OVER THE HILLS OF RUTHENIA

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CHAPTER ONE

And where is Ruthenia? It is in a curious position. The most solid bourgeois amongst us may at certain hours be visited by horrifying questions, which he never for the life of him would dream of making public and which ask—yes, ask—if he exists at all. Ruthenia is, of course, less justified to entertain such doubts; but sometimes, even when she hears the wind that murmurs in her million oaks or feels those great-horned oxen ploughing up the ruddy soil, she may remember with uneasiness that on the ordinary map of Europe there is no Ruthenia, albeit when you come to Eger, on the north-west frontier of the new Czecho-Slovak Republic, you will find a train of which one carriage goes to Užhorod, Ruthenia's capital.

Down at the far end of Czecho-Slovakia and forming, as it were, a wedge that projects itself

between Poland, Roumania and Hungary, down there is the little country which, until the conclusion of the Great War, was merely one of the Hungarian provinces, although the Hungarians who dwelt in that region—both the Christian Hungarians and the Jewish — were far less numerous than the Ruthenes. But in that respect the province was not different from several others which for centuries had been in the Hungarian realm, jewels, as the Hungarians told them, of the historic crown of St Stephen. " We are," said the Hungarians, " a proud people " —God knows why—" and you must be proud to belong to us." When the Yugoslavs and the Roumanians and the Slovaks answered, as their leaders occasionally did, that they would like to be treated on an equal footing with the Hungarian minority and not as second-class citizens, it thereupon was pointed out to them that the less central jewels of the crown would naturally be a little dimmer than the others. Perhaps the one which the Hungarians polished least of all was poor Ruthenia. We may, without exaggeration, say that it was an abandoned little country. Lying under the wooded Carpathians and a part of them, that was the country of this Slav people, by far the smallest of the Slav peoples, the Ruthenes. For many centuries they bore a

double overlordship, that of the Christian Hungarians, the real Magyars—gentlemen so lofty that they were not wont to have personal communication with the aboriginals, no more than did a former Prussian officer with one of his privates—and then the Jews, who were like the Prussian non-commissioned officers and a good deal more. They made themselves very useful to the Magyars—incidentally they often made a fortune for themselves—and in return the Magyars allowed them in the census to count themselves also as Magyars, though, to be sure, this magnanimity had its limits, for in the number of students at a university or the number of veterinary surgeons in a province or in any other competitive posts the permissible proportion of Jews was rigidly laid down, so that these energetic folk, in spite of all the services they rendered to the Magyars, were kept at arm's length. And that was a sage precaution of their rulers, who would otherwise—being a good deal more lazy and less thrifty than the Jews—have been almost as completely pushed to the wall as were the hapless Ruthenes. Magyars, Jews and Ruthenes—we had heard that since the end of the Great War this minute and almost illiterate Slav people was engaged in emancipating itself; that every other house in Užhorod, for example, was the editorial

office of a Ruthene newspaper, although the editors themselves were often at a loss how to express themselves in Ruthene; that for the first time Ruthenian schools and colleges were being opened, though the teachers were compelled sometimes to ask their pupils what a word might be in Ruthene; we had been told, in fact, that a people was trying to emerge from the quicksands, so that a little journey in that part of Europe seemed to be extremely worth the trouble.

Thus I found myself, on a Sunday afternoon in September, driving with several other persons from Rahovo to Bogdan. The village of Bogdan is the last place in Ruthenia; beyond it rises a semicircular mountain wall, whose paths, among the rocks and pines, are only known to smugglers and frontier-guards. About nine miles to the west is Rahovo, a place of no great size but of importance, seeing that the district authorities reside there, as well as the officials of the vast State forests of the neighbourhood, who look particularly nice on Sundays with their pale green suits and the coquettish feathers in their hats. One of the attractions of Rahovo—so a minor magistrate told me in another Ruthenian village—is that it lies on the main railway line; but before the railway reaches this last valley it must run, or rather dawdle, for some thirty miles across

Roumanian soil, so strangely remote it is. Should the Roumanians choose, as they have done before now, to stop the trains from going through their territory, then this ultimate valley has no communication with the rest of Ruthenia save by long and precipitous tracks which in the many months of winter are infested by large bears and wolves. I dare say it is always easier to criticise the frontier-makers than to trace a really satisfactory frontier, and I do not suggest that in an after-life the gentlemen of the Peace Conference should be made perpetually to traverse a new department of the inferno which embodies the aforementioned tracks, because it may be that these gentlemen in Paris did their best. They were dealing with a very unknown country, all of which had been in Hungary and which was now upon the boundaries of two of the Succession States—the Czecho-Slovak republic and the Roumanian kingdom. The Czechs, as wards of their fellow-Slavs, the Ruthenes, claimed that the mountains which in that region inclose the Ruthenes should become the frontier. This one cannot think was an unreasonable request. "But the best of all frontiers," argued the Roumanians, "is a considerable river. We should therefore like to have the left bank of the Theiss." And in the end the Peace Conference made a compromise,

bestowing part of the left bank on one claimant and part of it on the other. They saw that the Roumanians, in order to reach their little piece of Ruthenia, would, owing to the mountain-barrier, have to run their trains over the Czech system, and that the Czechs would have to run theirs over the Roumanian system; perhaps they thought that these two absurdities balanced each other. They might have noticed that the Roumanian bit was a mere enclave, which would probably be nothing but a useless expense to that country—as a matter of fact, the two Roumanian trains which penetrate into that district every day, in order to maintain the dignity of the Roumanian State, have hardly any other cargo—and they might have noticed that the trans-Roumanian portion adjudged to the Czechs was in a totally different case, forasmuch as it comprised a goodly portion of Ruthenia. But one scarcely expected the Western statesmen to consider Ruthenia, ignoring the river which flows through that part of it, and the railway which runs now on one side now on the other side of the river. The Ruthenes, it was presumably held, were such a small people that it would not matter if their official country became a little smaller; and so the mountains, which ethnically and geographically would have been an admirable