

MEMOIRS OF AN ANTI-SEMITE

GREGOR VON REZZORI (1914–1998) was born in Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy, Ukraine), Bukovina, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He later described his childhood in a family of declining fortunes as one “spent among slightly mad and dislocated personalities in a period that also was mad and dislocated and filled with unrest.” After studying at the University of Vienna, Rezzori moved to Bucharest and enlisted in the Romanian army. During World War II, he lived in Berlin, where he worked as a radio broadcaster and published his first novel. In West Germany after the war, he wrote for both radio and film and began publishing books at a rapid rate, including the four-volume *Idiot’s Guide to German Society* and *Ein Hermelin in Tschernopol* (to be published by NYRB Classics as *Ermine*). From the late 1950s on, Rezzori had parts in several French and West German films, including one directed by his friend Louis Malle. In 1967, after spending years classified as a stateless person, Rezzori settled in a fifteenth-century farmhouse outside of Florence with his wife, gallery owner Beatrice Monti. There he produced some of his best-known works, among them *Death of My Brother Abel*, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, and the memoir *The Snows of Yesteryear: Portraits for an Autobiography* (also forthcoming from NYRB Classics).

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MEMOIRS OF AN ANTI-SEMITES
A Novel in Five Stories

GREGOR VON REZZORI

Introduction by

DEBORAH EISENBERG

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CONTENTS

Introduction . vii

Skusbno . 1

Youth . 68

Löwinger's Rooming House . 138

Troth . 190

Pravda . 243

Introduction

The friend who introduced me to Ivan Turgenev's short novel *First Love*, characterized it as a beautiful thing that's made out of ugly things, and it has occurred to me since that a substantial quotient of ugliness may well be integral to all truly beautiful literary works. In any case, there can be few books rooted in a more profound ugliness than Gregor von Rezzori's *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, which so vividly, so feelingly, so elegantly, with such tender care, anarchic humor, and shocking honesty portrays the crucible of Central Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, with its catastrophically toxic compound of cultural elements and historical impulses.

Rezzori was born in 1914 in the Bukovina, and he preserves in print, in this and other books, the immense vitality of the region at that time—the linguistic and ethnic ferment, the vast, brooding landscapes lit by the fading glow of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the borderland combustibility. As a young man, Rezzori also spent time in Vienna, where he studied and had family, in Bucharest, and in Berlin, and he can cause those cities to spring to life on a page with such intense immediacy that you can practically drink the coffee and eat the pastry.

Memoirs of an Anti-Semite was first published in its entirety in German, in 1979, but the story "Troth," which the

polyglot author wrote in English, appeared ten years earlier in *The New Yorker* under the title “Memoirs of an Anti-Semite.” And although the book was written decades after World War II, most of it is set in the preceding years, along the road to that war.

The cultural life of Germany and Central Europe in the 1910s, '20s, and '30s burns so brightly against its dark background that for many of us who weren't there it has the force of thwarted memory, of something that grieving is straining to reinstate. And the art of the period—music, film, painting, architecture, and literature—with its probing, uneasy, anticipatory qualities, seems to be straining forward for some sort of information or resolution from the far side of the immense blood-filled trench that violently severs one part of history from another.

It is sickeningly clear to us, now, just what is about to happen back then, on the other side. And yet, though the abyss yawns conspicuously in their path, the people walking around in that particular past seem nearly oblivious. Why, why on earth don't they watch where they're going?

The names of certain years are like tolling bells that announce not only the horrors each contains, but also the greater ones to come: 1919—the Treaty of Versailles; 1923—the apex of hyperinflation in Germany; 1933—the Reichstag fire, which enabled Hitler to seize power by declaring a “state of emergency”; 1935—the Nuremberg Laws, which stripped German Jews of citizenship; 1938—Anschluss, the annexation of Austria into the German Reich; Kristallnacht, the state-sponsored pogrom against Jews throughout the Reich; 1939—the German invasion of Poland; 1942—the Wannsee Conference, at which the program was devised to eradicate all Jews by means of extermination camps.

And of course between these years and within each of them, there are the myriad new rules, decrees and laws, economic and social events, and developments within the Church as well as within the medical and academic establishments, all of which were to signify in the ensuing immolation of a large part of the world.

The incremental contributions to the intertwined catastrophes—the war and the attempted genocide of the Jews—continue to be sifted and scrutinized. And there are many contemporaneous reports available to us. We have a number of astonishing witnesses' accounts from people who were soon to be murdered and from some who, against all likelihood, evaded murder. And we have the Nazi's hair-raisingly meticulous records of their programs, policies, and deeds, their triumphal speeches and exhaustive propaganda. There are also some superb diaries and memoirs by people like Sebastian Haffner and Missy Vassiltchikov, who could perfectly well have led successful lives within the Third Reich but who instead dedicated themselves to opposing it.

But with all this wealth of documentation, one thing that we have very little insight into is what it felt like to be someone who managed somehow to remain relatively unaffected by and relatively unconcerned with the government's darkening shadow. What about the person who was managing just to go about his or her business? What might such a person have been experiencing at each turn, at each of the moments that, in retrospect at least, appear as so starkly significant?

Once a great public cataclysm has occurred, it is nearly impossible for people to recall what it is they felt and how they behaved during it or just prior to it. Misery is a potent aid in obliterating memory, and shame in distorting it. The

mind's mandate is to interpret, and even in the most routine course of things the mind confects a stance—codifies, retroactively, reactions and attitudes; interpretation springs instantaneously from experience, but interpretation is inherently inaccurate.

Perhaps Rezzori's most astounding coup in this book is to keep his narrator's consciousness severely restricted to the moment it is experiencing, his tone pristinely untouched by the reader's (and author's) indelible awareness of the conflagration about to engulf entire populations. The stories are told from some unspecified "present" about a younger self. Yet throughout those sections of the book set before the war, there is no stain of hindsight—sanctimony, apology, self-exoneration, regret, or even sobriety regarding the shattering events that are soon to follow. It is a fastidious exploration of a psyche in circumstances that became extraordinary, and it sheds more light on murderous and suicidal human irrationality than any other single work I've encountered. It is also—however troublingly—deliriously *funny* and a virtuoso literary performance.

The complexities of the book's title alone, the tangled and ambiguous colorations—brutal, nostalgic, formal, comedic, goading, confessional—put one off-balance and on guard before one even reaches the subtitle: *A Novel in Five Stories*, itself arrestingly equivocal.

I'd assume this choice of subtitle was at least in part a marketing decision: novels are more saleable than stories, never mind that the book is not really a novel at all. On the other hand, neither is the book exactly a collection of stories. The sections, each of which is complete in itself, are, in fact, related—though it's hard to say exactly *how*; they're certainly not related in any way that free-standing segments of a novel might be expected to be related.

The first and last sections of the book have Russian titles—“*Skushno*” and “*Pravda*.” *Skushno*, we’re told immediately, “is difficult to translate. It means more than dreary boredom: a spiritual void that sucks you in like a vague but intensely urgent longing.” *Pravda*, on the other hand, we can all easily translate, and yet—as exemplified, for instance, by the famous Soviet newspaper from whose name most of us know the word—whether it actually means anything is debatable.

What impels the book’s first section toward the dubious, fragmented goal of the last, expresses itself variously in the course of the intervening stories as a longing for one’s childhood landscape—source and symbol of one’s integration into the universe—the longing for something to believe in, the longing for something to be loyal to, the longing for something to *be*: childish and adolescent longings, the longings of the pure in heart—romantic, innocent, and noble. Or so they seem to those who hold or extol them. But under Rezzori’s unflinching gaze the sentimental haze evaporates from around them and we watch notions of “loyalty” and “identity” degrade into little more than fertile soil for the cultivation of hatred.

Anti-Semitism, in various aspects—mild distaste or virulent loathing, unabashedly arbitrary or justified by religious dogma or some idea of “race”—is the element that shapes each story in the book. Or, to put it another way, deforms what each story would be if anti-Semitism were not an overwhelming element in the narrator’s consciousness and history.

In “*Skushno*” the young narrator’s uncle Hubi fondly recalls an encounter with a distinguished neighbor, Saul Goldmann, casting a sickening display of bigotry as a youthful, high-spirited witticism. Anti-Semitism recurs throughout

the book as foible, ornament, quirk, heirloom, side effect, device—in short, always as something trivial.

The particularly dazzling story “Troth” is a vertiginous slalom down inter-looping trails of absurd logic, all constructed in the service of untenable ideas. Here is the narrator’s placidly anti-Semitic Viennese grandmother shortly after Germany has annexed Austria:

Coming back from Mass, she had been laughed at and shouted at in the open street, and nearly manhandled, by a handful of young rowdies who were forcing a group of Jews to wash slogans for the Schuschnigg regime off the wall of a house. Among those Jews, my grandmother recognized a physician who had once cured one of my aunts of a painful otitis media, and she interfered, attacking the young rowdies with her umbrella and shouting that this was going too far.

A marvelous phrase, “going too far.” How far is precisely far enough? What is a judicious, a decorous, an appropriate measure of contempt—the precise amount of contempt in which a Jew ought to be held? And how much is excessive, or, even worse, vulgar?

Rezzori is exquisitely sensitive to indices of status, and anti-Semitism frequently appears in the book as a function of prestige. Here, again from “Troth,” the narrator is describing a local charlatan, who calls himself Mr. Malik. Though Mr. Malik turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a passionate admirer of Hitler, the same grandmother of the narrator (whose vast string of ridiculously pompous names are summarily discarded by his Jewish friend, lover, and mentor, Minka, in favor of “Brommy”) takes it for granted that be-

cause Mr. Malik's name is obviously assumed, he must be a Jew. And

Jews who changed their names, like Mr. Malik, were crooks and swindlers. Their camouflage was but a falsehood to which they were driven by their disgusting greed for profit and their repulsive social climbing. This was particularly the case with the so-called Polish Jews. . . . The elder ones and very old ones, particularly the very poor, were humbly what they were—submissive men in black caftans and large-brimmed hats, with curls at their temples, and in their eyes a sort of melting look which the sadness of many thousands of years seemed to have bestowed. Their eyes were like dark ponds. Some of them were even beautiful in their melancholy. They had spun-silver prophets' heads, with which the butcher's face of Mr. Malik would have compared very unfavorably, and when they looked at you, humbly stepping aside to let you pass, it was like a sigh for not only themselves but all the burden of human existence which they knew so well. But the young ones, and especially the ones who were better off, or even rich, showed an embarrassing self-confidence. They wore elegant clothes and drove dandified roadsters, and their girls smelled of scent and sparkled with jewelry. Some of them even had dogs and walked them on leashes, just as my aunts did.

What an affront! Note the word "even"; note the word "just." After all, what is the point of having a dog, if it is not an indication that you are superior to someone who doesn't? The very scaffolding of the world trembles if there is not, demonstrably, an "other." And those who enact their

otherness—particularly through powerlessness and suffering—are admirable exemplars of a sanctified social order; those who defy, or more insultingly, ignore, the status levied upon them are arrivistes—that is, not to put too fine a point on it, scum; because it is the *job* of the oppressed and despised to prop up the dignity of those who oppress and despise them. The world Rezzori presents to us is a cauldron of East and West, nationalities, languages, customs, and legacies, and he reminds us repeatedly throughout the book how efficient and universal an instrument racism—specifically racism as an adjunct of nationalism—is in establishing and maintaining self-respect.

One of the many paradoxes that Rezzori presents to us in “Troth” with a straight face is that although the narrator can manage, due to his childhood in the Bukovina, a better Yiddish accent and tell a better Jewish joke than the Jews he encounters, those Jews are far more refined—more *European*—than he or any of the other gentiles around. And although the punctilious anti-Semitism of his relatives might afford him no end of amusement, he accepts anti-Semitism as his lot, a sort of badge of his being, as something—however distasteful from some points of view, however infantile or retrograde—that is an ineradicable feature of his being. It might cause him to behave, from time to time, in inconvenient ways; it might cause him, from time to time, to feel things that are highly inconvenient or even slightly shaming, but it does, nonetheless, confirm his identity.

The narrator, once again of “Troth,” who has been trying out various nationalities in search of one to be gratifyingly loyal to, says:

Salzburg in the summer of 1937 was just awful. It was overrun with Jews. The worst of them had come from

Germany as refugees and, in spite of their luggage-laden Mercedes cars, behaved as if they were the victims of a cruel persecution and therefore had the right to hang around in hundreds at the Café Mozart, criticize everything, and get whatever they wanted faster and cheaper—if not for nothing—than anybody else. They spoke with that particular Berlin snottiness that so got on the nerves of anyone brought up in Austria, and my sharp ears could all too easily detect the background of Jewish slang. My Turkish blood revolted. I could have slaughtered them all.

And a little bit later, he continues:

Poldi was the fat journalist from Prague, who as a theater critic, went regularly not only to Vienna but also to Berlin. He had lost a lot of weight and was not half so amusing as he used to be. What irritated me most of all was the self-complacent way he treated me—and I could not rise to the occasion, because he resolutely kept aiming at my cultural gaps. . . . In the landscape of my mind, politics had not figured prominently. As a subject of Rumania—that is, of His Majesty King Carol II—I knew. . . . that in Bucharest there was a parliament where deputies represented the party of the peasants and the party of the liberals and whatnot, and that they were a bunch of crooks who did nothing but steal the money of the state. There were also some Jews, who were Communists, and therefore, rightly were treated as such. . . . But fortunately, there were also some young Rumanians who, under their leader, a certain Mr. Cuza—which was a good and noble name, though only adopted by that gentleman—

beat up those Jews from time to time, thus keeping them in a hell of a fright, and preventing them from spreading more Communist propaganda and provocation. I knew, too, that in Austria there were many socialists, called Reds, who were beaten up by or beat up the Heimwehr, which was a national guard defending the ethical values—such as the cleanliness of mind guaranteed by the fresh mountain air, and the love for shooting goats and plucking edelweiss.

The reader's first reactions might well be shock and rage, revulsion at the playfulness, the unruly, romping satire—or shock and rage, revulsion at having been made to laugh out loud. How dare anyone make light of such willful ignorance, such self-absorption in the face of genocidal evil?

In fact, it is precisely this tone of levity that is the very substance of the book's gravity. If "1938" did not have its deadly ring in our ears—if we did not know perfectly well what was to take place in, for example, "1941," we might find the tone painfully callous, or contemptible, but not exactly *shocking*. As it is, though, we are shaken out of our automatic and sanitized a posteriori position on past crimes—that is, crimes in which we ourselves were not involved.

It is partly the narrator's engaging self-mockery that prevents us from being able to dismiss him outright as nothing more than an amazingly frivolous lout, and it is partly the transfixing spectacle of the various mental collisions he experiences in front of us. He takes the road of least resistance in almost every situation, but his weak character (which occasions much head-shaking on the part of his clownishly reactionary relatives) is no guarantee that he'll always have a good time; the same acuity that enables him to distort or camouflage the evidence in front of his eyes functions also

as almost an opponent, allowing highly unwelcome insights to dismantle his equanimity.

But just who is this narrator and who is he to us? The first four of the book's five segments, or stories, are narrated in the first person. The "I" that runs through these four sections grows older but is generally consistent, exhibiting a number of identical attitudes, many of them repugnant, and traits, many of them regrettable, in addition, always, to a vanquishing charm and an enchanting verbal panache. This "I" seems always to have been born around 1914 in the Bukovina and to have spent significant portions of time in Vienna, where he has family, and also in Berlin and Bucharest. And those of us who are at all familiar with Rezzori's biography are bound to recognize in this the general outline of his life.

Any first-person narrator's claim borrows from the unassailability of autobiography—often very effectively so, even though we know that it is only a conceit designed to do just that. And to present a narrator, as Rezzori does, whose name is primarily, confidently "I," is to strike a pact with the reader—to put the reader into a special, intimate, engaged position vis-à-vis the narrator, who seems to be saying something like, "I'm sharing a confidence with you, one that's important to me. It might be private, really, and embarrassing, but I'm not so ashamed that I can't tell *you*." The corollary is, of course, "Let's pretend this is *me* I'm talking about." And in the case of this book, in which some of the narrators are called "Gregor" and some of their experiences resemble the author's, there's the further, teasing, suggestion, "Who's to say it isn't?"

But there are little reminders throughout—even to those unfamiliar with particulars of Rezzori's life that diverge significantly from his narrators'—that what we're reading is *not* autobiography. Though we're content to assume that the

personal history of one section's narrator informs the thinking of the narrators of the other sections, the sections clearly aren't designed to be particularly cohesive. The foot-loose narrator of the harrowing "Löwinger's Rooming House" tells us, following his casual, pointless betrayal of a fellow lodger, "After nearly four years of the Balkans I'd had my fill and felt homesick for Vienna. I arrived there just in time for March 1938." Yet just a few pages later, it's a ridiculous love affair that brings the narrator of "Troth" to Romania and then to Vienna in February 1938.

Were these passages written on the day the writer interrupted his work to answer the phone? Was the editor asleep? Obviously not; this is fiction we're reading, and its purposes are the insights and illuminations of which fiction and only fiction is capable. Nor is this contradiction of circumstances a mistake in a novel. "Löwinger's Rooming House" and "Troth" are two distinct narratives, both of which require their protagonist to be in Vienna for the prelude to Anschluss, but each of which is working to a different end.

Also reminding us that fiction is what we're reading is the sheer artistry, conspicuously, even perhaps suspiciously so, in the forefront, of both structure and language. Is that display designed, we might ask, not only to thrill and delight, which it does, but also to bedazzle, to seduce—actually to distract? Or designed, rather, to make us note what it is to be seduced, bedazzled, and distracted? How will the author manage to land on his feet at the end of this whirling arabesque of a sentence? What outlandish sight will he unveil next? Look over there! There, at the party, the lovers, the hilarious passersby, not over here, where the train is being loaded up with Jews for its journey east.

But what would an author, who is so clearly devoted to verisimilitude, gain from pointing out to us, now and again,

that it is fiction rather than strict autobiography we're reading? Once the question is asked, the answer seems obvious: when we're aware of reading fiction, rather than memoir or autobiography, we're aware that the book is not about the singular experience of the author; the focus, the effort, the purpose lie elsewhere.

Each of Rezzori's disarming, capering, mischievous raconteurs puts an arm around us as he gambols at our side, turning our attention to this or that, and we can't help but read as a companion—or, one might say, as an accomplice; the charm is collusive; we can hardly pretend we're not party to his confidences! Nor can we pretend we don't understand his states of mind. What was so clear in hindsight, before we began the book—the step-by-step progress toward inevitable catastrophe—is obscured by the vital *presentness* of Rezzori's urgent and intimate narration.

The unexpected postwar narrator of the anguished, subtle, final section, "*Pravda*," with its inconclusive paragraphs and its unstable balancings of rage and resignation, is not "I" but "he." And the sensation of finding ourselves at a remove, alienated from prior convictions, habits, milieus, is deeply unsettling. Who is this "he," this other, whom life has made us? Where did we split off from ourselves, and what happened to our firm reliance on our received view of things? "The artful feat of always holding up a new possibility of himself, a fiction of himself, and the knack, the balletic skill, of eluding reality, withdrawing the fiction at the last instant before colliding with reality—those were talents no one could emulate," the protagonist, "he," observes.

One of the extraordinary capacities of fiction is its amenability to rendering conditions of self-deception, to enable us to read with a sort of double brain; we can be instructed to look at something and look away from it simultaneously.

Rezzori has provided us with a detailed examination of how the brain works when it's getting itself to think things that are advantageous to the person in whom it's housed and of how the brain works when it's getting itself not to think things disadvantageous to that person. And he has traced the mental consequences of those mental achievements, too: What happens when one's interests come to conflict, as in the event of divided loyalties and affections? What happens when reality runs out of room for one's system of beliefs and sense of oneself?

The relationships between these stories is one of a development of a consciousness, a consciousness that belongs to many people, to a world that has sustained seizures of destruction, that is waking from delusional dreams of glory and heroism to find itself grotesquely maimed, and drenched with blood.

It is perhaps in this retrospective section, "*Pravda*," that we become more uncomfortably aware of the future than the past. We recall from the earlier sections specious discussions, telling instances of misdirected focus, expressions of breathtaking shortsightedness. The narrator of "Troth" who has come to Vienna for a tryst, as it happens on the night of Anschluss, stands at the window the next morning with his lover

and looked down at the Opernring, now empty, where all the night through there had been ecstasy—a sudden ecstasy that had its source in the silent marching blocks, and that drew people out of their houses and made them run toward the marchers, shouting, roaring, embracing one another, swinging flags with swastikas, throwing their arms to heaven, jumping and dancing in delirium. It was an icy cold yet gloriously

sunny day, quite unusual for the middle of March. It was so cold that you would not allow your dog to stay outdoors for longer than five minutes. There was nobody as far as you could see except two or three of the old hags, wrapped, onionlike, in layers of frocks and coats, who sold flowers in the New Market. They were running across the Ring and throwing their roses and carnations in the air, yelling, “*Heil!*” What did they have to do with it, anyway?

What indeed? Everything, of course. While the narrator has been pursuing his amusements and various personal concerns, taking in no more information about the world he lives in than what impinges directly upon him, the irrelevant “old hags” have been starving, have been assiduously cultivated into perhaps Hitler’s most powerful constituency. And it almost must occur to the reader that although self-involvement might seem to be a minor and relatively innocent (to say nothing of prevalent) character flaw, perhaps there’s nothing *inherently* minor or innocent about it; perhaps it’s the context that determines just what it is and what its potentialities are.

If we take Rezzori’s anti-Semite seriously—and how can we not?—we are compelled also to recognize the portrait, or reflection, of a comfortable person in a period of social deterioration or economic crisis, a period of political fragility. Now and again it occurs to most of us to wonder, I suppose, what the consequences of our own unexamined attitudes or biases might be; it occurs to us to wonder how something to which we’re not particularly forced to pay much attention is going to develop, or whom it affects.

How many actually evil people does it take to accomplish a genocide and reduce much of a continent to ash? Only a

handful, it seems, but that handful requires the passive assistance of many, many other people who glance out of the windows of their secure homes and see a cloudless sky. It's easy enough for most of us to distance ourselves from attitudes of virulent racism, but what about from carelessness, poor logic, casual snobbery—either social or intellectual—inattentiveness? Rezzori reminds us painfully that the great and malignant hazard of privilege is obtuseness.

“Blood still flows today as it did then,” the narrator of “*Pravda*” observes. “That it was not his own blood was due to random circumstances that one cannot even call fortuitous: the only dignity to be maintained in our time is the dignity of being among the victims.”

Yes, we wonder, what does it take to be a “decent person”? Maybe the most significant component is luck—the good luck to be born into a place and moment that inflicts minimal cruelty and thus does not require from us the courage to discern and to resist its tides.

Rezzori keeps his nerve; he ensures that his “I” has no idea what the year “1933” is, or the year “1938”—what those numbers will mean to the reader, or, indeed, will mean to his future self. And in doing so, the author also ensures that just before—or just after—we dismiss the feckless young narrator as an idiot, a question inserts itself: What year is, for example, “2007”?

—DEBORAH EISENBERG

MEMOIRS OF AN ANTI-SEMITITE

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