

FROM PRAGUE TO GRENOBLE
WITH SUZANNE RENAUD AND BOHUSLAV REYNEK

Seven decades ago this year, Bohuslav Reynek came from his native Bohemia to marry Suzanne Renaud of Dauphiné in Grenoble. Ten years later, he brought her to live in his country.

Today the names of this creative couple do honor to the poetry and arts of their respective homelands. The Czech lands' very old francophonie, perpetuated since the Institut Français de Prague was founded in the 1920s, has long fostered encounters between two cultures and two mentalities. The recent exhibition *Dvoji domov/Deux terres* ("Two Lands"), which took for its theme the reflection of Bohemia and Dauphiné in the two artists' poetic and graphic work, was a success.¹

In Dauphiné, many events devoted to Renaud and Reynek in the past ten years or so have helped to locate their place in Dauphiné's cultural life. But only now has it been discovered how Prague viewed the French poet and the Czech artist during "those strange and terrible years", as Renaud called with her characteristic modesty and distinction the decades of isolation she had to suffer after permanently settling in Bohemia in 1936.

In the former Czechoslovakia, where people can again freely meet, travel, speak their minds and inform themselves, it did not take long for many of the foreign tourists flocking to Prague after the fall of the Iron Curtain to discover Renaud and Reynek's presence and aura. One of post-1989 Prague's first events was the celebration of the centenary of Reynek's birth with great fanfare in 1992: publication of an important monograph,² many republications and, especially, a beautiful retrospective of his work at the Stone Bell House in the heart of the Old Town. A remarkable catalogue—a painstaking work that required many years of effort in the shadow of Renata Bernardi—reveals the vast scale of his works on paper.

The jubilee acquired the meaning of a spiritual message during a moving ceremony in front of Reynek's birthplace, where a commemorative plaque was affixed. Before a large crowd, Father Vít Tajovský, once again the Father Superior of Želiv Monastery lengthily spoke about Reynek and his accomplished life. Prominent in the homily, the memory of Suzanne Renaud was an opportunity to mention another plaque, unveiled in Grenoble in 1989 at 9 rue Lesdiguières, recalling the poet's one-hundredth birth anniversary.

An obvious fact emerged from these fervent tributes: in the country where they worked, lived and died, Bohuslav Reynek and his French wife Suzanne Renaud have been admired and loved for a very long time.

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Around ten of Renaud's collections came out in Czechoslovakia between 1926 and 1993, whereas in France sixty years went by between the 1922 publication of her first anthology and the printing in

Grenoble of facsimiles of collections published in Bohemia,³ the start of publishing work in Dauphiné that led to the critical edition of Renaud's *Œuvres complètes* ("Complete Works"), the first volume of which has just come out.⁴

Reynek only belatedly achieved notoriety as an engraver in Bohemia, but almost all of his written work as a poet and translator was published there during his lifetime. His eleven collections of poems came out between 1912 and 1989. They were brought together in a *samizdat*, or underground edition, in 1980. Reynek's complete poetic work has just been fully restored by the masterful efforts of Milada Chlívová in the form of a critical edition published in Moravia three weeks ago. It is already out of print. Reynek published a considerable number of translations from 1915 to 1967: sixty titles, including forty or so works by French authors, in addition to his translations of Renaud's work.

Reynek had no exhibitions in Czechoslovakia before the early 1960s. There were many starting in 1964. In 1968 alone five took place nationwide. A major retrospective in Prague in 1972, a year after his death, was the last burst of cultural life before a new period of silence descended.

Between the wars and immediately after the Second World War, Reynek's works on paper, which the Galerie Saint-Louis began exhibiting in Dauphiné in 1928, were certainly better known in France than in his homeland.

Meanwhile, Czech studies and research on Renaud and Reynek came out during the Prague Spring and after the Velvet Revolution: two theses on Reynek, one in Prague in 1968 by Věra Jirousová, the other in Brno in 1990 by Renata Bernardi. The only known thesis on Renaud was written by Barbora Bukovinská and presented in Prague in 1994.

Renaud and Reynek's twin work, then, has always reached the Czech public, which is small but cultured and highly inquisitive.

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Reynek, the leading admirer of Renaud's work, set out to make it known in his country: he translated around two-thirds of it. Jan M. Tomeš, a highly cultured man with an excellent knowledge of French literature, succeeded him in 1980. Several titles of Renaud poetry came out in Czech.⁵ Despite their small print runs, these neatly presented brochures, almost always including works by Reynek, sufficed to anchor Renaud's poetry in Czech literature.

Renaud's contemporary, poet Jan Zahradníček, who translated Rilke and Hölderlin, was especially fond of her early poems. "The sources are drawn from the purest French poetry, from Baudelaire to Francis Jammes". In France, that enthusiasm was shared by Bernanos, who made other connoisseurs say years after the French poet's death and one year before Reynek's: "Suzanne Renaud's poetry must be read in its original version to understand what enchanted the great poet Zahradníček and Bernanos."

Reynek “made the reader feel the genius” of Renaud (Aragon’s definition of a good translation), but his translations inevitably bear the hallmarks of the poet-translator’s personality. “It has (quite rightly) been said of these translations,” Tomeš wrote in his preface to Renaud’s collection *Vers l’automne* (“Towards Autumn”, 1992), “that Reynek took up the main themes of Renaud’s poetry, which were essentially familiar to him, in his own work. That is how he stamped the poet’s verses with his own vision and language more than once.”

Nevertheless, Reynek’s translations deeply influenced Czech poetry. Zdeňka Stavínková, professor of Romance philology in Brno, emphasized their remarkably rich expression. He could “capture all the differences in tone corresponding to the original and had the art of using archaic and even regional expressions (such as the Breton people’s salty vocabulary in his translation of Corbière),” she wrote. “When there is no Czech equivalent, he finds other ways. Usually, he uses uncommon words. He finds excellent equivalents for poetic images.”

Reynek’s language nevertheless drew criticism. Poet Vítězslav Nezval, leader in the 1920s of *poetism* and the Czech Surrealist Group, made fun of *reynkovština* (Reynekeese). Reynek was unfazed. “Dazzled since youth by the gifts of the mind,” said his son Michel, “he never knew what vanity and touchiness were, and it was easy for him to turn his back on them by focusing only on his personal treasures.”

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Reynek introduced not only his wife’s work, but also that of many French writers to his country.⁶ Those he chose to translate leave little doubt about his direction and spiritual values. The *litany* character of Péguy’s poetry and Claudel’s *Biblical verse* drew him to translation at a very young age. The number of translations he published may be surprising. Translating breathed new life into the poet’s craft. Reynek was often the first translator of French works into Czech: he introduced Péguy and Jammes to Bohemia in 1914. The original editions of these translations were presented this year at the *Lune d’hiver*⁷ (“Winter Moon”) exhibition in Grenoble and Prague.

As an ambassador of French literature, Reynek had a deep influence on his country’s culture. The generation that was twenty years old during the Prague Spring remembers with emotion. “In 1966,” says Petr Herel, “the cultural situation in our country improved. We young people tried to find out as much as possible about prewar cultural life. The names Florian, Vokolek, Váchal and Reynek had become mythical. I often heard extraordinary details about daily life in Petrkov. So I decided to go there (...). When, following Bohuslav Reynek on the old wooden staircase in Petrkov, I walked into the room with high windows, there were books everywhere. Even then, I didn’t yet know that they included works by Bloy, Péguy, Valéry, Milosz and dozens more, all translated into Czech for the first time by Bohuslav Reynek”.

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Reynek also left his mark on the consciousness of poets of his century, including František Halas and Vladimír Holan, two of the greatest 20th-century Czech poets.

Confronted with an inner debate between Communism and Christianity, poet František Halas (1901-1949) was influenced by Czech poets with a spiritual orientation. In 1931, he said: “I have several Catholic friends and we get along very well. That does not diminish my commitment to Communism in the least. (...) One thing connects us: the language of beauty”.

The interwar period was one of the few times when, in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, Christian and Communist poets had esteem and understanding for each other. The faithful friendship between Halas and Reynek is the best-known example of this mutual respect.

Conversely, works by the Czech poets Halas and Holan had an influence on Renaud and Reynek.

Renaud magnificently translated a long poem by Halas, *Vieilles femmes* (“Old Women”, 1935), which is still famous. She learned Czech and, a friend of hers said, “could read not only books by our authors, but also translations of French writers when she could no longer order books from France.”

Renaud’s most important and accomplished translation is *Romarin ou Annette et Jean* (“Rosemary or Annette and Jean”), a collection of around sixty folksongs from Bohemia and Moravia, published in Grenoble only in 1992. A few learned people in Prague were aware of these translations, enchanted to find, admirably expressed in Renaud’s mother tongue, this treasure of the Czech language, this atmosphere of epic and legend, that the poets Halas and Holan had already gathered together in their anthology of folk poetry *L’Amour et la Mort* (“Love and Death”).

There was a deep poetic affinity between Reynek and the great poet Vladimír Holan (1905-1980). In the early 1960s, as soon as he read some poems by the Prague poet, then living quietly on Kampa Island, Reynek set about translating them into French. They were simple outlines but bore the stamp of a common sensibility between the two friends, united in silence by distance.

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In Prague, Renaud and Reynek’s cultural and spiritual heritage, a legacy enhanced by their strong, endearing personalities, is considered with respect and fondness.

In a country that underwent two massive waves of emigration in 1948 and 1968, Renaud, “a cultured poet without female sentimentality, having the courage of a great poet”, was in a seemingly aberrant situation. She left France, where she was happy, to live in a foreign country where she died without ever laying eyes on her homeland again. Never having really found a second homeland in her husband’s country, Renaud was, as Mojmir Trávníček put it, “the discrete guest of a harsh land”.

The presence of Renaud—Renaudová in Czech—and her work, “read through the glasses of her tender translator”, have become so familiar to the Czech public in the land where she lies buried next to her husband that some call her a “French-speaking Czech poet”. But she never wrote in Czech and

only occasionally adopted the nationality of her husband's country, probably through willful neglect for fear of being noticed by the authorities. For her Czech friends, she remained above all, as Jan V. Pojer said, "a French poet living among us". Her collection *Victimae laudes* is not just an act of resistance and a cry of revolt, but also very clearly a ballad about the Czech lands. Her poetry—as well as the poems Claudel wrote during his stay in Bohemia—sings of Prague, "city of a hundred steeples", Kutná Hora and many other Czech motifs in the "linen-colored country" where she lived.

*Where the sad apple trees slip away bowing,
Slip away dragging the hood and the eternal burden
Of misery and wind, of loneliness and age.*

"Suzanne Renaud's poetry is the journal of her soul," writes Zdeňka Stavinohová. This work, which long remained "an underground stream that from time to time appears in the light of day, in the setting of Reynek's poetic and graphic work, has proved so vital in Czech literature that it can now live on its own merits."⁸

It should come as no surprise, then, that the first volume of Renaud's complete works met with a warm welcome in Prague. It revealed all the original poems translated by Reynek. Around fifteen articles hailed the book's publication. The fact that a French publisher produced a bilingual edition was highly appreciated. Produced by the French Institute in Prague in collaboration with the Grenoble-based association Romarin, the *Dvoji domov/Deux terres* exhibition accompanying the publication drew between one hundred and one hundred and fifty visitors a day for six weeks. The seven hundred copies of the book still in stock in the Czech Republic were sold out in one month. That was enough to make the best French poet dream in a "Paris, blasé, egocentric and saturated with culture," as Milan Kundera said in 1990

Renaud's memory is also kept alive in Havlíčkův Brod, near the border between Bohemia and Moravia, in the bookshop-tearoom owned by Veronika Reynková, the Reyneks' granddaughter, who named the shop "Suzanne Renaud" in memory of her French grandmother.

For today's Czechs, Renaud is an emblematic companion who shared their country's fate and spoke to the Czech people in her verse: a "tutelary witness," says writer Václav Jamek.

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Perhaps the evolution of Renaud and Reynek's work from precariousness to eternity had already begun during the Prague Spring. In 1969, photographer Jaroslav Krejčí and Czech television went to Petrkov. Renaud had been resting in the small cemetery in Svatý Kříž for five years. Reynek remained alone with his sons Michel and Daniel. Stalked by questions he had never asked himself, Reynek was looking for corners of shadow and silence

"Mr. Reynek, time has allowed your work to be forgotten.

– *Time’s got nothing to do with it. It was circumstances. I didn’t bring my works to the general public’s attention.*

– We came here today to ask you two questions: ‘What is your trajectory—your life as an artist?’ and ‘How does a poet actually live?’

– *Like anybody else...*”

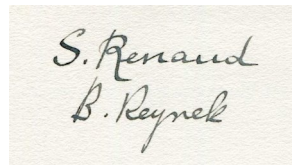
The Petrkov poets shared their values of existence and looked at everyday life in the same way: both recognized the Lord’s fingerprints. Those who approached the Reyneks felt “what was most beautiful about them: sincerity, the inability to lie and above all respect and consideration for others, for all that is alive,” says Aja Škochová, who was in Petrkov during Reynek’s last moments.

Close friends also shared those values.

After visiting Reynek in 1949, Jiří Šerých became a specialist on his graphic work. “The depth of Reynek’s legacy also appeals to the youngest generation (...) able to discover and read in his work basic values that far surpass fleeting problems. (...) Reynek was not so sterile as to deprive himself of the influences of today’s world if they were in tune with his light,” Šerých said before offering us this image: “Petrkov is not a stage but a spring.”

And this is how I think the legacy of Bohuslav Reynek and his wife Suzanne Renaud speaks to us.

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Académie delphinale, February 24, 1996
(In: *Bulletin de l’Académie delphinale*, May-June 1996, no. 4)



¹ Institut Français de Prague, November 16 to December 31, 1995.

² *Bohuslav Reynek*, by Dagmar Halasová, publisher Petrov, Brno 1992.

³ Renaud Suzanne: *Ailes de cendre et autres poèmes*, éd. Les Cahiers de l’Alpe, Grenoble 1986.

⁴ Renaud Suzanne: *Œuvres-Dilo. L’œuvre poétique traduite par Bohuslav Reynek*, published by the Association “Romarin-Les Amis de Suzanne Renaud et Bohuslav Reynek”, Grenoble 1995.

⁵ *Ta vie est là...* (1926), *Ailes de cendre* (1932), *Victimae laudes* (1939), *La porte grise* (1947), *L’aurore invisible* (1982), *Vers l’Automne* (1992).

⁶ La Fontaine, Victor Hugo, Péguy, Milosz, Paul Valéry, Claudel, Tristan Corbière, Max Jacob, Giono, Bernanos and others.

⁷ Bibliothèque Municipale d’Étude et d’Information de Grenoble, December 13, 1995 to January 20, 1996.

⁸ According to Přemysl Rut.