

Ghitza

By Konrad Bercovici

From *The Dial*

That winter had been a very severe one in Roumania. The Danube froze solid a week before Christmas and remained tight for five months. It was as if the blue waters were suddenly turned into steel. From across the river, from the Dobrudja, on sleds pulled by long-horned oxen, the Tartars brought barrels of frozen honey, quarters of killed lambs, poultry and game, and returned heavily laden with bags of flour and rolls of sole leather. The whole day long the crack of whips and the curses of the drivers rent the icy atmosphere. Whatever their destination, the carters were in a hurry to reach human habitation before nightfall--before the dreaded time when packs of wolves came out to prey for food.

In cold, clear nights, when even the wind was frozen still, the lugubrious howling of the wolf permitted no sleep. The indoor people spent the night praying for the lives and souls of the travellers.

All through the winter there was not one morning but some man or animal was found torn or eaten in our neighbourhood. The people of the village at first built fires on the shores to scare the beasts away, but they had to give it up because the thatched roofs of the huts in the village were set on fire in windy nights by flying sparks. The cold cowed the fiercest dogs. The wolves, crazed by hunger, grew more daring from day to day. They showed their heads even in daylight. When Baba Hana, the old gypsy fortune-teller, ran into the school-house one morning and cried, "Wolf, wolf in the yard," the teacher was inclined to attribute her scare to a long drink the night before. But that very night, Stan, the horseshoer, who had returned late from the inn and had evidently not closed the door as he entered the smithy, was eaten up by the beasts. And the smithy stood in the centre of the

village! A stone's throw from the inn, and the thatch-roofed school, and the red painted church! He must have put up a hard fight, Stan. Three huge dark brown beasts, as big as cows' yearlings, were found brained. The body of big Stan had disappeared in the stomachs of the rest of the pack. The high leather boots and the hand that still gripped the handle of the sledgehammer were the only remains of the man. There was no blood, either. It had been lapped dry. That stirred the village. Not even enough to bury him--and he had been a good Christian! But the priest ordered that the slight remains of Stan be buried, Christian-like. The empty coffin was brought to the church and all the rites were carried out as if the body of Stan were there rather than in the stomachs of wild beasts.

But after Stan's death the weather began to clear as if it had been God's will that such a price be paid for His clemency. The cold diminished daily and in a few days reports were brought from everywhere on the shore that the bridge of ice was giving way. Two weeks before Easter Sunday it was warm enough to give the cows an airing. The air cleared and the rays of the sun warmed man and beast. Traffic on the frozen river had ceased. Suddenly one morning a whip cracked, and from the bushes on the opposite shore of the Danube there appeared following one another six tent wagons, such as used by travelling gypsies, each wagon drawn by four horses harnessed side by side.

The people on our side of the Danube called to warn the travellers that the ice was not thick enough to hold them. In a few minutes the whole village was near the river, yelling and cursing like mad. But after they realized that the intention was to cross the Danube at any cost, the people settled down to watch what was going to happen. In front of the first wagon walked a tall, grey-bearded man trying the solidity of the ice with a heavy stick. Flanking the last wagon, in open lines, walked the male population of the tribe. Behind them came the women and children. No one said a word. The eyes of the whole village were on the travellers, for every one felt that they were

tempting Providence. Yet each one knew that Murdo, the chief of the tribe, who was well known to all, in fact to the whole Dobrudja, would not take such risks with his people without good reason.

They had crossed to the middle of the frozen river in steady fashion, when Murdo shouted one word and the feet of every man and beast stopped short. The crossing of the river had been planned to the slightest detail. The people on the shore were excited. The women began to cry and the children to yell. They were driven inland by the men, who remained to watch what was going on. No assistance was possible.

The tall chief of the gypsies walked to the left and chose another path on the ice. The movement continued. Slowly, slowly, in silence the gypsies approached the shore. Again they halted. Murdo was probing the ice with his stick. We could see that the feet of the horses were wrapped in bags, and instead of being shod each hoof was in a cushion made of straw. As Murdo felt his way, a noise at first as of the tearing of paper, but more distinct with every moment, came from somewhere in the distance.

"Whoa, whoa, Murdo, the ice is breaking!" every one began to shout excitedly. The noise grew louder and louder as it approached. One could hear it coming steadily and gauge how much nearer it was. The ice was splitting lengthwise in numberless sheets which broke up in smaller parts and submerged gaily in the water, rising afterwards and climbing one on top of the other, as in a merry embrace.

"Whoa, whoa, Murdo ..." but there was no time to give warning. With one gesture Murdo had given his orders. The wagons spread as for a frontal attack; the men seized the children and with the women at their heels they ran as fast as their legs could take them. On the shore every one fell to his knees in prayer. The strongest men closed their eyes, too horrified to watch the outcome. The noise of the cracking of the

ice increased. A loud report, as of a dozen cannon, and the Danube was a river again--and all, all the gypsies had saved themselves.

It was a gay afternoon, that afternoon, and a gay night also for the whole village. It drank the inn out of everything. The gypsies had a royal welcome. To all questions of why he had dared Providence, Murdo answered, "There was no food for my people and horses. The Tartars have none to sell."

Murdo and his tribe became the guests of the village. His people were all lean. The men hardly carried themselves on their legs. Each one of them had something to nurse. The village doctor amputated toes and fingers; several women had to be treated for gangrene. The children of the tribe were the only ones that had not suffered much. It was Murdo's rule: "Children first, the horses next." The animals were stabled and taken charge of by the peasants. The gypsies went to live in the huts of the people in order to warm themselves back to life. Father liked Murdo, and so the old chief came to live with us. The nights were long. After supper we all sat in a semicircle around the large fireplace in which a big log of seasoned oak was always burning.

I had received some books from a friend of the family who lived in the capital of the country, Bucharest. Among them was Carlyle's Heroes and Hero-Worship, translated into French. I was reading it when Murdo approached the table and said, "What a small Bible my son is reading."

"It is not a Bible, it is a book of stories, Murdo."

"Stories! Well, that's another thing."

He looked over my shoulders into the book. As I turned the page he asked:

"Is everything written in a book? I mean, is it written what the hero said and what she answered and how they said it? Is it written all about him and the villain? I mean are there signs, letters for everything; for laughter, cries, love gestures? Tell me."

I explained as best I could and he marvelled. I had to give an example, so I read a full page from a storybook.

"And is all that written in the book, my son? It is better than I thought possible, but not so good as when one tells a story.... It is like cloth woven by a machine, nice and straight, but it is not like the kind our women weave on the loom--but it is good; it is better than I thought possible. What are the stories in the book you are reading? Of love or of sorrow?"

"Of neither, Murdo. Only about all the great heroes that have lived in this world of cowards."

"About every one of them?" he asked again. "That's good. It is good to tell the stories of the heroes."

He returned to the fireplace to light his pipe; then he came to me again.

"If it is written in this book about all the great heroes, then there must also be the record of Ghitza--the great Ghitza, our hero. The greatest that ever lived. See, son, what is there said about him?"

I turned the pages one by one to the end of the book and then reported, "Nothing, Murdo. Not even his name is mentioned."

"Then this book is not a good book. The man who wrote it did not know every hero ... because not Alexander of Macedon and not even Napoleon was greater than Ghitza...."

I sat near him at the fireplace and watched his wrinkled face while Murdo told me the story of Ghitza as it should be written in the book of heroes where the first place should be given to the greatest of them all....

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About the birth of people, I, Murdo, the chief of the gypsy tribe which was ruled by the forefathers of my great-grandfather (who each ruled close to a hundred years)--about the birth of people, I, Murdo, can say this: That the seed of an oak gives birth to an oak, and that of a pine to a pine. No matter where the seed be carried by the winds, if it is the seed of an oak, an oak will grow; if it is the seed of a pine, a pine. So though it never was known who was the father of Ghitza, we knew him through his son. Ghitza's mother died because she bore him, the son of a white man--she, the daughter of the chief of our tribe. It was Lupu's rule to punish those who bore a child begotten from outside the tribe. But the child was so charming that he was brought up in the tent of one of our people. When Ghitza was ten years old, he worked alongside the men; and there was none better to try a horse before a customer than Ghitza. The oldest and slowest gathered all the strength it had and galloped and ran when it felt the bare boy on its back. Old mares frisked about like yearlings when he approached to mount them.

In his fifteenth summer he was a man, tall, broad, straight and lissom as a locust tree. His face was like rich milk and his eyes as black as the night. When he laughed or sang--and he laughed and sang all the time--his mouth was like a rose in the morning, when the dewdrops hang on its outer petals. And he was strong and good. If it happened that a heavy cart was stuck in the mud of the road and the oxen could not budge it, Ghitza would crawl under the cart, get on all fours, and lift the cart clear of the mud. Never giving time to the driver to thank him, his work done, he walked quickly away, whistling a song through a trembling leaf between his lips. And he was loved by

everybody; and the women died just for the looks of him. The whole tribe became younger and happier because of Ghitza. We travelled very much those days. Dobrudja belonged yet to the Turks and was inhabited mostly by Tartars. The villages were far apart and very small, so we could not stay long in any place.

When Ghitza was twenty, our tribe, which was then ruled by my mighty grandfather, Lupu, happened to winter near Cerna Voda, a village on the other side of the Danube. We sold many horses to the peasants that winter. They had had a fine year. So our people had to be about the inn a good deal. Ghitza, who was one of the best traders, was in the inn the whole day. He knew every one. He knew the major and his wife and the two daughters and chummed with his son. And they all loved Ghitza, because he was so strong, so beautiful, and so wise. They never called him "tzigán" because he was fairer than they were. And there was quite a friendship between him and Maria, the smith's daughter. She was glad to talk to him and to listen to his stories when he came to the smithy. She helped her father in his work. She blew the bellows and prepared the shoes for the anvil. Her hair was as red as the fire and her arms round and strong. She was a sweet maid to speak to, and even the old priest liked to pinch her arms when she kissed his hand.

Then came spring and the first Sunday dance in front of the inn. The innkeeper had brought a special band of musicians. They were seated on a large table between two trees, and all around them the village maidens and the young men, locked arm in arm in one long chain of youth, danced the Hora, turning round and round.

Ghitza had been away to town, trading. When he came to the inn, the dance was already on. He was dressed in his best, wearing his new broad, red silken belt with his snow-white pantaloons and new footgear with silver bells on the ankles and tips. His shirt was as white and thin as air. On it the deftest fingers of our tribe had embroidered figures and flowers. On his head Ghitza wore a high black cap made

of finest Astrakhan fur. And he had on his large ear-rings of white gold. Ghitza watched the dance for a while. Maria's right arm was locked with the arm of the smith's helper, and her left with the powerful arm of the mayor's son. Twice the long chain of dancing youths had gone around, and twice Ghitza had seen her neck and bare arms, and his blood boiled. When she passed him the third time, he jumped in, broke the hold between Maria and the smith's helper, and locked his arm in hers.

Death could not have stopped the dance more suddenly. The musicians stopped playing. The feet stopped dancing. The arms freed themselves and hung limply.

The smith's helper faced Ghitza with his arm uplifted.

"You cursed tzigan! You low-born gypsy! How dare you break into our dance? Our dance!" Other voices said the same.

Everybody expected blows, then knives and blood. But Ghitza just laughed aloud and they were all calmed. He pinned the smith's helper's arm and laughed. Then he spoke to the people as follows:

"You can see on my face that I am fairer than any of you. I love Maria, but I will not renounce the people I am with. I love them. The smith's helper knows that I could kill him with one blow. But I shall not do it. I could fight a dozen of you together. You know I can. But I shall not do it. Instead I shall outdance all of you. Dance each man and woman of the village until she or he falls tired on the ground. And if I do this I am as you are, and Maria marries me without word of shame from you."

And as he finished speaking he grasped the smith's helper around the waist and called to the musicians:

"Play, play."

For a full hour he danced around and around with the man while the village watched them and called to the white man to hold out. But the smith's helper was no match for Ghitza. He dragged his feet and fell. Ghitza, still fresh and vigorous, grasped another man and called to the musicians to play an even faster dance than before. When that one had fallen exhausted to the ground, Ghitza took on a third and a fourth. Then he began to dance with the maidens. The fiddler's string broke and the guitar player's fingers were numb. The sun went to rest behind the mountains and the moon rose in the sky to watch over her little children, the stars.

But Ghitza was still dancing. There was no trace of fatigue on his face and no signs of weariness in his steps. The more he danced, the fresher he became. When he had danced half of the village tired, and they were all lying on the ground, drinking wine from earthen urns to refresh themselves, the last string of the fiddle snapped and the musician reeled from his chair. Only the flute and the guitar kept on.

"Play on, play on, you children of sweet angels, and I shall give to each of you a young lamb in the morning," Ghitza urged them. But soon the breath of the flutist gave way. His lips swelled and blood spurted from his nose. The guitar player's fingers were so numb he could no longer move them. Then some of the people beat the rhythm of the dance with their open palms. Ghitza was still dancing on. They broke all the glasses of the inn and all the bottles beating time to his dance.

The night wore away. The cock crew. Early dogs arose and the sun woke and started to climb from behind the eastern range of mountains. Ghitza laughed aloud as he saw all the dancers lying on the ground. Even Maria was asleep near her mother. He entered the inn and woke the innkeeper, who had fallen asleep behind the counter.

"Whoa, whoa, you old swindler! Wake up! Day is come and I am thirsty."

After a long drink, he went to his tent to play with the dogs, as he did early every morning.

A little later, toward noon, he walked over to the smith's shop, shook hands with Maria's father and kissed the girl on the mouth even as the helper looked on.

"She shall be your wife, son," the smith said. "She will be waiting for you when your tribe comes to winter here. And no man shall ever say my daughter married an unworthy one."

The fame of our tribe spread rapidly. The tale of Ghitza's feat spread among all the villages and our tribe was respected everywhere. People no longer insulted us, and many another of our tribe now danced on Sundays at the inn--yea, our girls and our boys danced with the other people of the villages. Our trade doubled and tripled. We bartered more horses in a month than we had at other times in a year. Ghitza's word was law everywhere. He was so strong his honesty was not doubted. And he was honest. An honest horse-trader! He travelled far and wide. But if Cerna Voda was within a day's distance, Ghitza was sure to be there on Sunday to see Maria.

To brighten such days, wrestling matches were arranged and bets were made as to how long the strongest of them could stay with Ghitza. And every time Ghitza threw the other man. Once in the vise of his two arms, a man went down like a log.

And so it lasted the whole summer. But in whatever village our tribe happened to be, the women were running after the boy. Lupu, the chief of the tribe, warned him; told him that life is like a burning candle and that one must not burn it from both ends at the same time. But Ghitza only laughed and made merry.

"Lupu, old chief, didst thou not once say that I was an oak? Why dost thou speak of candles now?"

And he carried on as before. And ever so good, and ever so merry, and ever such a good trader.

Our tribe returned to Cerna Voda early that fall. We had many horses and we felt that Cerna was the best place for them. Most of them were of the little Tartar kind, so we thought it well for them to winter in the Danube's valley.

Every Sunday, at the inn, there were wrestling matches. Young men, the strongest, came from far-away villages. And they all, each one of them, hit the ground when Ghitza let go his vise.

One Sunday, when the leaves had fallen from the trees and the harvest was in, there came a Tartar horse-trading tribe to Cerna Voda.

And in their midst they had a big, strong man. Lupu, our chief, met their chief at the inn. They talked and drank and praised each their horses and men. Thus it happened that the Tartar chief spoke about his strong man. The peasants crowded nearer to hear the Tartar's story. Then they talked of Ghitza and his strength. The Tartar chief did not believe it.

"I bet three of my horses that my man can down him," the Tartar chief called.

"I take the bet against a hundred ducats in gold," the innkeeper answered.

"It's a bet," the Tartar said.

"Any more horses to bet?" others called out.

The Tartar paled but he was a proud chief and soon all his horses and all his ducats were pledged in bets to the peasants. That whole day and the rest of the week to Sunday, nothing else was spoken about. The people of our tribe pledged everything they possessed. The women gave even their ear-rings. The Tartars were rich and proud and took every bet that was offered. The match was to be on Sunday afternoon in front of the inn. Ghitza was not in the village at all the whole week. He was in Constantza, on the shores of the Black Sea, finishing some trade. When he arrived home on Sunday morning he found the people of the village, our people, the Tartars, and a hundred carriages that had brought people from the surrounding villages camped in front of the inn. He jumped down from his horse and looked about wondering from where and why so many people at once! The men and the women were in their best clothes and the horses all decorated as for a fair. The people gave him a rousing welcome. Lupu called Ghitza aside and told him why the people had gathered. Ghitza was taken aback but laughed instantly and slapped the chief on the shoulders.

"It will be as you know, and the Tartars shall depart poor and dishonoured, while we will remain the kings of the horse trade in the Dobrudja honoured and beloved by all."

Oak that he was! Thus he spoke, and he had not even seen the other man, the man he was to wrestle. He only knew he had to maintain the honour of his tribe. At the appointed hour he came to the inn. The whole tribe was about and around. He had stripped to the waist. He was good to look at. On the ground were bundles of rich skins near rolls of cloth that our men and women had bet against the Tartars. Heaps of gold, rings, watches, ear-rings, and ducats were spread on the tables. Tartar horses and oxen of our men and the people of the village were trooped together, the necks tied to one long rope held on one side by one of our men or a villager and at the other end by a Tartar boy. If Ghitza were thrown, one of ours had just to let his end of the rope go and all belonged to the other one. The smithy had

pledged all he had, even his daughter, to the winner; and many another daughter, too, was pledged.

Ghitza looked about and saw what was at stake: the wealth and honour of his tribe and the wealth and honour of the village and the surrounding villages.

Then the Tartar came. He was tall and square. His trunk rested on short, stocky legs, and his face was black, ugly, and pock-marked. All shouting ceased. The men formed a wide ring around the two wrestlers. It was so quiet one could hear the slightest noise. Then the mayor spoke to the Tartars and pointed to the Danube; the inn was right on its shore.

"If your man is thrown, this very night you leave our shore, for the other side."

Ghitza kissed Maria and Lupu, the chief. Then the fight began.

A mighty man was Ghitza and powerful were his arms and legs. But it was seen from the very first grip that he had burned the candle at both ends at the same time. He had wasted himself in carouses. The two men closed one another in their vises and each tried to crush the other's ribs. Ghitza broke the Tartar's hold and got a grip on his head and twisted it with all his might. But the neck of the devil was of steel. It did not yield. Maria began to call to her lover:

"Twist his neck, Ghitza. My father has pledged me to him if he wins." And many another girl begged Ghitza to save her from marrying a black devil.

The Tartars, from another side, kept giving advice to their man. Everybody shrieked like mad, and even the dogs howled. From Ghitza's body the sweat flowed as freely as a river. But the Tartar's

neck yielded not and his feet were like pillars of steel embedded in rocks.

"Don't let his head go, don't let him go," our people cried, when it was plain that all his strength had gone out of his arms. Achmed's pear-shaped head slipped from between his arms as the Tartar wound his legs about Ghitza's body and began to crush him. Ghitza held on with all his strength. His face was blue black. His nose bled, and from his mouth he spat blood. Our people cried and begged him to hold on. The eyes of the Tartars shot fire, their white teeth showed from under their thick lips and they called on Achmed to crush the Giaour. Oh! it seemed that all was lost. All our wealth, the honour and respect Ghitza had won for us; the village's wealth and all. And all the maidens were to be taken away as slaves to the Tartars. One man said aloud so that Ghitza should hear:

"There will not be a pair of oxen in the whole village to plough with; not a horse to harrow with, and our maidens are pledged to the black sons of the devil."

Ghitza was being downed. But, wait ... what happened! With the last of his strength he broke the hold. A shout rose to rend the skies. Bewildered Achmed lay stupefied and looked on. Tottering on his feet, in three jumps Ghitza was on the high point of the shore--a splash--and there was no more Ghitza. He was swallowed by the Danube. No Tartar had downed him!

And so our people had back their wealth, and the people of the village theirs. No honour was lost and the maidens remained in the village--only Maria did not. She followed her lover even as the people looked on. No one even attempted to stop her. It was her right. Where was she to find one such as he? She, too, was from the seed of an oak.

* * * * *

"And now, son, I ask thee--if the book before thee speaks of all the great heroes, why is it that Ghitza has not been given the place of honour?"

The log was burning in the fireplace, but I said good night to Murdo. I wanted to dream of the mighty Ghitza and his Maria. And ever since I have been dreaming of ... her.

FOOTNOTE:

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