

As a young woman, she divided her time between upper-class city life in Grenoble and Lans-en-Vercors, a mountain village and winter resort reached by stagecoach. The wistful *Images de mon pays* ["Images of My Land"], probably written during the war, touchingly evokes the "fresh, bright scent of mint" on the plateau that wafted over her whenever she opened the door…

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[2] Marcelle, born in 1898, married André Robert. Together they had two girls, Suzanne and Magali.
Suzanne was a traditional name in the family. Félicie called the daughter she had had from her first marriage Suzanne. She died of diphtheria at around the age of seven. When Félicie married Abel, she named their first daughter, the future poet, after the little girl who had passed away.

[3] See Jean-Jacques Chevalier's article in *La Vie Alpine*, February 1932.

Abel died in 1917. During the First World War, between 1914 and 1918, Félicie, Suzanne and Marcelle became nurses caring for the seriously wounded. Friends who once gathered on the balcony overlooking rue Lesdiguières were dying. In a poem from Suzanne's later years, *Au balcon* ["On the Balcony"], circa 1953, the memory of those who died pierces the mists of time and she seems to be having a dialogue with the afterlife – a leitmotiv in her work.

The presence of a loving mother who nurtured her gifts stayed with Suzanne all her life, becoming intertwined with her poetry. Félicie died on January 5, 1924: "I felt a big chill… I did not want to leave her."[4]

But Suzanne would leave her homeland.

Several years earlier, around 1919, she met Joseph Parnin during a stay at La Louvesc in the Vivarais region. A literature teacher in the rhetoric class at the high school in Tournon, he had a decisive influence on her poetic calling. Parnin encouraged her to write her first poems. It was said of him that he "awakened souls." During this period, Louis Pize, René Fernandat, Paul Morillot, Louis Le Cardonnel, André de Richaud, Jacques Reynaud and others gathered around the poet Charles Forot at the Pigeonnier in Saint-Félicien-en-Vivarais[5]. Bohuslav later translated some of these writers.

In 1922, Suzanne, then thirty-three years old, published her first collection of poems, *Ta vie est là* ["Your Life Is There"], with Éditions du Pigeonnier. Bohuslav read the book in Czechoslovakia. It impressed him so much that, around 1923, he went to France to meet the author.

Your life is there, a reed alone
On dreary shores;
Your life is there, a spindle spun
In idle hands;
And the reed wants to sing
Only to lips of dreams, (…)

Later, Suzanne saw this poem as an omen.

On March 13, 1926, Bohuslav and Suzanne were married at St. Joseph's Church in Grenoble.

[4] Suzanne Renaud, Petrkov, 1963.
[5] In 1926, the review *Les Amitiés* published a collective tribute to Parnin. Suzanne contributed with *Souvenirs vivarois*.

1892 – 1926

BOHUSLAV REYNEK'S YOUTH

Bohuslav Reynek was born in Petrkov on May 31, 1892. His father, Bedřich Reynek, ran the family estate – a farm and land surrounding an old park and a beautiful but simple early eighteenth-century manor house.

For ten years, Bohuslav attended school in Iglau, a small, half-Czech, half-German town with a sizeable Jewish minority. That is where he acquired a thorough command of German. In 1913, he began translating Trakl, and later Milosz, Billinger, Rilke and Stifter. In a beautiful text, *Meeting Bohuslav Reynek*,[6] Austrian professor and Trakl expert Gottfried Stix explained how Reynek, unlike other translators, understood the meaning of a line in the poem "Helian".



Private collection, France

Wanting Bohuslav to become an agricultural engineer, his father practically forced him to pursue scientific study. After failing out of school, Bohuslav returned to the big house, far from cities and colleges, to find the solitude his soul needed. He drew and made oil paintings (portraits, landscapes) but spent most of his time translating: Péguy, Claudel, Francis Jammes and Tristan Corbière. He never attended art school or took lessons from a teacher.

Around 1912, Bohuslav met publisher Josef Florian (1873-1941), a follower of Léon Bloy and one of the "most influential driving forces behind the Catholic revival in Bohemia"[7]. Florian founded *Dobré Dílo* (a pun meaning both "good book" and "good deed"). Many of the works he published appeared in Czech for the first time thanks to "the thoughtful and sensitive poet and painter Bohuslav Reynek[8]", the main translator.

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[6] 1967
[7] O. F. Babler in the review *Rencontres*: "Bohuslav Reynek, traducteur tchèque de Bernanos" (1964).
[8] Cahiers de l'Herne, *Charles Péguy* (1977).

Reynek would walk from Iglau or Petrkov to see his friend Florian, who had twelve children – and refused to put them in school. In the Florians' humble home on the edge of Moravia's huge forest, he saw a still life and a painting of Christ by Rouault, which, Eva Floranová writes, had been bought around 1914.

Around 1913, young Bohuslav went to France for the first time – an experience that left a deep impression on him. He would always remember his days in Concarneau, Brittany, which healed the trauma of his university experience: "It was in November and December. A dark, soft rain came down almost the whole time. Sometimes the sky would clear up a little and we would go outside to pick blackberries in the brambles on the heath. (…)



Private collection, France

I stayed at a small hotel with a plaque saying that Flaubert had slept there. At night I would read poetry in the company of rats that scuttled out of the walls or floor." [9]

On his second trip to France, in 1923, he met Suzanne Renaud.

[9] Letter from Bohuslav Reynek, August 9, 1963.

1926 – 1950

In 1926, Suzanne went to Bohemia for the first time, discovering its forests, vast skies "cloudy like waiting wings"[10] and horizons lined with apple trees or punctuated by the onion dome of a church. The open fields, the large house with its small bell tower and the old trees surrounding it and the pond with its reeds can be seen from the train station... She stepped into her husband's home and saw the master's sheep, with their "gaze of the night in Judea".[11]

This seems to have been a happy time. Suzanne and Bohuslav's two sons, Daniel and Jiří (called Michel in France), were born in Grenoble, where they returned to spend every winter[12]. Suzanne wrote many poems between 1930 and 1940. She never put them into any kind of order and scattered them amongst friends. However, sources of inspiration with recurring themes can be identified in about fifteen beautiful pieces she called her "poetic grab bag": the poet's garden (*C'est le jardin sans nom*, *c'est le jardin sans hôte* ["It Is the Garden without a Name, It Is the Garden without a Host"], 1935); the sorrow of exile (*Les noix* ["The Walnuts"], ca. 1953); winter and its anxieties (*Corbeaux* ["Crows"], 1937); the afterlife and prayer (*Glas* ["Death Knell"], 1934) and death. They could be called *Nocturnes* ["Nighttime"].



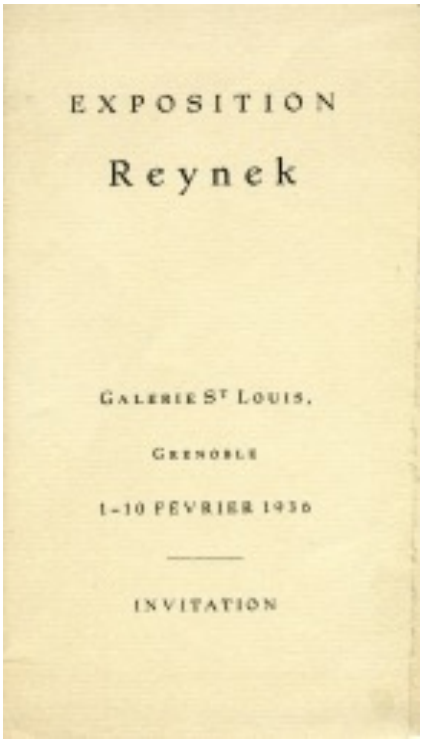
Private collection, France

It is difficult to establish the chronology of the complete works (around 250 poems and prose pieces). Suzanne carried all her work inside herself. She would write down a poem only after it had perfectly matured in her mind. She seldom dated them. Years could go by for a piece to take shape in her mind before its final version appeared on paper. The manuscripts are sheets of paper filled with a single poem on a page written without any cross-outs or variations.

From 1927 to 1936, the Saint Louis gallery in Grenoble hosted Bohuslav's first exhibitions. He met painters like abbé Jean-Louis Gervat, who lived in the "Terres Froides" region, and discovered Louis Carrand's work. Young artists such as Édith

[10] "C'est le pays couleur de lin" ("It Is the Flaxen-coloured Land", *Victimae laudes*, 1939).
[11] *Les brebis* ("The Sheep"), 1942.
[12] 1928 and 1929

Berger, Aurore Vicat and perhaps Sahut came to rue Lesdiguières. Bohuslav and Gabriel Ducultit wrote articles about one another. In 1930, *La Vie Alpine* published an important review of Ducultit's retrospective by the Czech artist[13]. Spending winters in the Dauphiné allowed Bohuslav to discover the works of Jean Achard and Johan Jongkind. The curator Andry-Farcy introduced him to Chagall, the artist who influenced him the most, after Rouault[14].


EXPOSITION

Reynek

GALERIE ST LOUIS,

GRENOBLE

1-10 FEVRIER 1936

INVITATION

Writers in the Dauphiné and Suzanne's friends from the Vivarais introduced Bohuslav to the literary scene of the time. He met Giono and travelled to La Salette with Bernanos and his wife in the summer of 1928[15].

Meanwhile, he continued translating French literature – a monumental endeavour.

After his parents' deaths in 1936 and 1938, Bohuslav had to take care of the farm, which he inherited in 1939. He stopped going to Grenoble, or anywhere else for that matter. Suzanne wrote the poem *Corbeaux* ["Crows"] during her first winter in Petrkov (1936-37) – one of the hardest times of her life. The engraving that illustrates the poem depicts a village woman ringing the death knell in a small chapel that no longer exists.

Czech winters are long and harsh. But Bohuslav loved his country. Snow inspired some of his most beautiful engravings and poems of great purity[16].

Bohuslav's work breathes life into silence.

He would diligently rise at around one or two in the morning to begin engraving alone in the kitchen, by the fire with his cats. At a set time every day, he would peel vegetables for soup. In the summer, he would venture out into the woods with his cardboard boxes almost every morning. One day, probably after the war, he stopped going there, overwhelmed by sadness.

[13] Signed Timothée Reynek.
[14] When Claude Roger-Marx visited Bohuslav's show at Jean Damien's gallery in the autumn of 1963, he admired the artist's technique and inspiration but criticized Chagall's influence.
[15] In April 1906, Bloy and Florian, his translator, had met at La Salette (O. F. Babler, *Rencontres*, 1964). On July 28, 1932, Bloy's son-in-law, O. A. Tichý, organized a pilgrimage for the Czech visitors. (See *La grande aventure de La Salette de 1846 à nos jours*, V. Bettega, 1984).
[16] "Bohuslav Reynek's poetry is not easy to translate into French. "His concise, short verses resist being watered down" (Michel Reynek, 1985).

It is useful here to recall the ominous events that unfolded in 1938. In her poem "Bohême 1938", Suzanne drew inspiration from the martyrdom of Saint Ludmilla, who was strangled by her own hair. Paul Claudel had depicted this scene in *Images saintes de Bohème* ["Holy Images of Bohemia"]. In 1939, Suzanne wrote *Victimae laudes*, which was published by Vlastimil Vokolek. Pierre Dalloz considered these poems "In praise of the victim..." a distinct act of literary resistance, probably the first written in French before *The Silence of the Sea* by Vercors[17]." The collection features 17 poems steeped in the beauty, grandeur and drama of Bohemia. The bitterness of betrayal has even more intensity in *La Ville aux cent clochers* ["The City of a Hundred Spires"], a long poem set in Prague.



Private collection, France

Other poems dating from the war years include *Vánoce* (1939), a Christmas tale set in exile written for her friends; *Arrière-saison* ["Late Season"], a beautiful piece about hunger; *Tilleul*s ["Linden Trees"], 1942; and *Le troupeau dispersé* ["The Scattered Flock"], June 1944.

Seething with stifled anger, *Le troupeau dispersé* painfully recalls when the Germans took the Reyneks' sheep and expelled them from Petrkov shortly afterwards.

Suzanne wrote almost nothing from 1943 to 1953. With her husband's help, she compiled a collection of old poems written before and during the war, which were published in 1947: *La porte grise* ["The Gray Door"].

[17] Pierre Dalloz, 1984.

THE 1950s

Michel and Daniel Reynek recalled: “That was our life. They took everything away from us. The cats had mange and died. The house was cold. The windows were broken. We had no resources.”

These memories describe the circumstances in which Bohuslav created *Job* (1948-1950), a series of nine drypoint etchings. Suffering inspired numerous versions of *Pietà* and *Le Christ au roseau* [“Christ with Reed”], ca. 1950. Christ was in Petrkov for the first time. The path that can be made out in the distance leads to the church in Svatý Kříž.

As Bohuslav began the greater part of his work on his engravings, Suzanne stopped writing poetry. She started translating folk songs from her wretched adopted country. *Romarin ou Annette et Jean* [“Rosemary, or Annette and Jean”] is a collection of about sixty adaptations of Czech poems that she brought to the attention of Henri Pourrat. He liked them[18]. Some were published in *Témoignage chrétien* in 1948 and in *Le Mercure de France* around 1952. “All of them are old... They have become a balm for the soul, just as lowly objects caressed by so many generations are a balm that soothes our hands… and they carry a small cross in their hearts because they come from a people who have gone through tremendous suffering.”[19]



Henri Pourrat. Photo by Albert Monier, July 1955
© Centre Henri Pourrat. Private collection, France

In 1947, Suzanne returned to France, not without risk, for the first time since 1936. A year later, in 1948, the Prague coup brought the Communists to power in Czechoslovakia. The Reyneks’ family estate was turned into a collective farm. Bohuslav became a shepherd, while his sons worked as day labourers. Around 1950, imprisonments and trials began across the country.

[18] Suzanne and Pourrat exchanged correspondence between 1947 and 1959.
[19] Preface by Suzanne Renaud.



Michel Reynek
Private collection, France

"My parents bore all the misfortunes that befell them with unflinching courage… As tragic events continuously struck Europe... my mother's life was nothing but a long test of patience and endurance[20]."

It is late. I am alone with my sorrow (…)
Come gather round me, O abandoned dead
So powerful, so forlorn!
We will form one crown
Of blood and thorns...

In the kitchen, where she stayed up until around midnight, Suzanne would speak to the moon and wandering souls, and seek solace in the Communion of Saints.



Photo by A. Auzimour, 1963
Private collection, France

[20] Letter from Michel Reynek to Pierre Dalloz, January 21, 1982.

"MY COUNTRY"

"The brown-backed mountain sinks into the night like an old woman carrying her lamp." From her distant land of exile, this is how Suzanne pictured the sunset behind Mount Moucherotte west of Grenoble.

Le ciel s'écrase au loin, grappe de raisin noir ["The Sky Crashes Far Away, a Bunch of Black Grapes"], 1953, *J'ai revu la maison où rêva mon enfance* ["I again Saw the House Where I Dreamed My Childhood"], ca. 1930, *Images de mon pays* ["Images of My Country"], the war years, *Les noix*, *Colchiques*, *Seul assis à l'écart* and *Au balcon* ["Walnuts", "Colchicum", "Alone", "Sitting Apart" and "On the Balcony"], after 1953, are some of the poems that Suzanne's homeland inspired her to write. Every year between 1926 and 1936, she left France with a lump in her throat, gazing out at the landscape as she said goodbye to "that gentle blue mist lingering over Corenc" or the sunset over "our light, pink mountains[21]". These images of the Dauphiné sometimes brought a little inner warmth to her torment as an exile. Bohuslav sketched these landscapes during his walks in the area around Grenoble: Rue L… [Lesdiguières], *Corenc*, *Poisat*, *Saint-Nizier d'Uriage*, and *Villeneuve d'Uriage* are pastels or charcoal drawings. These little-known works remained in his boxes in Petrkov.

Although she would never set eyes on France again, Suzanne stayed in touch with her friends. She would write to them, showing great concern for the welfare of one friend's child, the artistic talent of another's. She hardly ever mentioned her "hard life", in which everything was lacking: a woolen shawl, a tablecloth, friends at the table, a future for her children. Whenever her friends in the Dauphiné sent her books, records or coffee, she responded with touching gratitude, slipping poems into her letters.

Between 1948 and 1960, Maurice Caillard published Suzanne's poems, often for the first time, in *Les Pages libres des Écrivains dauphinois*[22] and *Les Cahiers de l'Alpe*. *Nous avons tant marché sur les chemins durcis* ["We Walked So Much on the Hardened Paths, C"], *Vánoce* ["Christmas"], 1939) appeared as *Noël d'exil* ["Christmas in Exile"] in the Christmas 1963 issue of *Les Cahiers de l'Alpe.* Shortly after Suzanne's death in 1964, Caillard began cataloguing her body of work with a view to publishing it.

[21] Letter from Suzanne Renaud to Henriette Gröll, undated.
[22] No. 3, 11, 54, 58, 65. In issue 67-68 of *Hommage à René Fernandat*, Suzanne wrote a text in prose: *Une pensée cueillie au loin* ["A Thought Picked from Afar"].

1950-1964

De-Stalinization did not reach Czechoslovakia until late, but it seems that after 1953 the blows dealt by men and fate began to ease up in Petrkov. It was certainly around then that Suzanne began writing her own poems again. Characterized by simplicity, this second burst of creativity was quite different from the first. Suzanne discarded her beautiful natural language, striking imagery and sonnets. Her poems are in a new style. The lines are shorter and simpler; the tone is less elegiac.

Behind the kitchen, which looked out onto an old linden tree, she had had a small, tidy room set up for herself, adding a stove. She would retreat there to meditate with her coffee and books. She called this small collection of verse, her poetic testament, *La chambre pauvre* ["The Bare Room"]. Here are some of the titles: *Les champignons* ["Mushrooms"], *Les souvenirs que fait naître la pluie* ["Memories Awakened by the Rain"], *Aube* ["Dawn"], *Oiseaux nocturnes* ["Night Birds"], *La chambre pauvre* ["The Bare Room"], *On entend vaguement rôder par les labours* ["Something Can Be Vaguely Heard Roaming in the Ploughed Fields"], *Je me souviens* ["I Remember"].

"*I remember*
That a wing flew
That God set me down in a fire of dew
I remember"

Michel received these spare lines of verse from his mother when he was in the army. But Suzanne's late poems were less well known to her children. In the last years of her life, she was destitute and wracked with grief. Michel and Daniel no longer heard her recite her poetry with such devotion or sing its music in a crystalline voice.

I first met her in September 1963. She looked after my well-being and lit up my life. Her wide eyes were weary. She died on January 21, 1964.



Photo © Daniel Reynek, 1963
Private collection, France

1950 – 1971

During the last 20 years of his life, Bohuslav continued his work as an engraver. He "glorified the Lord[23]" in Bible scenes, in silent snow and in his bestiary[24].

His spiritually rich inner life shines through intensely but as softly as his voice and gaze. Jacques Félix-Faure contemplated these engravings throughout his life. They were his joy and his grace: "Whether or not you place your hope in Christ, it is enough to have a heart capable of real emotion to be deeply moved by a testimony whose depth and intensity reaches the height of contemplation."[25]

These engravings combine mysticism with a high degree of realism. If anyone were tempted to crown him with the halo of sainthood, they would probably have found him making elderberry wine, shearing sheep in the living room or performing some other deed worthy of Saint Bonaventure.



Photo A. Auzimour, 1963
Private collection, France

Between 1950 and 1952, the Saint Louis gallery in Grenoble again hosted exhibitions of Bohuslav's engravings. They undoubtedly featured *Saint-Martin au Cheval blanc* ["Saint Martin on a White Horse"], 1948, and *La pénitence de Ninive* ["The Repentance of Nineveh"], ca. 1952, two works with the same atmosphere of first snow. The journalist Séverac wrote a rapturous review of *La pénitence de Ninive* entitled "Reynek, the Night Wiper." The *Don Quichotte* series (1955-56) was exhibited for the first time at a 1960 show in Jean Damien's Grenoble bookshop. These thirteen drypoint etchings illustrate Cervantes's work with winter landscapes and onion-domed churches. "Reynek the dreamer ceaselessly depicted the Knight of the Sad Countenance from the depths of his Bohemia. He saw him as no one had ever done before more tender, more mystical, more ethereal, if that were possible. He dressed him like you and me. He wrapped purring cats around his legs and filled his hands with

[23] Bohuslav means "one who glorifies the Lord", which he sometimes transposed in French as "Timothée," a name found in the signatures of some of his drawings and linocuts.
[24] *L'enfant prodigue* ["The Prodigal Son"], 1950, *Pietà* (1955), *Saint Thomas* (1956), *Bénédiction d'Esaü* ["Esau's Blessing"], 1950, *Sueurs de sang* ["Sweats of Blood"], 1958s, *Cour en hiver* ["Courtyard in Winter"], 1955, *Première Neige* ["First Snow"], 1958, *Petrkov sous la neige* ["Petrkov in The Snow"], 1962.
[25] Jacques Félix-Faure, *Le Dauphiné Libéré,* March 1974. On that date, an exhibition organized by Élisabeth and Jacques Félix-Faure, "Hommage au poète, peintre et graveur tchèque" ("Tribute to the Czech Poet, Painter and Printmaker"), took place in the cellar of 8 Rue Millet in Grenoble.

doves…[26].” It is worth noting that Bohuslav’s ancestors included Spaniards who settled in Bohemia during the Seven Years’ War. He showed many signs of this heritage: a light complexion, a taste for spices and an attraction to Provence.

From 1964 until his death, all the exhibitions took place in Czechoslovakia except for one in Rome organized by Professor Gottfried Stix in 1967. In 1968, the year of the Prague Spring, his works were exhibited across the country. Czech television aired a film about him in 1969.

After Suzanne’s death, Bohuslav lived alone with his sons Daniel and Michel. They helped each other with all the household chores. Every day, Bohuslav kept an eye on the potatoes being cooked to feed about 30 piglets, which Michel was in charge of. Daniel helped his father print all the engravings[27].



Photo © Daniel Reynek
Private collection, France

He died in Petrkov on September 28, 1971. He is buried in Bohemia next to Suzanne.

In 1972, Prague honoured him with a major retrospective at the city hall. His last book of poems, *Le départ des hirondelles (The Swallows' Departure), came out the same year.*

The peace known
only to true ascetics...

He wrote these words near the end of his youth. Perhaps, far from the world and for a long time, he eventually found that deep peace.

Annick Auzimour

[26] *Don Quichotte*, preface by Jean Damien.
[27] Bohuslav himself printed his engravings on a press purchased in 1940.