

CARPATHIAN GAMES





Miloslav Nevrlý

CARPATHIAN GAMES

Translated by Benjamin Lovett

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FOREWORD

This book was not originally written for you. Nevertheless, it may well transform your perspective on hiking and the Carpathians. At least this is what it has done for many.

The *Carpathian Games* was intended for a circle of nature-loving fellows in the early 1980s in Czechoslovakia. It was published unofficially since its “truths were not for everyone’s ears.” However, words of the text were so touching that people would copy them on typewriters and circulate it amongst friends.

Some read the *Carpathian Games* as an account of the desire for freedom during communist times. The author of this book, Miloslav Nevrlý, led a scout group disguised as a tourist sports club, because scouting was banned after communist armies invaded the country. In the mid-1970s, Míla (short for Miloslav in Czech) started taking the group to the Romanian Carpathians, mountains where tourists, rules, maps and surveillance were scarce. They hyperbolically named their fellowship the Society for Exploration of the

Romanian Mountains. Those few summer weeks provided the much-needed remedy of freedom. The far-away mountains became an exercise field for woodcraft and scouting virtues.

Others read the *Carpathian Games* as a transformative text. Míla uplifts hiking from a pastime activity into a source of wisdom. Referring back to generations of pilgrims, he finds a connection with the universe while on voyage – at the mercy of the elements and good will of strangers. He describes the deep joy of a mystic born from what the rest of the world would consider misery. To invite everyone into this fellowship, Míla intimately addresses the reader as a little brother, which has nothing to do with gender.

For some, this is the ideal hiking guide to the Romanian mountain ranges. It does not list transport options, trails and shelters – quite the opposite. The text brews intimate personal experience with a brief sketch of each range. Thus, the half a century old descriptions remain atemporal, despite the fact that the Romanian mountains are changing with the fast development of the country. The author, a professional naturalist, roughs out the places and leaves it upon the hikers to find their way.

After reading several games and mountain depictions, you shall understand why the translation into English was a must. Many of us had difficulties describing to fellow hikers the essence of the book that brought thousands of Czech and Slovak pilgrims to the Romanian mountains. Meeting there, they quote from the *Carpathian Games* by heart and read the book while sitting around campfires. Accept the invitation, the fire is about to start burning.

Michal Medek, Editor

CARPATHIAN GAMES



A BROTHERLY WORD IN OPENING

The Indian may not know much, but what
he does we would do well to heed.

*JOE HAMANN in his book
On the Trail of the Wild West*

THOUGH IT MAY SEEM I start far afield, little brother, persevere. It is a virtue. Once upon a time, before mighty Indian chief Good Fortune (whose name Spanish missionaries translated centuries ago as Bona Ventura) began speaking to his little brothers – dark-headed Indian boys who would soon be men – he said to them: “Listen and let your hearts be filled with zeal!” Then he was silent. Placing one hand on the head of the nearest boy, he drew a circle with the other in the darkness. A great, enormous circle.

The fire crackled, and the boys sat as still as river minnows. In the darkness surrounding the fire, in the unending circle that stretched out in every direction, they could sense the world. Knowing nothing of it made them yearn for it all the more.

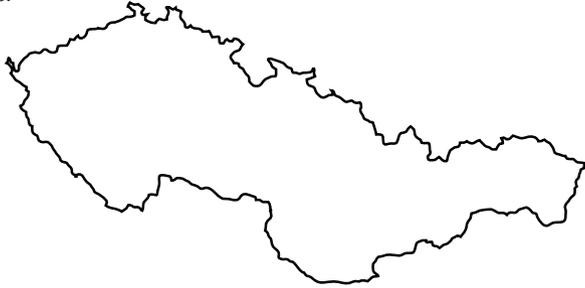
And Good Fortune began. He spoke of grasslands and wild horses that thundered freely across them. And though it was a still night, the boys could hear their distant whinnies. He spoke of lakes and shadows cast by mountain peaks. And though it was a windless night, the breeze that rushed over the crystal waters smelled to the boys of salmon. He spoke of deserts where the sky was a dusty haze. And though it was a chilly night, the boys could feel the white-hot desert sun and taste sand and thirst and freedom in their mouths. He spoke of dark fissures in gleaming chasms so deep there was no telling what lay below. And though it was a dark night, the boys glimpsed a bright-winged eagle soaring high above the cliffs in the sunlight. He spoke of endless lake-filled forests so vast it was beyond their comprehension. And though they sat around the fire, they could feel the silky coats of lynx, and the harsh twigs of bushes, and their feet caught firmly in cold marshes. Such was the power of Good Fortune's words.

They listened and were filled with zeal. At that moment, the whole world belonged to them, and they yearned for it. But he spoke of more than the world and its lands. He spoke of the games of solitary hunters and pilgrims. The beauty of frosty mornings, the glory of summer's dog days. The virtues of both full bellies and hunger. Of things that contradict and yet together are beautiful. Birth and death, each as fitting as the other. Of how in Indian lands, all things are good, and even bad things help those who love good to serve good. But here the missionaries transcribing Good Fortune's words went a bit far; the Indian boys were still too young and eager. Little dark heads! They understood horses and grass, fish and lakes, eagles and treasure, even sand and dust clouds. And after all, why not? All things have their time. When dancing days have passed, other days come.

Good Fortune lives no more. Neither do those he spoke to of the world and its games. But new little heads have since been born. Blond, brown, black. And let us hope that the joy of simple things and clean lands has not faded, and the pilgrim still delights at what he encounters there. When I was as young as those Indian boys, silent as a river minnow, I, too, yearned

for distant lands, strange animals, unfamiliar people, anything and everything. Books and travelogues, hundreds of them, they were my Chief Bona Ventura. They told of northern tundras and southern deserts, Mongolian plains and Alaskan mountains. Yet those were lands beyond the boundary of my circle. Back then, my circle was not endless, it was small and wiggly.

It looked like this:



Little could we travel then, and it was certain I would not glimpse taigas, deserts, fjords or dark-haired girls when I yearned for them most. I was left no choice but to set forth into my little circle of unique and winding form. I journeyed not broadly through the infinite circle of the world, but deeply through the little circle of my homeland. Though it was by virtue of necessity, it proved a wonderful circle indeed. Beautiful! I traveled mostly alone. On foot. For nearly a quarter century. Thousands of kilometers. It was a remarkable circle, containing all a little dark head could desire. Great rivers, majestic mountains, waterfalls, icefalls. Traps for lynx, cliffs for eagles – many species of eagles. Salty plains and hot prairies. Soft sands, steppe grasses and grazing horses. Lakes of sturgeon, riparian forests, unbearable swarms of mosquitos, still river bends, teeming with turtles! Mountains as far as the eye could see. The purest, loneliest of lakes. Craggy labyrinths abundant in the unforgettable sweet scents of plants whose names are ever sung in praise. Endless eastern beech forests ruled by black boar. Desolate peat bogs that fill a lonely little head with fear and gloom. Muddy sheer-banked rivers where bee-eaters, most colorful of birds, make

their nests. Moose and salmon. Wolves and bears. Wildcats. Native girls singing beneath polonynas in words you cannot understand. When they dance, your fists clench and eyes moisten in gladness. Shepherds in wool coats, the ancient fragrance of sheep pastures. Gales! Wood for a thousand fires and as many solitary nights.

In that winding circle I experienced all I had read about in books of distant lands, all I had so yearned for. I experienced moments that seemed so glorious to me, yet I know there are not many who would even notice them. Hunger, cold, thirst and adventure that many would think nothing of. Fears and joys they would laugh at. I have seen lands whose peace, purity, loneliness and beauty will forever remain etched in my memory. And yet those who walked with me did not even raise their eyes; they just passed them indifferently by. They can go to the devil, it is their loss! They have lost their childlike soul.

Then something began happening to the blessed Slovak land of my youth. At first invisibly. There were ever more restrictions, smells, foreigners, obesity, asphalt. Thirty years ago, I pitched camp in Roháče at the far end of Látané Doliny. I carried in enough food for a month from the town of Zuberec, and during the four weeks I spent in that rainy valley, I saw no one. But today? A waste of words. I hated hiding like an outlaw in mountains I had spent so much time in alone and where I had done no harm to anyone. Like a timid animal, it was time to move on. And so I went east along the Carpathians until I came to Romania! I fell in love with that land as blindly and ridiculously as an old man who, to the laughter of all, falls in love with a young girl. But it gave me back my joy, little brother! I discovered mountains so deserted you do not meet a soul. Mountains of sweet waters and uncharted forests. Where you can play ancient games upon pastures and cliffs tops. I was reminded of how Slovakia, northern Hungarian land, looked so many years ago. For in Transylvania, time still passes lazily by, and gazing from mountain tops at midnight, you see no human lights in the valleys below, just dark forests and endless plains.

And now I've come to the important part! For though I lack much, if not all of Good Fortune's blessed wisdom, I wish to tell you of Romanian mountain ranges and the games that can still be played there.

I have little hope you will listen or be filled with zeal. Yet it is still worth a try, for each continent, land and age has its own little dark heads, its soft sands, its eagles, its freedom and its nocturnal glimmering fires.

I wish to describe to you, little brother, some regions of Romania as if they were fairytale lands, half realistically, half as a child sees them: simply and with a sense of mystery. Briefly in a few short lines. It is not to be the guide you may be accustomed to, the all-encompassing handbook of maps, hotels, dates, color-coded hiking trails, timetables, precise instructions on where to turn or go straight. That is merely excess information. Those books are never necessary and, more often than not, lay waste to fantasy and independence while obliterating all urge to wander and discover. The answer lies elsewhere. The freer you travel, the better. You will try more and experience more!

You should be prepared, however, that you may not find Romania exactly as I did only a short time ago. Times there are changing swiftly too – hurry! But that is as it has always been. Each age has had to redefine nature's beauty and wildness for itself. As did I. If our long-dead ancestors rose from the dead and encountered the wilderness of Slovakia as I knew it in all her supposed savageness, they would weep for the land that was, for it would appear wretched and miserable to them. In vain would they hunt the European bison. As for me, I hunted no bison for they went extinct long before I was born. I never knew the thunder of their feet. But I miss the solitude of the Roháč valleys, that has vanished in my lifetime. And so it will be with you, little brother! Only the games of solitary pilgrims remain unchanged. I will tell you a few of them for they brought me much joy in my better youthful days!

My opening words are now drawing to a close, and carefully as an Indian, I creep toward your camp fire. I wish to tell you something. To teach

you. Yet I know not why. Afraid to cause more harm than good, I have put it off for years. I never thought to change your life, let alone take any interest in it. I only cared for the prairie grasses that run before the wind. The mountain maples that turn to gold, the sandy shores at evening along chill waters. I held all that dearer than you. The solitude of evening fires was most precious to me. I loved games too. Solitary roving games, and wildly joyful forest song that brings you to tears. And now I approach you almost fearfully! Perhaps I come because I sense in your camp both boredom and yearning. Emptiness and weariness, but also good will. Laziness and determination. Envy and eagerness. Come, my velvety little brother, it is better to give than to take! And most importantly, to awaken desire, to open your eyes, to fill you with zeal. A most difficult task. The rest is up to you.

Those last words may have sounded grandiose and delusional, but that is not how I meant them.

Let Good Fortune guide my words!





VLĂDEASA

THE FOAL MOUNTAINS. How long it has been since I visited them. First wonder at Carpathian expanses. Carved farmstead gates in Draganu Valley; old women on doorsteps weaving, embroidering. First time a-roving. First time struggling up steep wooded hillsides toward visions of a path pointed out in fog by a shepherd's hand. Ceața the shepherd called it. Fog. Who knows if the distant Slovak town of Čadca, nestled among Wallachian mountains, has anything to do with the word.

We left nothing out on our trek across the Western Carpathians; we even tried our luck with the wild horses that gallop there freely in herds. White horses, brown ravines, black horses, white clouds, chestnut horses, black forests. Green grass, dappled horses. Pastures as far as the eye can see, no sight of a shepherd in three days. But the crack of shepherds' whips rings out across Vlădeasa from north to south.



A camp of miserable-looking shelters guarded by a sun-bleached skull. Water on ridges vanishes into mossy troughs. Like animals we eat, like animals we sleep, soaking up Carpathian freedom. If, after night, the morning sun shows its face, it spreads a silky emerald canopy out over the mountain plains. Three layers of clouds, three steps to heaven. The ridge leads us onward to the cliffs of Bihor. At the mountains' edge not far from the headwaters of the Draganu, we turn off the ridge, descending southward from an altitude of sixteen hundred meters to where Padiş and the watery karst fortresses of Bihor await us.

Vlădeasa: wooded grassy expanses for a thousand summer fires, unpopulated.

BIHOR



THE CHASM MOUNTAINS. Land of plummeting rivers, land of mountain chasms. Nowhere in Romanian is there a more exquisite place. Waters plunge into the ground or rush forth from it. They vanish into caves to gush out again from others. Sheep graze upon the emerald grasses that surround great sinkholes, and brooks bubble into cul-de-sac valleys to flow, muddy and swirling, down into the earth. The warm Someș and cool Galbena, or Yellow River, float through karst tunnels. An abyss hundreds of meters deep plummets down into the Fortress of Ponor: water hurtles into darkness and ghostly green light streams into the depths through collapsed cavern ceilings. White cliffs above are illuminated by sunlight, all around the buzzing silence of Western Carpathia. Lost World: a beautiful name for the surrounding plains. There is no subterranean path through the Fortress of Ponor. Galbena's spring lies across a mountain ridge where its waters rush out from beneath a cliff. Happening upon it in a summer hailstorm, you are certain to be astonished. Though water and ice are dumped in buckets from the sky, the river gurgles quietly on. Then, quite suddenly, the clear waters beneath the cliff change. Browning, they begin to rise rapidly. Under enormous pressure from the Fortress of Ponor, they spew forth from the stranglehold of the earth, arching higher and higher into the air. Within seconds, they have grown a meter, then two. No longer a peaceful stream, they have become a hurtling, roaring, yellow torrent lurching into the canyon below.

You would be in a bad way, little brother, down in the Fortress of Ponor, down in the Galbena valley. During such a storm, your back becomes bruised by balls of ice and the forests are fist-high in hailstones – you might even build a “hailman” on the banks of the Galbena.

Padiș lodge, the only human dwelling in the heart of the Apuseni Mountains. All around: velvety places to pitch your tent and cool nights on valley floors. Indian water buffalo pass your shelter in the night, regurgitating gently. To the south of Bihor lies Țara Moșilor – Land of Stone – where amid dense, low-mowed meadows and icy ravines, you can borrow a carbide lamp. Out of the steep-pitched roofs of dwellings grow little, red, narrow-leaved willows. Above the Gîrdy valley, black hogs root in dust near wooden mills.



THE GAME OF THE LIGHT-HEARTED PILGRIM

The only people who never lose their way are the lamas of Tibet and Mongolia. Forever roaming the great expanses of High Asia, they travel tirelessly from one place to the next. Having no home, they can never lose their way, and having no aim they can never stray from the path. They go carelessly, ever happy, ever free.

*Lady Evelyn E. Sloock,
traveler, 1881*

My face burns with excitement, little brother, for the first game is so important to understand, yet so hard to explain! If it goes uncomprehended, your journey will be a futile slog and any further reading a waste of time. The game of the light-hearted pilgrim, the light-footed pilgrim, the pilgrim of the small bundle – the most beautiful game of all.

It is good to begin playing it in youth. Not in childhood when legs tire and feet ache and all you remember of outings is the ice cream man. In youth. In the time when spirit is open and eager and the world passes through it as light through a church window: vividly, jubilantly. Unceasingly. Eternally. The spirit can yet be charmed and legs still have their spring. The body is a steed, the spirit its indomitable rider wielding gaiety's banner in the sunny whirlwinds above.

I sometimes see such pilgrims, young and beautiful. Bright-haired, slim girls with heart-shaped patches on their trousers and bottoms like hearts upside down. Next to them sway young men like Prince Harald Fairhair of old. Carefree, tall with woven bags across their shoulders, nearly empty. Under one arm, a blanket, sandals on their bare feet. Envy their carelessness! They roam. Where to? Where will they sleep, what will they eat? Light souls! Those are true pilgrims.

Yet they are not alone. Pilgrims have walked the earth for thousands of years. People give them epithets, each age and continent has its own: rambler, pilgrim, vagrant, prophet, sightseer, wanderer, saint, rover, wayfarer, drifter, wandering preacher, journeyman, traveler, tourist (what a funny word!), hobo, explorer, tramp, lama. They move from place to place. The truest of them have no home, the others give theirs up for the duration of their travels. Some admire them, others despise them. Muhammadans pray for them for they loathe aimless tramping and pity the traveler and his tired feet, rubbed raw on the parched cliffs. They sit at home sleeping through the hot afternoons, smoking hookahs, drinking tea and shelling sunflower seeds. And why not? That, too, is beautiful, though too easily won, my downy little brother! First, toil and trudge for days on end – the longer the better. Then long afternoons of repose, marked by the tick-tock crack of sunflower seeds, will acquire their deepest meaning. A pilgrim traveling from Tarsus once remarked that while it is good to try many things, one must never let go of what is best. There is no place to experience greater good and hardship than on a journey far from home. Discovery is the essence of traveling.

It might appear that the days of footloose wayfaring have vanished forever. That the times of the rover, the journeyman and the wandering monk are no more, and that the tracks that led past haystacks, around millraces and into monastery gardens have become disused and overgrown. However, the yearning to march freely over open countryside has remained and given rise to something new,

something which is at once beautiful and terribly deformed. Outdoor tourism. The second word holds almost no meaning, it is as empty as the word "world". "TOUR" comes from the French meaning a journey around something, to walk around, sail around, fly around. It signifies both a walk and an excursion, a ride and a trip. A tower, a revolution (of a wheel), and the wheel itself; a turn, a circumference, a lap, a lathe, a sleight of hand. A butterball, a porker, a fatty. There are many meanings and many kinds of tourism and many types of tourists. A whole range of them from those oppressed by mammon and dependence, to those as light-footed as a bird.

I feel no pity for the first of them. They pay for their own millstones and sell their incapacity for self-reliance to travel agencies. Unfortunates! Their punishment will be swift. They fly around the world in metal boxes while the poorer of them contract heat rashes from sitting in sweaty, poorly ventilated coaches. They all have one thing in common: they return from their journeys maximally unrefreshed, feeling as if they have just mushed a delicious breakfast, lunch and supper into a disgusting sludge and swallowed it all in a single gulp. More courageous butterball-tourists sit behind the wheel of their smog-producing, combustion-powered automobiles. An air of heaviness rests upon them from beginning to end. Mountains gleam above them in the sunlight, forests on hillsides sway like seaweed meadows in the fragrant breeze. But they beckon in vain – asphalt has shackled these travelers and pulled them to the ground. They are not true pilgrims, for they have succumbed to matter.

Fat-thighed fellows in fuzzy, knee-high socks belong to what can be called the royal class of tourists. The heavy pilgrim. With great "backbreaker" packs

atop their shoulders, they trek through mountainous country imperviously. They often stay in cabins, though the more valorous of them set up tents in tourist campsites. They love the society of their peers, they are noisy and travel together in droves, breathlessly seeking tourist badges, posters, certificates, and acknowledgment. They are the salt of the tourist earth. They maintain the pilgrim consciousness, yet take joy in counting up all the miles they have walked along their rigidly-planned routes, senselessly reporting the information to someone somewhere, and blanketing the forests in thousands of color-coded trail signs, the more, the merrier. Those with the fuzziest knee-highs may indeed be trophy holders, some even champions of their sport!

Then there are the boaters, the cyclists and the mountain climbers. However grand these pilgrims appear, they cannot go everywhere. Their spirits may soar mightily and freely, but their bodies are bound to water and boat, road and wheel, cliff and rope. They are not light. I know that from experience, I was one of them. Traveling, scientific expeditions and mountaineering treks no longer count as wandering; all the necessary metal and food and obligations and responsibilities make lightness and joy impossible. These are but a few kinds of tourists, there are many more I have not mentioned. The words of Saint Irenaeus of Smyrna still ring true today: "God is certainly not too poor to lend a pilgrim his own soul." Seek your own interpretation, meaning and joy.

Thus, little brother, I shall write only of the lightest pilgrims, of the noblest tourists – often impoverished and wild – of the birds among wayfarers, of those who today would not hesitate to set out for unfamiliar mountains and forests, taking with them only what they can carry, not fearing how one day will end or what will transpire the next. They wander in sunshine and rain, alone or together, lightly and carelessly – poverty their greatest freedom. They join hands with brothers of old who, with nothing but a clear mind, a beggar's bowl and a loin cloth, walked through the Umbrian sunlight, the Theban sands and the Tibetan winds. Theirs is an ancient

yearning. Thousands of years ago, an Egyptian scroll revealed what awaited them: “The pilgrim walks through the desert carrying bread and water on his shoulders as a donkey carries its burden. The bones of his back are bent and his drink is stale water.”

Our homeland has no deserts, the people I write about wend their way through forests and mountains. Such journeys have many names – hiking, backpacking, camping – and such travelers usually visit a region only once. Whether that is good or bad is a matter for debate. But at least their first impression of a place is never diluted by a second, and they experience no disappointment upon returning to discover so much has changed. Where they arrive, they sleep, they linger where they like. They eat what they find and usually carry no tent.

Many have not survived such existential uncertainties, but our travelers flourish in it. Uncertainty keeps their minds limber and luminous. They know neither the hour nor the day; seldom do they fall ill; if they get wet, they dry: it is as simple as that. They must be self-reliant and are proud to balance days of self-sufficiency with the lightest possible knapsack. It gives them confidence. Such pilgrims can venture into far-flung regions where heaviness and comfort, fussiness and caution do not allow other tourists to go. It is difficult to reconcile self-sufficiency with lightness, long is the journey to that aim! But it is essential, for only with a light pack can the spirit leave the body and soar above in wind and joy – the very reason for embarking on such light and distant journeys. In vain do those without this gift drag their bodies through mountain forests! The spirit in the mountains soars highest when the pack is light enough to be worn on one shoulder. This is no easy feat, however. Mountains are high, forests deep, people far away and the body is a demanding steed: in the day it needs food, at night it craves warmth.

Many useful qualities are nurtured on such summer journeys. Modesty. Independence. Endurance. Respect for the earth and local peoples. Conquering one’s fears, overcoming dejection of body and spirit. You explore the

land as an ant senses with its feelers. Time passes slower, too, dissolving into individual points in time; it is as if you are living in another dimension. You remember more from one month's wandering than from all the previous eleven months combined. A year's worth of banalities swiftly fades into the well of oblivion, but the fullness of experience from a few summer weeks spent wandering the mountains radiates from you for years to come. Those eleven trivial months, however, need not be fully wasted – they can be spent pouring over maps. From them, as if by magic, arise the lands to which you will turn your feet the coming summer.

My face still burns. Too vaguely, too tepidly have I described the beauty of light-footed pilgrimages. I fear you will not be roused by the blissful thought of such a journey. But one final and glorious card remains. Do you know what so intoxicates on such feather-light voyages, little brother? Freedom! The enthralling river of freedom from the first sweet breath of morning, so deep it pricks in the pit of your throat, to the final slumber of evening which falls upon the weary body like a warm and wooly beast. Only while traveling are you truly free, my light-winged bird!

You sit atop a bare ridge amidst unfamiliar mountains, the silvery grasses blowing in the wind. Like a polecat, the Carpathian evening approaches, dark and furtive. Silence. Below you, nothing but Transylvanian forest, no other sight to catch your eye. Green ridges and foothills flow like streams out of the mountains, the solitude is absolute. Such places do exist. Which way will you go? There is no bed waiting for you, no food has been prepared. Yet wherever you are, you always get a good night's rest and you never die of hunger. Which direction do you go? You can travel wherever you wish, you are free. Head for the northern valleys and from there to the river currents and stony banks of the Bucovina. Or turn towards the southern ravines, following them to the distant wormwood pastures of Wallachian plains. Or venture eastward to where the mountains tumble down into Moldova. It will be beautiful wherever you go and just the way you make it. You fear the unknown, but know with crystal clear certainty that

your home is wherever you choose to be. You will never lose your way, you carry everything with you; wherever you arrive, that is your aim. The wind blows silvery, no other sight to catch your eye. Cool air wafts from strange forests. Somewhere within them you will make your bed and drink from their waters. The unknown lies all around you. Long would you sit among the grasses with the rock at your back, but the time has come to decide: evening's cloak is growing darker. You rise like an animal, scenting the wind with your nostrils. And then it comes, the brief moment of freedom, like an arrow racing through the air. Now you know which way to go.

The unknown before you, the unknown behind you, only the polecat paws of night rushing to meet you. That sweet, heavenly second of freedom!

MUNTELE MARE

THE MOTLEY MOUNTAINS.

White cliffs shimmer above vibrant flowers far from the eyes of eager tourists. In the distance we can just make out the towering ridge of Scărișoara-Belioara, considered by some to be part of the Gilău mountain range, reaching one thousand three hundred meters into the sky. It stands a long dusty journey away, down a valley and along the crystalline waters of the Poșaga. Steep slopes, plateaus, and gorges plunge off King's Plains, waterless and abounding in the soft greens of bearberry bushes and gentle hues of savin junipers. Canyons carved by running water have, by mid-August, become dry and

parched, and grasshoppers remain the only creatures still jumping among the shriveled, crackling grasses. Visible from afar is an enormous cave worn by ancient waters into a white cliff face dozens of meters up in the air – the jewel of King Béla's natural mountain fortress. The sun shines through a gaping oval hole in the cavern's ceiling, casting its shape around the sides of the cave hour by hour. The floor grows thick with a strange non-stinging nettle known as Upright pellitory.

Scărișoara-Belioara is a renowned nature preserve where gently bleating sheep munch on the rarest of wild-growing plants. A picturesque land.





Below the cliffs, slopes are dotted with haystacks and elven cottages, here and there inhabited by people and white dogs – sentinels of silence, wooden huts and cool rushing water. Roads here are only for the surefooted. We arrive at a house as light fades. The door creaks open: it is unlocked, uninhabited. Just as in the fairytales, it stands awaiting the weary pilgrim. Inside, a kerosene lamp, a wooden bowl, a table and bench, a coffin-like bed lined with sheep wool, an icon in a dusky corner. We drink our fill of water from the brook and fall contentedly asleep in a dark house beneath white mountain walls.

TRASCĂU

THE GORGE MOUNTAINS.

Nowhere else have I seen so many white gorges. On the map, the Trascău Mountains appear striped, crisscrossed by narrow limestone formations from Northeast to Southwest. Water flows out of them following a diagonal course, each stream carving a sheer white gorge. The remote and isolated village of Cheia rests in a deep basin between four such gorges



and is altogether without electricity. A raspy-voiced matron stands guard at a log-bridge; smooth and narrow, it is the only path to the homes on the other side. Buildings here are the most peculiar in all of the Trascău Mountains. The deeper you forge into the mountainous terrain, the higher the roofs of dwellings become. Thatched and many times taller than the houses themselves, they appear like haystack resting atop low ceilings. Man and beast gaze from the windows of these fairytale huts, bread ovens stand before each home, and wells have painted roofs. There is a sacred spring in the Râmeț Monastery, which lies below a gorge and can only be reached by fording deep water between high cliffs. We must have looked like beggar pilgrims, for the old women of the monastery brought us baskets of hot donuts to feast on. We ate them gratefully, feeling both Mediterranean and medieval. The white cliffs towered above the ancient monastery like the Holy Mountain of Athos as the sun sang to them its sultry song.



Some say the Trascăus belong to the Munții Metaliferi, the Ore Mountains, where the Romans had their most impressive gold mines. There are many remarkable places there, little brother. Huda lui Papară is a rare and beautiful cave well worth a visit, though you will not see much more than the front and the back of it. Two streams pour down into an enormous basin, one flowing into a clear pool, the other plunging from the heights above where alpine swifts wheel and call. The waters rush round the base of a towering white wall and spill into the cave – there is nowhere else for them to go. During spring thaws, the entire basin fills with water twenty-five meters deep; on the other side of the ridge, a torrent gushes from a crevice in the cliff, and the only way in is to swim. A valley, lone and peaceful, spreads out below full of flowers, bleached water-worn sheep paths, sunlight, silence.



THE GAME OF THE PRINCE AND THE KING ❧

I have seen many a wild and beautiful place on the border between the States and Canada that no white man has laid eyes on since. Mine was the first white face to bend to the clear waters of Yellowstone Lake. Those were wonderful moments. They cost me toil, struggle, hunger, suffering, danger, and health, but I regret nothing. Yet, now, looking back at all the journeys I have embarked upon, half-blind and old as I am, none were more wonderful than my two-day trek across Porcupine Valley into the woods behind my father's farm. I was thirteen years old then, and my father did not want to allow it. Never have I had to overcome such fear of solitude, distance and the unknown as that time, and never has the victory been sweeter and my happiness and pride greater than when, after the first lonely night, I gazed from the top of Badger Hill at the endless forests of the north for the first time in my life.

*JIM BRIDGER, mountain man
and explorer of the Wild West, 1881*

How glad I am the world still lies before you, little brother! All who set out on journeys in their youth are like the princes in fairytales of old. The

boy, the king-to-be, forges ahead into strange and distant lands. He wanders alone, himself a stranger, seeking what others have never dared seek. He is not driven by lust of aim, delusions of grandeur, avarice or ambition, but by quiet attentiveness to the bright and distant star of his destiny. He experiences much, but always returns home again – I have never read of a prince who does not return happily home.

The time of quests begins when a child enters adolescence, when he becomes a prince. A boy's aim might seem small – the top of Badger Hill overlooking Porcupine Valley – but the blissful feeling of victorious independence is so complete, nothing can surpass it. The expeditions of youth are like the universe compressed before the Big Bang, like the fruits of adulthood yet a kernel in some heavenly flower. Adults may undertake longer and more ostentatious voyages, but who is to say, little brother, which is the greater prize ten kilometers as a boy or a thousand in adulthood? For just as a person ages, so does all of humanity. Yearning to experience the bliss of its youth, it sets its goals further and further afield. A century ago, men ascended the Alps in woolen pants, bearing bottles of brandy and wearing funny hobnail boots. Mountaineers through and through, they risked their health and their necks, overjoyed to reach the place where cable cars and automobiles can carry you today, bored and indifferent. For mountain climbers today to sense the same self-assuredness and exceptionality, they must spend years training in the harshest conditions. Then clambering into trucks packed with high-tech space-age equipment, they rumble across the globe before finally reaching the Himalayas, or the Andes, or the Pamir Mountains. Once it was enough to sail the Black Sea in search of the Golden Fleece, now we must send shock troops in airtight suits all the way to the moon.

It is easier for boys. There will come a day when everyone seems stale, pallid and insufferable. That is the moment to leave for fresher lands where true and distant suns shine. Those are the journeys that remain most luminously imprinted on the soul. Never again will there be so much to

remember and so much triumphant pride. I was lucky, for that was the age I explored all the Czechoslovakian mountain ranges. I hiked through each of them, one after the other, usually alone and without a guide, using only some outdated military maps. I walked through Slovakia and ascended the Carpathians just as boys from coastal lands would venture out into the southern seas. I must have traveled thousands of kilometers, and though I did not count any of them, I remember each one. That was my domain! I came to realize that the most beautiful moments are experienced in silence and solitude, far from a parent's care which may dispel hunger and fear, but which crushes joy and independence. I also learned to endure, for there is nothing worse than not achieving your dream because of rain, weariness, cold or fear of hunger and solitude. Always keep going, tomorrow will be better! Whenever I turned my back on my journey's aim, the cost in time, money and suffering to return was always greater; for even more unbearable than cold and hunger is not bending to the waters of the lake you have dreamed of for so many months. Remember, little brother, mud washes away and hunger is forgotten, but the pure taste of fresh lake water remains forever in your soul. Do not forget that the honor of every prince and conquistador is heroic endurance. The worse things get, the better – repeat those words often, and if you weep, weep quietly.

All later trips are mere reflections of pilgrimages embarked upon in the prince-years of long ago. With sadness, you come to realize you will never see every mountain or cross every meridian. But if you do not grow bitter or small-minded, adulthood is not lost! For it is only then you acquire a king's knowledge, wisdom no prince possesses – and discover the world is beautiful wherever you are and wonderful days are to be had even in weed-grown landfills.

You can wander through saltbush thickets like a giant over forest-covered mountains. Such wastelands hold many secrets, and there, as everywhere, the sun shines down on both good and evil. No more do you feel pride in fleeing people's pallidness. In adulthood, you finally learn to wander the

countryside. To saunter aimlessly yet knowingly, without sweat and toil. Lowlands, ponds, fields, muddy dirt roads; no matter where you are, it is all beautiful. Once a year in spring, I walk through the countryside like Sir Peleček, the knight, with nothing but my leather jacket and a sleeping bag. I roam the lowlands I had no time for in my youth, the country I once despised. Those journeys are like sunbaths after winter, returning strength to back and spring to step. Above the forests, birds call, and I go slowly and lightly. I rest on pine needles and lie in the fallows. It is on such journeys I have most of my ideas; they are an annual spiritual renewal and the announcement of spring. Taking no food with me, I follow wherever my eyes lead. I go without the obstinacy of youth, without pride and disappointed expectations; I go with joy. I walk, I wave, I am. I stride lovingly through places many would find disagreeable, places I would not have visited in my youth: village peripheries that have a long way to Scandinavian neatness, villages like the Slavic ¹“zadruga” of old; mud after winter, wilted goosefoot, dead grass amid unmown dropwort marshes; broken fences, goose droppings, unpruned apple trees with last year’s apples rotting beneath them. I like it all. The smell of spring, the rawness, the manure: those are smells I love. Having breathed them for thousands of years, they have entered the human bloodstream; in cities we have lived for no more than a few hundred. Here alone, among good-natured ruffians, farmers and country girls, do I find the remnants of genuine community, uncorrupted by money and tourism. ²Zadruga – one comrade for another. They give you milk to drink and offer you a bed of hay to sleep on, but that, too, is fading. Nights on spring journeys are often spent in forests beneath pheasant feeders. They are usually dry inside with plenty of food left over from winter. Before sleep, I pick out kernels of wheat from among the weeds and bird droppings. It grows sweet in the mouth, most ancient of foods. On warm nights I sleep

1 Patriarchal farmsteads in old Slavic societies where an extended family or clan of related families lived, worked, and took care of one another for the benefit of the entire community.

2 The term “zadruga” is from Old Slavonic and is derived from the words “za” meaning “for” and “drug” meaning “comrade.” Thus the literal meaning translates to “for a comrade.”

in deer mangers beneath blackthorn bushes, occasionally in the attics of deserted fishing huts or in the homes of good people if I find any.

How long ago those princehood journeys now seem, how distant the voyages to wild mountains and the yearning for southern seas! Once again, I feel humans were not created to love but one thing. For we often love – is it our salvation or our doom, little brother? – incongruously. Towering mountains and muddy villages, the solitude of evening fires and the jungle roar of taverns. The silence of lakeshores and the thundering of orchestri- ons. The unwavering faithfulness of one woman and unbridled debauchery. The rigidness of the oak tree which snaps in the storm and the suppleness of the reeds which bend before the gale. The chasteness of the desert and the filthiness of landfills, apostolic poverty and innumerable riches. Arctic waters and warm seas, rags and glamor, unfettered feasting and a life of simple fare. You carry it all within you, little brother!

Two games are now drawing to a close: that of prince and that of king. Know that you can play both in the beautiful land of Romania. As a prince, you walk through melancholic mountains gripped by their desolation, and the strange words of shepherds fail to brighten your smile. Storms wail darkly about you – beware, or you may falter. As a king, you wander lazily through steppe sands sensing, amidst the vast plains, beauty not all per- ceive as the sun rains its heat down slantwise upon the flat land and your journey feels torrid, endless, and senseless.

Fear nothing. Travel to the end of the world - wherever you go, things will be what they are. Hunger does not kill, neither thirst nor distance. But fear of them does. Have you reached the Himalayas? You may well find they seemed more terrifying in books. The truth is, they are a land of shepherds. If you content yourself with barley cakes and tea as the natives do, you can walk right below the highest mountains in the world as lightly as in the Carpathians. Join the barefooted shepherds who graze their sheep at glaciers' edge just where climbers make their basecamp. Walk softly as the princes of old, clear of mind, quietly alert, towards your bright and distant star.



SEMENIC

THE INHABITED MOUNTIANS. Passing through the Iron Gates, the pure, running waters of the upper Timiș River flow deep into the heart of the mountains. In peaceful wooded valleys, *Festuca alpina* grass leans out over the river's surface. In vain had I searched for it in the Carpathians of Slovakia. A full moon shines through the leaves of silvery beech groves. Such nights in Banat bathe everything in light metallic hues: leaves, mushrooms, evening breezes, ground beetles, mice. The fragrance of wild thyme rises from fields below the wood, and fireflies flicker the whole night through – though differently than at home: hotly blazing, extinguishing, reigniting – amorous lighthouses. The mountain ridges are home to meadows, oat fields, wild fruit, beehives, lonely dwellings and quiet, hard-working folk, and the heart of the Banat Mountains is bestrewn with raspberry scarlets and fireweed purples.

As we descended into a silent valley at Three Waters Lake, which lies at the confluence of three small rivers, the mountains changed around us: a great lake fire raged among old spruce trees at the water's edge long into the night.



We arrived in the Semenic Mountains after being chased away by border guards at the Cazanele, the Danube Gorges. They were not so lucky the next time, however, and we floated downriver from Moldova to Orșova. It was a beautiful boat trip – sheer white bluffs hugged the powerful, dark river from both sides. The mouths of caves gaped at us curiously from cliff faces and sturgeons swam beneath our bark. Even here soldiers kept watch, so we dared not move on deck or disembark for a climb among the cliffs in search of rare Danube feather grass. But it was a beautiful journey nonetheless. A Romanian Slovak had told us about it, for ever since Banat had ceased to be an Ottoman-Hungarian battlefield, all Czech and Slovak villages had settled above the Danube Gorges.

The great river carried us down to the sultry city of Orșova where we had once been chased into the Semenic Mountains. Once again the smells of river mud, fish and tar, black mulberries – wild and sweet, as we rested at the wayside.

THE ANINA MOUNTAINS

THE RIVEN MOUNTAINS. Fissures, gorges, canyons, valleys and ravines on display nowhere else. Deep earthen scars lead to vast green-white karst fields. Sultry southern breath of the Banat Mountains. Horned vipers in regal velvety purples sun themselves on baking limestone. Abounding rustyback ferns gleam silkily from rocky crevices. Deep crystalline waters flow through the Caraş River gorge, joined upstream by the Comarnik River. There is no sign of man or footpath here. Running between leaning white bluffs, the watery depths are so clear you can pierce their bottom. Aside from occasional wild cataracts, white water rapids or shallows through which our boats are towed, there is little else to do than float down this aquatic thoroughfare, sheer overgrown crags towering above. Deserted caves in the cliffs appear like a giant's cooking pots. And when the sun's rays illuminate the mossy greens of watery caverns, a thousand scintillating rainbows gleam amid great Hart's-tongue ferns, caught in falling droplets.

Through the stunning Gârlişte canyon, foul coal-black water pours; dry Serbian plains lie above it, the home of old men, ripening plums and hot summer nights.

The Nera River gorge is an astonishing place. Three days among bluffs and river currents, three nights on white sands and gravel islands kept company by mole crickets and black spiders. Its solitary meanders tear fiercely at pearly cliff walls which clutch at its path-carving currents. The river is wide, powerful, flowing. Its brownny hues are washed to greens by the gorge. The river, cleansed, speaks, smelling of fish. Quiet pools. Nera, a river without





bridges. Traces of great floods, fatal currents, hang in tree branches ten meters above the water's surface. On early mornings, the river is cloaked in dusky chill, but high up on the sharp cliffs, linden trees shimmer in the sunlight like silver candles. Vines hang from trees and white hyacinths breathe their tropical fragrance: exuberant growth wherever the eye alights. Evil valleys: great craggy cauldrons. Travertine lakes and cataracts of the Beu River. A dragon lake lies clear and blue in a sunken cave, while hundreds of meters up a precipitous cliff, a grotto yawns. Nera – a breathtaking land from the Wild West.



THE GAME OF MORNING JOY ❧

A NEW DAY IS HERE!

The most beautiful cry

Sunny mornings are a fiery sword, a single blow brings you to paradise! There should be a thousand words to describe such beauty. The sun rises above the mountain plains, a morning firebird. It soars, silent and dazzling. You have just awakened, born anew. A new day has begun; a new day in which anything can happen.

Sleep under an open sky when nights are clear. Only then will you wake before the sun has risen. You open your eyes to a pale dawn. Your sleeping bag is heavy with moisture, but you lie within, cloaked in your own warmth. The night's chill still lies in the grass, and dew falls from the heavens. With each movement, a cold shiver runs through your body – better to rest still and quiet. Only your eyes gaze up at the pale, tranquil sky. Suddenly you experience the same second of joy as the Eskimos when, high up in the black sky at the end of the polar night, they spot a gleaming white bird. The first solitary bird returning north after winter! In the land of the

Eskimos, it remains dark and cold and the sun still stays below the horizon. But from below, it sends forth the first ray, months unseen, weeks awaited, illuminating the breast of the flying bird. The first ray in the darkness! The white arctic bird wings silently through the air, oblivious to its dazzling prophecy, but down below, the people cheer, cry, jump and shout: the sun, warmth of life, is returning.

You, too, little brother, can see a little greenish cloud appear on the pale sky just above the northeastern horizon. It scuds alone across the sky, far and wide the only cloud. As of yet, no sight of the sun. But lo, while the back of the morning cloud remains in darkness, its belly has already begun to gleam. For he who shows and aligns its heavenly track has now begun to illuminate it with his glow. A new day is dawning in which anything can happen. Even death may come as you wait for night. Sleep, too, is a short death. But now a new day has come!

The cloud dissolves in the radiance of the rising sun. You lay wrapped in your sleeping bag, nostrils taking in the ever more fragrant air, eyes gazing into the brilliance which is still bearable. You smile your happiness – you have awoken to a sentence from the Hindu Upanishads which says that he who dwells within the sun dwells also within man. They are one. At these moments it is best to sing a morning song of celebration and thanksgiving if you know one. And if you do not, my impious little brother, make one up for it is sure to come useful. Steam is now rising from your sleeping bag as the fiery bird flaps ever more ardently, drawing from you the dewy damp of the night. Now you can finally move in your sleeping bag. Spread out lazily inside it. The cold shiver no longer runs through you, and the heavens rain down ever growing heat. Soon you will once more be unable to move – not for cold, but for warmth – for you will be doused in a sweltering humid cloud. As the sun rises, so does the temperature. Suddenly, the moment arrives when you can no longer bear another second in your sleeping bag. You tear it off, but you are still too hot. Unable to stand the heat, you strip off your clothes.

How wonderful to be on the plains alone. You can lay naked upon your sleeping bag, immeasurably relieved. The sun sings to you, the silky air gently fans you, and flies, first of friends, settle upon you. Do not chase them away, for they sing to you and lap you with their tongues. It delights them. Be grateful when you can delight someone, little brother, there may come a day when you would give your eyeteeth for that! The wind rises. Brother wind. Balmy, but the flies take to the air. How wonderfully un-European to lay naked in wild pastures. Laid bare to the sky. There is so much our ragged garments withhold from us!

And if, with the morning sun's return, you are not alone? All the better, especially if you wake beside a shiny-eyed girl with a nose as gentle as a foal's. Perhaps it is she will enkindle the lamp of love, that rosy glow that gleams so rarely in life, sometimes only for a second, sometimes only once, sometimes never, but which is always worth trudging the world for. You will never forget it. The universe hauls up its anchor for a voyage that is eternity in a single second. Shivers up and down your spine, tears of joy. A quiet ringing in your head, a murmuring and chiming, rosy light as you gaze upward through shut eyelids. The fullness of everything. You touch her gently, and the moment comes. The world is bathed in apple-blossom light. The ark of bliss rocks upon sunlit waters. This light, which comes always unexpected and unsummoned, shines elsewhere, too - in the deepest of monastic solitudes, on the peaks of great mountains, on Olympic pedestals before crowds of thousands, above a completed masterpiece, in a shepherd's song, at a ship's sailing. But most often, it is borne by girls, fragrant, light-legged light-bearers; fragrant, light legs play their oldest and most beautiful game.

Making love in the morning is the most beautiful thing of all. So pure. With a girl whose eyes are like the sea. On the open plains in the embrace of the eager sun. Like wild horses, whinnying, manes flying. There, all cries dissipate. I hope it is no sin. It was not I who breathed into girls their wild fragrance or gave them such sultry skin. He who dwells within the sun

dwells also within girls. On such amorous mornings when the sun hangs in the blue like a flaming tine, I think it better to make love just once in with a wild southern princess and die as punishment than a thousand times embrace a lethargic lemur. That a single scintillating year is better than fifty dull ones, and one day of fire is worth ten thousand days of darkness. Worry about today, little brother, tomorrow will take care of itself! But I don't think that always, for the hot sun does not always blaze above open plains.

But beautiful mornings need not be lived only under the open skies of distant journeys, my life-weary little bother! A new day rises even amidst November's gloom and chilly winds. Astonishingly, most people hate mornings, they hate waking and rebirth. They do not prattle on gleefully, but shuffle gloomily around the house in fear of the new day – old men and women lost to hope. They know too well how the day will end. Yet turning mornings gold and days to silver is such a simple task. It requires but three things: a song of thanks, a cold bath and exercise or a wild dance. Three offensively simple things can change the world! Dismal thoughts and dreariness vanish, and strength and happiness swiftly take their place. Just three things – a song, a little water and a bit of movement – and mornings are transformed. Yet I know I write these words in vain, my life-weary brother, for you will not change – you will not even try it!

I walk along a morning street. Looking round, I see it is empty. So I dance my morning dance. I whirl around gleefully, stamping my feet because that is the only dance I know. It is a new day. The street is still empty. So I bleat loudly. Like a goat. Meehhh! A prostatic Prague Ratter urinates at length beneath an ash tree, I greet him in my best Frrrench: "Bon jour, mon ami, ça va?" And the street is still perfectly empty.

A morning song, a cold bath and a bit of exercise make you feel strong and healthy. Indomitable of body, insurmountable of soul. You can sit motionless, hands on the table, and yet feel as strong as a snow leopard, the most beautiful of animals. Of their own accord, the muscles in your back

begin to coil. If you make a fist, no earthly power can unmake it against your will. You sit motionless like a leopard in wait of a mountain sheep, prepared to leap, full of explosive energy, yet seemingly inert. Resting on the snow, it looks like a boulder. You, too, sit quietly, but warmth and power emanate from within you, it is a wonderful feeling. At that morning hour, the entire world is yours. You sit alone, insignificant and unimportant, no one knows you exist. And yet on such mornings, the whole planet belongs to you.



RODNA

THE ROSEBAY MOUNTAINS. Standing beneath them at the edge of the Maramureş Mountains, you might think yourself in Carpathian Ruthenia: streets strewn with river rocks, wood-gabled villages kilometers long, homes without chimneys, centuries-old wooden churches – onion-shaped – and paschal candles half a millennium old. Dusty hearths and shaggy-coated herds of goats. Shepherds in bast sandals, handmade leather shoes, and incredible hats, smelling biblically of sheep.

Far up the two thousand three hundred meter high ridges of the Rodna Alps, beauty awaits – realms of grass, verdant mountain crests and millions of gentle-red rhododendrons. Here, the weather shifts from storms to mist to sunshine, sometimes twice a day. I liked the Rodna Mountains. Walking southeast along the ridge, you encounter nothing but grass for days; the tree line is far beneath your feet. Occasionally, you may spot a small lake or herd of animals. Alpine accentors, their flight wild and whirring, alight on crags. Deserted mountain ridges. The only lodge far and wide is in Puzdrele,



concealed among the sorrel of age-old sheep farms. In front of it, hogs with wires in their snouts root in the earth – without them they would surely root even more.

There are very few hikers on Rodna mountain ridges, though you may occasionally pass a band of shaved-headed Romanian pilgrims with loaves of bread tied to their backs. They carry satchels, and blankets hang around their necks. The person at the rear of the procession bears a kerosene lamp that swings from his rucksack. Sincere and modest people, they eat mostly tomatoes, bacon, and yellow kashkaval cheese.

Beneath towering Ineu Mountain lies icy Lala Lake. On our final night in Rodna, we took refuge from a storm in a deserted hunting cabin just below the lake's frigid waters. We thought of last year's rutting season as we ate our fill of rotten potatoes around a fire of Witch's Broom, the only wood that burns so wet, and the flooded Lala River roared below the cabin.

A black and white photograph of a mountain range. In the foreground, a wire fence with several wooden posts runs across the frame. The background shows a series of rolling mountains under a hazy sky. The word 'MARAMUREȘ' is written in a white, serif font across the lower part of the image.

MARAMUREȘ

THE TRACKLESS MOUNTAINS. Not one tourist marker sullies this mountain range, not one tourist cabin. Only military fences from another era lie toppled and disused below the grassy border. We hike along the old frontier for days. To the north, all of eastern Carpathian Ruthenia lies at our feet, the ancient comitat of Máramaros, the Tisza River valley, the highlands of ³Nikola Šuhaj, snow covered Mount Hoverla, mighty Pip Ivan Peak. The Romanian side of the former Hungarian territory breathes fresh and green – endless forests, long valleys, pasture lands. Near the summit of Farcău Mountain, a lake lies where horned oxen drink each evening among black-bird flocks and windblown meadows. Beyond the old border tripoint of Stoh, even the uprooted border markers seem different: cast-iron posts lie, pink and decorative, amid the grass and wildflowers along the old Romanian-Polish frontier. And still we have not met a soul. Over the course of five days, we meet seven shepherds and two border guards who we appease with handwritten authorizations and homemade stamps – such documents work wonders in those deserted mountains! There is little water and few

³ Nikola Šuhaj was an outlaw and local folk hero from Carpathian Ruthenia.



people atop the ridges that make up the western edge of Máramaros, and the border there is at times unmarked, at others secured by five layers of fencing, as the Rodna Mountains hem in the southern horizon. According to a sixty-year-old general map, we are scarcely clinging to a wild, forested ridge between the Ruscovei and Vaser valleys. Miserable forest crossroads fade into the undergrowth; this is a trackless land. We wander through rainstorms, Carpathian mists, and steep, rocky, rain-soaked pine thickets. We bed down near forest peat bogs, uprooted by wild beasts. We sleep near grouse droppings, wolf scat, sheep cadavers, horse bones strung across crooked pines: how bleak those rainy nights are! Huts emerge from the mountain fog, inhabited mostly by Rusyns, whose language is remarkably similar to Czech. They are kind, chasing the dogs away and giving us sheep's milk and cheese – sweet and salty. But most beautiful of all is the music they play on their long fujaras to accompany us on our way. They blow their eastern song into great, glossy, homemade pipes until we are forever lost to sight among the junipers, scrub-pines, and trackless forests of the Maramureş Mountains.



THE GAME

STARRY NIGHTS ❧

My tent, airy and windswept, is sweeter than the finest palace.

Um-Jesid, mother of the sixth Caliph of Islam

Nights are the cornerstones of every journey and the games of kings. Days can be hot or rainy, merry or monotonous, endless, or a mere blink of an eye. But the pilgrim faces them wide awake. When night comes, however, he goes helplessly forward, vulnerable and at the mercy of the darkness. When the windy tail of day sweeps away its footprints and evening falls restless as a pregnant doe, it is time to seek safety, shelter, and rest. I see the land with different eyes, forests take on a new shape at dusk. On balmy evenings, they beckon to me, and their dry peripheries spread out before me like a beautiful maiden. But on nights of hail amid strange mountains, an evening mist at two thousand meters bodes uncertainty, even doom. On such nights, I wish to be far away among people, basking in the sun of morning. But I have no choice. It is time to sleep, time to search for a place to spend the night. Fear not, my timid little brother, I have gone to sleep every night

and always woken the following morning. The less I take with me on my journey, the more I am at the mercy of the night and the unknown, and the more beautiful and unusual nights I spend.

With a tent, I am a millionaire: indifferent, oblivious, self-assured. I can go wherever I wish. Spreading out my palace of green, my fear of night vanishes. Heed only the words of the Prophet Muhammad, "First tie your camel firmly to a tree, then consign him to God's protection." Thus, I build my tent securely and do not rely impertinently on the mercy of the night. For it is long, and better is to sleep than to patch canvas in darkness, hunt the winds for possessions borne on gusty wings, or bale water out of sleeping bags. Only then do I lie down to sleep.

Tents are like girls, each one has a different smell, but all are equally fragrant. And though they all let the sunlight in, each morning has its own hue. It is strange – some people have never slept in such airy palaces. What unfortunates!

Possessing only a tarp, I am still a wealthy man. A two-by-two-meter canvas is a bundle light and small, and I need not fear the night. I lay beneath it feeling as glad as the rich man and as happy as the outlaw. I have a home, but I also have the wind and the stars. Raindrops, though meddlesome in a tent with a floor, dry up and disappear, absorbed by the earth. When the rain stops, the stars reappear. I lean out from under my roof like a caddis fly from its watery conduit. An occasional drop falls on my face from the branches above, but who cares, my body is dry, and my eyes gaze upwards at the night sky. Strange – some people have never fallen asleep with their gaze fixed on the stars. What unfortunates!

Finally, there are the journeys when I carry no shelter at all. I prepare for the night without tent or tarp. It is bad to walk into long and rainy darkness. My gaze scours the sky, the clouds, and the thickets. It is alright, the afternoon clouds have dispersed with the coming evening, dissolving into faded blues and vanishing altogether. It is growing rapidly cooler. The night will be clear and cold, but I do not mind the chill, I adapt to it quickly.

I console myself with the memory of Taras Bulba, knowing that evening frost on wild fields gladdens Cossack bones. Lowering my pack, the day is behind me. Suddenly, there is plenty of time. I sprawl in the grass. The earth has completed her daily Sun Dance; having twirled before her star, her face fades with the approaching night. Strange – some people cannot carry all they need upon their backs. What unfortunates!

I break off pine boughs to place under my sleeping bag. Blessed is the land where I can go about this work and fear no pricking of the conscience. For breaking off branches in Carpathian forests is like pulling a few hairs from a girl's mane in love-play: it only makes her wilder. Yet preparing such a bed of boughs in Czech forests is like tearing out the last of an old man's bristles.

Before nightfall, I gather wood for a "foc mare", a great Romanian fire. Blessed are the lands where there is still wood enough for the nocturnal pilgrim! Fire, the most sparkling of nighttime games, would deserve its own chapter. Fires are joyful and pure, you can gaze into them for hours. I remember them as I do lovers. The quiet, three-log fire I slept by in Poloniny National Park. The secret watch-fires of forest dells and craggy glens. The fragrant fires of precious woods from the southern Slovak Karst. The blazing pine-log fires which illuminated and heated our rocky shelters beneath the limestone walls of Velká Fatra and the sandstone overhangs of Děčín. Driftwood fires on the sandy shores of the Tisza River, the smell of fish, mud, freedom, and bacon cooking on a willow stick, the hot dust of herds and plains. The clear fires of wood from beaver dams at the border of Poland and Lithuania where pure water splashes down onto the steep, desolate banks of deep Suwalki lakes, and sheldrakes' cries ring out above the surface of the water. Shepherds' fires of juniper, rosebay and scrub-pine amid the Transylvanian Carpathians and the Macedonian Pirin Mountains. Fire and sheep – such safe and soothing smells. We lived among them for thousands of years, a few short years amid the stony walls of cities cannot wipe that out. I sleep with shepherds near silent flocks. Sheep bleat from their

dreams. They shake their heads with a soft ringing of bells and a dog laps the stranger's dusty hand. Silence. Such great good cannot be expressed in words and I can never be grateful enough to fire, the oldest good, which fends off wild animals, and banishes fear from the soul and cold from the body. I believe I would never be done with the game of sparkling fire, so beautiful and so beneficial. And therefore I will spare no more words upon it, my blanket-loving brother! But when you grow tired of your blankets and your bed, pull night's wide and starry brim down around your head! For who knows if the term wide open sky did not originally come from the wide hats under which 19th century poets slept as they wondered the land, or if instead it reminds us of the broad midnight heavens so familiar to ancient pilgrims. Thus, when you grow tired of the world, pull night's wide and starry brim down around your head! Bed down under a moonlit bluff, bed down in a south-facing fallow. There the ground is dry and hard and your bed of plants smells pungent beneath your head as crickets sing. Above such mattresses, the stars shine brightest and the full moon glows like the window of a dark ship on the Black Sea. I lie in the grass recalling the names of constellations. Once I knew them all and had learned them with delight, but now I see it was not necessary. It is good in youth to know much about stars – though not only about stars – but even better is, in old age, to knowingly forget unimportant external things. To keep only what is meaningful – only what nourishes us inwardly. Just as the names of animals and plants are not what is most significant about them, neither are the shapes of age-old constellations that which is most important about stars. It is enough to lie beneath them, to graze your thoughts on verdant pastures and water your deeds at clear streams as the words of an evening song of thanks flit like silver swallows upon your lips.

So as not to discourage you from nocturnal journeys, my chilly little brother, I will comfort you. There are other ways to sleep beneath the starry heavens that are just as beautiful! Under the open sky I wake often to check the midnight breezes and scour the sky for clouds. The calls of

night birds wake me too. I sleep lightly under the open sky, like an animal prepared for anything, ready to flee in search of shelter from rain, storms, danger. Remember that the best place to sleep is in the hay – amidst dried grasses. Perhaps that is because our early ancestors hearkened from the sultry eastern steppes. We are the brothers of horses. Moonlight streams into the old hay shed. The fragrant warmth of a fresh night wafts through the air. You lie in the depths of your sanctuary. If there is someone to place a warm arm around your neck before you sleep, all the better. So much the better, my sensuous little brother. Hay sheds: the most wonderful confluence of nature and civilization, grass and ingenuity. Unsurpassable. I lie there exhausted and satiated. All that was meant to happen has happened, the day is finished. A last gentle burp and the heavenly taste of the departing day, with all its blessings, drifts through the body. The balanced taste of garlic and chocolate. Two seemingly disparate smells blend silkily together. Garlocolate.

I lay and I listen – is someone dancing outside in the dark? No, it is only the grass running before the wind. Strange that I do not believe in grass fairies, for all that is necessary for their birth and dance lies here at hand, beneath the stars of the heavens. Perhaps I do not believe in them simply because I cannot see them, just like without a radio receiver, I cannot believe in radio waves that travel around the earth, inaudibly roaring even through the silence of my moonlit hay shed. After that I rest without thoughts, heavy with fatigue, as warm and hefty as pewter. I can no longer move my arms, sleep is a light death. From out of the forest, night, the dark sister of time, enters the hay shed. She lays down beside me and presses close, I can no longer hold my eyes open. In vain do I remind her of the Prophet's words – that prayer is better than sleep. She laughs, her warm body fills the depths of my sanctuary. Her kingdom draws ever nearer, the realm of sleep, the realm of sleeep, the realm of sleeeee...

GIUMALĂU

THE SMALL MOUNTAINS. They stand upon the left Bank of the Golden Bistrița River in an area once called Bukovina and are composed of two parts: Giumalău and Rarău. The most stunning and well-known place here is a remote stony fortress, a craggy pinnacle of white limestone called Pietrele Doamnei or “Lady’s Stones”. It reaches skyward, high above the surrounding forests and grazing lands, feet planted among the rarest of mountain grasses. Once at its base I gathered yellow oat grass, beautiful and silky.

The Rarău Mountains were where I first saw people making homemade lime. A group of old men stoked a blazing kiln – a devil’s forge – cracking off chunks of limestone and baking them in the fierce heat. Sweat poured off them as they merrily worked the bellows, and all around the limekiln, nothing but grass and forests – inspiration for the rest of the world’s factories.

A few kilometers on, a group of monks mowed grass amid trees and meadows. Young and old, dressed in black, with tall hats and coal-black beards. Sweat poured off them too as they brandished their scythes, their dark cassocks fluttering behind them. A short way on, there stood a small solitary monastery, and the sound of orthodox chants floated through the still air.

In a merry little hut beneath Lady’s Stones, wine flows to the spluttering of a kerosene lamp and a voice there sings long into the night. Drinking is not frowned upon in Romania: it seems moderation is the law of the land, often reinforced by grave-looking constables in faded blue uniforms, though they are not the real reason for restraint. After all, beată – the Romanian word for an inebriated woman – is nearly identical to the Latin word, beata, meaning a blissful woman. Thus, blissful women sing among the Giumalău Mountains as Lady’s Stones gleam softly in the moonlight.



CĂLIMAN

THE SULFUR MOUNTAINS. Enormous, tree-covered, volcanic, deserted. There is not so much as a single tourist cabin. Vultures wing aloft in the pale firmament above. Wildly jagged cliffs stand at crater's edge – igneous apostles. Below, ferocious dogs guard mottled herds. They surround the pilgrims, their teeth snapping close. In vain, you brandish your stick – it only makes them. A shepherd boy of about five years old runs towards you. He kicks the dogs who turn and slink back to their herds, tails between their legs. At crude sulfur mines, you collect the yellow brimstone that lies strewn upon the ground. Its smoke will come handy when you tell your tales of hellish Călimanic adventures. Over a century ago, the borders of Hungarian Transylvania, Austrian Bukovina, and Romanian Moldavia met here in Căliman. Even today, there is evidence of Maria Theresa's influence alongside the remains of World War I era military trenches. But peace has long reigned in this region, and the Căliman Mountains now belong to a single country. Grassy ridges and rugged cliffs stretch on gently till they are lost to sight at the horizon. Vast expanses, wild horses, and gentle breezes.

We arrived from the north, passing around the crater and across Negoii peak. You must have your own food and bedding wherever you go there. Though once we dined with some shepherds on mamaliga – thick, rustic cornmeal porridge and sheep curds – washing it down with amber schnapps. Enormous fleas leaped from their woolly coats, but it would have been impolite to show our surprise, and anyway, the little creatures vanished





swiftly enough. But the taste of yellow porridge and amber schnapps will stay with us forever. What more could you ask, little brother?

We endured many storms in Căliman, which clouded trout-filled streams. But at long last, we descended from the ridge, climbing down into the long lvy valley and the villages of upper Mureș. We had grown wild and hungry in those mountains and were in need of a good shirt-washing and fingernail trimming. The feast in Wallachian Hot Springs was nearly at hand.



THE GAME OF THE EMERALD VOID OF TIME

For thou art man and not God, thou art flesh and not of angels. How couldst thou remain forever in this state of grace being neither an angel in heaven nor the first man in Paradise?
I am He who comforteth the downcast with gladness.

*From the third book of Rhenish traveler
THOMAS à KEMPIS (1379 – 1471)*

That day is sure to come, as unexpectedly as a lone swan appearing upon the northern horizon. Rare, snowy white, it flaps its wings slowly – far has it yet fly. An other-worldly day, unburdened by time. The longer you sweat and toil beneath the weight of time, the greater the certainty that the day will soon arrive. Days when I feel the ponderousness of time and my own diminishing vigor are days when I strain and struggle. Time and a stallion's strength are the hounds that drive me. I feel I must see everything, climb

each craggy slope, ford each rushing river, explore each winding valley, and record it all in my memory. I trudge arduously through the mountains. The joy I feel is not silent and knowing, but fierce and animal. On such days, I yearn to try all that life has to offer. To rob my own father. To give all my money away to Gypsies. To make love to four girls at once. To have all my teeth knocked out. To kill whales in the South Seas, to freeze my feet off on Lake Athabasca. To dance myself to death, to burn at the stake for the salvation of all. A thousand seductive things. And if I knew I could resurrect the dead, I would even kill someone – run them through, just once in my life. But instead, I stumble through the mountains as my life forces become slowly spent. Let these secrets remain between us though, my tender-eared brother, they are not truths for everyone's ears!

On the evening of such feral days, I stink of sweat, I cannot eat for sheer exhaustion, even sleep is long in coming. Once in the Carpathians years ago, I had come to the end of my strength. I could not take another step, so complete was my fatigue. Earlier that day, I had spent hours climbing sheer hillsides without so much as a bite to eat, my heavy pack strapped to my back. Suddenly, I felt my legs turn to lead, lactic acid infused my muscles, and I collapsed. I used to laugh at tales of heroes who, for their wounds or exhaustion, crawled theatrically toward an unattainable aim, only to collapse forever a meter before it. That evening I was no different from them. My pack lay over me, and I could not move. I lay there for a very long time. But those are not the days when a swan appears upon the northern horizon.

Swan days are different. I remember one of them in the Eastern Carpathians. I was alone with three sun-filled, jubilant, weary, feral days behind me. I had not met a soul the entire time. It was the end of September and the shepherds had already led their flocks down into the valleys. After dark on the third day, I descended below the pastures to find shelter beneath a tree. Morning broke foggy and rainy. My back was sore, the weather was dismal and cold. The smoke from the fire stung my eyes, my body was

wearily from the strain of the previous days and my clothes were damp and sticky. I felt so miserable, I could have cried. But I had to keep going, the rest of my holiday had been planned out precisely. I was suddenly overcome by utter fatigue, more emotional than physical. Another day of lugging myself toward empty and futile goals! On long journeys, ambivalence is dangerous and indecision can be fatal. I stood there blankly. My very being rebelled against leaving, I shook with cold and feebleness. Then I looked up and noticed a black hut standing in the fog. I must have missed it in the dark the evening before. Or had a ghost built it over night? Like Muhammad in his visions, I did not know who was tempting me – was it a good or evil spirit? I drew closer, the hay shed was open. I felt relieved, it was decided. Haste, that wily comrade, vanished and I saw a swan circling above the mountains.

I changed back into dry clothes, and with my sleeping bag, crawled into the darkest corner. Rain drummed on the roof, ancient rain. How sweet to listen to it while lying in dry hay. The first moment of bliss, and how many more awaited me that day! I felt completely and utterly safe, like a child, racked with fever, but cared for by his mother. My classmates were at school, and I lay unconcerned in the uncustomary light of my bedroom, ravaged by illness, yet in safety's arms, having vivid dreams that are not dreamt at other times. No ill could befall me.

Here, too, walls of wood, hay, darkness, warmth and wafting aromas took motherly care of me. The river of time flowed sweetly by, and its waters took on a new dimension. I lay there for minutes, then hours without moving, the rain drummed, and I sank into the fragrant emerald void. Oh, if death could be so sweet – a crossing into another state of consciousness. Strength vanished, I felt only the boundless yearning to rest. My body yielded to its bed. I lifted my foot, such heavenly exhaustion, a moment later I could no longer even lift a finger. The muscles in my face loosened, their ever-present grimace vanished along with the mask that accompanies people wherever they go. I fell freely into my subconscious. Wonderful

imagery arose there, but I had no power or will to capture it. My notebook and pencil were within grasp, but I did not have the strength to reach for them. I was incapable of writing down the thoughts that floated around me that others might experience my joy and assurance, however distantly. Such sublime happiness did not permit me to move, or draw my clumsy hand vacuously across paper. Perhaps later, once the body regains its loathsome, shallow cheerfulness, and the soul reclaims its bothersome busy-bee alacrity which drives a person incessantly and instinctively from nowhere to nowhere. The hours passed silently by, and my soul drank its fill at the wellspring. Such swan days must serve us long, for who knows when they will return again. Without their solitude, the soul would shrivel and dry, becoming like Zarathustra's empty sacks of flour which might still cloud the air with their dust, but would be of little other use. In those moments, I clearly sensed how most of what people do comes down to mere games and substitution. Everything is a game: work, hobbies, property, art, power. And people – small and self-important. Chubby little toddlers. Of all material necessities, being fed, warm and dry are all we need to survive. And that is all easily attainable.

Sometimes I slept; waking and dreaming merged together. This was no sloth or idleness. It was life to which belong both days of labor and days of rest. I floated in peace and immobility while still clearly realizing all that was going on in the cosmos around me. I lay in the silence of a Carpathian hay shed while one man somewhere shot at another. And throngs of people listened attentively to someone's speech. And a ship sank into the sea. And billions of spermatozoa surrounded their planet, their earth-like egg. And silent reindeer trekked across the tundra. And a grandmother in Malaysia told her little grandchildren fairytales.

Above the mountains, the day was passing. The hay shed was silent, and I, too, remained quiet and immobile. But life swirled in both of us; we were part of cosmic events. Love and extinction. Tears of joy and realization rolled down my cheeks. I had lain there the whole day without eating or drinking

anything, in the dark and the rain. Yet – tears of joy. An old friend of mine told me he had experienced his most profound moments of happiness in a concentration camp during the war. Absolute happiness. And I believe him. The deeper the valley, the higher the mountain, the greater the despair, the more dazzling the exultation. Gratefulness for small things. For all things. If great pain vanishes from the world, so too will great joy. If sin vanishes, so too will forgiveness.

It must have been afternoon, the rain had stopped. The hay shed shone. A fox crossed a corner of the meadow, hunting for voles. It leaped, straight-pawed, into the air, landed, and with a shake of its head went round the other side of the shed. I was beginning my return to the world. The sun was pulling me back. It gleamed through the roof between shingles. My lethargy was dissipating. Thousands of grass seeds and grains of dust danced in the glowing rays, life swirled and turned to gold. As is written in the Vedas, “The sun is the soul of the world.” Fragrant mists rose from the meadows, and the sun awoke amorous fantasies. Pray that the darkest fantasies never come to pass – they would destroy body and soul. I had almost awoken. The swan day had come to an end. I gazed at the evening heavens. Yellow, green, and red clouds scudded swiftly westward. Island-like. Crete, New Guinea, Iceland. Painted monsters. They glided across the, where a high wind blew. How fresh and crisp it must be. To fly with it! Rush with it! How fast would I have to run to feel warm in it? Because the faster I race downhill on a bike or skis, the chillier I feel. And how about a meteor blazing through the air? At what speed do cold and heat meet in perfect balance so the aeronaut can sit astride it in comfort?

The game of the emerald void had come to an end. Night had arrived, the swan had disappeared beyond the horizon, and the day was at its end. A blessed day and a blessed game. Vital and purifying. The wellsprings were replenished, the soul cleansed, the body resurrected. It had revived from its daylong stupor like an Indian saint waking in an underground grave. A moonbeam passed through the roof, piercing the darkness. Silver-gleaming.

I suddenly felt my old stallion-strength returning. The yearning to press onwards. I knew that both were wonderful and human: animal strength and clear consciousness. I also knew that the morning after such days would find me once again prepared to bear cold and heat, hunger and thirst, ready to ford treacherous waters, give all my possession to Gypsies, make love to four girls at once, burn at the stake for all of humanity. But let the secret of the emerald void, which breaks time's reign of terror and snaps the futile whip of haste, remain between us, my tender-eared little brother. That truth is not for all!



CEAHLĂU

THE WHITE-FLECKED MOUNTAINS. These are a wild belt of conglomerate mountains. They stand above the mild waters of the Golden Bistrița River from whose waters you scoop fresh zeal for sheer climbs up mountainsides and green-white mountain gorges. Their peaks, blanketed in green, mossy plains and dark scrub-pine thickets, are beautiful to behold. But most stunning of all are their white cliffs. Not hillsides or slopes, but precipices hundreds of meters high. Around their brinks, edelweiss and mouse-ears reach into the abyss like the hanging gardens of old. But August is not the best month for botanizing in Ceahlău, for the Moldavian sun has singed most of the color out of its plants. As you walk along the brink of a precipice, a raven takes flight beneath your feet. It beats the air with its wings and is suddenly above the abyss, taking with it the whirl of its plumage. Many such dark-winged birds soar above the white cliffs.

Toaca Peak, a towering, nearly two-thousand-meter-tall summit, resembles the gleaming crown of “the olden king of Moldavian Carpathia,” as Romanian bards have called the Ceahlău Mountains. We have trekked across them from north to south, and from south to north. They are not as deserted as other Romanian ranges. On folk holidays, people climb all the way up to their myth shrouded plains. We had very little to eat once, the tiny shop at the foot of the mountains was closed. From sacks that stood





open before the shop, we scooped rough cornmeal and begged a farmer for some drippings: meat baked in lard, garnished with dead fly larvae. We cooked mamaliga on an open fire, greased it with the fatty, fly-infested residue and disinfected our stomachs in the Eastern fashion: with firewater. Life in the Ceahlău Mountains was good and healthy.

If you are not strong of lung or sure of foot, do not go Ceahlău. The mountains are exceedingly steep from all sides, perhaps the steepest in all of Romania: above the waterfall of Duruitoarea, hikers wept for sheer exhaustion.

OBCINA MARE

THE MONASTERY MOUNTAINS. This range lies in the easternmost Carpathians where three “obcinas”,

or mountain ridges, rest side by side. Obcina Mare – the Great Ridge, home to the largest number of monasteries – lies furthest eastward. At the foot of mountains only twelve hundred meters tall, painted monastery churches have stood for half a millennium. Deep in the ancient Muntenian principality of Moldavia, long dead heroes, rulers, voivodes, and princes rest beneath the gravestones of forest-fringed orthodox monasteries. Everything about them is simple and modest. Clear brooks flow near verdant forests. Enter any church and thousands of faces stare down at you from the walls – saints and sinners painted in colors that neither fade nor tarnish. A dusky and secretive world. Faces appear on the outside walls of churches too, shining with bluish hues beneath an azure Moldavian sky. Saints gaze with dark, glittering stares, their beards woven reverently like braided loaves. Sinners and saint-slayers all have small pointy noses. Evil Turkish soldiers had their eyes gouged out by pilgrims long ago. Others, too, have carved into the old paintings. Ever since 1775, when the Sublime Porte ceded northern Moldavia to Maria Theresa who renamed it Bukovina, Austrian pilgrims have travelled to those forest monasteries and carved their names barbarically into the painted walls. Thousands of ornate signatures can still be seen today. Years there are also different, counted from the creation of the world. Thus 1981 is said to be the year five thousand seven hundred and forty-one.





If you ever venture into those lands, little brother, visit the monasteries by mountain route. The journey from Putna to Sucevița monastery will take several hours, and you will have to cross a fir-covered mountain ridge where heart-leaf oxeyes shine from green riverbanks. The path on the rim becomes nearly indiscernible, grouse fly from thickets, the smallest chick taking last to the air. Great silver beeches of Bukovina. From Sucevița to Moldovița, you must cross the main ridge. Forests rise up to the mountain rim on the eastward side, the west-facing slopes are a mix of trees and grass. Do not forget that most beautiful is the descent to the monasteries

HĂȘMAȘ

THE DAPPLED MOUNTAINS. White limestone cliffs, dark pinewood forests, fresh sheep pastures, the Hagymás of old Hungary. Lonely Rock, the most famous landmark, towers above a wooden tourist lodge, the only one far and wide. At the foot of the mountains near the little town of Balan, people mine for copper, but the area is otherwise deserted and grows ever more so the further north you travel. Most wild and beautiful it seemed below Black Hășmaș Peak where great white bluffs, precipices and rock pinnacles soar above sweeping pastures. Dogs and shepherd children race from ramshackle huts to beg for whatever we give them. The sweets they so desire are a long way off.

Crossing the Hășmaș Mountains, we continued northward for about a day from Pingarați Pass, which is spanned by the road to Bicaz, without knowing if we'd entered the Giurgeu Mountains or not. There seemed to be fewer sheep and more cows, and streams of water trickled down wooded slopes more frequently than in the southern Hășmaș. There were also fewer pine forests on mountain rims and broad clearings were commonplace. Gradually dissipating forest paths led us southward and roundabout from a tributary of the Bicaz River to the enormous cliffs of Little Suhard Mountain. Above crystal clear brooks: bluffs of meadowsweets, giant fir trees,





nocturnal fires and teas of seven rare Hășmaș herbs. Evenings were silent despite the proximity of Bicz gorge.

Bicz Gorge is unparalleled among Romanian gorges. Plunging hundreds of meters between sheer limestone walls, its floor is barely wide enough for the pure water that bubbles at its bottom. Even the road that runs through it had to be cut into the rock in places. The busy route disturbs the gorge's beauty, but peace reigns in adjoining canyons where white waterfalls rush above great watery pools. Below Bicz and on its eastward end, the narrow Șugăul Gorge opens up on the left, its wooden footbridge dangling dozens of meters above the water. The cliff walls and flora of Bicz Gorge have no equal: it was there I collected some of the rarest European bluegrass for my herbarium.



THE GAME OF AMBROSIAL MEMORY

There are three things most beautiful in all
the world, and the first of these is scent.

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD
7th century AD

This is a game of kings, little brother – once born without it, you can never learn it, if it is yours from birth, it is yours forever. Sensing an aroma you have not smelled for a quarter-century transports you straight back to the journeys of yesteryear, to the girls of your youth, to wooden shacks long turned to dust, to river banks of old. It is as if you had left them but an hour before. Memory of scent is the clearest, deepest, and most animal of all. Perhaps only useless, passionate people possess it. Compared to scent, our travel diaries, memories, pictures, and collections are blurred and sightless. Concealed beneath our crown, vault of primeval smells, lie tucked away all the perfumes of places we have ever visited, fragrant details we have

long forgotten, waiting for the wind to catch them up after decades of dust and sleep. Therefore, sniff to everything, my squeamish little brother. Wrinkle not your nose, complain not of foul odor. All things are fragrant if you wish, even the most odious. Put your nose to anything and take a breath. Your nostrils smart at the scent; it rises up into your head, never again to be forgotten.

That which you grow accustomed to in your youth is ambrosial in old age. Kings should sprinkle all newborns, children, milk, gruel, clothes, and toys with their odor, whatever it may be. They would gain a devoted nation. All the hive would smell as one, all would love their ruler's scent. Therefore, sniff to everything, little brother. Soon nothing will disgust you, and that is important. World and people will spread out before you as an array of different aromas. It is good that each person has his own smell and unbearable to drown out one's scent with artificial odors. All Americans smell alike, their toxic aftershaves deprive them of their individuality. An Eskimo kiss is a beautiful thing – man and woman breathe in each other's smells. How diverse and wonderful the Eskimo scent must be, so deep and full, when they say that all white men – even unwashed hunters and woodsmen – smell of flowers.

Put your nose to everything. How wonderful that each girl has her own bouquet of smells. You will never forget the aroma of her secret places, the milky scent of thousands of fragrant little creatures. There is no greater death than to be repulsed by your lover's scent. Smell is of utmost importance in marriage too. A thirty-year-old lecture by my zoology professor, Mr. Komárek, still sticks in my mind. The old man warned against marrying a girl whose scent did not please or excite us. Sight is not important. Beauty passes and we cease to notice unseemly things. Hearing, too, is not a decisive factor. We can grow accustomed even to a squawky voice. Touch is deceptive. Love makes what is rough tender. But smell cannot be deceived. What is unpleasant the first night becomes repugnant until death, we never grow used to it.

But enough, I am skating on thin and distant ice. Let us return to our pilgrim games! The game of smells is perfect for when you travel. You can use it to recall bygone lands. Have you forgotten what the Sázava River looked like when you were nine years old? Do you search your memory, vainly trying to conjure up visions of the past? Try letting three earthworms die in a matchbox, then open it two days later. That will do the trick! The unmistakable, heavy aroma (call it that, my squeamish little brother!) will evoke that July day of forty years ago. Suddenly, you remember everything. You wore red trousers, a white bird soared above the river. Willows swayed in the current, a barbel leapt above the water's surface, a raftsman called in the distance. You were sorry for the earthworms that died, forgotten in the little box. If only their lives had ended in a better death – like at the end of a fishing line. One sniff and you remember it all: how wide the river, how slippery the stones. Someone ambling along the further bank. Lunch time, and the linden blossoms fading. The smell of tar and fish in your nostrils. The yearning to stand barefoot on a boat and sail off into the distance. What a remarkable eulogy to long dead earthworms. They did not die in vain!

Therefore, smell everything, little brother, your life will be the better for it!



GURGHIIU

THE HUNGARIAN MOUNTAINS. This little-known belt of mountains is nestled among the volcanic peaks of the inner Carpathians. At the foot of its highest summit, Seacă Mare, lies a steep, wooded crater, its northward face perforated by a rush of water. Amid the vast ragwort-juniper expanses of this dry mountain, stands a royal hunting lodge with pink ottomans and decorative, castellated flasks. It towers on stilts high above stunted scrub-pine thickets, windows gazing out in every direction in search of game.

The ridges of the Gurghiu range are dry and ungrazed. Their blanket of pine forests, snow-colored false hellebore, sky-hued adenostyles and mist-shrouded, water-worn roads are reminiscent of the Krkonoš Mountains. Yet not everything about them is similar. Forest tracks are deserted here, unused by people. Only an occasional musky pile of bear droppings, indigo from beetle shells or blueberries, can be found lying in their midst.

Fresh spring water pours out of the Bucin Pass, and the forests above appear tall and welcoming, full of dry wood and mushrooms. The track to the



south along the ridge is poor, and eventually vanishes for disuse. To reach the Harghita Mountains, you must scrape your way southward, compass in hand, through rugged, bewildering forests. It is a strenuous journey and so easy to become lost.

The people dwelling at the foot of the Gurghiu Mountains are almost entirely Hungarian-speaking. These Romanian Magyars, or Székelys, sit at their potter's wheels, turning out beautiful pitchers and cups that they decorate with flowers and doves to sell at markets all across Romania.

Snug in a salt karst lies the saline Ursu Lake; run around by a double fence, it bears little resemblance to the surrounding wilderness. Its buoyant surface is dotted with people floating like bloated, unsinkable frogs, heads propped up on boards to keep them from sinking as they sleep; the briny water grows hot in the sun.



HARGHITA

THE DARK MOUNTAINS. Between the baths of Harghita and the Mădăraș mountain lodge lie deep black forests, the splendor of the range. They stand like dark parapets, black horizons, shadowy forest fleece, unbroken by clearings, untouched by the woodcutter's hand. Forest hillslope fens are deserted and desolate, not many people hike the Harghitas. Ridges are grassy, sheep-trampled pastures, and the eighteen-hundred-meter-high peak is blanketed in bog bilberry, juniper, and moss.

Further to the north, the mountain ridges dwindle and lose their dark pall. But they remain trackless until reaching the neighboring Gurghiuș. Stones here are dark, too – testimony to the volcanic activity that formed this Carpathian belt.

The baths of Harghita are surreal. Lost amid mountains and forests, they undoubtedly remember better days. I climbed out of the valley with the mists of evening, and what I saw seemed dismal and strange. Ivory sentinels stood guard, kaolin mountains, from which water streamed into viscous alabaster lakes where the full moon shone. To and fro along muddy forest



tracks, bristly old men and wide-hipped grandmothers hobbled toward rust-colored springs where they set about exuberantly healing their ills. Many headed straight for two tiny shacks that had been erected upon a muddy meadow. I peeked in. By the light of a kerosene lamp, people in hats and headscarves sat within a dry pit, dug stairwise into the ground, sighing and groaning with relief. The stench of sulfur permeated the shed, fumes that emanated from the depths of the earth. That, I imagined, is how a medieval plague pit must have smelled. The Harghita baths have no resident doctor, the grubby man I took to be a shepherd was, in fact, the facility's administrator. Everyone there spoke Hungarian, their Romanian was not very good. The Harghitas are home to more Székelys, Romanian Magyars, than ethnic Romanians. Children in the baths greeted me with the unfamiliar word "choklom", and when I responded in Romanian, they ran timidly away. The last building at the forest's edge was a small wooden church with an organ. Hungarian all, inside and out. Not a Romanian word to be seen.

BODOC



THE CRATER MOUNTAINS. At the utmost southern edge of the volcanic Carpathians, two most remarkable Romanian craters rise into the sky. One is awash with pure lake water, the other is a mighty fen. The former is called St. Anne Lake. A small stone church is the only manmade structure at its crystal waters. The crater looms hundreds of meters above the Olt valley, and the view from the rim down into its center is breathtaking. The lake has two faces: on hot summer days it is aswarm with people, but in the evening it grows completely deserted, mild and clean. You can even drink its water; after all, the pilgrim has not much other choice. Forests of pine, beech, and birch descend from the crater's rim down to the water's edge. Peace and quiet wherever you look. Not far from where we stood, a great bear came out of the forest. It lumbered slowly along the shoreline in search of tidbits left behind by visitors. We drew close to him, but he did not retreat; at dusk, he was king of St. Anne Lake. Those of us who hid our packs from him fearfully in trees lost all our food: he returned at night to pull them down and eat our bread.

A few hours' journey hence, the baneful mountain of Puciosu rears above the lonely hamlet of Toria. Toxic gas streams from rocky fissures and small caves, yet only one such grotto has been marked. A weathered old sign notifies travelers of the dangers of venturing into the sulfane-breathing mouths: certain death. No other such vents have been marked despite more poison gas escaping here than in the fabled Neapolitan Cave of Dogs. Beyond the entrance, a candle's flame goes out as if snuffed by Satan. In a nearby beechwood forest at the foot of a craggy old sulfur mine, another surprise awaits. Dozens of birds lie dead at the bottom of a damp ravine. Having flown too near the toxic openings, they were knocked clean out of the air. A gloomy and dismal place indeed. Death wherever you look – bleached pine needles, rotten birch twigs, talon-like, the snarling corpse of a wildcat. In most countries, an area like this would be turned into a nature reserve, but here only two words mark the spot, carved crudely in Magyar into a beech trunk: *madarák temető*, bird cemetery.



THE GAME OF DIAMOND-EDGED HEALTH

There are five things that ensure mental
and physical wellbeing. Exercise.
Garlic. A clean conscience. Moderation.
And faith in one's own health.

A shepherd from the mountain plains of Ethiopia

A pilgrim on his journey, like an animal in the wild, is safe from illness, for no ailment can harm him. What's more, any malady that afflicts him at his departure is sure to abandon him soon, washed by the first rain into a wayside ditch, and left to fade powerlessly in the distance. Wandering the wilderness has healing powers. It is a peculiar game, indeed. The less you worry about your health, the more indomitable and diamond-edged it becomes. You can walk for weeks in wet clothes and shoes without the slightest runny nose. At night you may shiver with cold, but in the morning, you are as fit as a fiddle. At home, it would be the death of you.

Constantly monitoring yourself, swallowing pills and going for massages, you inevitably fall ill. But there is no time for illness when you travel, so you simply pay it no heed. Perhaps one day, when we shed our mortal coil and God holds us in the palm of His hand, we will come to regret all of that heedlessness, but until then, farewell first aid kits and soap and towels and band-aids and snake repellents and tissues and pills and enemas. We can go further without you. Yet this is no gambler's game. On the contrary, far from civilization's medicines and bandages, we are less rash, more cautious, and entirely self-reliant. Your health and wellbeing depend solely upon you. If you break your leg, bandages and medicine are far away. If for pride or ignorance, your kidneys catch a chill, there is no one to sympathize with you or give you the cure. Respect your health, but do not fear for it.

You need it for the journey, that is why you have it. Knowing you must not get sick, you don't. A diamond-edged game.

Health and hygiene are sisters – good servants, but bad masters. Just as worrying too much about one's health is counterproductive, being overly sanitary is also harmful, my squeaky-clean little brother. A reasonable amount of dirt is good for one's health. Those who live too cleanly fall to the first illness they encounter. To gain the proper immunity, you must sometimes scrounge for food in garbage cans. And drink with sheep from rivers. And lick dogs. And not throw away bread that has touched the station floor. Then nothing will kill you. For cleanliness is relative, a graded scale from the toxic sterility of fretful ladies who sanitize the most luxurious of Paris hotel rooms to the Nenets of Siberia who, always healthy, dwell in muddy yurts among the remains of rotting fish. I am somewhere in between. The Nenets could not tell me apart from a starch-collared senator, and the senator, upon meeting me at my journey's end, would think me a Nenets. Hygiene is viewed differently from culture to culture, custom to custom, era to era, upbringing to upbringing. Western culture is no panacea. Just think of the barbaric custom of storing snot in a cloth in your

pocket. Nothing tops the good old Asian method of smacking your phlegm on a rock. There, all taken care of, all clean. Before your journey, have your teeth fixed and clip your fingernails. On your voyage, have plenty to drink, urinate regularly, and do not sit your sweaty buttocks on the cold ground. Garlic and a bit of alcohol will clean you out inside and send any little germs scurrying for cover. Do not weigh your pack down with nonessentials, my hygienic little brother! One bar of soap for all is plenty, river sand is nearly everywhere. And a single toothbrush. Forget about combs, towels, mirrors, tissues, and razors. Beards itch only between the eighth and ninth day. And bring no extra clothing either. Wash your clothes the ancient way, on warm river rocks, the day your shirt stiffens and sticks greasily, unbearably to your back. The day you begin to disgust yourself. The day your own billy-goat musk engulfs you, and you can no longer resist a bath. Here, too, applies that if you wish to feel gloriously clean and refreshed, you must first be as greasy, dirty, and sweaty as a buffalo. The dirtier you are, the greater the relief of the wash. All itches, bumps, exhaustion, and rashes vanish after a bath, it is that simple.

I still remember the most delightful wash I ever had. Heavily flea-bitten, I had thumbed a ride from the eastern reaches of Slovakia to the town of Liptovský Mikuláš. My shirt was ripped half-way up my back, and the heat, itchiness, weariness and stench sent me staggering. Suddenly, down a side street, I spotted the sign for a municipal bathhouse. A rather dubious looking place. And then a crazy idea occurred to me – why not take a bath?

Inside the building, clean, though antiquated, bathing chambers furnished with bathtubs, soap, and emerald bath salts awaited. I poured a bath. To its brim. There was the sparkling effervescence of bubbles and salts. I jumped in. It was like being struck by a fiery blade, unrepeatable. I roared. Hundreds of flea bites burned, but their sting was sweet. Like in lovemaking, when you cannot tell the difference between pain and pleasure. I roared with burn and bliss. My body flowed with sweat from the Slanské Hills, dirt from Branisko, fetor from Partium, fleas from Fričovce u Prešova. What a

glorious, intoxicating sensation, such blissful absolution of corporeal filth. The bath, a fiery confessional.

On the square, I bought curd cheese, garlic, and a new shirt – what incredible luxury. Outside the town, I bid my old shirt – aged, decrepit friend – farewell. I hate throwing old things away. It's like losing family.

Yellow with black stripes, it had journeyed with me for years, growing ever more threadbare with each journey. Happier thoughts now – garlic and fresh curd cheese. Heavenly, diamond-edged manna. I hitched a ride in a truck. Standing outside on the bed, I gulped in good health, cleanliness, and warm wind. A fragrant banner of garlic blew in the breeze behind me, wafting down the river Váh. All of Liptov Comitát and the Choč Mountains were swathed in that glorious metallic smell – my diamond-edged greetings to the northern Hungarian lands.





PENLEU

THE FORSAKEN MOUNTAINS. Crossing the Ivanet ridge with its salt springs, gleaming meadows, and Orthodox crosses – date bearers of genesis – we finally arrive in the most distant of Buzău mountain ranges. The village of Lopătari rests at the foot of the mountains. Everything about it is remarkable. Mailmen sit astride horses. Saltwater courses through riverbeds. Solitary fires burn for weeks and centuries on banks of forest brooks and amid barren pastures. They feed on gas rushing from the earth's core and the singed ground smokes sweetly. Not long ago, local children and a colony of ants discovered the blaze around which we cook and sleep. Just a few meters away, a black pool lies concealed amidst the undergrowth. From it, a tarry current pours into the river and another bubbles up from the river bottom. Natural oil seeps. Ten meters further on among some hazelnut bushes, the air is thick with sulfur, and alabaster water gushes from the mightiest of sulfur springs. Across the valley, strange cliffs loom; their stones, when thrown into flames, are set alight. The salt encrusted under-worlds of Meledic and Sărata, deep gashes in a great salt karst, present another miracle. Stones, branches and dead insects are coated in elaborate



briny blooms, white battlements of salt in a prehistoric canyon. A karst lake lies amid open plains, a fairytale realm among steepest Carpathians in a cracked and barren land.

Two crystalline rivers embrace the Penteleu Mountains – the Bâsca Mare and the Bâsca Mică: green waters, white bluffs, shallow pools. Stately beech trees stand amid the virgin forests of Viforîta surrounded by muddy bear tracks, tall fir trees, three-toed woodpeckers and ancient sycamores. A beautiful corner of the Carpathians indeed. Ridge-top sheep folds are enclosed by fences to keep wolves and bears at bay. Days go by without meeting a single tourist. Making camp above beautiful Red Lake, bear scaring in the woods, quiet singing deep into the night – and not a soul knows we are about. At the end of a day's march through grass, muddy beech forests, and damp pinewood thickets, we reach the end of the map with storms approaching. Drenched to the bone, we forge miserably onward not knowing if we have crossed into the Vranceas which must lie somewhere before us. Such days remain long in your memory, little brother, they are well worth the slog.



VRANCEA

THE PINEY MOUNTAINS. Sweeping, dwellingless. We crossed them without a map. Wandering high up at the boundaries of ancient principalities: Transylvania, Wallachia, Moldavia. Ridges stretch from horizon to horizon and beyond. We arrived by way of Benedec, a solitary Carpathian settlement with four wooden buildings, good silent people, and the scent of cows and bitter brook-side plants. Evening chill rises from Bâsca Mică's clear waters and creeps from dusky forests. No road leads there, but a mysterious forest train – tiny, brassy, ancient – makes the daily journey; it's like nothing you would ever see at home. The Vrancean forests must once have been heavily logged, today most of the hillsides are covered in pine trees, only on the Transylvanian side to the west can beech wealds still be found. Gora, the highest mountain far and wide, stands bestrewn with smooth white, stones and dark mountain pines. From its elevation of seventeen hundred meters, forested mountainsides are all that meets the eye. Even the distant peaks of Sboina, Coza, and Furu are Vrancea!



The only human dwelling about is a lighthouse-like weather station atop Lacauț peak where bearded sentries watch over fog and wind. They defy the Carpathian climate for weeks, baking their bread and telling of bear adventures. The last day. We descend blindly, hungrily through rain and fog. Ever westward. First down then up, along sheep tracks, through mud, scree, and thickets. We ask about a strange and distant city, Covasna, our salvation. Located in Hungarian Transylvania, most of its inhabitants still speak Hungarian. The shepherds only wave their hands far into the distance. At the fog-shrouded headwaters of Bâsca Mare, a woodcutter's son takes us under his wing. He leads us over hill and dale, forest and clearing, windthrow and wet thicket to distant Transylvania. At the foot of the mountains, he bows, turns, and sets off homeward, a little grey bird ascending the steep, wooded, Vrancean mountainsides. Out of the goodness of his heart, he took us all the way. Twenty long kilometers on foot.

CIUCAȘ

THE SCENIC MOUNTAINS.

The Green-White Mountains. The Juniper Mountains. The Rough-Hewn Mountains – all are fitting epithets. Not a large range, it can be crossed in a day taking Bratocea Pass eastward to the inner Eastern Carpathians. But don't forget, the Ciucaș extend westward too. There they are called Bobu, or – if I understood the toothless shepherd – Babeș. Once long ago, I hiked mapless across the mountains, foolishly thinking to arrive at Piatra Mare in the Bîrsei Mountains, the utter

edge of the Eastern Carpathians, by evening. Unaware that between us stood Gîrbovei, Doftanu, and Baiu peaks, I got no farther than the sheep-grazed, blueberry-covered western Ciucaș. Plovers hopped about plateau marshes, and the high plains stretched ever onward. I returned to the pass and headed eastward. That, little brother, is where the true Ciucaș lie! Curious, white, conglomerate cliffs shaped into craggy needles, clusters, labyrinths, and enormous rough walls. Wind-chiseled orbs and cornices: beautiful, decorative, white, steep, and overgrown with juniper, rosebay, and grass. Once I saw a similar landscape on a photograph from southern China. The Sphinx of Bratocea, God's finger: abloom with purple asters, it rises solitarily skyward at the boundaries of Wallachia and Transylvania. We look on as cold, murky





Transylvanian mists bear down on one side, and Wallachian sun illuminates the other. The Rock of Truth we call it. Its roots sink deep beneath yellow flowers of lady's mantel, the likes of which I have never seen before.

Upon Chirușca plain nestled among mountains, stands a hut so austere it brings one to tears – the hub of Ciucaș tourism. From there, we traverse grassy expanses, dells of white bulls, and dense beech forests high above Sheepfold Valley, finally arriving at Bonecuța pass. What distant reaches, little brother. The headwaters of the Buzău River, where picturesque Ciucaș Mountains give way to Siriu peaks, the westernmost summits of Buzău. Onward from there, few pilgrims venture. Only teams of oxen wearily haul great beech logs along miserable forest roads.



SIRIU

THE BUZĂU MOUNTAINS. Surrounded on three side by the lazy Buzău River, these mountains are entirely deserted aside from an occasional shepherd. Dog shacks and green alders stand near sheep tracks. Clear springs bubble beneath grassy ridges, forests turn to pastures, pastures to alpine mists. The basin between Tatar and Siriu peaks grows dense in wild, far-reaching forests. Above our heads a clearing stands, partially overgrown with beech so impenetrable, the path through it has become a tunnel, home to millions of aphids. With nowhere to turn, the mud of the path has collected animal tracks, one printed atop the other: evening hooves of sheep, nighttime paws of bears, morning prints of boots. Piles of bear droppings lie strewn across the path. Bear tracks lead us steeply upwards to the Sirian plains above, where we are met with astonishing vistas, grasses and pine groves. As we draw nearer Winds' Gate, trees diminish, grass remains. Beneath the windy portal lies Dry Lake, Icelandic in appearance, a little further on, silvery black Eagle Lake. At day's close, we find ourselves far below the ridge amidst silky fir-beech forests, dry and light. Towering trees, fast streams, scree and



enormous mushrooms. We burn entire tree trunks at our forest camp, then depart the mountains where pure Sirian waters join the lazy Buzău River. Fringe of hot Wallachian lands, we head for realms of mud volcanoes that lie not far away.

Do not omit this corner of the world, little brother! On drylands near the village of Picle, oil pumps rock like storks hunting with their beaks; no longer disrupting the view, they have become the landscape. Amidst a barren fallow, an alien planet: soft, salty sludge bubbles from the earth, pulsing to the top of muddy cones. Everything strangely colorful and bizarre, it is the only place in all Romania where salty nitre bushes grow. In the distance, feather grass waves upon steppes and air shimmers with heat.



THE GAME OF HUNGER

If one lives too long on cranberries,
he loses all self-assurance.

*From the journal of ataman Yermak,
16th century conquest of Siberia*

Do you hear the call, my voracious little brother? It is hunger's yearly cry. The hungry wolf-days of summer once again creep down from the mountains, days when you eat gratefully things you wouldn't touch in times of plenty. Do not complain, do not howl at the summer moon, it is you who put your head into the wolf's snare. With anticipation and anxiety, you wait to see if you will endure. You fear your appetite, yet are glad to be, if but slightly, more like the rest of humanity. To merge with the hungering millions. From the corner of your eye, you glimpse a life of scarcity. On journeys, eat to live, eat to be.

Without food, there's no going on. The traveler's pride – bearing ten day's rations on his back. A long, meaningful, but arduous game. Food

is heavy and cumbersome, it turns runny and goes bad. At our latitudes, victuals and not subzero temperatures, monsoons, beasts of prey, stormy seas, natives or disease, play the deciding role in summer journeys. On real expeditions – like to the Romanian Carpathians – where civilization is distant and people are days away, food is the most important of all belongings. It hangs like a specter over campfires and sunbaked marches, it is on everyone's tongue, and visions of bounty pass before all eyes as each imagines when next he'll eat his fill. Good luck depriving us of that. Food, like life, is a gift. How easy at home to go hungry for three days, I have tried it. Sitting by an illuminated window at the end of the second day, I feel no hunger as I grow sweetly weaker, inwardly brighter. My soul lightened of flab and lust. Fasting is liberating, releasing within different, better forces. Yet one might come to erroneously believe that matter, food, the senses hold no sway over him, he is their master. But no one is ever rid of the burden of the senses, no one can easily escape their embrace, and eluding one, you fall straight into the arms of the other. What we overcome in appetite, we make up in sensuality.

Three days of hunger in the mountains can be disastrous, however. Stumbling listlessly beneath a heavy pack, ears roaring, heart throbbing, legs buckling, you curse the day you set out on your journey. Things do not often become so severe, though. There is always something that can pass for food lying at the bottom of the pack – a few damp grains of sugar, some rancid bacon, the dusty remnants of oat flakes, a bit of slimy cheese, a cube of bouillon, some cocoa powder. A unique palate of tastes to be sure. Knead it all into a barely edible ball, and your life has been saved. You can survive another day. Travelogues from lands of adversity and hunger have always fascinated me, as have the diets of Eskimos, Nambikwara, and Tungusic Peoples. Everything, or nearly everything, is edible. As a boy, I learned to eat all things, determined not to be choosy or repulsed. I believed the Czech wilderness would feed me. I ate earthworms and dined on May bugs, and was able to discern which had lived on oak leaves, which on maple – maple

eaters were sweeter. I did worse things too, but quit soon enough because my classmates thought me disgusting. Try to survive on insects in Europe, and people think you're crazy. The habit of smelling and tasting everything has remained with me since, however, along with the realization that the European wild cannot provide for all the traveler's needs. It is too small and too inhabited a continent! Game, fruit, eggs, potatoes, fish, corn, squirrels, it all belongs to somebody. Mushrooms do not satiate, I'm sorry for frogs, and an omelet of worms and seagull eggs served with a bowl of water flea soup repulses most people. I began to eat more normal food. But each time I went a-roving, I played a different eating game. Sometimes gladly, other times not. A week long ago in South Bohemia: seven days on bread rolls and red, war-era jam. Out of necessity. Another week many years later: white south Slovak bread, bacon, and a few drops of plum brandy. What joy! Those fiery drops washed the dust off my soul. Another time in Polana: seven days on salami, which grew blacker each day; when it was blackest, I fell ill. I had no cure for my "salami sickness" until I reached Rimavská Sobota and drank plenty of bitters. Afterwards, the dresses of gypsy girls seemed brighter, more colorful, and their teeth gleamed like silver. But beware, little brother, a small amount usually suffices; the saints did not drink at all. Have you heard the Scandinavian saying about Saint Olaf, who felt as good without liquor as a drunken sailor felt with it?

But none of that is food fit for the roaming pilgrim. His provisions must be as light and dry as possible. Flour, rice, noodles. There was the era of gruels – corn, semolina, barley. The age of soy flour flatbreads. The years of oats. The months of rice. The weeks of noodles. The days of buckwheat. Always combined with salt or sugar. Dried apricots, ears of Chinese princesses, can be nibbled with anything.

A little food is all you need, carry only what is truly essential. Supper takes ten minutes to eat, but ten hours to bear on your back. Do not take food that is too tasty. Unpalatable, repetitive meals will help you eat in moderation. You'll eat only of necessity and hunger. That is good. You

didn't embark on your journey to experience gastronomical heights. You'll soon forget your misery and later take pride in it. Hunger will leave you. Knowing you ventured where you couldn't have with a knapsack heavy with victuals – that remains. What you see, you'll remember forever. But food, both good and bad, swiftly vanishes from memory. Fear not, little brother, you will still enjoy your meals. When the angel of hunger passes over you, each bite is blissful. Bread tastes like cake and water like wine – those are moments to savor. Celebrate, for you are living life to the fullest! Such a diet keeps you healthy and not overfed. Hardy as a wolf. You'll learn many things. That garlic goes with every meal. That cheese, the product of rotting milk, is always a welcome ingredient. That bacon is the only fat that doesn't spill. That teas from certain herbs force you often from your tent. That stale bread can be broken with a stone and boiled. That when staying with shepherds, you eat what they give you. That there are better provisions than canned food, which is heavy, cumbersome, full of water, expensive, unhealthy, and pollutes the forest. That russulas are the only mushrooms whose edibility can be determined by taste: if sweet when raw, they are not poisonous. That the simpler the meal, the more delicious it is. And hundreds more!

When I prepare food for my summer journeys, calculating sugars, carbohydrates, weighing out raisins, and measuring out powdered milk, I often think of a Romanian shepherd I met in the Godeanu Mountains, a wizened old man. Every morning at sunrise, he took his sheep to the summit of Gugu peak. In his hand, his day's provisions: a cold lump of corn mamaliga, food most of us wouldn't touch. That was his way of life. I think of him and feel ashamed. I yearn to roam the Southern Carpathians with a handful of flour and less food in my pack. And even if I removed most of it, I wouldn't die – hunger is not a hasty killer!

Once, as I sat on the shore of the Georgiiski Lakes in the Pirin, nary a bite to eat, the nearest settlement a long journey away, I thought of all those who had found themselves in much greater misery. In particular, Huc and

Gabet, two French missionaries, whose plight a hundred and thirty years ago was distressing indeed: “For two years we ate nothing more than black barley cakes cooked on fires of dried cow dung, drinking nothing more than salty tea and rancid butter. But even for that, we were grateful. God gave us strength and a joyful spirit. With His guidance, we safely crossed the terrible, barren lands of Mongolia, Manchuria, northern China, and Tibet.”

My thoughts on the two French friars, I folded my pinions and fell peacefully to sleep.



PIATRA CRAIULUI

THE LOFTY MOUNTAINS. Great limestone walls tower high, their summits lost to sight even when necks are craned. Glittering like a dragon's arched back, narrow, dagger-like, they color with the sun's celestial circuit from blazing white to bluish-white, whitish-pink to rosy white. Sun rays fall through alabaster cliff-face windows, water courses the bottoms of abyssal valleys, look again, and canyons are dry: the water has been swallowed up.

Piatra Craiului (Prince's Stone) is not one of Romania's uninhabited mountain ranges, but the number of pilgrims there is bearable. Hidden among perpendicular precipices to the west, mountain climbers dangle like cliff-hanging woodpeckers, here and there dotting the mountain's base, crosses with the names of those for whom the cliffs were too steep.

Travelers journey from afar to study the rare plants that grow there, Piatra Craiului blossoms like a botanical garden, colorful, glorious. Endemic to nowhere else in the world, *Dianthus callizonus* clings to juts and ledges in the cliffs. Hiking trails are not easily navigable, and it's best not to suffer from vertigo if you ascend Prince's Stone. In the span of a few short kilometers, you climb to a height of more than two thousand two hundred meters. Beware of storms on the ridge, it is so narrow there is often no place to cling. If you see a black cloud approaching, descend a little lower. Not too much, however, lest you draw close to unscalable precipices and chasms.

The further south you venture, the more deserted Prince's Stone becomes. It descends between branches of two rivers – the Dâmbovița and its slimmer sister, Dâmbovicioara, which rush through gorges. Northwards toward Brașov, the number of inhabitants grows.

If you plan to continue onwards to the Făgăraș, Romania's highest mountains, cut across the Iezer and Păpușa ranges, you will enjoy greater solitude, fresher winds, and broader plains.



BUCEGI

THE WHITE MOUNTAINS. There is not much to say about these mountains, little brother. I visited them twice over twenty years. They have changed. Once, they were a beautiful south Carpathian range – the first I ever laid eyes on – blazing white with cliffs and rare plants to make one’s heart glow. We arrived there by train, passengers sitting atop wagons like birds on the yardarms of ancient ships. The smell of flea powder – olden day Romania. We climbed through forests and over bluffs, ever upward to grassy prairies. There we frisked about like playful goats with only a thin blanket between us. At the foot of a cliff, an old shepherd lived with his two donkeys. On and on we climbed, stopping to milk some half-wild cows, alas to no avail. The sun sank rosy in the sky, and the scarlet rosebay bloomed bloody in its light. Limestone as far as the eye could see, rocky spires, chasms, precipices. The grasslands were bestrewn with flowers, and across a high rock, sphinx-like, skull-like, a blustery wind blew, making us giddy and wild.



Even then, the mountains were not wholly deserted, but we didn't mind. We passed through Howling Valley and arrived at an ancient monastery that stood before a cavern's mouth. Upon the white butterfly-like cliff, a wallcreeper flitted and climbed, feeding its young. Such a beautiful bird. I saw it again years later at Popovo Lake in the Pirin Mountains. Icons hung before the cave, along with wood paintings depicting all the horrors of hell. Monks, black and bearded, took charge of us, and we spent an anxious night in the Bucegi mountain monastery.

I returned to Bucegi years later but should have saved myself the journey. Cable cars, ski tows, roads, and power lines led up and down the mountains, a hotel and playing field stood where a pasture had once been. Cars and people wherever you looked. I never saw the old man from the cliff again.

The Bucegi are beautiful mountains abounding in rare flowers and great climbing opportunities, but if it's solitude you yearn for, plan your trip for the spring or autumn.



THE GAME OF WOLF BREATHS AND GAZELLE LEAPS

The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young hart.

Song of Songs 2: 8-9

There will come a day when your world turns dark. A day when your only wish is to stare into the dark gaping barrel of a machine gun. Ta-ta-ta! You hear no more. Swiftly, sweetly, contentedly, you crumple. Another bad day, another wish: to smash the crooked face of anyone who comes near you. For no good reason. Randomly. Those are not good days or good intentions. But you brought them on yourself, forgetting to breathe like a wolf and fly like a gazelle.

So run through the forests like a wolf, leap o'er the plains like a gazelle. You will smile, my chubby, lazy little brother. Without knowing why. You know nothing of the run! A forest sprint reinigorates the spirit and makes

the body fleet of foot! Hardest is to start. Pay no heed to weariness or ridicule. The worse things get, the better – the best of all principals. Just half an hour a day. You'd dawdle that away drowsily at home anyway. Morning or evening, winter or summer, rain or shine. King of the day is the run. And often the only proper thing you do.

Start in spring, early in the evening, lightly dressed and healthy. Run through forests or meadows. Or anywhere else, though forests are most beautiful: fresh honey air pours off their hillsides. Run lightly without panting, and you will hear the robin's quiet song. When short of breath, slow your pace but do not stop. To start, run but a few hundred meters, each time farther and longer. Soon you'll find it no good to run less than five kilometers. Try it three or four times, if you've done it right, you'll never quit. After such exercise, even the thought of tobacco smoke repulses the body – that deathly, sooty air. We suddenly realize what poison we voluntarily put in our lungs. If it was forced on us, we'd sue. Draw near a smoker and smell the bane and death of plague pits. But that isn't essential to the run. A beginner's sore legs soon grow strong, bringing with them an ever greater desire for fresh air, pure deep breaths, blissful, soul-cleansing exhaustion, power born of the run. Anger vanishes, envy flees, headaches disappear, and where have all ill wishes gone? Run to diamond realms, to Transylvania if you wish. But start, my lazy little brother! Running is beautiful, healthy, and accessible to all. You can be as poor as a church mouse and still partake of it. It is good in and of itself, as a means and an aim. In time you'll learn to breathe like a wolf and leap like a gazelle, and nothing will serve you better on your journeys. That is why I write this. But you must begin.

Let me describe, however imperfectly, one such forest jog. The most Mongolian of days: October sunshine on a dry and frosty late afternoon, first snow in north-facing gullies, paths softly blanketed in larch needles, otherwise bare, breezes in a cloudless sky. The most Mongolian of days. I run lightly, solitarily, joyfully. Paths and forest aisles lead uphill and down. At crossings, I take whichever track seems to beckon me on. I run incessantly

onward, neither swiftly nor slowly, like a lone wolf in the mountains of Sikhote-Alin. The trivialities of the day melt away, I see how artificial and irrelevant were the cares that troubled my soul. Throb, throb, throb. After three kilometers, October mountains are all I notice. The body is warm, its core fills with delicious air, and dry frost gently stings the nostrils. Quagmires stiffen with a light crust of evening ice. There is nothing more beautiful than running. Silverlike. Up a slight incline. I run lightly, and my thoughts are light and long. I forgive those who have trespassed against me (though they have usually done nothing wrong). I forgive myself for what I haven't done (and what I have failed to do). My thoughts are ever sweeter, soon I will think only of the run. Forest opium, perhaps it is a good thing.

Steep climbs are delightful. Why do people fear exhaustion so? There is nothing better than to fall wearily to the ground, little brother, entirely deserving of the day! Thud, thud, from its very being the body toils. The hill is steep, you pace your breath – every three steps, two, one. Your neck feels cool, and your back goes soft as if struck by an ax. Higher, higher! If the aim is distant, the body instinctively stretches its will to endure, it is more powerful than you had ever thought. But woe if you choose an aim too near, deciding then to run on. The body feels betrayed. Better indeed to set distant goals!

Summit claimed: oh, joy! Breathing slows. The forest is empty, the beech trees fiery. I raise my voice to shout gleefully across distant woodlands the only word I know. IMBARAHHNA!!! A word that means nothing.

Down from the peak and back to the valley. Feet flying, stride straining, rocks ricocheting, breeze blowing. After five kilometers you catch your stride, now you can run on and on. I've heard of Indians on Andean plains that run five hundred kilometers kicking a wooden ball. But ten is enough for me, even without a ball. I wish to find the balance between absolute rest and total exertion. For a life of running or sitting doubtless leads to the same end: a dying off or wearing down of limbs and joints. Therefore, run only as much as you enjoy, my silky little brother!

Back to the valley. Forest yellows no longer glow, they have gone out. Blackbird hour of evening. Black wings flit o'er fields to forests. Birds that waste their days in yards and city streets. At night they return to their birthplaces, like people before death, to woods they abandoned years ago for cities and an easier life. The first star appears and suddenly a tumult of bird calls. Sweat cools my back, and home is near, the best of all resting places. I lay completely still, absolutely limp, totally fulfilled. Euphoria of the forest runner. I melt with benevolence for humankind, with indifference to trivial problems. The deepest of wolf breaths – aaaaaahhhhh! With night's hour comes sleep, swift and healthy as a black bear.

And with morning's light? Most delightful of all! Yesterday's run and sweet exhaustion, absorbed during the night, have turned to jubilant vivacity. Assuredness, exuberance. I leap on high! I walk down the street, and it belongs to me. I smile nonchalantly at a beautiful girl I wouldn't have dared look at the day before. Yesterday, all I could have mustered was a weary, pitiful croak for which I would have gleaned but humiliating laughter. Today, I call to the dark-haired beauty with indifferent certainty, naturally, easily, merrily – and just like that, she's mine. Because girls love indifference, my timid little brother. It is our most powerful weapon. Indifference to rejection = self-assuredness. Indifference to illness = health. Indifference to humiliation = humility.

In a street nearby, a honey-haired girl gazes at a shop window. She stands confidently, regally as a queen. But today I step in close and kiss her on the back of her neck, right where the hair meets the head. I wouldn't have dared without my wolf-strength. She turns, her confidence vanishing. She was in the palm of my hand, but I fly onward swiftly as a gazelle. Hand over head, I wave to her, then spin round, crying gleefully the only word I know. IMBARAHHNA!!! A word that means everything.



IEZER-PĂPUȘA

THE STONEY MOUNTAINS. It is well worth cutting across this range to get from towering Prince's Stone to Romania's tallest summits. Winding, westering peaks, craggy grasslands, grassy crags stretching nearly two and a half thousand meters into the air: Iezer and Păpușa are as inseparable as their rains and mists. We climb out of the Dâmbovița River valley into eastern Păpușa, pitching camp on a steep hillside at forest-fringe and pasture-brink. Our fire flickers upon the only flat ground, and a three-legged dog limps about its flames. I can only guess who took its leg: bear, or shepherd: to put an end to its hunting. Timidly, it eats any leftovers it finds.

A new day and a new dog follows us across white, wandering plains. In the company of fog and wind, we stray together, Iezer-Păpușa does not have the thickest network of tracks and paths. Mists disperse with evening, and a pale sun sets behind southern slopes. We descend near the mountain of Piskanu and settle upon the most beautiful, windswept, alpine campsite. Tents stand among dry lake grasses and silver-flowering marshes. The quiet sound of falling water can be heard somewhere in the distance as mountains dim in the solitude. Dry rhododendrons crackling in the fire fill the air with smoky fragrance; there is no other wood to be found.

Early morning: most beautiful time of day. Two slender, snowy, flute-like clouds stretch across an azure sky. Gaze now, long and silent, into the red





and rising sun. Amidst a softly wafting breeze, the Leaota Mountains climb above a southeasterly horizon. Few have been mornings as beautiful as in the Iezer-Păpușa Mountains!

The view northward from Roșu Peak, highest mountain of the range, is striking too. There, the eastern Făgăraș stretch into the distance like engravings of ancient Asia, the only link between us and them: a narrow ridge, long and parched, which must be crossed. We rest near adders in the grass and drink from murky sheep pools, and at evening's fall, we find ourselves amid the peaks of the windy Făgăraș.



FĂGĂRAȘ

THE WINDY MOUNTAINS. Swirling mists roll up to the crests of northern Transylvanian scarps, dark and craggy. But gales from gently sloping green Wallachia thwart their passage over the ridge, sending them whirling down into the devil's kitchen, whence they came. Mist to the north, grass and craggy slopes to the south, a sharp boundary in their midst. The south-facing hillsides are abrupt too. A fallen bread loaf rolls and bounces wildly hundreds of meters down into the valley below before finding rest on the banks of Lake Valea Rea.

The days above Urlea waterfall: blissful, solitary, stormy – eleven tempests in a single day. Below us, wind, rain, and waves on the lonely waters of cliff-skirted Urlea Lake. Exquisite mountain plants grow wherever sheep cannot reach. All of the eastward lying Făgăraș are uninhabited, after departing Bratilei Saddle, we hardly meet a soul. Endless marching days, up mountains, and down again. Crosses for the lost and frozen stand upon



Făgăraș ridges where one had best not venture unequipped. To the west, boisterous foreigners appear in droves. Most of them see no more of Romania's mountains than the Făgăraș. Their numbers grow thickest at Bâlea Lake near a road that passes beneath the main ridge. Better to stay away from there, little brother! Descend instead to the deserted Carpathian valleys below Podragu Lake, hike through forests long into the night. Drizzle drips lightly among giant beech trees, rain falls upon old fir thickets. Though they emanate safety, finding a flat place to rest among them is nearly impossible. Somewhere far below, wild water thunders, unseen, only heard. You must push on, ever deeper into the valley. Light soil slips underfoot, sliding down steep slopes into muddy forest streams that rush forth from the mountains. Walking along Podragu valley at night without a light is foolhardy. But all the sweeter midnight's rest on the valley floor, all the sweeter morning's awakening.



THE GAME OF THE GRASS-SEEKER'S DELIGHT

THE MOST EXQUISIT COLLECTION? AN EMPTY WALL!

I Moi The Old, Chinese traveler

I Moi lived half a century before I was born and sister China was far too distant. My journeys had different aims: seeking out every species of grass. The most exquisite collection? All the world's grasses! As I traveled, I played the collector's game. Nearly everyone plays this game, for they wish to return home with souvenirs of their distant journeys. For girls, small things usually suffice: a feather, a picture, a leaf from a tree where they spent a magical night, a smooth river stone. The well of feminine joy has a different spring. Men are more thorough in collecting their souvenirs, poor souls! They do not realize what senseless burdens they bear upon their shoulders. They collect plants, animals, and stones; write in journals about caves, rivers, and castles; systematically explore mountains, valleys, and cliffs; photograph landscapes, buildings, and waterfalls; beg for brass spoons, cups, and flutes; sketch each lake, tree, and sheepfold; buy postcards, stickers, and walking stick tags; steal holy pictures from wayside chapels, pub signs, and sheep

bells. There are a thousand different things people collect, but they all share one attribute: once the tiger has been mounted, there is no jumping off. For me, it was Carpathian mountain grasses, a collection no worse than any other. It might have been far worse. Friends of mine collected trickier items: bats, traditional folk costumes, moldavite, firebugs, Gothic Madonnas – all heavier, larger, more expensive, more punishable things. But not even a fox barks for grass. Without knowing why, I fell in love with the different species. From one day to the next, from one night to another. Perhaps it was for their verdant simplicity, or because people can't distinguish between them and merely trample them underfoot, or because not even a fox barks for them. Or perhaps because everyone has to fall in love with something. As with all games of love, the beginning was the most beautiful. My haversack may have been 894 grams heavier – my botanical key wasn't light – it simply could not be helped. The magnifying glass, on the other hand, weighed only 18 grams. I needed to find, recognize, pick, dry and bring home several hundred species and subspecies of grass – enough for a beautiful collection, enough to provide me years of traveling. All it took was a bit of grass, an assortment of hay, and a foolish aim to open Czechoslovakia, and later Romania, to my wandering feet. I felt compelled to hike, crawl, wade and squelch through those lands, end to end. *Festuca rhaetica*: three-thirty in the morning on the steepest, rugged, grass-covered slopes of the Belianské Tatras. Predawn mists in restricted territory. Hidden from Mountain Rescue by fog and early hour, protected from precipitous plunge by untold yearnings for alpine grasses that grow there alone. Having an aim leaves no time for fear, you will not fall. And if you do, the plunge is sweet. But how long and difficult the search! Slimstem Reedgrass: June, soft mud squelches between the toes of sedge-sliced feet in Hrabanovská Černava Nature Reserve. The smell of flatlands. There, by the Elbe River, the narrow grass's only habitat. *Koeleria tristis*: Branisko, amid eastern Slovak mountains of fir, field maple, and pasturelands. A single limestone cliff is its home; the journey there is long and arduous. *Danthonia alpina*:

sunbaked slopes of the South Slovak Karst, white rocks, fragrant nights. There and nowhere else. *Melica altissima*: a day's march through the Inovce Mountains – beech forests, eagles, disused, overgrown paths, forest gullies. At the ridge's outmost edge, there is a place called Bezovce where grows the remarkable, enormous species of grass. *Poa riphaea* grows only in the Jeseníky Mountains, high above the valleys. With heavy heart, I pick one – in all the world, in all the universe, it grows only in Petrovy Kameny. *Pholiurus pannonicus*: strange habitat. I spent hours searching for the inconspicuous grass. First step, seek out a salt marsh, a few square meters of hard white soil amid the endless flatlands of Potisí. Hamsters dart about here and there. And it is boiling hot. I searched for hours before I came upon some white earth – no more hunting for Potisí salt marshes! I crawled about on hands and knees, no sign of the salt-loving grass anywhere. Three times I gave it up for lost, three times returned to the hunt. Then as dusk fell, I found a tuft of the strange grass in a horse's damp hoof-print, perhaps the last in Potisí, the only one in all of Czechoslovakia. Salt marshes grow fewer, cornfields more numerous. There are many other grasses, but I'll spare you, little brother. Countless journeys, countless joys. *Chrysopogon gryllus*: king of southern grasses.

What noble joy to stumble upon an unknown plant in wastelands on the opposite side of the world! If it's never happened to you, you can't understand. Such delight in winter to gaze at the world's beauty, pinned to white pages. A sweet-scented collection, proof those distant journeys were indeed meaningful. It is but foolish consolation, but collectors are fools who play foolish games. Play them too, little brother, each one so wonderful and silly, meaningful only unto itself. When the traveler opens his herbarium he sees not only *Trisetum fuscum*, but Seven Spring Valley and steep Holuby mine mottled white and green. He feels anew the closeness of past summer storms, the wonder of nights under Skalné Vrata – Cliff Gates. He turns the page. *Stipa borysthenica* brings back the softly flowering beauty of Danubian Lowlands, sandy prairies on the banks of a mighty river, the laughter of

a black-haired girl. In broken Hungarian, he had asked her the way as she stood outside her homestead. Pointing somewhere into the darkening flatlands, she spoke slowly, yet for him incomprehensibly. He looked at her lips but heard not what she said: barefoot she stood, a shirt and skirt over her bare body. Her sudden sensuality nearly brought him to his knees. The deserted, dusky yard smelled of warm rain, sandy dust, and straw. The stable doors were open wide. He stood silently, overwhelmed with desire. He knew how to ask the way, but asking to stay the night in Hungarian was beyond his skills. He asked in Slovak if she would let him stay the night, but she pretended not to understand. She laughed, it must have been written on his face. Captivated, she looked him over, said something, and gave another curious laugh. He walked away awkwardly, blinded with desire.

Today the traveler is much older. He knows there was no need to timidly take his leave of the solitary homestead. A realization now worth precious little. Gazing at the dry *Stipa borysthenica*, he would like to know, do the Hungarian girls still laugh so curiously in those parts?

Stop when you're ahead. There are two sides to the collector's coin, my insatiable little brother. Hear me out. Collections are a wonderful thing, they exact hard work and sacrifice, bring us joy, help us overcome misery on long journeys, and awaken sleeping memories. They are the first step to realizing there are better things than material momentos. But there is little worth in hoarding the world's treasures. If for too long one plays the collector's game with insectile exanimation and tedium, it goes rancid. It begins to stink and rot. It loses its original sense and becomes a burden, a tormenting ball and chain. Unable to survive, joy vanishes instantly. There can be too much of a good thing – a truth of the ages. This can happen imperceptibly. As the collection grows, it devours. The collector becomes its slave. No longer does he see the happy children that skipped among the grasses, but mere items for his herbarium. Distant are the winter evenings, distant the Hungarian girls! The collector has changed. He travels the countryside not because he is happy there, but merely to be there. Constantly cramming and stuffing. He

writes journal entries he will never read, takes pictures he holds dearer than the journey itself. If he runs out of film, he can no longer enjoy himself, the journey has lost its sense. No longer does he seek rare plants among cliffs, he has them in his garden. A collection of purchased or bartered alpine rock plants is more precious to him than mountain wildflowers. Perverse desire indeed to wish for the greatest number of plants in the smallest area. An Imperial flower state, pruned squadrons at attention. He fears burglars and poisons moles. How different it was those years ago when he returned from the Carpathians with his first saffron plant! Then, the spring rains still tidied up last year's grass and leaves, helped by little soil-dwelling creatures – bacteria. What is worse, he begins to believe in the uniqueness of his collection. No longer does he nurture it for pleasure or reminiscence. It must serve higher aims. To cease collecting and hoarding means to rob humanity of science. He must press on, make his sacrifices. Ring ye heavenly bells, sound the alarm! When he utters these words, throw his entire collection into the blaze. Burn it. As the old fairytale says – Fire, fire, burn and rage, dark hearts to salvage. His saving grace. Strong characters will prevail. Nothing will ever enslave them again. Weak characters will not. Better they give their collection to a museum, for they satiate mankind's desire to hoard. To feel fulfilled. To endure, to abolish time's reign. Ancient balm, this human desire to amass the greatest number of things in the smallest space. To possess a book that contains the universe, a house that holds everything, where wafting wind remains without. True, the universe is the grandest of museums, it contains all. But it is too vast for people, they cannot see its entirety, their souls cannot comprehend it.

You will be neither the first nor the last to liberate yourself of bloated collections. There is nothing else to do anyhow. All travelers bring home souvenirs, it behooves them, it is what's expected. To be deserving of their journey, olden day explorers, with their pith helmets and manly features, sent home entire ships laden with stuffed and mounted beasts, bison, insects, spears and shields. If they returned empty-handed, they would be

considered poor explorers, idlers. Even today's travelers with their climate-controlled trucks, national funding, and sensitive mouths return with boxes of ethnographic volumes, aphids, and stones as they pour cosmic earth-matter from one pile to another.

I should not say this, but most collections sooner or later come to naught. People might care for them, sometimes conscientiously, other times not, but they have lost their sense. Resting in chests and boxes for decades on end, only a small portion is ever used. And the oblivious crowd streams by, ignorant of the collector's joy and suffering. Item after item without end, chests of worries fill museum basements, the mouse's jewel box. A single picture on the wall – how beautiful. You could look for hours. A corridor of a thousand pictures – a graveyard. Painters should scream in terror at such fate, and give away all their pictures to children. The final secret, my avaricious little brother. Museums are beautiful, oh so beautiful. I have spent so much time in them. And that is why I can say that sometimes it is even more beautiful to blow them up with dynamite. To let the sunlight into the grave. To illuminate chambers of mice. That is what you should do with your collection in old age. Liberate yourself. Don't turn to stone. Leap lightly on high!

My situation – I foolishly console myself – is not so bad. I still have years of hiking and collecting in front of me. Somewhere in the clayey fallows near the Krupinská plateau, *Aira elegantissima* awaits me. Where this grass stood one year, it stands not the next. For years I have sought it vainly along the banks of the Ipel River, trudging through arid wastelands. Does it even exist? Yes, but it is hiding. It evades me as if knowing that something must remain for next year too. *Crypsis*, rare grass of southeastern salt marshes, awaits me somewhere, as does *Leersia oryzoides* in the marshes of South Bohemia, a grass which only flowers once in many years. Joy to journeys' end.

I, too, knowingly delay my gratification. Long have I put off my journey to the southern Carpathians, to the mountains of Banat. There is still time for that. One day, somewhere amid steep ivory bluffs above the Nera River,

Sesleria filifolia will blossom for me. Once in my collection, I will gaze at my grasses one last time, recall all those beautiful Hungarian girls, and ask the plants' forgiveness for taking them from their home, for taking their life. Then I will light a fire in the stove. Collections should live and die with those who lovingly created them. Knowing when to stop, when to dispose of material possessions, leaving nothing behind that could cause others pain – that is an art. And being honest with oneself, for whatever we do as people, whether the vilest act or the noblest deed, we do for our own satisfaction. Best at the end to have nothing at all. Naked from the womb, naked to the tomb.

I see in my mind's eye a picture from an old book. A wizened old Chinese man at the end of his days sits within an empty, whitewashed room somewhere among the mountains of Szechuan. Gazing at an empty white wall, his only worldly possession, he plays the quietest game of all. There is nothing more he needs. The caravans he once led march across it, the rivers from which he drank flow over it, the flowers he once collected blossom upon it, the stones he gathered for emperors on the banks of wild lakes glitter upon it, the books he wrote about his travels open on it. The old man stares and smiles, all is complete. The cooling warmth of inland summer permeates the room. A wind wafts through an open window and a brilliant square of sunlight moves across the wall hour by hour. Memories are the best intangible collection of all, succumbing not to time, encompassing the entire world. Superfluities pass, forgotten. Only the essential remains. Once that passes, the old man will pass too. None of his voyages were futile, never did he cause anyone any harm. I Moi The Old.

An empty white wall in the mountains of Szechuan – the most exquisite collection of all, little brother, but the road there is long and winding!

CINDREL

THE SHEEP MOUNTAINS. Rolling ridges on all sides, the Cindrel Mountains, the Cibin peaks, the summits of Sibiu rise more than twenty-two hundred meters into the sky. Years ago, they were deserted, nowadays you can catch a bus from Sibiu up to the Pălteniș Resort. Beyond that lies a nearly impenetrable windfall of trees followed by lonely grassy mountainsides – the first stair to the Lotru, Parîng and Șurean Mountains. Cindrel Ridge is deserted – Cînaia, the only refuge, contains a single rickety old table. Below the highest peak, fog. We wander across Devil's Plain above glacial lakes, one of few places in Romania the rare Eurasian dotterel calls home; I encounter him next on plains amid the Ciucaș mountains. On tallest Cindrel Peak, dark garnets fall from their sockets into waving grass. We gather them, not knowing why, but they do not bring good weather. Wet to the bone, we forge our way down from the summit to Șteflești Pass, empty and desolate, which divides the Cindrel and Lotru ranges. The miserable path descends on both sides to the waters of the Frumoasa and the Sadu.

A sheepfold, sunk in mud, lies deserted in the dusk. The shepherds must have remained on the misty hillsides whooping, calling, playing their flutes. Above scrubby forests, grass, grass, grass.

Evening falls above the Șteflești sheepfold, foggy and dismal. Everything is soaked and soggy: mountains, grass, forests, us. We build our shelter in a





mossy pine grove – fresh, beautiful – like nothing you’d see at home. In such hearty habitat, tree branches hang with hoary lichens, thick and unburning. Vain our attempts at drying, vain our breath on smoldering flames. The fire languishes, wet wood smoke blends with billowing brume. The frontier between Cindrel and Lotru: the very edge of the world, little brother.



COZIA

THE BIRCHWOOD MOUNTAINS. Small and steep, the southernmost tip of the Făgăraș rises thirteen hundred meters above the Olt River valley. Below, barefoot locals dwell in solitary homesteads. The air smells of summer hay, and rows of plum trees climb the mountainsides. Beyond them lie beech groves, pinewood forests, fir thickets, scree slopes, birch woodlands, plains, pasturelands, and craggy cliffs, dark and dangerous. Mountain huts are hemmed by nettle thickets so dense one was christened Stinging Nettle Shanty. Our descent from the summit – a mix of luck and misfortune. We find ourselves in a parched and wild ravine where water must roar in spring. Now dusty and dry, white rocks crumble underfoot, the ground a tangle of branches, trees, stones, stumps, and tree bark. Like nothing I've ever seen at home. The ravine descends ever steeper until, with a great leap, it falls away altogether, an arid waterfall. The Olt flows below it, banks abounding in blackberry bushes.

Once in the Cozia Mountains, do not forget to visit the ancient Orthodox monasteries. Not far from the dry ravine stands the cloister of Turnu, accessible only by footpath. There you will meet only locals, quiet whispers, and kindness. I sit, gazing quietly at painted crosses and pictures of levitating saints as the sun sets. How heavenly the smell of fragrant candles, how great my shame for sitting there. Two days before, I bathed in the sulfuric black mud of Ocna Sibiu, which had left me smelling of hellfire and brimstone. In vain had I washed in Sibiu's deep salt pits with water too thick to drown in. In vain had I tried to cleanse myself of that smell.

And here I sat in the Turnu monastery smelling like Satan himself.

LOTRU

THE GRASSY MOUNTAINS. “Mountains of Thieves” located north of the “River of Thieves”, also called the Șteflești Mountains. We hiked them without a map, and indeed I don’t know if a map of the area even exists. Kilometer after kilometer of grass, flat, layered cliffs and Asian-like steppes, horizon to horizon. I am astonished when, after hours of trudging, we rise again to the horizon only to discover more ridges rolling off into the distance. We do not encounter a single dwelling, only shepherds from a different world. An old engraving published long ago by the Hungarian Carpathian Society shows shepherds standing beside a gneiss cliff on Șteflești Peak. They grin roguishly at us as their dogs stare stubbornly on. Three-quarters of a century later, and the same cliffs, the same expressions, the same bristly faces, the same fur coats, the same snarling dogs. The grandsons of olden shepherds, the great-grandsons of bygone dogs – they stand before us unchanged! Be grateful for such lands, little brother, they are few and vanishing!

On high Lotru plateaus, dogs fight fiercely and distant horses whinny. Land of hailstones and sweet grassy beds. We descend to the valley with evening. Chilly air rises from Lotru waters, but the sun high above illuminates the southern horizon, rimmed by the white cliffs of the Latorița Mountains.





Beneath the slopes nestles a tiny settlement called Obîrșia Lotrului, which boasts a little shop that sells exploding beer, watermelons, black bread, and long-untasted sugar. We are the only foreigners, perhaps the only customers. The shopkeeper sells sugar – a precious commodity in Romania – in the most peculiar way: only some customers are allowed to buy the damp yellow crystals, the others are not, no matter how much they beg and wave their money.

The rest of that exquisite day is spent resting on the banks of the Lotru River, protecting our shelter from curious bulls, eating bread and watermelon, and sampling amber sugar.



THE GAME OF INNOCENT BROTHERS ❧

Do not throw your leftovers into the fire, place them on the ground. Tomorrow we leave, but others will come. Who? The wolverine, the badger, the crow, the mouse. And if the mouse does not come, the ant will take his place. There are many that walk the Taiga. They are just like us, only they wear a different coat.

*Nanai hunter DERSU UZALA
in Hot Breath of the Taiga
by V. K. Arsenyev, 1903*

Play this game with me, my bloodthirsty little brother! It's alright if you do not understand it right away. One day perhaps you will, and you'll be a better person for it. This is the game of brother beast and sister plant. There are many steps on the path to mastering it. In the beginning, a little suffices: do not kill a frog on its wedding night, do not break a wagtail's eggs, do not pull a fly's legs out. That is enough for a long time. Your youthful blood must be infused with the beauty of April frogs and watery song, with

wonder at a bird's nest and a fly's wispy legs, with the joyful knowledge you do not walk this earth alone. It takes time. If a spider comes to call upon you, do not howl in panic. It is just your eight-legged brother who crawls over you. Lift him gently, you are his boulder. If he were three hundred times larger, then there would be cause to panic. I haven't yet asked you to love tapeworms or adore leeches, the gems of summer fishponds. But try not to harm ants, you kill enough as it is. And do not snuff out the life of each fly that buzzes passed. If a centipede crawls into your tent, lift it out lightly. If you come across a Carpathian blue slug resting on a dewy path, bend to it, move it aside so no hiker tramples it. How simple and how good. If you have come this far in the game, it is far enough. You will know, my stride-taking little brother, that you breathe the same air as all your other brothers. As all those creatures you cannot give life to yourself. As every beast that does a thousand things you can't, and has been doing so for millions of years. You will cease to pointlessly end another's life. Respect for life is of utmost importance, obsessing about overbred pets of least purport. As if "purebreds" were not of mongrel stock! Treat animals with respect even if they are the most ordinary creatures, their abundance is no reason to cause them harm. Treat them with respect even if they are uncomely and plain, or cannot raise their voice in song, or cannot be cooked and eaten. It is neither difficult nor praiseworthy to love useful or beautiful beasts. Yet I judge no one, it is not my lot. All depend upon the blood of innocent brothers. Some more so, some less. Eskimos – whalers and butchers – entirely. Bodhisattvas – ashram dwellers, rice eaters lovingly liberating every last louse – least of all. The rest of humanity lies in between, that is the way of things. Ahimsa and Ahinsa, two beautiful Indian princesses, have but one law: kill only what you must!

A beautiful sight, the hunter who kills only to survive. Days of solitary trudging through forests. Man and animal, who will get who? Death is part of the wheel of life; the electrons in a corpse never cease orbiting their nuclei. All the more repulsive is the city hunter, panting murderer, who,

once a year, dons hat and coat and sets forth from his rancid office to kill in clean autumn fields. Not for need or for passion, it merely behooves him. Trumpets call out his blasphemy above glazed-eyed hares. The more needless the killing, the more pompous the trumpeting. But horns justify nothing, nor do they give glory to murderers. A bloody game!

Animal games are difficult, the rules unclear. It would seem that man is God to hares and deer and can do with them as he pleases, killing at will. And it's true, without man, there would be fewer fields and in them fewer hares. Deer, too, would be fewer, only the strong would survive. But someone with many children has no greater right to the lives of his children than someone with one.

That is why each age must create its own rules, as humane as possible, for coexisting with our brothers, the animals. There was a time humans bartered for other humans, shot Indians, killed Tasmanians. Now they are ashamed of it. One day they will lament trapping, murdering and selling their brother beasts. At the moment, most biologists believe animals must be sacrificed for research. There are times when it is necessary and times when it isn't. But for now, that is the way things are in this barbaric time when no one ever stops to think. This primitivism will pass one day just as slavery did. A new age will dawn and with it, new hunting grounds, new biology, new museums. It must change. For the past three hundred years, scientists have lived entirely on cadavers. Three hundred years of necrophilia, corpse worship, three hundred years of positive science. My friend works in a natural history museum. He has spent his whole life among corpses, collecting them, caring for them lovingly. How appalling. A perverted huntsman. He proves no courage on the hunt, the prey is defenseless, almost tame, soon to soar again in liquid solutions and exhibit boxes, awaiting judgment day. These thrushes and shrews will never rear their young, grow old in forests, return to dust or receive a proper funeral by burying beetles. But he provides them with eternally glassy eyes and a bellyful of stuffing. Hecatombs of birds and butterflies, halted mid-flight. Skulls, cadavers, bones.

Death wherever you look, captured in time. Like Azrael, angel of death, my friend wings o'er the countryside playing his dark game. He loves moles best of all. They can keep no secrets from him, every inch of their little corpses has been weighed, measured and counted. How wonderful it would be if he discovered one day that no two moles are alike. That each is a unique little creature with a unique little soul. That day will be long in coming, and who knows if he won't need to inspect all the moles that tunnel below before he makes his discovery. My museum friend examines his beautiful lover too, but thank goodness, in quite a different manner. He doesn't care how many hairs she has or how much her insides weigh. Those are secrets she can keep to herself – the most beautiful things about her.

Foul words have I written, hunters and biologists are sure to tear me apart. And rightly so. I deserve it. Just as those who freed the slaves of good people two thousand years ago deserved it. What they still don't know is that my words on animals apply to plants as well. They, too, hear and see. One day they, too, will be free – but that is a different game.

Back to light, summer forest games! Precious lands, my curious little brother, you will never be alone there. Home to thousands of little creatures. The three Fates, many-legged, frightfully named. *Haasea Flavescens*, *Polydesmus Complanus*, *Polyxenus Lagurus*. And their mother *Glomeris Pustulata* and aunt *Polyzonium Germanicum*. Under leaves, under bark, you might not know it, but they are there. A game of merrymaking!

Try catching an adder by then tip of its tail. It cannot reach your hand to bite you. And if it does, don't kill it, it would not understand the punishment. Besides, you won't die if you are not weak of heart. A game of courage!

Try catching a bumblebee, ever so gently. Workers sting, drones do not. They are otherwise nearly indistinguishable. A devils' game! Bumblebees are not aggressive and seldom sting, but when they do, it is no more painful than an ordinary bee. Yet people never pluck up the courage to touch them. A funny game: elephants afraid of mice.

If you catch a crayfish, admire it. It is only an arthropod, but looking at its large, elaborate body, you'd swear it was a vertebrate. Wonderful. Grandfather of the river, who could ever eat it?

You can play animal games forever, they will make you a better person. At the very end, perhaps you will discover that earthworms infinitely exceed the most perfect machines – an airplane, by comparison, is poorly organized submatter. That it is better to spend a year locked in a prison cell with a fly than with an automobile. That it does less harm to the universe to let a steamboat sink than to kill a wasp. But those truths are not for everyone, my less bloodthirsty brother, they are difficult games!

Enough about animals. They are your brothers, you are profoundly close to them. Little children smell like baby chicks in the nest. Hair and feathers, the same splendid fragrance. It is wonderful to drift off to sleep with a girl at your side, but if she is missing, little brother, falling asleep beside dog or horse is also nice: the reflection of human warmth, breath, love, and life.

You can be sure of one thing, when one day beings from other worlds or star clusters alight upon this earth, they will not be able to distinguish that barely noticeable difference that divides humans from animals. They will not be able to distinguish the playful cries of children from the seagulls cry above the pond. And they will think a skunk to be a man – the same eyes, hunger, ears, stench, the same yearning to live.



ŞUREAN

THE DESERTED MOUNTAINS. Vast, godforsaken plains – like inner Mongolia. A solitary horse. Not a single pilgrim for three days. Miserable huts amid pastures, shepherds on horseback riding like bandits, flying like the wind, soaring and playing their flutes as they ride wildly. Toward Şurean Lake they gallop, beneath a peak two kilometers high. Silent glacial lake, skirted by bogs and scrub pine, overlooked by cliff upon cliff.

Tarrying and doldrums beneath Lui Pătru, the highest summit. These deserted mountains belong to us. Sparks from a great fire fly heavenwards on a beautiful windless night. Ascent the loftiest peak is murder. Four stages to the summit, from beneath you see but one. Vainly you hope for the climb to end.

Black Mountain towers amidst the Şureans. Its scrub-pine forests draw the pilgrim's eye like a magnet amid those grassy prairies. Give it wide berth though, little brother. Better to avoid a shortcut on hands and knees!



Beautiful the Șurean Mountains, the Sebeș Mountains, the Orăștie Mountains. Culminating in gleaming mica to the northwest, they pour down into a valley, streams of innumerable slopes and ridges. With a bit of luck, you'll find the right one. Follow it to lush forests where a mighty fortress stands. Temples and walls overgrown like ancient Mayan structures in Yucatan jungles, the Dacian stronghold of Sarmizegetusa was conquered more than two thousand years ago. Breath of antiquity. All is deserted, pieces of statues litter the ground. A single path, steep and narrow, leads out of the valley below. Even the main valley proved impassable. Not until Grădiștea de Munte, amid still trackless countryside, do we encounter smoking charcoal kilns and barefoot children playing with speckled pigs. A boulder filled river valley, dust-covered wormwood, the smell of cows, the buzz of insects, a warm evening.



CĂPĂȚÎNII

THE ENDLESS MOUNTAINS. You walk. Days pass. Hiking westward from the waters of the murky Olt with its warm sands and driftwood. Long will it be before its waters join the clear, rushing Lotru, river of thieves. Above it, walls so steep trees grow perpendicularly outwards. A gypsy settlement beyond Tent Valley, like nothing you've ever seen: fires, ragged dogs, earthen huts, stench, mud, skirts of red. Above the village, motley, waterless meadows, gnarled beech thickets, moist and distant pine forests, lofty grassy summits. Long the climb to two-thousand-meter high Căpățîinii pastures, long the

journey through them, grasslands interspersed with boulders and broken slopes. Painted crosses stand at sheep intersections amid mountain passes. Take all your provisions with you. You will bring home silver horseshoes. Cabins there are large and square, like the mighty fortresses of old. If you fear drinking from muddy watering holes, better stay away from Căpățîniî mountain ridges! Olt pass marks the end of this range, continuing westward and you'll enter the Parîng Mountains.

To the southeast, a great limestone massif provides stunning views, but its jagged skyline provides only limited hiking. Abruptly, majestically, Vinturarița stretches skyward, queen over south Carpathian gales. Riven cliffs. Fierce, wild dogs. From out of nowhere, a pack of beasts surrounds you. To reach the range's eastern boundary, you must pass through Cheia gorge, the narrowest in all Carpathia, harrowing passage in a storm. Between white walls an arm span across, the deep, jade green Cheia River rushes out of the mountains. At its mouth, the most magnificent Carpathian wilderness. A pearly cliff basin amid massive perpendicular walls. On its floor, broken and deserted hunting cabins. Ibexes. Archangelica and heartleaf oxeye high above our heads, bitter scent. Silence, mint tea and fir-bough beds. Absolute solitude.

In forests beneath the Cheia's mouth stands a solitary convent run about by stone walls. I knock at the door, four nuns open. White lilies, fiery poppies shine in the evening glow. A cell-bound supper of corn, painted icons. Blows on wood call to evening prayers. The scent of plants, silent weavers. Never have I felt such peace of heart, never have felt such shame for my black and lustful soul.

PARÎNG

THE WILD MOUNTAINS.

Enter them from the east if you can, you will better relish their majesty. We staggered in from the Căpățîniis exhausted and half-starved, surviving on the barely edible leftovers from the bottom of our packs. Phantoms of feasts hovered over each step and evening fire, yet we were stunned by

the breadth and beauty of the mighty mountains, a convergence of five Carpathian ranges. With its boulders and great retaining wall, the Wallachia – Transylvania trail resembled medieval military roads of interior upper Asia. It wound over passes and ridges for kilometer after kilometer without crossing paths with a single creature. Mountains on all sides. Time dissipated above endless plains, above the Lotru River, and above the green ridges and white cliffs of the Latorița Mountains which join the Parîngs. From here westward, there are more and more cliffs and craggy ridges and fewer grassy summits. Passing over gray glacial valleys and dark lakes, you may glimpse pilgrims in solitary tents, the first you've met in days.

I encountered the most beautiful sight on a side ridge. Hidden among dwarf pines and grass lies Shepherd Lake, also called Stoney Lake. Round, mild in daylight, icy at night. The most magnificent campsite in the South-





ern Carpathians. To get there, you must pass white limestone formations, red grass and sparkling green cliffs which are mined for the most opulent necklaces.

One rainy night beneath Pařing peak at the lower end of the Jieř River gorge, I arrived at a lonely little elven cottage. I wanted to ask to stay the night, but I found the door open and the cottage empty and deserted. Inside there was a bed, and a chain hung from a pitchfork in the corner. Raindrops rustled on cornhusks upon the doorstep, a battered window creaked on its hinges. I had no blessed chalk with me, but there was nothing else to do – I lay down like a fairytale hero, all but sure I'd have a dark visitor in the night. But only the mice could be heard singing beneath the floorboards all night long.



THE GAME OF JOYFUL SIMPLICITY

What ill can Your Excellency do someone
who lives on ten rubles a month?

N. S. LESKOV, 1831 – 1895: Jednomysl

I loved playing this game, in my youth I was a master of it. And I feel its joy today as I write this for you, my desirous little brother. I recall my past simplicity, and I rejoice that perhaps your heart, too – who knows? – will be gladdened by it. Best of all is to delight someone with a letter, a smile, a handshake, love, a kind word – the game of joyful simplicity.

There was a time I wanted to survive in the universe without possessions, money, even food. The highest of games, unachievable. I was forced to give it up in the end. But I fought over every triviality, decided to live with as little possessions, money and food as possible. The most important traveler's game! Seemingly banal, yet beautiful all the same. I didn't play for greed or thrift, I only wanted to dispense with material things, and I felt pity for nature. If everyone lived as I did (I supposed), the earth, its forests,

waters, winds, and depths would survive a few thousand years longer than under the current circumstances. People would need less and produce less. But I didn't have many followers despite not requiring much of them. I hadn't come to destroy the new age or force anyone to live in poverty, I was merely practicing joyful simplicity.

I was well prepared for this game having encountered need during the war. I had never come close to starving, but I had learned not to live in excess. After the war, I received a laughable allowance from my parents, all my friends had more. It was hard not to grow bitter, but I succeeded. I never started the game of bitter simplicity. I wanted to travel far and wide, that requires simplicity – you won't get far with a heavy pack. In it, I carried light and simple things since I wanted to be as free from people, their ingenuity and their products as possible. With every action, I tried to save the earth from the destruction that awaits it anyway, and perfect my ability to survive on my wits and skills. Try it too, little brother, it will cause you no harm. A first millennium Greek philosopher writing on happiness and morality once said that those who enjoy luxury the most are those who need it the least. When you grow old, you will fondly recall the days you needed almost nothing. You need nothing for joy, fortune, and love. Bared soul and naked body. I remember the most beautiful time of marriage, the beginning. A straw tick on the ground, rough canvas filled with straw. Beneath a holey blanket, two hot breaths. There was nothing else in the room. Long can you draw on such beautiful beginnings, absolute poverty, the pure self-sufficiency of two hot breaths. Learn simplicity, my possession-hungry little brother! You must cease to love possessions, garments, money, food. You will gain more than you can imagine in return. Most people spend all their income on their things. Like little monkeys, they desire newer, shinier toys, incessantly snapping up colorful trifles. Swallowing and swallowing, their inexhaustible bottoms let loose a steady stream of barely used items, filling dumps. Dumps, depositories of wonderful things. Blessed are they who go there unabashed, whose sympathy for the earth and respect for

the work of others compels them to gather discarded objects and give them new life. They delay world's end! There is now so much discarding of barely used items and extra food that it has become something of a natural phenomenon. And we should not feel ashamed to take advantage of it. Hunting about in dumps, fishing about in dumpsters. Like ancient hunters in search of game. There are places where those in poverty can receive all they need to survive. Dishes, food, skis, furniture, pencils, clothes, bicycles, backpacks, blankets, string, books, axes, boots, stoves, spoons. Anything and everything. Not out of love, but out of gratefulness. The givers rid themselves of their burdens but immediately replace them with new ones. One can live for free, as it were, though most of us dwell in an enchanted forest of vile excess. Throwing away useful items is committing murder. Remember the Eskimos. Keep the things you have grown old with - the things you love and those that have served you well - to the day you die, little brother! Knife, pot, house, wife, boat. Everything. To waste is to sin. It should be illegal, one day it will be. What can be more fulfilling than using a backpack till it can be used no more? That old, rank, Tibetan-looking sack has traveled everywhere you have. It has carried your belongings, helped you survive, gotten you through thick and thin. How can you simply throw it away and buy a new one?

We watch wealthier countries in horror as plates and utensils are discarded with the leftovers into sprawling dumps that stretch as far as the eye can see. Eskimos must stand aghast. They would not throw out so much as a burnt match or a bent nail. We don't hesitate to scrap useful, well-crafted tin cans. Tin, a noble element. From the Big Bang, the universe spent billions of years creating it, transforming heavenly hydrogen to helium, to terrestrial tin. It will never happen again. Yet without batting an eye, we throw away something forged by the universe and crafted by ingenuity. Something that can heat food, fix boats, mend skis, carry water, save lives, hold heat, carry a candle, and perform dozens of other useful tasks. Naturally, we can't spend our whole lives storing up old cans, but we can learn to

live without them. A prisoner would be horrified if you threw away a clean sheet of paper. He would use a mere shred of it to write a message that might set him free, a poem that could immortalize him. We can't stockpile paper our whole lives, but we can produce less. Being rarer, people would treat it with greater respect.

A little suffices, especially when traveling, little brother! Show me what you can make do without, and I'll tell you if you can come with me. Learn to carry less. You will be the lighter for it. There was a time I could hardly lift the packs I carried: saw, ax, cooker, kerosene lamp, flashlight, first aid kit, extra shoes, and lots of food – so I wouldn't starve to death. Mine was a heavy, slow and joyless slog. But today I flit lightly over Carpathian slopes in want of nothing. I break branches by hand, cook quickly on an open fire, lay down in the dark by memory, dry my boots beneath my head, and I still haven't starved to death. First aid kit? Garlic for every illness, my own urine for cuts and scrapes.

But in vain do I write. Values change, I see it on myself. As a boy, I used to laugh at my grandmother for refusing to throw old newspapers away. Today, my children laugh at my shocked expression as they throw away books they have finished reading. Grandma's sense of pride and self-reliance came simply from knowing how to grow grain and bake bread. Pure soul. These days, pride is harder to come by. It is not born of store-bought bread and easy money.

Most people love new clothes. Wrapping their bodies in bolts of fresh cloth, they coo their satisfaction. That is what girls should do, my wise little brother. Dressing and disrobing is their lot in life. But you, love old clothes! Are you afraid girls will like you less for wearing them? Do you fear without nice clothes, buttons and silly collars you have no chance to find love? Then you underestimate them, at least the ones worth loving. Men, strong of thought and spirit, can walk about in rags, and deep forest souls with gleaming eyes and wild fragrance will still adore them, lay their lives down for them, long to fall asleep next to them. There may not be many of them,

perhaps only one in a hundred, but they make living worthwhile. The rest is merely dust and ashes. Wear old pants proudly. Their age has taken nothing from them. Care not what others think. Take not their fashion, but let them take yours. Beach-loving dandies whose buttons shine brighter than their spirit. They will envy you and try mightily to emulate you. But never will they roll up their pant-legs as easily and nonchalantly as you do.

Most people love money, and will even harm their own souls for it. But a little money is enough. If you had twice what you have, you wouldn't have twice as many beautiful days amid mountains and forests. If you spend it on transportation, you might shorten your journey but that is all. Planes are fastest and most expensive, but you see little of the journey. Trains are cheaper and slower. That is better. Walking is nearly free, except what you pay in fuel for your body. You see and experience so much. Stick to walking, little brother! Best of all, stay where you are. Sit back and gaze down from mountaintops, take it all in. Breathe the sweet air as clouds float gently by. You need no money for that. Then you will be like the old sage, long dead. First a king of ancient India, he became a naked saint. "Liberated from the chains of wealth, false hopes and fear of fall, he was no longer ruler of the land, but of himself. Having nothing, he owned everything."

And finally, most people love food, and not many show much moderation. If they must curtail their cravings, it is without joy. They are torpid and gluttonous. The full bottles they bear into the mountains they do not carry out. They toss them away in the forest as a monkey its banana peel. Since food has its own game, I will speak but shortly on it – gluttony is repulsive, disrespect for food even more so. Old bread must be eaten. Not because of a few pennies, but because of principle, because we should respect all that sustains us. Most of our brothers around the world are so hungry, many of them starve to death. Once I saw a magazine with a full-page color photograph (what a waste of paper, ink, and work) of a doleful looking young man. He had squashed his unfinished cigarette into a plate of bacon and eggs. The cigarette butt stood upright amid a serving of the most

scrumptious looking bacon. It was undoubtedly the young man's supper, he had undoubtedly paid for it with his own money. He could do with it as he pleased, he simply didn't let it pass through his intestines. Yet looking at the photo nearly made me sick. There is almost nothing in the world that bothers me, but such deep disrespect does. If I were in charge, I'd lock the gloomy youngster up and feed him nothing but bread and water for three years. Not a day less.

How distant that youngster is from the old man I once visited deep amid Balkan mountains. He was preparing his stores for winter. Six barrels stood in the middle of a cool chamber. He raised the lid on each one: sour kraut, powidl, sheep curds, lard, honey, pickled herring. In the corner, there stood three large sacks. Flour. Dried peas. Salt. A bunch of garlic and some herbs hung from the wall, a pile of corn ears lay on the floor. That was it. The old man looked healthy. He smiled happily, and it seemed he had all he needed so survive five months of cold and dark.

Be modest too, little brother! Do not seek longingly for new things, keep to the old. Eat what you are given, let nothing repulse you. You will learn to survive arduous journeys, perhaps even wars. You will remain hopeful in hardship, not hang yourself in prison. Be harder on yourself! If you search, you will find hundreds of ways to be modest. At times it may not be pleasant, it may even hurt, but there is always a way. And if the day should come when you must choose between wealth and opulence that corrupts, and humble poverty, choose poverty! Not hardship and misery, that is bad. But bird-like poverty that nurtures gaiety and carefreeness.





RETEZAT

THE TARN MOUNTAINS. Black bison and white sheep traverse mossy pastures, a rapid river rushes as clear-green as glass, embracing the entire range. The main mountain path is but a cattle track that winds its way upwards to meadows of wild grass beneath craggy precipices. You can tread where you wish and build your shelter as you see fit. Dwarf pine, juniper, and rosebay burn merrily in pilgrim fires. The faces of wild-roaming horses reflect off evening waters. The silence of mountain lakes is so deep you would gladly give up your life to remain there forever. Rare *Festuca* grasses on great rocky hillsides nod their heads in the wind, not a soul nearby. What you don't bring with you, you must do without.

There are many paths to the Retezat Mountains, princesses of South Carpathia. But the southeastern route from the Jiu Valley is best. Oil lamps gleam in Buta lodge where bread-laden horses ascend southerly slopes. From there it's a steady upward climb through forests, red heaths, and wetlands



to steep, sheep-scaled crevices. Breathtaking views from ridgetops await, the tarn mountains are in sight. There on a wind-buffed saddle far above equine lakes, the Retezats lay before us. Do not follow the ridge left through dwarf pine thickets, you will arrive in the “Little Retezats”, looming, pearly limestone summits, magnificent airy plateaus and a palette of low-growing flowers. That is where the Godeanu Mountains have their start, you will admire their beauty yet. Descend into a granite valley where flows an emerald river with no bridge across it. From there it is a skyward climb again up to the mountain lakes. There is nothing to give away that this is a national park. Shepherds leave behind charred stumps, sheep bathe their hooves in clear waters. Though not entirely deserted, there is no one to disturb the starry silence of evening fires. Soy patties cooked on a blaze of dry manure – food for the hardest of travelers. Buffalo cheese from an unwashed shepherdess – only those who ate it with garlic were spared ailment.



GODEANU

THE VARIED MOUNTAINS. White cliffs shimmer in the northern reaches: ivory precipices, abyssal valleys. You will find no water there, no human dwelling, no mountain paths. Cliffs and plains, that is all. In the west, a memorial cross stands in the grass. Black hailstorms and blacker mists swallow ridgetop sheep tracks, but there is no getting lost here. Mountains stretch into the distance on all sides. After a cold night, the snow on distant the Borascu plain glistens strangely. Three days of arduous wandering. Bear droppings amid uprooted trees in Yellow Valley. The only way forward: through brook and waterfall. Hard going. Copses of plants, shoulder high, soaked in rain. Nights spent beneath igneous cliffs where water trickles, drop by drop. It takes patience to fill your cup. Windy nights among damp meadow flowers. Nights when eyes of dogs glow red in the darkness. They circle round you, silently, ever closer. Sleep is restless. You sleep beneath huge trees at the upper edge of the forest. At the mouths of gloomy valleys, puddled in yesterday's snow, feral dogs tear at sheep carcasses. Desolation.



A shepherd carries a cold handful of cornmeal pudding, his day's rations. Huts here are built of thin stone slabs that have clawed their way to Earth's surface and now lie strewn about throughout the range. Build a stony hermitage on the shores Gugu Lake, playing to the clouds your fluted song. Tibetan song of solitude.

Below the mountains flows Cerna River, once Wallachia's utmost boundary, today still magnificent countryside. No roads lead to its source, only donkey trails. Wild old women twist sheep wool into thread. Spindles whirl between fingers, bean blossoms bloom red. An abyss of time. A few wooden, black, dwarfish dwellings whelming in manure. Beechwood fires. A river gushing from a cliff beneath windthrown trees, a wooden corn mill grinding away, clunk, creak, squeak. Stop the river, and the mill stops too. Shops and electricity are a long way off. Nothing but flat valleys, untended wetlands, and white gorges. From here the track rises to the boundary of the Godeanu, Retezat, and Vilcan mountains.

VÎLCAN

THE BEAR MOUNTAINS. Errant, rugged, and pathless. We spent three mapless days battling our way through them, crisscrossing valleys and ridges, some bare others overgrown, the sun above our only compass. We had but one thought: forge onwards, ever north. It was hot in the south near Tismana amid trackless karst plains. Sweet chestnut trees had been brought there long ago from the Greek monastery at Athos. At their outer edge, an old man stood guarding his beehives day and night. Next, endless beech forests. Our day ended in one of them, blessed day. Sleeping under an open sky, not knowing where we were. What a way to fall asleep! All was still – fire, forest, mouths, moon. No one about but a herd of boar in the dense thickets below us. Blessed was the morning as well: on a fallen beech trunk about four meters

off stood a great bear. It looked at me long and hard, silently observing. I was silent too, and happy. Across distant valleys, raspberry covered hillsides reached skyward. The reddest slopes and largest raspberries in all Romania. Wild eastern song, clear and strong, rang from their midst. Raspberry pickers scaring bears, banishing loneliness. Have you ever eaten too many succulent raspberries, little brother? If not, go to the Vilcan Mountains!

The following day's toil ended above tangled gulches and valleys at the boundary between beech forests and pastureland. Beautiful, the mapless





Carpathian journey following sun, shepherd, and woodcutter. The final night at forest fringe, evening mists descend into ravines. The last campsite of a wonderful holiday – two tarps stretched over three pilgrims keeps the rain off but let sweet breezes in. A pot to feed six pilgrims. A pot to quench their thirst. The next day is the last. We will walk through ridgetop meadows and descend along northern slopes through pine forests to the clear Jiu river. We will wash ourselves in emerald pools of mountain sweat, summer's scent.



THE GAME OF THE WAYFARER'S DELIGHT

Poets words as such, sense they haven't much
But childlike gladness, and a child's sadness,
But truth all-pleasing, and truth uneasing,
But heavenly love, oh heavenly love.
Let him not hunger that he may call,
Let him not thirst that his tears may fall.
The path to heaven, the pathway to hell
He will show you.

15th century Aragonese song

This book often speaks of joy, sweet companion of long journeys. Joy turns dusty paths golden, and makes rainy lands bright. Just like people, trips also have two faces, and you can have your pick. Either you journey joyfully, remembering only the most beautiful aspects, or you walk in apathy and misery, taking home wretched, useless memories. Joy is the penultimate rung on the celestial ladder. It radiates from you brightly, promising to take

you far. You feel the best is yet to come. In that way it differs from the highest rung, illuminated by the still, rosy light of beatific bliss and the knowledge that this life has come to absolute fruition. From there leads but one path – back.

Where is joy to be found, my grumpy little brother? Almost everywhere. It sits by the wayside and beckons to passing pilgrims, but few ever notice it, few are of pure and open heart. Those who do are rewarded, for it flies into their hearts and dances in their eyes, mouth, arms, and legs before rushing out again to await the next pilgrim. Eyes gleam, but they don't know why. Mouth speaks words without meaning. Feet stomp, fists clench, tears well in the eyes. A truly remarkable game!

Yet I do not know why joy leaps to the heart. High spirits are often its only residue. The highest joy neither rushes nor dances. At times, it rearranges the darkest, most despairing of thoughts like fragments in a kaleidoscope. The concerns that worried you for hours miraculously dissipate, and radiant joy bounds into your freshly swept heart. It only needs space! It leaps into your arms, and you wave to the sun. It leaps into your feet, and you do a pirouette. It leaps into your mouth, and you sing and shout for joy.

Everyone likely has different experiences. I was seized by pure joy in a little town at the foot of North Bohemian mountains. It was just a few hundred meters to the border. Irritable and unhappy with myself (I had hurt someone but didn't want to admit it), I wandered the little town, having never been there before. Out of despair, I entered the rather derelict municipal museum. A little man bowed in the doorway, nose red from years of colds, two scarlet, slimy tracks etched onto the upper lip. And you know what, little brother? It was precisely him, an insignificant, neglected little man, who brought me joy. The museum was strange, old-fashioned. Sometimes I couldn't distinguish between the collections and the rest of the rubbish that lay, left during cleaning, in piles on the floor. Broken bayonets, piles of dead flies, fragments of a pot (perhaps of ancient origin?),

antique, rusty fire brigade helmets, chipped porcelain, crumbling photo albums of long-dead locals, tarnished gold rings, military bugles, stuffed animals, trash, treasure. There is not such a wonderful museum in all of Czechoslovakia! The little man, encouraged by my excitement, described how good people from near and far bring him things they have no use for, and how he himself visits the dump to discover wonderful objects and return to them their vitality. The exhibit displays were all open, but when I asked, "Do visitors ever steal exhibit pieces?" his answer was peaceful. "They do, they do, but others keep on bringing." There was nothing else to add, it was a lovely museum.

"I'll show my most precious possession," the man said finally. He drew back the curtain to expose a niche where a small engraving hung. Ancient. Dead horses lay on their backs, feet in the air, dying soldiers in their midst. Flying banners, flashing flames. The battle was over. A solitary mercenary knelt bareheaded in the corner. Beneath the depiction, two sentences had been written in strange letters. "Dear God, give us the courage to risk and strike in life's battles, and if we are to win, let it be according to the law and with untarnished faith and honor. And if we are to lose, endow us with the humility to stand at the wayside and greet the victors as they pass." And suddenly it happened. Tears welled up in my eyes and I was overwhelmed by indescribable joy. Suddenly, I saw my iniquity and wretchedness juxtaposed to the glory, beauty, and grandeur of the world. An inexpressible sensation. The little man stood there at attention like the last sentinel, the faithful guard. Bidding him a hasty farewell, I ran out into the silent streets, no longer dreary but flaring in flame. In joy's embrace, I sang at the top of my lungs. Like a Chasidic saint, I danced down streets to the forest's edge. Out of that glorious town I waltzed, all the way to the border. Out of the town that had given me so much. At the forest's edge, far from people, I fell to the ground for sheer joy and rolled in pine needles.

But joy comes to me most often with music or girls or a combination of the two. A South Bohemian village at noon. The summer fragrance of

linden trees and Sunday dinners. I walk alone, not a soul to be seen. Sleepy village, goose droppings, afternoon so hot not even dogs bark. I limp along dismally. Stillness. Suddenly, sweet song soars, wild yet gentle. I cannot hear the words, but the girl's voice electrifies me. It rises sharply and suddenly, amicably, then falls meekly away, as if the woman were laying her head on someone's shoulder. I stand on the square glued to the spot, listening to the invisible girl, absentmindedly toeing grassy goose droppings with my foot. Rising above the deserted village, swelter, scents, and song. I clench my fists as reckless joy overwhelms me. Immobilized, I listen and listen. I wish to remain with that singing girl for all eternity, to sail with her across the sea. Strange are the ways of joy!

Enough about these experiences, everyone has their own paths. You might rejoice at a great fire, little brother, or an immense flood, shouting for joy at the sight of something so remarkably powerful. At the fullness of earth's intensity. Yet the roaring of flames, the rushing of water drowns out your voice. Perhaps looking up into a circus dome moves you to tears as slender acrobats, like hummingbirds, flit high above earth, unafraid of death. Though perhaps clumsy or overweight, you suddenly rejoice in your humanness, in belonging to a race of beings capable of such unbelievable stunts. Or perhaps one autumn day, you enter an empty countryside church so still, only leaves rustle in the rectory garden. Sepulchral smells stray through the air. Your greatest desire: to lie beneath it. Such sorrow for a futile, useless life weighs upon you. Into that silence and despair, an organ unexpectedly thunders. Freezing, chills run down your spine. Music, striking with its silvery hooves, soars heavenward in a cleansing cascade. Suddenly the sinfulness and triviality of your sorrow become clear. You leave the church transformed, joy in your heart.

Only joy, my fervent little brother, permits you to speak and act like a madman. People will forgive you if it radiates from you. I write this because there are many like you, feel not ashamed! Only ecstatic joy permits you to spontaneously do otherwise impermissible things. To thrust a penny

into an unsuspecting stranger's mouth; observe close up the faces of fellow passengers with hands like a telescope; knock a superior agreeably over the head with a roll of paper; play air violin in the middle of a shopping center; roll about in the town square calling, "By God, constable, do thy duty!"; address an old woman selling onions at the market, "Fair lady, what makes thee so exquisitely plumptilian and fuzziicious?"; with an apologetic smile, press a glass pig into a strange girl's hand. And hundreds of other forbidden things.

Nonsense words occur to you in joy, little brother. Hymen Thimblefist: a tiny, tight-fisted, lecherous tailor. A wordplay poem while picking sesel: Nestle sesel in a vessel. Wrestle vessel to a pestle. Pestle sesel then re-vessel. Joy reassures you it is better to write a poem than a book about mice or chemistry. Those who know can take no offense. You can spend hours, even days lying joyously on sandy beaches in apparent idleness, laziness, and dawdling without the slightest feeling of wasted time. Time vanishes in happiness. You live as cheerfully as a gypsy. Such carefree people, it is said their language does not even possess the future tense. They live here and now, in the present moment.

Joy - the barometer of the soul. What you do in joy can be neither wrong nor sinful. In doing wrong, you feel no joy. That is the justice of the universe. Immediate, merited. Joyless deeds - iniquity and hell. Were you unfaithful? Did you ride that dusty horse? Your punishment was swift. You were not happy, even if you thought you were. In the depths of your soul, there was sorrow. In joyful lovemaking, you feel your love must last until death, not just one beautiful hour, night or year. I think a joyful death must be beautiful too. So easy, so alluring. For death has two faces, little brother! One clear, honey-gold spring day, I walked through a city. There was a fair on the square full of laughing, joyful people. The April air drew my soul from my body, and I yearned to melt into the blue distance. Banners waved, trumpets played with martial tone beneath wafting breezes. I would follow them to hell, such was my joy. Someone beckoned, girls smiled and laughed,

blowing each other kisses. At that moment I felt the joyful inclination to die. Right there and then. To soar into the air and simply vanish. How beautiful! There would be music playing, bagpipes and whistles wildly wailing. Like a hero, I'd stand upon the podium. Soldiers would smile, merrily aiming their rifles at me. Wind, wind! I would cry something beautiful and reassuring to the people, call to the girls, dance a final dance, laugh a last laugh and boom – I'd fall vanquished by sister death. Death on such a day! Haha! Let her come, I haven't made love to her yet!





CERNEI

THE FLORAL MOUNTAINS. The paths to Cernei mountain valleys pass through great craggy gates cascading with cataracts. Alpine swifts shriek shrill before precipitous portals and lofty, towering walls, their voices somehow different than at home. Steep, rocky landscapes. Villages nestled at ends of valleys – comforting little dwellings on slanting slopes accessible on foot or donkey. Blossoms blooming all around: large, abundant, colorful, thermophilic. Flower gardens near houses, wildflowers on bare cliffs. High above the valley, Arjana gleams. Steep ivory mountain. So abruptly does it rise, some have wept in weariness upon its craggy plateaus.

The Cernei Mountains fall steeply southward into Cernei valley, where one of the most exquisite of Romanian rivers flows. To the north lie the high rocky pastures of the Țarcu Mountains which join the pathless Godeanus. This is the boundary of the Southern Carpathians.

Once, wearily, I sat on the bank of a brook beneath some mountains. My fire blazed as people, cows and goats returned to their remote hamlets



from forests and mountain pastures. I greeted them and drank my tea. It was growing dark. As I prepared my bed for the night, a group of children dashed up from the hamlets below. Their little heads trembled in excitement, but they halted a good ways off. They were frightened. Some even held rocks in their fists. I called to them, they dropped their weapons and crept closer. The oldest began some jibber-jabber, and the others laughed in relief. Their parents had told them that a terrible stranger sits beneath the mountain at the forest's edge, and his beard stretches all the way to the ground. That is how fairytales are born in the far reaches of the Southern Carpathians. Fear dissipated, the beard grew much shorter. Long into the night, the children poked and prodded me, closely observing me as I lay down to sleep, whispering and begging for Czech coins, thrusting slimy bits of bread into my mouth. I felt a bit like Mungo Park, the first white man in upper Nigeria.



MEHEDIŢI

THE SULTRY MOUNTAINS. A thousand meters above the river, the Mehedinți Mountains scour the sky, the utmost outpost of the Southern Carpathians. Sheer. White. Thorny thickets, pathless precipices, serrated steppe grasses, the rarest and prickliest of which is *Achnatherum calamagrostis* – silver spike grass. Gleaming white cliffs blanketed in Banat pines and strange southern flora. Plants are fragrant and cicadas sing. Only after an arduous climb to the ridge by way of Seven Springs will you truly have encountered the Mehedinți Mountains.

The remarkable Țasna River ravine empties into the Cerna at the fourteenth kilometer. Steep, deep, black and white. Black pines, white bluffs climbing stepwise hundreds of meters up. Like a Japanese ink drawing. An impassible white-water canyon overlooked by Indian prairies – what a place to grow old. You lay watching herds. Sheep, little black, squealing hogs, thick-coated goats. A beautiful land where you can lie amid sheep droppings and not look a fool. Above the herds, water vanishes and mountains regain their ivory sheen. Mehedinți peaks sparkle like ancient silver as the sun sets



faithfully on distant limestone crags. Nights are warm and fragrant with southern tranquility.

Below the mountains lies an old spa where you can rest your path-weary body in Herculane waters. You first catch sight of it from unimaginable heights, descending from Domogled, the tallest mountain, and oldest Hungarian nature preserve. From White Cross, you get a bird's eye view of Băile Herculane. Fly down and alight for a while at the hot springs. Seven swirling springs bubble up at the base of bluffs. Free for all to enjoy. In the largest of them, a stony grotto below the path, you will find yourself at one with humanity's suffering. Be not discouraged or repulsed. Immerse yourself in the warm water with the most afflicted: limping shepherds, scabrous old women. Gipsy ladies take off their blouses and descend into the mikvah, stripped to the waist. Their skirts billow in the water like great pink airships. Take your cure wildly in the smelly springs. Don't be afraid to gargle. And when you emerge, you will find yourself strong and healthy once more.



A BROTHERLY WORD IN CLOSING

The *Spray* discovered no new continents on her voyage, nor did she seek new worlds. But to find one's way to lands already discovered is a good thing. No king, no country, no treasury at all, was taxed for the voyage of the *Spray*, and she accomplished all she undertook to do.

JOSHUA SLOCUM
*the first man to singlehandedly
circumnavigate the globe from 1895 - 1898*

EMERALD WINDS waft o'er the oceanic expanses of Carpathian forests, I sense their fierceness and power. The time has come to raise your flag, little brother! Sail and become a child of Carpathia! You have no more excuses; I have so praised the pilgrim games, Romania, and her mountains even more. The sooner you set sail, the more likely you are to glimpse that land as I have known it. Hesitate and you may forfeit all and have nowhere to go. For even in Romania, people are destroying the wilderness at incredible speed; that which has been called progress hurtles ever onward like some

unhuman force, a charging, unstoppable boulder. But a beautiful sort of poverty is still to be found among the Romanian mountains, as is the solitude of Asia-like plains. Shepherds there still speak a clear, hard Roman tongue and their boots, coats, and cheeses are still homemade.

Many more beautiful lands likely exist whose mountains are mightier, valleys longer, pastures and forests vaster, and lakes deeper. But, for now, there are no other such places you can go to whenever you wish, whenever you feel burdened and wistful or yearn for mountain summits, solitude, freedom. Decide to go, and in a few short hours you are sitting aboard a train, celestial carriage, bound for Transylvania, Wallachia or Moldavia. No need for prior self-abasement, months of begging, bribery, and extortion. And none of the disappointment that awaits when your request to travel to mountains far afield is rejected. Freedom and independence, yet another reason I love Romania! And once you have circumnavigated all the Carpathian Mountains and played all the games, you will better understand the verses of poet Friedrich Nietzsche from his century-old book on holy Zarathustra, "My wild wisdom became pregnant on the lonesome mountains; on the rough stones did she bear the youngest of her young. Now runneth she foolishly in the arid wilderness, and seeketh the soft sward—mine old, wild wisdom!"

MAP OF THE ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS

Nothing twice, all things but once behold
Ever onward – ne'er back o'er tracks gone cold.

KAREL HYNEK MÁCHA, Gypsies, 1836

To conclude this Carpathian account, I have appended a few more precise and useful lines on the Romanian side of the Carpathian arc. As far as I know, this marks the first attempt in Czech to clearly, though somewhat schematically, classify individual Romanian Carpathian mountain ranges. Though this is but a simple summary, it was no easy task mainly due to the varying opinions of Romanian cartographers and publications, of which I have read many and in which I always encountered greater or lesser deviations. I drew from the following titles to great extent: ROȘU, A. – *Geografia fizică a României*, București, 1973; COTEȚ, P. – *Geomorfologia României*, *ibid.*, 1973; ONCESCU, N. – *Geologia României*, *ibid.* 1965 (3rd edition).

Of the entire Carpathian arc which is commonly divided into either three parts (the Northern or Western Carpathians found in Czechoslovakia and Poland, reaching as far as Dukla Pass; the Central or Wooded Carpathians from Dukla Pass onward in a line connecting the headwaters of the Tisa and Prut rivers; the Southern or Romanian Carpathians found primarily in Romanian), or two (the Northwestern Carpathians and the Southeastern Carpathians, where the boundary is formed by an imaginary line between the Carpatho-Ruthenian (Zakarpattian) cities of Mukachevo and Stryi), only the third, or if you like, the second arm of the arc stretches into Romania, though by area it is the largest. The geological genesis of the Carpathians has been dealt with sufficiently in geology textbooks.

The Romanian Carpathians are traditionally divided into three larger groups: the Eastern, Southern and Western Carpathians. There is, however, considerable difference of opinion among experts regarding where the respective borders of these Carpathian groups lie. The old border between Eastern and Southern Carpathians – the Prahova River Valley – is rarely used today. Geomorphologists have moved the boundary further westward to the Dâmbovița River Valley and Rucăr-Bran fissure (a designation I have kept to as well), and geologists go even further to the west considering Piatra Craiului to be a nappe of the Eastern Carpathians, while regarding a shoulder of the Perșani Mountains as part of the Southern Carpathians. Geologists count what are sometimes called the Banat Mountains to be part of the Southern Carpathians, while geomorphologists claim they belong to the Western Carpathians.

I have incorporated the geological perspective into the map by arranging individual mountain ranges according to their formation. This has proved especially useful as it pertains to the much more geologically complex Eastern Carpathians, which can be roughly divided into volcanic, Crystalline-Mesozoic and flysch zones. The Southern and Western Carpathians are geologically simpler, formed, broadly speaking, of bedrock. These divisions roughly correspond to the Czechoslovak Carpathians, though they are naturally not overly precise since some ranges (Perșani, Bodoc massifs among others) are not geologically monolithic.

For that reason, I have divided the Romanian Carpathians into 71 different ranges. Several of them (nos. 9, 12, 27, 29, 36, 40, 55, 56, etc.) are distinguished only in scholarly literature, and their distinctions are insignificant to the visitor. There is no definitive or uniform number of ranges since different maps and sources designate the boundaries at various places. In addition, the ranges have often been divided into individual massifs, even ridges, so orienting in mountain systems and their synonyms can prove very difficult.

The highest peak in the Romanian Carpathians is located among the Făgăraș Mountains (Moldoveanu 2,543 m.a.s.l.) while the overall highest



Carpathian peak, Gerlachovský štít, lies in the Slovak High Tatras. Fifteen Romanian summits reach an altitude of more than 2,000 meters (nos. 5, 11, 20, 21, 39, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50, 51, 52) while four stretch above 2500 meters (20, 42, 48, 50). The Hășmaș Mountains are regarded as the area's main watershed, a "confinium triplex" or triple divide (similar to Králický Sněžník on the Czech – Polish border, except that all Romanian rivers flow into the same sea.)

For the visitor and reader of Romanian maps and guidebooks, I offer a few lines on the proper use of Romanian grammar in nomenclature. There is little difference in using the definite and indefinite forms (Făgăraș or Făgărașul, Retezat or Retezatul, etc.), though the first is more common. However, using the bare genitive (2nd case) for which Romanian has masculine and feminine endings, -ui and -ei respectively, e.g. Făgărașului, Retezatului or Rodnei, Bistriței, is incorrect without adding the word

“munții” or “mountains.” Thus we can use either the nominative (1st case) – Făgăraș, Rodna, munții Făgăraș, munții Rodna – or the genitive – munții Făgărașului, munții Rodnei – which translates directly as “mountains of Făgăraș” and “mountains of Rodna.”

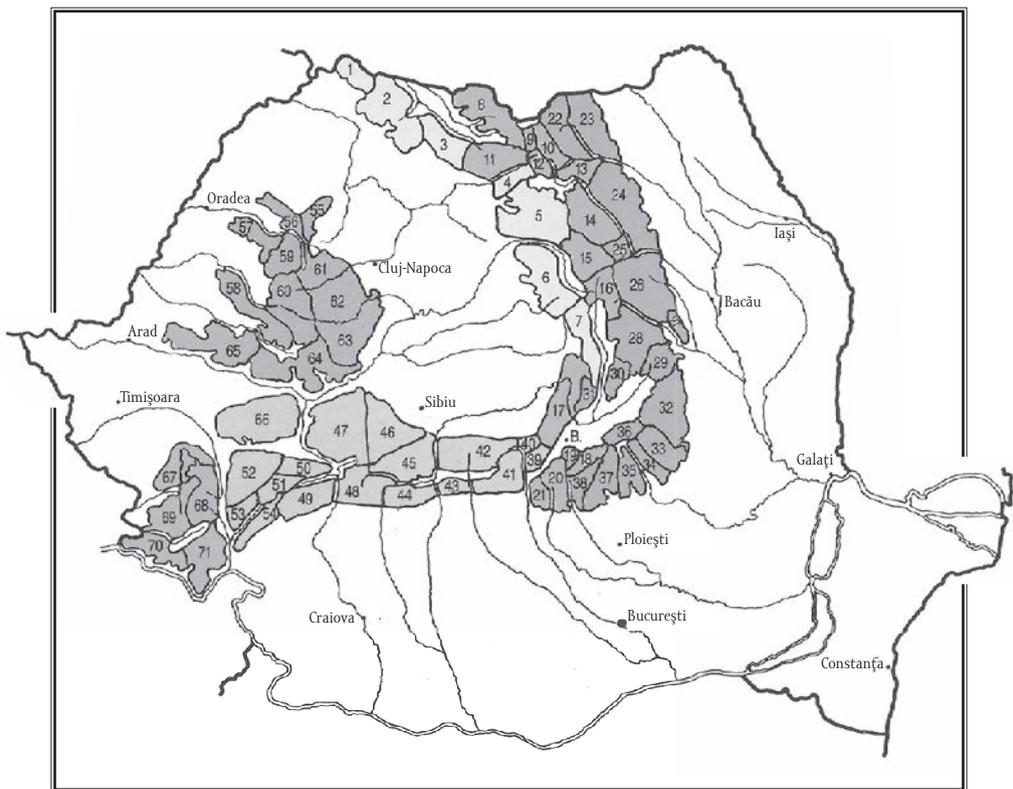
In the last decade, Romanian spelling has undergone some changes. For example, in place of the somewhat old-fashioned “î” they have begun using “ă” (except in certain instances like at the beginning of proper nouns). But since this book was first written under the old rules, I have left the original spellings unchanged.

It is interesting to note that Romanian has only used the Latin alphabet since 1860. Before that, the Cyrillic alphabet (a Greco-Slavic script created at the turn of the 9th century) was used for writing and printing and is still used in countries like Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia.

In conclusion, a few words on Romanian pronunciation so you can ask your way if you need to, little brother. Shepherds in the Șurean Mountains could not tell you how to get to the town of Cugir until you pronounced it “Koojeer.” They simply would not understand, and no doubt you would lose your way.

Romanian pronunciation is actually quite simple: ă is simply the short “a” in “around;” Â and Î are pronounced identically and amount roughly to the “u” sound in the word “burn” or the “eux” sound in the French word “deux;” CE and CI are pronounced “-che-” and “-chi-” respectively, otherwise C is pronounced as “-k-.” The same is true for GE and GI the pronunciation being “-je-” and “-ji-” while in all other situations, G is simply “-g-” as in “girl;” the letter J sounds like the “j” in “Jacque”; consonants Ș and Ț are “-sh-” and “-ts-” respectively.

And that is really all you need to know to read names on Romanian maps and find your way through the land.



**CARPAȚII ORIENTALI (ROMANIAN EASTERN CARPATHIANS)
VOLCANIC MOUNTAINS**

- 1 Munții Oaș
- 2 Munții Gutâi
- 3 Munții Țibleș
- 4 Munții Bîrgau
- 5 Munții Căliman
- 6 Munții Gurghiu
- 7 Munții Harghita

CRYSTALLINE-MEZOZOIC (CORE) MOUNTAINS

- 8 Munții Maramureș
- 9 Munții Țibau
- 10 Munții Obcina Mestecaniș
- 11 Munții Rodna
- 12 Munții Suhard
- 13 Munții Giupalău-Rarău
- 14 Munții Bistriței
- 15 Munții Giurgeu
- 16 Munții Hăghimaș (= M. Hășmaș)
- 17 Munții Perșani
- Munții Bîrsei (18–19)
- 18 Munții Postavarul
- 19 Munții Piatra Mare
- 20 Munții Bucegi
- 21 Munții Leaota

FLYSCH MOUNTAINS – OUTER CARPATHIANS

- 22 Munții Obcina Feredeu
- 23 Munții Obcina Mare
- 24 Munții Stînișoarei
- 25 Munții Ceahlău
- 26 Munții Tercău (= M. Tarhaus + M. Goșman / Geamăna)
- 27 Munții Berzunț (= M. Tazlău)
- 28 Munții Ciuc
- 29 Munții Nemira (+ M. Oituz)
- 30 Munții Bodoc
- 31 Munții Baraolt
- 32 Munții Vrancea
- Munții Buzăului (33–35)
- 33 Munții Penteleu

- 34 Munții Podu Calului
- 35 Munții Siriu
- 36 Munții Întorsurii
- Munții Doftanu (37–38)
- 37 Munții Ciucaș (+ M. Teleajen, M. Grohotișu)
- 38 Munții Gârbovei (= M. Baiu)

CARPAȚII MERIDIONALI (ROMANIAN SOUTHERN CARPATHIANS)

- 39 Munții Piatra Craiului
- 40 Munții Țaga
- 41 Munții Iezer-Papușa
- 42 Munții Făgăraș
- 43 Munții Cozia
- 44 Munții Căpățînii
- 45 Munții Lotru (= M. Șteflești)
- 46 Munții Cindrel (= M. Cibin, M. Sibiului)
- 47 Munții Șurean (= M. Sebeșului, M. Oraștiei)
- 48 Munții Parîng (+ M. Latoriței)
- 49 Munții Vilcan
- 50 Munții Retezat
- 51 Munții Godeanu
- 52 Munții Țarcu
- 53 Munții Cernei
- 54 Munții Mehedinți

CARPAȚII OCCIDENTALI (ROMANIAN WESTERN CARPATHIANS)

- Munții Apuseni (Western mountains, 55–65)
- 55 Munții Meseș
- 56 Munții Șes (= M. Plopiș)
- 57 Munții Padurea Craiului
- 58 Munții Codra Moma

- 59 Munții Vlădeasa
- 60 Munții Bihor
- 61 Munții Gilău
- 62 Munții Muntele Mare
- 63 Munții Trascău
- 64 Munții Metaliferi
- 65 Munții Zărand
- 66 Munții Poiana Ruscă
- Munții Banatului (Banat Mountains, 67–71)
- 67 Munții Dognecea
- 68 Munții Semenic
- 69 Munții Aninei
- 70 Munții Locva
- 71 Munții Almaj



A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROMANIA

I've been asked to do a lovely task: play the game of Herodotus the historian. What a good thing too, for history is nearly as important as fairytales, concealing the world's essence within. But because the books I read on the subject were voluminous and the game was meant to be short, I had to trim down the history of Romania and take the golden path of brevity.

DACIA. Land of the Dacians, an Indo-European people that emerged in this part of Europe from Neolithic mists and, after much blending with other tribes and nations, has remained here to this day. Historians officially call them Geto-Dacians, though it is not certain if they were originally two related tribes (like the Dudlebs and the Luchans) or if they are one and the same nation, called differently by Romans and Greeks. They were descendants of the northern branch of Thracians who flooded the entire Balkan region thousands of years ago. Centuries passed and the Thracian king, Burebista, tried to unite all the Geto-Dacian tribes (among them the Carpi, after whom the Carpathians take their name) that resided in the territory of modern-day Romania into a sovereign and independent Dacian state. He succeeded for a time, but not all Dacians were happy with the centralizing tendencies, and in 44 B.C., Burebista was assassinated and the state fell. Around that time, the Dacians first encountered the Roman Empire, which had by then established the province of Moesia south of the Danube River. Greek colonization of Romania's Black Sea region had begun three-quarters of a millennium earlier with the harbors of Istros (today called Histria) established at the mouth of the Danube in the 7th century B.C., Kallatis (Mangalia) in the 6th century, and Tomis (Constanța) in the 5th century. The Dacians were a warlike people, and so were the Romans. Decebal, leader of the Dacians re-formed and lead the Dacian state between 87 and 106 AD, establishing Sarmizegetusa in the Orăștie Mountains as the religious and political capital. An era of wars had

come. At first, the Romans seemed to be losing, then they got the upper hand. Despite Emperor Domitian's victory in 88 AD, and Trajan's in 102 (see the Adamclisi monument in Dobrogea), Dacia remained unconquered. The Romans built a bridge over the Danube at the Iron Gates and defeated the mountain city of Sarmizegetusa in 106 AD during the Second Dacian War. As a result, Decebal fell on his own knife, and the Dacian state became a Roman province for the next 169 years. The Romans were skillful colonizers and 40 km southwest of the Dacian capital, they established another city also called Sarmizegetusa (today a Roman archeological dig). They founded other towns and settlements as well, mined for gold, imported citizens from all across the empire and settled war veterans. This brought about a unified language: vulgar Latin, which to this day, remains the language of Romania (enriched by Slavic and Germanic expressions, and the remnants of the now-extinct Dacian tongue). Română – Roman. But the rest of the uncolonized Dacians, along with other invading tribes so vexed the province that by the year 272, or more precisely 275, the Romans had left completely. Of all of Dacia, only Dobrogea remained part of Rome, and today's Romanians can take pride in their ancestors' heroic past, the most glorious time in their history.

WALLACHIA. One of the three major geographical regions in present-day Romania, it stretches from the Carpathians to the Danube, divided by the Olt River into Oltenia or Lesser Wallachia (west of the river) and Muntenia, Greater Wallachia (east of the Olt). The origins of the name are Germanic since, for the Teutons of the time, the word Wallachian was synonymous with the word Vlach and used for all Romanic tribes. I shall now attempt to bridge swiftly the nearly ten centuries that separate the departure of the Romans from Dacia and the establishment of the first principalities of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, though history has not been overly forthcoming in this regard. After the end of Roman domination, the Dacians, by far the most numerous ethnic group in the region, lived in commons initially with shared property, herds and fields. The Migration Period had

a profound influence on the land lying between the Carpathians and the Black Sea since, from about the 4th century AD, innumerable tribes, with names almost mythical, settled or passed through the region: Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Huns, Gepids, Avars, Lombards, Slavs, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Pechenegs, and Cumans (Polovtsians, Kipchaks) after which Romania was often called Black Cumania between the 10th and 13th centuries. For a time, the territory of Romania belonged to the Kievan Rus (northern Moldavia), then to the Principality of Halych, then to the Bulgarian Empire, falling subsequently under Byzantine influence; it was ruled by both Tartars and Hungarians. Today's Romanians are a combination of mainly Dacian blood mixed with all the tribes above that speak the Roman tongue.

The modern-day region of Wallachia became a principality in the 12th century, and in 1324, ruler Basarab I threw off Hungarian domination, bringing independence to the land. The capital city was Curtea de Argeş which still stands today at the south-facing base of the Făgăraş; Bucharest became the capital much later, established as such by the Turks for its location: resting in the flatlands it was difficult to defend. From the end of the 14th century to the year 1878, the Turks were the main actors in this region of Europe. Though the Wallachian Voivode, Mircea the Elder, (whose illegitimate son was notorious Vlad the Impaler, or Dracula) defeated them in 1394, the Turks soon returned to the Balkans, flooding all of southeast Europe. For centuries, Wallachian (as well as Moldavian and Transylvanian) voivodes, boyars magnates and aristocrats were forced to tuck between the Turks (in 1545, Wallachia became a vassal state of Turkey, but was initially largely autonomous) and their enemies the Russians, Austrians, and Hungarians. Often divided, they were bloodily defeated in countless uprisings, battles, and rebellions (e.g. Oltenia belonged to Austria for part of the 18th century, etc.). After numerous uprisings, the Turks revoked the autonomy of the local nobility (or "boyars") and between 1715 and 1821 (1711 in Moldavia) installed Phanariots – rulers of Greek origin named for Phanar, the quarter of Constantinople they came from. They guaranteed that the

heavy imperial taxes the Turks (otherwise benevolent toward the religions and liberties of occupied nations) exacted on their vanquished territories would be duly collected and delivered.

Ever more similar political fates with neighboring Moldavia led, in 1859, to the establishment of a personal union between the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia under Moldavian prince Cuzou and, in 1869, to the unification of both lands, as yet subject to weakening Turkish influence and growing Russian might, into the principality of Romania.

Wallachian influence even stretched as far as Moravia. From about the 12th century, they moved gradually with their herds along the Carpathian arc up to the northernmost edge of the Carpathians in Slovakia and Moravia (Wallachian colonization) where they blended with the local inhabitants, leaving many residual Romanian herdsman expressions.

MOLDAVIA. Named for the Moldova River, it originally stretched between the rivers Siret and Dniester, and in days of old was sometimes referred to as Multania. Western Moldavia spreads between the Carpathian Mountains and the river Prut (which formed a boundary with the former USSR), while eastern Moldavia, also called Bessarabia (apparently for the Thracian Besei tribe⁴ that once inhabited the region), lies betwixt the Prut and the Dniester, and after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 became part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which included the Pridnestrovian and Gaguz Republics,⁵ with the capital city in Kishinev. Moldavia is a fertile land that has historically belonged to, or at least fallen under, the dominance of Russia, Poland, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey. In 1538, the kingdom that had been established there in the 14th century became a vassal of the Ottoman Empire. Famous voivodes of the region include Dragoș, Alexander

4 Translator's note: Current scholarly research suggests Bessarabia was named after the Wallachian Basarab Dynasty which ruled the region during the 14th century.

5 Translator's note: The Pridnestrovian and Gaguz Republics are referred to together as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic; it is an unrecognized breakaway state within the country of Moldova.

the Good, Stephen the Great, and Petru Rareș. In the 15th and especially 16th centuries, Eastern Orthodox architecture (Moldavian monasteries) blossomed in the region. For many years, the capital city was Suceava but was later moved to Iași. As in Wallachia, the land was swept by conflicts between boyars, voivodes, and their Turkish occupiers, while a segment of Moldavia (see Bukovina) remained in Austrian hands between 1774 and 1919 after they defeated the Turks. A source of constant friction between Moldavia and the neighboring Russian Empire was Bessarabia, which Russia occupied several times in 1787, 1812, 1829, and as part of a treaty after expelling the Turks in 1878. After World War I, however, Bessarabia fell to Romania (over 50 percent of the population was Romanian), but the annexation was not recognized by the Soviet Union which, first in 1940, and then definitively after the Second World War made it a part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1861, the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia united in the principality of Romania.

TRANSYLVANIA. A land embraced from the south, east, and west by the Carpathian arc. After which seven castles it takes its name I have not discovered.⁶ Though perhaps it comes from the old name for the present-day town of Sibiu – Sibinburg. The Romans called the region Transsilvania (an important mining area in their province of Dacia), which means "Land beyond the forest", beyond Carpathian walls, Hungarians used the name Edély (pronounced approximately "erday"), Romanians Ardeal, and Germans Siebenbürg. For centuries, Romans, Hungarians, Germans, Austrians, and Turks struggled to dominate the region, and it was not until 1919 that Romanians were finally victorious. Even the illustrious former crown city of Transylvania was known by many names in many tongues: Latin – Apulum, German – Karlsburg or Weissburg, Hungarian – Gyula Fehérvar, Czech – Karlův Bělehrad, Romanian – Alba Iulia. Transylvania fell under Hungarian

6 The Czech word for Transylvania, "Sedmihrady", is a translation of the German "Siebenbürgen" or "Seven Castles", a name commonly used for the region in other Slavic languages as well.

influence in the 12th century as an independent principality or voivodeship in the Kingdom of Hungary, and as such, was afforded its own parliament and voivodes (magnates). This status continued until 1541 when it was taken over by Turks whom Transylvanian voivode Jan Hunyady had successfully repelled in 1456. The Turks chose a more moderate form of occupation and Transylvania became an "autonomous principality under the suzerainty of the Porte" (Porte = the name for the gate to the palace of the sultan, later a name for the Ottoman Empire). Austria and Hungary alternated in dominance over the region, one side uniting with the Turks against the other; Transylvanian nobles, too, were split, some favoring the Turks, others the Hapsburgs. At the start of the 16th century under Voivode Jan Zápolský, the principality expanded its territory to include eastern Slovakia and the town of Košice, while under Voivode Báthory, Transylvania united with the Polish Empire. The land was inhabited by four nationalities: Hungarians, Germans (brought in as colonizers from various parts of Germany, especially Saxony, by King Géza II in the 13th century) Szekelys (descendants of Hungarians and older Turkish tribes) and native Romanians who, though far more numerous, had no political power. Between 1686 and 1699 after Turkey's defeat, Transylvania gradually fell under definitive Austrian control, bringing about what are known as the kuruc⁷ uprisings (kuruc = forces of Hungarian nobleman Francis II Rákóczi who led the anti-Hapsburg rebellions). The situation in Transylvania, however, changed very little overall and, with an ever-growing national awakening of Romanians and not a few uprisings (in the Western Carpathians for example), Transylvania remained part of Austro-Hungary until its collapse in 1919 whereupon it was given to Romania. And there, aside from the Hungarian occupation of 1940–1944, it remains even today.

BANAT. A flat fertile region between the Lower Tisza, Mureș, and Carpathian Mountains. The name is derived from the word "ban," a high-ranking mili-

⁷ Pronunciation: "kooorootz"



tary governor in charge of provinces in the southern reaches of Hungarian lands. It was completely destroyed during the Ottoman wars and resettled in the 18th century by Serbs, Romanians, Slovaks, Czechs, and Germans after the expulsion of the Turks. Upon falling into Turkish hands in 1552, the former Hungarian region was renamed Temesvár pashalik (pashalik = territory governed by a pasha or local ruler who answers directly to the sultan) called for its capital city – Banat. The northern part was later renamed the Pashalik of Varat (after the city of Oradea). In 1699, the Turks were expelled from Hungary and Transylvania (following the Treaty of Karlowitz) but still clung to Banat; after two more wars with Austria, they would lose that too succeeding the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718. Banat remained under Austrian military rule until 1751, and subsequent civilian governance was administered mainly by Hungary, though between 1849 and 1860, this

responsibility fell to Austria. Banat became part of Romania in 1919, while the western segments between the Tisza and Danube Rivers (called Vojvodina) were forfeited by Austro-Hungary to the newly formed Yugoslavia, or more precisely, Serbia.

BUKOVINA. The northwestern area of the former Principality of Moldavia, it was acquired by the Austrian Empire in 1775 following victory over the Turks. Though at first a part of Galicia, it became a nominal duchy within the Austrian Empire in 1849. Although the name Bukovina is quite new, wooded areas along the Moldavian-Polish border had been commonly called that since the 15th century. In 1919, the region was turned over to Romania (with the exception of four Polish municipalities), including the capital city of Chernivtsi. After the Second World War, the region's northern area was annexed by the Ukrainian SSR, and what was left remained part of Romania. About a third of the population of Bukovina is made up of Hutsuls and Rusyns.

DOBRUDJA. A grassland region between the Danube and the Black Sea. Dobrogea in Romanian, a name hearkening back to 14th-century Bulgarian boyar Dobrotitsa. Essentially uninhabited till the end of the 19th century, it was a corridor for countless war parties, conquests, and migrations. A narrow strip of coastland was colonized by the Greeks in the 7th century B.C. (harbors of Istros – Histria, Kallatis – Mangalia, Tomis – Constanța). Despite the Romans withdrawing from Dacia, they continued to cling to Dobrudja (part of the province of Moesia they called Scythia Minor after the ancient inhabitants of the region). Until the 14th century, the territory was part of the Bulgarian Empire and its battle for regional influence against the Eastern Roman Empire⁸ and the Cumans. After that, the Turks occupied the region, and it became the Sanjak of Dobrudja (lying within the Pashalik of Rumelia) for centuries to come. In 1878, after the defeat of

⁸ Also called The Byzantine Empire.

the Ottomans, much of Dobrudja was ceded to Romania through the Treaty of Berlin, though a small segment also fell to Bulgaria. As a result, from 1912–1919 conflicts arose between the two countries (each occupying the other's territory), but Romania succeeded in clinging to its part of Dobrudja and the Black Sea coast.

ROMANIA. Became a country in 1861 through the uniting of Wallachian and Moldavian principalities (though Wallachian voivode Michael the Brave, or Mihail Viteazu, briefly united Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania to fight off the Turks at the start of the 17th century). After lengthy talks, Moldavian prince Colonel Cuza⁹ was chosen as the first unifying ruler of the Romanian principality. However, in 1866 he was forced, by mounting interior and international pressures, to pass governance of Romania to the foreign rule of Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. A year prior to the 1878 expulsion of the Ottomans, which largely succeeded due to assistance from the Russian army, the Principality of Romania proclaimed itself a kingdom (ratified by its parliament in 1881), and Prince Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen became King Carol I, who ruled until his death in 1914. He was succeeded by his nephew, Ferdinand who, after two years of hesitation, joined the allied forces (England, France, etc.) in 1916 in declaring war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany, thus entering World War I. Though Romania was swiftly defeated and three-quarters occupied by enemy forces, the Romanians heroically defended their last stronghold in Moldavia, and after the war, the Allies declared that by halting the onslaught of enemy forces, the Romanians had shortened the war by several weeks, perhaps months. As a result, in 1919 Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina, and Bessarabia were ceded to Romania, doubling its territory and number of citizens. Rather astonishingly, when King Ferdinand I died in 1927, his son Carol forfeited the throne to his six-year-old son Michael (and an appointed regency) and departed the country. Not until 1930, satiated by the western

⁹ Alexander Iona Cuza – Prince of Moldavia, Prince of Wallachia and Domnitor of Romania.

bon vivant lifestyle, did he return to rule Romania as King Carol II. His reign was not a happy one, however, and in 1938 he transformed what was a constitutional monarchy into an ever-deepening dictatorship. The eight previous years had been spent cooperating with the Gardă de Fier, or Iron Guard, a fascist movement and political party that first terrorized communists, then Hungarians and Jews, and finally the Romanian population itself. After initially attempting to join forces with them, the king began violently suppressing the group, even having their leader, Codreanu, shot “while escaping.” Unsurprisingly, the Gardă reacted with assassinations and ever greater terror in the streets. With the start of World War II in 1940 and the Hungarian occupation of Transylvania, Carol II lost control of the political situation at home and decided to emigrate for a second time. Before his departure, he formally conferred kingship to his son Michael, though real power and the title of Conducător – Leader of the State – was held to General Antonescu, war hero of the First World War. He, too, proved unsuccessful in fully mitigating the murderous Iron Guard, later joining forces with them because of shared sympathies for Hitler’s Germany. Side by side with Germany, Romania joined the assault of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Despite re-occupying Bessarabia, which the Russians had taken in 1940, their army suffered heavy casualties across the Russian Front. A day after the Red Army victoriously crossed into Moldavia, Romania erupted in anti-government, anti-German rebellion (August 23, 1944)¹⁰. At King Michael’s command, Antonescu was arrested and a democratic government appointed. However, democracy lasted less than a year, and at Moscow’s orders, a communist government, with Petru Groza at its head, was established. A 1945 attempt at returning to democracy was violently suppressed by the ruling communists, and a mock trial of General Antonescu was held where he was sentenced to death and shot on June 1, 1946. On the thirtieth of December 1947, the monarchy was dismantled, Romania was proclaimed a people’s republic, and King Michael I left the country. Forty-two years

¹⁰ King Michael I, son of Carol II, led a coup against Conducător Antonescu.



of brutal communist rule later and following a week of bloodbaths and murders perpetrated on the citizen population, the last dictator of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was shot and killed along with his wife on Christmas of 1989. This land of bankrupt economic and moral relationships has been struggling to return to civilized life since 1990. Evidence of this can be seen in the return of King Carol II's remains from Portugal in 2003, where he died in 1953. Additionally, his son, King Michael I was allowed to repatriate in 2002 after living in emigration in Switzerland, and all his property was returned.

Romania became a NATO member on March 9, 2004 and joined the European Union on January 1, 2007. It currently remains outside the so-called Schengen Area.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Wonder not at all I have seen on my journeys or at the lands I have visited; for everything I have seen, my horse has seen too, and wherever I've gone, my bags have come with me. Wonder instead at all I have learned of exotic lands. Because there is no greater or lasting delight than to keep learn.

An abbé and traveler, XVII century

It was years ago that I sat down to write Carpathian Games for my friends Leopold Kukačka and Vláda Slouka of Ústí nad Labem. With great devotion, they had just put out the first Czech language guide to the Romanian mountains, for at the time, ranges in more distant lands were difficult, if not impossible, for ordinary pilgrims to visit. I was assigned one mountain range which they asked me to describe as precisely and thoroughly as possible, omitting no signpost, forgetting no bunk bed in any mountain cabin. That approach, you may imagine, went against my very grain. And besides, I probably would not have been up to the task since I had crisscrossed the Carpathians mostly without a map, and never slept in a cabin. It is testimony to the nobleness of their souls, then, that they published four editions (in 1982, 1986, 1988 and 1989) of Carpathian Games at several hundred copies apiece, despite it bearing so little resemblance to their original vision. I am much indebted to them. Carpathian Games, therefore, was not samizdat in the true sense, that would be too strong a word, but neither was it a book printed in normal fashion. Both of my friends risked trouble and sanctions, and for that, I am very grateful. In order for the book to come out as it did, however, I had to adhere to strict, unbendable rules: thirty-two lines of type for each and every mountain range, whether big or small, beautiful or



ordinary and a precise length of the manuscript, set to the page. I had just been reading the remarkable writer Nikolai Leskov, and caught myself saying with Alexander of Soligalich that it was precisely the length that should “suffice the devoted servant”.

My friends were also responsible for the book's graphic design. The first edition was illustrated by Petr Chvojka, the following three by Zdeněk Urban. I merely harvested the undeserved fruits of their labor (for without friends there would be no book), receiving the most wonderful letters from timid, gracious people all across Czechoslovakia. It was due to those letters that I realized the only forgivable reason to write books is to

make people better, to help them discover the good in themselves. All else is worthless.

I traveled to Romania every year for twenty-six years – with a few breaks here and there – and spent many months of my life there. On mountaintops, in lowlands, in the Danube delta. Sometimes alone, more often with rover scouts from Liberec who had lost their stomping grounds after scouting was banned in 1970. Together, we discovered the poorest, emptiest corners of Europe, just as Captain Cook in the 18th century discovered the Pacific islands. He was not the first person to set foot in Hawaii, just the first European. For hundreds of years, people of only slightly darker complexion than his own sailors had lived in the South Seas and rejoiced in volcanoes and deep rainforests. Yet he was – just like us – an explorer!

I loved Romania very much, a land where mountain folk and country folk lived modestly, struggling to make an honest living, and youngsters in towns were not rude and rough and did not ruin what others had built. A friendly land where we could freely wander, eat and sleep, and where we learned the truth of the antique philosopher's words, "Happiness belongs to the self-sufficient." Before 1989, there were few such lands, and it would be ungrateful to forget that.

Then, with the ease of gods, someone tore down the wall, and the world changed remarkably. One month to another, one week to the next. The Carpathians became deserted. Those who had not been allowed to go anywhere else suddenly, breathlessly, flooded wealthier countries in Europe and North America like happy indigent lemmings. But the time will come again for the Carpathians, for the mountains of Russia and Asia too, and their plains and steppes, because most beautiful of all is to wander through poor and deserted lands that have not yet lost their distinct and ancient appearance.

There is yet another way the world's changes have ushered in a new era: for the first time since it was written, *Carpathian Games* was published – in print! Skauting, Miloš Zapletal and Jaroslav Štátný's Liberec based publishing house issued the book twice, once in 1992 and again in 2000, in an edition called *Skautské cesty*¹¹. The new editions contained dozens of old engravings of Romanian mountains I had found by coincidence in a twenty-four volume collection called *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie*, published in Vienna between 1887 and 1902.

In 2006, Vestri, another Liberec based publisher, graciously published the seventh edition of my manuscript. Thanks to the owner-editor-and-publisher-in-one, *Carpathian Games* became a book for the first time. Hardbound and with superb graphic design by Miroslav Fulín, it contains gorgeous color photographs that, for the first time, let you experience the captivating Carpathian beauty for yourself. I am ever so grateful.

¹¹ Translation: Scouting Journeys

Ten years have gone by, and Vestri has decided it is time for the eighth edition, this time differing from all previous versions at least as regards graphic design. To illustrate it, the publisher asked our mutual friend, Ludvík Kunc, expert and admirer of Carpathian landscapes, nature and its four-legged dwellers bear, lynx and wolf. His watercolors gave the book a new face, and I am much indebted to him. It was issued in hardback and, per request, in paperback so it could be carried in packs and read around pilgrim fires. The manuscript remains unchanged except for a word added here and another subtracted there – I can add nothing in my old age to the enchantment of my youth. Remaining, too, is the outdated word Czechoslovakia, the name of my beautiful birthland, land where I lived most of my life, land that, to my great sorrow, no longer exists.

And one final note. Thirty-five years have passed since Carpathian Games was first written and published. If you read, therefore, of an experience I had thirty or forty years ago, do not forget to add to that number, monstrous and unimaginable as it must seem, the additional third of a century that has passed since!

The old abbé's words which stand at the head of this chapter – whether he truly lived or not – are wise and true, and there is nothing for it but to keep them. It is wonderful to run over mountains as free and oblivious as a wild horse, drinking from the waters of streams, resting in the grass. But far better is to walk those lands like a knowledgeable abbé, like one who knows. He, too, drinks of fresh mountain waters and falls asleep beneath starry skies, but he also knows things horses do not. How beautiful, little brother, if Carpathian Games helped you discover greater wisdom. It may even come in handy when one day you write your own book of Games. Chances are they will be about a different country in a different time, but write them you should, for every land deserves its own. And as you write, remember the Russian saying, "A land with no poet is a land that has ceased to exist."

Miloslav Nevrly, 2017



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Martina Šedivá
Martin "Sherry" Šerák
Tomáš Šetina
Jan Šimbera
Petr Škara
Klára Škvorová
Martin Šlapák
Anna Pírko a Stanislav
Kotlík Šlechtovi
Šlinczovi
Martin Špička
Petr Štaffa
Kryštof Štafl
Zuzana Štěpánová

Pavel Švancara
Jan Tauchman
Dalimil Toman
Jaroslav Tomiczek
Hana Trachtulcová
Šimon Trlifaj
Lucie Trnena
Jan Trpák
Petr Tulach
Robin Ujfalusi
Leopold Ullmann
Barbora Váchová
Iva van Leeuwen
Jan Vávra
Pavla Velinská
Jiří Velinský
Václav Vencovský
Jaroslav Vepřek -
Promyšleno
Anna Veselá
Zdenka Veselá
Zuzana Veselá
Ondřej Veselý
Petr Vinš
Petr Jan Vinš
Ondřej Višňák
Tomáš Vítěk
Jiří Vobiš
Jaroslav Vodáček
Robert Vystrčil,
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David Yilma
Jiří Zajíc
Tomáš Zaplatílek
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Kateřina Zavřelová
Michal Zedníček