

THE SALT
OF THE
EARTH

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PUSHKIN PRESS

Prologue

I

The black two-headed bird, the triple-crowned eagle, convulsively grips in its talons a golden apple and an unsheathed sword. What is the reason for its sudden appearance above our heads, darkening the sky with its massive black plumage? With a rustle of its wings and a clanking of its golden chains festooned with coats of arms, it escaped from the black-and-yellow sign above the tobacconist's where my brother used to buy cigarettes. Like a startled cockerel, it suddenly tore itself away from the metallic shield above the entrance to the post office, just as I was sending a telegram to our village to tell my mother about the birth of my son. It abandoned the cosy, warm nests it built years ago above the doorways to the school, the courthouse and the prison. It took flight, abandoning the round red seals on baptism, marriage and death certificates. It suddenly vanished from my tattered national identity certificate, and it scarpered from the official notice imposing on me a fine of 10 crowns for jay-walking across the railway tracks. It deserted from the postman's brass

buttons, the cap of the guard at the savings bank and the gendarme's helmet. Like a gigantic black-and-yellow aircraft, it is swaying overhead with the sword in its grasp.

My brother is a reader of the boulevard press. My brother is a messenger in the offices of a certain commercial company. My brother sees—my brothers see—the eagle circling in the air, menacingly wielding the heraldic sword in its claws. The keen sword glints in its sharp talons like a thunderbolt from heaven, then abruptly plunges from on high to pierce the distant heart of my mother, our old mother who works on the land, her back bent as she struggles to wrest potatoes from the earth with her hoe—the last of this year's crops.

My brother is a simple man. My brothers are simple folk—barbers, cobblers, railway workers, tram conductors, foundry-men in vast iron foundries, clerks, waiters, peasants. Peasants.

My sister is a simple woman. They are all like her—simple and loquacious. Market-stall sellers, washerwomen, milliners, seamstresses, “maids of all work”, nannies of children better situated than mine.

They have seen, they have heard, they have read their local papers, they have seen coloured picture postcards. I may have seen, heard and read myself.

II

Everyone stood up. The old rococo armchairs heaved a sigh of relief, suddenly free of the burden of venerable bodies. Below, outside the gateway, the crash of the palace guard's hobnailed boots rang out. Traditionally, soldiers of the 99th

Moravian Infantry Regiment had the privilege of guarding these sacred places.

“*Gewehr heraaaaaus!*” yelled the sentry, like a locomotive whistle administering the last rites to victims of a disaster. The guard presented arms.

A tall, bald-headed, distinguished-looking man, smiling frostily beneath a thin black moustache, cleared his throat. Today it was he who was to fulfil the most important role. Already as a child he had been fond of history. Very. Once more he glanced provocatively in the direction of the ministers poised stiffly in anticipation. Their faces, which now took on a ceremonial expression, though they were customarily sour and morose, bore witness to a severe hardening of the arteries. The worn-out vessels were now having difficulty pumping these gentlemen’s true-blue blood to their hearts. It was common knowledge whom these hearts were beating for. History itself would testify to whom they had promised to give the “last drop” of their blood. Especially as nobody had asked it of them. Meanwhile, the blood was battling against its own degeneration.

The agreeable gentleman’s gaze next came to rest on Maria Theresa’s silver wig; from the enormous portrait, she was sizing up the bald heads and beards gathered around the table with her large, unashamedly masculine eyes. Above the wig, over the gilt frame, the large stones set in the crown of St Stephen surmounted by its leaning cross glowed with fiery reds, greens and purples. The crown blazed in the glow of the setting sun; it shed multi-coloured tears, but the Empress’s eyes glowed even more intensely. Her arteries had never hardened.

A carriage rumbled up to the gateway. A crash of rifle butts on the command to order arms. Down below a dry cough.

The magnificent double doors were flung open. Two svelte guards officers had assumed their positions either side of the entrance, as motionless as two statues in the foyer of the court theatre. A secret ritual suddenly enclosed the two living bodies in deep silence, as though in chilly niches of marble. The ringing of the spurs, sounding like broken glass, was muffled in that silence.

Ceremonial expressions rapidly came over the gentlemen's faces. The short, stocky Chief of the General Staff knitted his bushy eyebrows. He inclined his greying, close-cropped head slightly to one side towards his left breast, where the most illustrious crosses and stars were soon to blossom. The bald, elegant gentleman, the Foreign Minister, shifted impatiently from foot to foot. The patent-leather shoes that he had to wear on official occasions had given him bunions. One had to create a good impression at the embassy! He was the only one in this company to wear a fragrance. Very discreetly, mind you. He was accustomed to importing his fragrances directly from Paris. He didn't trust the local products.

All of a sudden, two old men in general's uniform, with sashes the colour of scrambled eggs draped across their chests, escorted in a third old man in a bright blue tunic. He was stooping, leaning on a silver-handled cane. All three of them had grey sideburns and they were as alike as peas in a pod. The life they had shared over many years—the shared boredom and the shared pleasures—had conferred on them the same appearance. If it were not for the Golden Fleece beneath the third button on the breast of the stooping figure, a stranger

in this house would be unable to tell which of the three old men was by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, King of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia, King of Galicia and Lodomeria, King of Illyria, Archduke of Upper and Lower Austria, Grand Duke of Transylvania, Duke of Lorraine, Carinthia, Carniola, Bukovina and Upper and Lower Silesia, Prince-Count of Habsburg and Tyrol, Margrave of Moravia, King of Jerusalem, etc., etc., and which were the two aides-de-camp, Count Paar and Baron Bolfras.

The ministers and the generals bowed their heads. Just one of them, a third replica of His Majesty with sideburns, stood erect. He had the right to do so. On his breast—considerably younger than the Emperor's, it's true—he also wore a Golden Fleece. He was, after all, the grandson of the victor of Aspern, Archduke Karl.

The armchair the Emperor sat down on was covered in red plush and it stood close to Maria Theresa's portrait. For a moment, the Empress's eyes seemed to be searching, over the top of Franz Joseph's head, for the bushy eyebrows of little Baron Conrad, Chief of the General Staff, in order to remind him that the highest decoration an officer of the Imperial and Royal Army could be awarded is, was, and always would be her own Order, the Order of Maria Theresa. Conrad knew how one gained it. He knew Heinrich von Kleist's *Prince of Homburg* virtually off by heart.

Just then, dusk began to sprinkle fluff on the old portraits, exaggerating their outlines. The portraits grew and grew and grew, eventually merging into a continuous grey mass along with the wallpaper and the wood panelling of the elegant

room. Prince Eugene of Savoy, with a final glint of his sleek, mirror-like black armour, disappeared into the gloom, where only a moment earlier his golden sceptre and the signet ring on his finger had clearly stood out. Maria Theresa's crinoline billowed like a gigantic, bulbous cushion filling with water. One might have expected that at any moment the old matriarch of the Habsburgs would emerge from her gilt frame, powerfully elbowing aside these old sclerotics, and casually sit down next to the wilting offspring of her exuberant lifeblood. She would embrace the old man in her plump arms, injecting vigour into his pale, withered being, and burst into lusty peals of laughter.

But the lights in the crown of St Stephen are going out one by one; the fiery glints in her eyes grow dim.

A valet enters. He turns on the electric lights in the crystal chandeliers. Not all of them, however, because His Imperial Majesty cannot bear bright lights. With a trembling hand, he dons his spectacles. After a short while, he removes them again and spends a long time cleaning them with a handkerchief. At this point the bald Count Berchtold, the Foreign Minister, loses his patience. He takes some documents from his briefcase, casting his gaze sternly, yet respectfully, in the Emperor's direction. His Parisian fragrances not unpleasantly tickle the nostrils of his immediate neighbour, His Excellency von Krobatin, the Minister for War. This aroma at dusk arouses in him memories of his youth. Those wonderful Hungarian girls really know how to kiss!

The Emperor has finished polishing his spectacles. The starchy faces of the highest state dignitaries come back to life. Not a trace of sclerosis now.

The Emperor is speaking. In a dull tone of voice, he is thanking them for something or other. What his dear Count Berchtold spoke about yesterday had greatly saddened him. If he was not mistaken, that meant—if his memory served him correctly—Belgrade? He was happy to acknowledge that feelings were growing strong among his beloved peoples, who were demanding, demanding...

The Emperor could not recall what it was that the beloved peoples were demanding.

So they began explaining to him. There was something the Emperor, despite everything, was still unwilling to understand at any price, apparently. At first, they explained matters to him patiently, like a mother to her child, but eventually they lost their composure and started gesticulating. When the light finally dawned, they began bargaining with him. The Emperor went on the defensive for some time, resisting, hesitating, coughing, and recalling the murdered Empress Elisabeth. At one point he even stood up unassisted, striking the table so forcibly with his silver-handled cane that the two statuesque guardsmen flinched and Maria Theresa's eyes sparkled.

Archduke Friedrich, the grandson of the one of Aspern fame, leapt to his feet. He approached His Majesty and bent over the pink ear from which wads of grey cotton wool protruded. At some length, he poured certain weighty words into that ear. As he bent over, the two Golden Fleeces on the Habsburgs' chests found one another and for a few moments they swung in unison. Then the Emperor conceded. He yielded to the will of his beloved peoples.

He had just one wish; let them display the traditional oak leaves on their helmets. And they must sing. Here the

monarch was interrupted again by Archduke Friedrich, who spoke up to remind him that in the twentieth century his soldiers no longer wore helmets, only soft caps. The Emperor apologized; he hadn't been on manoeuvres for such a long time. He was visualizing the old heads of veterans of Novara, Mortara and Solferino, the Pandours, Radetzky... Shamefacedly, he turned to the Minister for War as a pupil to his teacher.

"Perhaps Your Excellency will be so good as to remind me how many troops I have?"

"Thirty-eight divisions in peacetime, not counting the Landwehr or the Honvéds."

"Thank you. I have thirty-eight divisions!"

Thirty-eight divisions! Franz Joseph relished in his imagination every division individually, delighting in the multitude and the diversity of colours represented by these numbers, sworn to serve him in life and death. He conjured up in his mind the last parades at which he had been present, the last simulated battles, in which the enemy's soldiers were identified by red ribbons in their caps. On that occasion he had personally, on horseback, led one of the warring armies, and his adversary had been none other than Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne, murdered four weeks earlier. His memory did not fail him here. That was unforgettable! Old passions were revived in the old man as he recalled it. For a while, he felt the old aversion for his mock enemy in the manoeuvres, whose actual death he and the entire Imperial and Royal Army were now bound to avenge. The old man felt a rush of blood to his head at the thought that this obstinate opponent, who had waited in vain for so many years for him to die a natural death, still

gave him no peace even after his own death. Something in the old man's mind declared, triumphantly, "Look, I have outlived him after all!" But even this single unspoken victory was moments later overshadowed by sorrow for his unforgettable only son Rudolf, who had also been unfortunate: "*Mir bleibt nichts erspart!*"*

An uncomfortable silence descended on the room. Berchtold's cloying perfume was in the air, drifting like incense over the bodies of the murdered. "Adieu, Parisian perfumes!" The road is cut off. The Triple Alliance, the Triple Entente! Count Berchtold knew very well what this meant. He recognized the odour of the impending course of history. It smelt of restriction to local products. But in the eerie silence not even the jovial Krobotin noticed that scent. He had never smelt powder either, but he was Minister for War, nonetheless.

The Emperor was deep in thought. His light blue, watery eyes grew dim behind his spectacles. His clean-shaven chin sank into his golden collar; only the whiskers of his sideburns protruded. The glittering cross on the crown of St Stephen leant even farther, threatening to fall on the old man's head. He remained silent, engrossed in the sombre catacombs of cadaverous recollections.

The tension continued to mount at the round table. The old armchairs were creaking. The sclerosis in the veins of the paladins advanced another step. Eventually, the Crown Council's impatience broke the bounds of etiquette. The generals began to whisper.

* "I am spared nothing!"

“Time is running out! He must sign.”

Krobotin could not last any longer without a cigarette. At this point, Berchtold touched Count Paar’s elbow. The latter placed a large sheet of paper before the Emperor. The second replica of the Emperor held a pen with (as court ceremonial procedures dictated) a new, unused steel nib. All eyes were turned towards the Emperor’s dried-up, frail hand. At last, he came to and adjusted his spectacles. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

The monarch spent several minutes coldly perusing the rigid black rows of letters. He paid strict attention to every word, every punctuation mark. But after he had read the first sentences, his eyelids reddened and he had a burning sensation in his eyes. His spectacles misted up. Lately, the old man had found reading very tiring, especially in artificial light. He now looked away from the sheet of paper and, noting the Crown Council’s impatience, dipped the pen with a trembling hand into the open black maw of the inkwell. The hand returned with the nib now steeped in the poisonous fluid and settled shakily on the paper like a pilot feeling for the ground below as he lands. Soon the left hand came to its assistance, holding the paper steady.

The Emperor was placing his signature, so long awaited by the ministers. As soon as the name “Franz” was written, the pen ran out of liquid breath; the ink ran dry. As the Emperor reached for the inkwell once more, the quivering pen slightly scratched the thumb of his left hand. A tiny drop of blood squirted from his thumb. It was red. No one noticed that he had scratched his thumb; he quickly wiped it and, with a single flourish, added “Joseph”. The ink was blue.

Count Berchtold picked up the document. The following day it was translated into all the languages of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was printed and displayed at all street-corners in cities, towns and villages. It began "To my peoples...". For the illiterate, it was read aloud by town criers.

The Emperor rose with the assistance of his aides-de-camp. He was not accustomed to shaking hands with his officials. On this occasion, however, he shook the hand of the prime minister. In the doorway, he turned once more and said—it was unclear to whom—

"If I am not mistaken, blood will be spilt."

Then he left. Archduke Friedrich offered Finance Minister Biliński a Havana cigar. From down below, the crash of the hobnailed boots of the 99th Regiment infantrymen was heard. A crash of rifle butts on the command to order arms. At the nearby barracks the lights-out bugle call was sounded. It was nine o'clock.

At nine o'clock, the soldiers throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire go to bed.