

***Bohuslav Reynek's graphic work in France***  
***Suzanne Renaud, a "Czech poet in the French language"***

Have you noticed the commemorative plaque at the entrance to the building at 9 rue Lesdiguières in Grenoble? It says that Suzanne Renaud, a poet, lived in the building from 1904 to 1936. The name doesn't mean much to today's passer-by, does it?

And yet... It was there that, a hundred years ago, on an October day in 1923, a woman and a man, both poets, met over a book of poetry. The woman was Suzanne Renaud of Grenoble. The man was Bohuslav Reynek of Czechoslovakia. The book, *Ta Vie est là... (Your Life Is There...)*, was the first published collection of Suzanne's poems. The young man wanted to translate it, so he travelled all the way from his native village, Petrkov, in Eastern Bohemia, a thousand kilometres away. First he went to La Salette before stopping off at rue Lesdiguières. What began as a literary friendship blossomed into romance. Three years later, the poets got married in Grenoble and the Czech translation of *Ta vie est là...* came out.

A bridge between two languages, two countries and two cultures was built.

Suzanne died in 1964, Bohuslav in 1971. The story of these two destinies is intertwined with the apocalypse of the last century and the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia. Their lives as artists were also sacrificed. But they left behind an admirable legacy of art and poetry and, decades later, have come to symbolize the cultural exchanges and friendship between their homelands. The Czech government understood this very well. Recently, on May 27, 2021, it acquired the Reyneks' home, a testament to their story and lives as creators. Under the aegis of the National Museum of Czech Literature, it is now a vibrant Czech-French cultural centre hosting events and shows under the directorship of Lucie Tučková.

How did Petrkov come to be enshrined and its soul perpetuated? And how was this arch of living memory between Grenoble and Petrkov kept alive during the painful history of Czechoslovakia from 1939, the year the war started, to 1989, the Velvet Revolution?

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In 1923, nothing suggested that Suzanne and Bohuslav would share a common destiny, so different were the worlds from which they came.

Suzanne, 34, was living a pampered life with her cultured mother in the heart of Grenoble's high society. A rarity for a young woman at the time, she had a bachelor's degree in literature from the University of Grenoble and taught foreign students. As for Bohuslav, he hated his eight years of secondary school and gave up the agricultural engineering studies his father wanted him to follow. A shy loner who shunned the city, considering it a prison, he was happy only in his native Petrkov, a village with a harsh climate nestling in the forest of the Czech-Moravian High Plateau. He wrote poetry, translated French and German literature and worked for the Moravian publisher Josef Florian in Stará Říše.

The gulf between these two people and their respective environments could not have been wider, as it already was when they were 20. Ten years earlier, in 1913, Suzanne sang at a social event in Grenoble's Saint-Louis church before an audience "devoted to the arts, literature and poetry", according to the local newspaper. Meanwhile, Bohuslav, was recovering from his painful studies in a little hotel in Concarneau where, fifty years later, he wrote to me, "In the evenings, I read poems with rats coming out of the walls and floor."

How can the meeting between these two people be understood, and why was the poet and translator Reynek so drawn to France? Why did he go to La Salette, a place lost in the Dauphiné mountains whose austerity is fertile ground for dark prophecies?

In fact, La Salette has a key place in Czech literature. It inspired Czech Catholic poets such as Jan Zahradníček and Jan Čep. Czechoslovak pilgrimages went there, such as the one in 1932 led by Otto-Albert Tichý, Léon Bloy's son-in-law. French writers and their Czech translators met each other in La Salette: Léon Bloy and Josef Florian in 1906, Bernanos and Reynek when the latter translated the novel *Sous le soleil de Satan* (*Under the Sun of Satan*) (1928). Through his friendship with this great French author and many others, Suzanne's Czech translator became a "missionary of French literature in his country" (Yves Farge, 1935).

Beyond this impulse towards the shrine and its myth, and Bohuslav's attraction to French literature, the Renaud-Reynek partnership was rooted in the intense Franco-Czech cultural exchanges that took place during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly between 1927 and 1935. Philippe Soupault visited Prague (1927), Apollinaire wrote *Le Passant de Prague* (*The Passerby of Prague*) and *Zone*, Nezval translated Rimbaud and founded the Czech Surrealist Group (1934), André Breton gave three lectures in Prague and met Toyen, and the list goes on.

Reading, translating, travelling, the young intellectual Bohuslav Reynek was in step with the times and became the "Czech of Grenoble", a Dauphiné journalist later wrote. (G. Morel, *Le Dauphiné libéré*, 1991).

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That is an overstatement. Let's say that Grenoble was his temporary home. Above all, it was during his ten-year stay in Grenoble that the young artist first gained a following.

In the 1920s, Grenoble, which had become a winter resort, broke out of its fortifications and quickly grew. The Perret Tower was built and the International Skiing Exhibition took place (1925). The city's museum of contemporary art, directed by Andry-Farcy (1882-1950), was renowned. There Reynek discovered works by Chagall, Matisse, Carrand and Jongkind and rubbed shoulders with young Dauphiné artists Louis Gervat, Édith Berger, Sahut and G. Ducultit. Taking the streetcar to get away from the grey city, he drew landscapes and Romanesque churches around Grenoble as well as in Haute-Provence when he met Giono in Manosque. He created hundreds of charcoals and pastels in France during the decade 1926-1936. And in 1927, Grenoble is where Reynek exhibited for the first time in his life, among Dauphiné painters, at Joseph Laforge's, who founded the Saint-Louis gallery at 5 rue Félix Poulat in 1924. Laforge offered him solo shows every year between the wars. (1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1934, 1936). During this period, Reynek's admired and renowned graphic work became rooted in our region's heritage.

This was the happiest time of Suzanne's life. Her poems, such as the long-form *Ailes de cendre* (*Wings of Ash*), were immediately translated by her husband and published in Bohemia. Lucie Tučková will tell you about Suzanne and Bohuslav's Czech publisher friends Vokolek, Pojer and Rezníček, whose names can be found in the book coming out today because their children are in turn our translators. She will talk about the abundance and diversity of French literature that reached Reynek's Czech contemporaries: Victor Hugo, Lafontaine, Péguy, Claudel, Valéry, Bernanos, Giono, Max Jacob, Verlaine and many others. Some of these rare books are on display in the exhibition showcases. The work of one was first recognized in the country of the other.

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During this period, the Reyneks and their two little boys divided their time between Grenoble and Petrkov, depending on the season. A family event, the death of Bohuslav's father, led them to move to Petrkov in 1936. The war broke out three years later. In Petrkov, the family lived in a handsome manor house, a former fort that became a stately home over the centuries. Despite its turret, stables, vaulted entrance, drawing room and park, Reynek never wanted to call it a castle. The park was the

poets' garden, with its old trees, periwinkle beds in summer and deer and pheasants in winter glimpsed through the curlicues of frost on the windows.

No sooner had Suzanne settled down in her husband's homeland when her native country signed the Munich Agreement. She was overcome with shame. She wrote the collection *Victimae laudes (Praised Be the Victim)*, which was immediately published in French in Czechoslovakia (1939). In beautiful verses she expressed her disgust at France's betrayal, but she also, Czech writer Václav Jamek wrote, "harnessed all her poetic powers to embody a good, gentle and loyal France inside a wounded and sacrificed Bohemia. [...] She is one of those French men and women who worked to save France in Czech hearts and minds: an emblematic, holy figure – a tutelary witness". (V. Jamek, preface, in S. Renaud, *Œuvres-Dilo*, Romarin, 1995)

Isn't Suzanne Renaud's exile paradoxical? Here is a woman who, unlike so many Czechoslovakian émigrés who fled whatever oppressive regime was in power, left comfort and freedom to share the torments of her husband's country: uniformity, poverty and fear. This is something she kept quiet or only expressed in muted tones in letters to her friends in France. It was in the letters to her Czech friends published today that, stranded by the storms of history, she confided her sadness and daily miseries (S. Renaud: *Lettres à ses amis tchèques (Letters to Czech Friends) – Dopisy českým přátelům (1934-1963)*, Romarin 2023).

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War, post-war, Nazism, Communism, Stalinism... What happened to the intense Franco-Czech exchanges between poets, artists, translators, illustrators and publishers between the wars? How did the Reyneks, who embody the otherness and harmony of two cultures, survive brutal events?

Le Clézio recently wrote (*Le 1 des libraires*, May 25, 2022), "in a country dispossessed of its literature and history, language is the consolation of exiles, a refuge". In Petrkov Suzanne wrote long letters to her friends in France, received books and records from them, spoke French to her children, borrowed books from the Institut français in Prague and taught French to her friend Eva Florianová. That is how, quietly, on an invisible bridge, French culture came to Petrkov. And the Reyneks' home became a haven for the younger generation of Czech poets and artists, who spontaneously came to Petrkov in search of a breath of fresh air through music, literature, newspapers and the words of their hosts, for an inviolable space of freedom surrounded the two poets.

*In 1966," wrote the young printmaker Petr Herel in 1985, "the cultural situation in our country was looking up. We young people tried to rediscover as much of pre-war cultural life as possible. The names Florian, Vokolek, Váchal and Reynek had become legendary. I'd often heard extraordinary details about everyday life in Petrkov, so I decided to go there [...]. I was 25 [...]. When you followed Bohuslav Reynek up the old staircase and entered the room with the tall windows, there were hundreds of books everywhere. I didn't know then that among them were works by Bloy, Péguy, Valéry, Billinger and Milosz translated by Reynek for the first time into Czech.*

Like his fellow poets and painters (Halas, Deml, Holan, Kolar, Divis) buried under the regime's leaden cloak, Reynek withdrew into privacy, into a kind of inner exile glimmering with hope and creative energy. He was Job on his pile of manure. The prints slumbered in a large cardboard box. Visitors came to see works about simple things and to spend time with a man who had preserved the value of silence.

Václav Jamek gave a particularly good account of what was happening in the country at the time. In his opening speech for *Les Belles Étrangères* at the Bastille Opera House in 1999, he talked about how the brutal interruptions of the war and the Communist regime stopped the development of Czech literature in its tracks. It was an emotional and intellectual disaster. Forty years of "non-existent literature", as he put it. But he emphasized that the creative power of these writers continued to exist

in the shadows. It could burst out instantly, forcefully and abundantly at any moment. And it did during the Prague Spring. Reynek and his admirers rose to the challenge. Youth, for whom Petrkov was an oasis in the intellectual desert, accompanied him. Art historian Jiří Šerých began an inventory of Reynek's graphic work, which he had been interested in since 1949. The writers of "non-existent literature" wrote for the "drawer". Some went into exile, others became dissidents. Their work was born long before being published and translated today. It was born solely of an inner need.

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In Grenoble, on the other side of the "invisible footbridge", the forces of loyalty and the legendary Dauphiné tenacity were at work. After years of silence, correspondence between the Reyneks and families in Grenoble resumed (1947):

*I wish you could have heard [...] my grandmother [...], her voice trembling with age and emotion, read the letter Suzanne Renaud [...] sent her from Petrkov just before Christmas. [...] Suzanne thanked her for the delicious chocolates she had sent [...] for Christmas and wrote of [...] her exile in Petrkov, the grey and white icy landscapes [...] their children raising pigs [...]. The letter, read out loud in the living room, took us to the dark world of Czechoslovakia on the other side of the Iron Curtain. (Olivier Félix-Faure, 2021)*

These families supported the Reyneks with their staunch friendship, sending them items that were hard to find: paper for Bohuslav's prints, books and records, "manna in the desert, a lamp in the cave", wrote Suzanne, who enclosed a handwritten poem or an engraving by her husband. That is how Reynek and Renaud's work spread in Dauphiné, where it thrived in the full light of day. Reynek was exhibited again at Laforge's (1950, 1952) and enthusiastic collectors bought his works. His drypoints and etchings were increasingly accomplished. In 1960, a show in Grenoble, the last in France during his lifetime, introduced the *Don Quichotte (Don Quixote) Series*, a major work.

Eight years later, Dubček became head of Czechoslovakia during the short-lived Prague Spring. By the mid-sixties, Reynek was increasingly recognized. His poems were officially censored but circulated. His prints were sold in secret. Young people spontaneously organized shows in Brno and Prague. French people visited, despite harassment by the police and customs officials I went in 1963. In 1967, Gottfried Stix, an Austrian professor living in Rome, managed to organize an exhibition with help from friends in Dauphiné. In 1968 and 1969, an exhibition of nearly 200 Reynek works travelled around Czechoslovakia before Stalinism reared its ugly head again and his art was banned for twenty years. But Reynek was no longer unknown. He died in 1971, eighteen years before the Velvet Revolution.

Suzanne came close to losing her identity. She was sometimes called a "Czech poet in the French language". Her poetry was known because Reynek translated two-thirds of it. She was French but published in Bohemia. The "Lady from Petrkov", as she was known, learned Czech and translated Bohemian and Moravian folk songs, as well as poems by Halas, into her native language. But she did not write in Czech. After her death, her poems struck a chord with a new translator, Jan M. Tomeš (S. Renaud: *L'Aurore invisible (The Invisible Dawn)*, 1982). As a result, almost all of her poetry became part of Czech literature. But in the 1980s, it remained unpublished in her native country.

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In 1983, a decisive event occurred in Grenoble. Having reached the age when people start putting their affairs in order, Pierre Dalloz, one of the Reyneks' old friends from Dauphiné, found *Victimae laudes* in his family archives. It deeply affected him, for in Suzanne's indignant tone he found echoes of the most important time of his life: Dalloz was head of the Resistance in the Vercors. He decided to rehabilitate Suzanne's poetic work, unpublished in France, collected the handwritten poems and talked about her life and work in a memorable address to the Académie Delphinale. This was the founding

act of everything that followed here: exhibitions, publications, conferences, lectures, theses, etc. In 1985, the Maison Stendhal held the first really documented exhibition on the Reyneks, marking the start of publishing and academic work in both countries.

Franco-Czech cultural relations were finally restored during the Velvet Revolution in 1989. A 1992 retrospective in Prague rehabilitated Reynek's graphic work, accompanied by the publication of an inventory compiled by Renata Bernardi based on that of Jiří Šerých. Then came the first thesis, by art historian Věra Jirousová, and the first monograph, by philologist Dagmar Halasová. Two reference works nearly a thousand pages long were also published: *L'Œuvre poétique complet de B. Reynek* (*The Complete Poems of B. Reynek*) (by Milada Chlěbčová, 2009) and *La Correspondance de B. Reynek* (*The Letters of B. Reynek*) (by Jiří Šerých, 2012). In 2012, a bold Prague gallerist organized a Reynek exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing, accompanied by the publication of a beautiful monograph in Chinese.

A moving event took place in the shadow of these institutional events. A young woman, Veronika Reynková, Suzanne and Bohuslav's granddaughter, walked onto the stage. She thought of the grandmother she never knew, who lies in the cemetery at Svatý Kříž, near Petrkov, far from the homeland she never forgot. Veronika opened a bookshop and tearoom called "Suzanne Renaud" in the neighbouring town of Havlíčkův Brod: "Literární čajovna Suzanne Renaudové".

In France, testimonies and studies poured in. In 1991, a Czech student, Barbora Bukovinská, came to Grenoble to write the first known thesis on Suzanne, based on documents collected by Dalloz. At the initiative of Bohemian Studies professor Xavier Galmiche, the Grenoble Municipal Library organized an exhibition of samizdats (works published clandestinely by hand transcription on a typewriter on four or five sheets of thin paper separated by carbon paper) entitled *L'édition souterraine en Tchécoslovaquie (1948-1989)* (*Underground Publishing in the Czech Republic (1948-1989)*), which revealed the power of cultural resilience in the former Czechoslovakia, as evoked by Václav Jarek. In 1993, exactly 30 years ago, the two poets' friends from the Dauphiné region – those who whispered on the invisible footbridge – founded "Romarin-Les Amis de Suzanne Renaud et Bohuslav Reynek", a small bilingual publishing house focusing exclusively on their work. Its first major achievement was the critical edition of Suzanne's complete *Œuvre poétique* in two volumes (1995 and 1999) based on Bukovinská's thesis and the manuscripts compiled by Dalloz. After being translated into Czech, Suzanne's original work finally found its rightful place in French literature. Unfortunately, no French thesis or biography about her has been written yet. Lucie Tučková wrote one in Czech in 2014. Another major achievement by Romarin, in the field of research, is the digital edition of the illustrated *Catalogue raisonné of Bohuslav Reynek's graphic work, paintings, drawings and prints* underway since 1985. The catalogue, a comprehensive directory, the only one of its kind to date, is organized in chronological order and contains almost 3,500 entries. Continuously updated, it can be consulted on the Romarin website created in 2001. Almost all the works studied have a visual and a detailed description in French, Czech and English for the essential sections.

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These rediscovered links have brought to light a literary and artistic heritage present in both countries, a shared treasure. While Reynek's graphic work is in almost twenty museums and private collections in his native land, in France it is mainly in private hands, passed down from generation to generation. The only French public institution with substantial Renaud-Reynek holdings, the Grenoble Municipal Library, has almost a hundred drawings and prints by Bohuslav and all of Suzanne's handwritten poems. They are donations. The Renaud-Reynek Endowment Fund, which supplements Romarin's activities, was set up ten years ago. Comprising original works and books by the two artists, this collection is inalienable.

As the history of the Renaud-Reynek century concludes, the words of the Dauphiné journalist Yves Farge in 1935 come to mind: “Will we ever know what intellectual exchanges between France and Czechoslovakia owe to Bohuslav Reynek and Suzanne Renaud?” (*La Dépêche dauphinoise*, May 31, 1935). And this brings us back to the original question: how has an arch of friendship and cultural conviviality between two countries, born a century ago from the union of two poets and a phalanx of fervent Czech and French friends around them, remained a living memory today? Well, there was resilience, courage, trust and, finally, gratitude, wasn’t there?

Annick Auzimour  
Meylan, May 31, 2023

