

SIXTY YEARS AGO TODAY...

Dear friends,

I am delighted to make new friends in Petrkov and to see old ones again. Barbora Bukovinská, who collaborated with me on Suzanne Renaud's work, will translate my remarks.

As you know, September 28 is the anniversary of Bohuslav Reynek's death. On a more personal note, September 28, 1963, exactly 60 years ago, was the day I left this house after staying with the Reyneks for a month. It was two days before Suzanne's 75th birthday. I never saw her again. She died a few months later.

Lucie Tučková and I thought of paying tribute to Suzanne, who was born in Dauphiné, by listening to her poetry in her native language and in her house. MaO Tourmen, who for many years has been devoted to making the poet's work better known, is with us here today. Through poems, she will trace Suzanne's life, whose marriage in 1926 to Czech printmaker Bohuslav Reynek was the prelude to a long, hard exile in Czechoslovakia.

I shared that life with Suzanne, Bohuslav and their two sons Daniel and Michel during the month of September 1963. Suzanne would stay up late, contemplating a poem or letting her memories wash over her, the kitchen window lit until the middle of the night. Some days, her homesickness was almost too much to bear. I would sit with her for many hours in that kitchen, the centre of home life, which revolved around the large tiled stove. Suzanne would talk to me about what Grenoble was like between the wars, her distant friends, what she was reading and her favourite writers. She really shared her knowledge with me. As a science student, I had little contact with literature and the arts.

Bohuslav would get up while it was still dark outside—the poets' waking and bedtime hours were as different as night and day! He would wake me up at around five o'clock. Awaiting me in the kitchen would be a good coffee with milk in an old Bohemian cup next to a Gospel passage to read while, sitting by the fire, he would engrave his plate on his lap. The rich life of the mind filled me up through him as well.

The rest of the day would unfold with indispensable rituals: bringing wood upstairs for the fire, peeling vegetables for the soup, going to Maruška, the kind grocer, to fetch the meal prepared by the kolkhoz. At the end of the day, Bohuslav would keep an eye on the potatoes cooking for the 50 pigs in the stable, a moment that brought us together in silent complicity. Coming back to warm up after swimming in the nearby pond, I would find him sitting there in front of the big steamer. There were also walks in the forest or to the Lípa mill at the Melouns. The days seemed to skip lightly by in the beautiful autumn.

We never talked about the political context. The carefree attitude of my youth (I was 20) blinded me to the magnitude of the moral and material difficulties in Petrkov at the time, although I was well aware that Daniel, the eldest son, stood in line outside the butcher's shop for part of the night to buy something nice for Sunday lunch. And I found that visitors had to bite their tongues during conversations. I did not ask any questions.

Doing research on the two artists' work twenty years later, I gradually grew aware of how exceptional and tragic their destinies were. The book we have just published, *Lettres à ses amis tchèques* ("Letters to Her Czech Friends"), provides a glimpse into Suzanne's particularly harsh life. France's betrayal at the Munich Conference left her

feeling shattered and ashamed. Then came the war, Nazi occupation and Communist oppression, a chain of disasters that left Suzanne with no hope of ever seeing France again. Nevertheless, she felt a deep affection for her sacrificed adopted country and wrote beautiful poems about it.

Suzanne's letters attest to her friendship with the Czech people and fondness for the families whose plight she shared: the family of Dr. Pojer, father of Dagmar Halasová, the main translator of this book; and of publisher Zdeněk Řezníček, whose son, Petr, is also a translator of the book. Lastly, Suzanne's many letters to Eva Florianová, the daughter of publisher Josef Florian, reveal the affection that deeply bonded the two women together until Suzanne's last Christmas in December 1963.

Reading and editing Suzanne's letters gave me insights into the grinding hardships of daily life in Petrkov and the suffering of those who lived there. She could hardly reveal her living conditions to friends in France due to censorship. On the other hand, domestic mail was less closely monitored. Suzanne could confide in her Czech friends, share the hardships of her unfortunate adopted country with them and discuss solutions to many domestic problems. Picture what Petrkov was like in those times:

I feel quite sad and downcast. We have become machines, paying beyond our resources in a painful atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. My homesickness for France grows by the day, but one must bravely follow one's path to the end. (To Eva Florianová, December 21, 1948)

It is increasingly difficult to put food on the table, especially when there are working men at home [...] This year it will be very hard to grow vegetables [...] except for some lettuce. (To Eva Florianová, June 21, 1962) *We hope we'll be able to raise a pig.* (To Eva Florianová, December 21, 1955)

We are doomed, perhaps for a long time, to a grey and grim life; we must create an inner paradise for ourselves. (To Eva Florianová, December 21, 1955)

That is how it was. For a long time, I tried to understand how this remarkable family managed to bear up under the circumstances. Today, Suzanne's poetry speaks to us, accompanies us through life, mine and yours. You are about to hear it.

Annick Auzimour
Petrkov, September 28, 2023