

Ievshan-Zillia, the Magic Herb

Leonid Mosendz

“And when Otrok, the khan’s son, smelled the magic herb *ievshan-zillia* that the court musician Or had brought from his father, Khan Sirchan, he immediately recalled his Polovtsian homeland, and, together with Or, he fled from the enemy in Kyiv to the free steppes.”

Thus ends the legend about the magic herb. But it is only the beginning of the story about the khan’s son himself. And this is how that story goes.

After a long journey, the runaways reached the encampment of their tribe. Neither songs nor joyous exclamations greeted them, but only silence and sorrow: Khan Sirchan was dying. The enfeebled khan lay in his yurt, surrounded as far as the eye could see by the tents of his people. With his last ounce of strength he clung to what was left of his life, so as to have a last glimpse of the son whom he had lost a long time ago. He had ordered the flaps of the yurt raised so that he could look out for him on all sides of the earth, day and night. He dispatched sentries in every direction to herald in advance the approach of his son. He did not sleep at night, nor did he close his eyes during the day. He watched and he waited.

When at last the young man, dressed in a dust-covered fox coat and a marten cap, leaned over him, Sirchan could barely utter a word. His eyes only flashed with a final joy, and he firmly pressed the son’s extended hands. Then the chiefs of the Horde arrived to bow to Sirchan, sweeping the earth with their marten caps, and one after another they put their left hand on the joined hands of father and son. Otrok knew that his people were swearing allegiance to him, to be as loyal to the son as they had been to the father.

Afterwards Sirchan raised himself up in his bed, his eyes glistening like the blade of a hunter’s knife and his teeth bared like the fangs of a steppe wolf. He wanted to call something out, but his body shuddered, he dropped back and breathed his last. Otrok stood over him without moving or thinking, his senses stirred only by the fragrance of the magic herb wafting up from the sachet around his neck. He felt his chest tighten.

For three days and three nights, laments resounded throughout the camp. Women wailed, sitting around a dead campfire; warriors shouted bellicose challenges to Death, children screamed, hungry horses neighed,

and camels bawled. This savage world of the steppe was so strange and wild to the young man that it seemed to him a horrible nightmare, like those he used to dream in the Rus' land he had left. But then he lowered his head to the sachel, and the fragrance of the magic herb aroused his slumbering Polovtsian soul.

During the night of the third day, the body of the dead khan, dressed in the costly attire of the Great Khan, was put on a horse, fastened to the high back of the "saddle of the dead" and the last guard of honor closed around the horse. Then the funeral train galloped off into the boundless steppe, toward the sinking sun. The young khan rode in front, flanked by two old warriors who lead the train. Otrok felt uneasy and frightened among these strangers. The horses' hoofs clattered as startled gophers scampered from under their legs. The air whistled in his ears. All this was alien to the Rus' soul of the Polovtsian khan. Only the millwheel of a moon was the same as it had been in the distant Rus' land.

Otrok looked back and saw the horse of death with the dead figure in the saddle and beyond, a disorderly troop of warriors galloping behind the khans. Suddenly, they seemed to him not warriors, but a troop of devils racing across the steppe to a horrible victory. But then he clutched the sachel with the herb and his heart again began to beat in time with the rhythm of the steppe.

The wild train finally halted above an unfamiliar ravine where a deep grave yawned. When the cries of the slaughtered horses mingled with the screams of the sacrificed slaves, a wave of alienation swept over Otrok again. But the fragrance of the *ievshan-zillia* tickled his nostrils anew, and he, like all the others, struck his sword against his shield and shouted the Polovtsian battle cry. When the corpses were covered with earth and the pale moon had completely sunk in the east, the first glimmering light of dawn aroused a manly courage in the young Polovtsian's body and Khan Otrok felt that he was the master and ruler of a great people. He rose in his stirrups, waved his sword, and a war cry burst from his lips. Thousands of horsemen repeated it after their lord: "At Rus'! At Rus'!"

The fragrance of the magic herb tickled the khan's nostrils, his chest heaved with excitement, and his eyes turned to the north, against which he intended to lead his hordes.

The next day Otrok was dressed in the costly royal attire that had been captured from the Romei and he was crowned with the cap of the Great Khan. Sitting in the middle of an open yurt, he was lauded with shouts of glory to the Great Khan. At the sight of the mighty and loyal hordes, Otrok again could not restrain himself, and the war cry of the previous day—"At Rus'!"—repeated by thousands of strong throats, rolled all the way to the Polovtsian Sea.

All the hordes had assembled to greet the new khan. Eager for battle, victory, and booty, the chiefs and the warriors alike looked to their new

khan to revive the glory of their steppe people. They looked forward to good fortune in campaigns, success in battles, a multitude of captive maidens and other booty. When excitement and koumiss had muddled their brains, Otrok convened a great council of the chiefs.

As the khan began to speak, the fragrance of the *ievshan-zillia* assailed his nostrils and clouded his judgment. He recounted the great woe Rus' had inflicted on the steppe people, he mentioned all the victories over Rus', its wealth, raiments, churches, stone palaces, and fair maidens. He also recounted his bondage in Kyiv, the subjugation of the glorious kin of Khan Sirchan, as well as all the dangers to the Polovtsian tribe posed by the growth of Rus' and its encroachment into the open steppe. While he spoke, the eyes of the chiefs glistened like Polovtsian knives. They bared their teeth with the insatiable fury of steppe wolves and their concerted war cry—"At Rus'! At Rus'!"—shook the Khan's yurt, rolled through the encampment, and did not fade until it reached the shores of the Polovtsian Sea.

A great battle was fought in Kyiv. The arrows blocked the sun; the stamping of hooves, the neighing of horses, and the clatter of steel drowned out human voices. The entire horde under Otrok had come to the walls of the city. In their mind's eye they already saw Kyivan raiments, fair Kyiv maidens, handfuls of gold, and endless rows of slaves. Otrok experienced a strange sensation as he looked on the golden cupolas of the Cathedral of St. Sophia, which he had visited as a Christian boy, and a peculiar sorrow and fear contracted his heart. But he clutched the bag hanging on his neck, and the fragrance of the herb drifted into his brain.

However relentlessly the Polovtsians pushed ahead, however much Otrok, riding at the head of the host and shooting arrow after arrow at the Rus' armored troops, urged them on, however much he raced with his standard from one flank of the host to the other, the Rus' stood their ground, like the walls of St. Sophia. Polovtsian arrows stuck in the chain mail of the Rus', spears broke against their shields, and when a Rus' warrior fell, an impregnable wall of shields closed the gap. The waves of the Polovtsian sea broke against this wall like the waves of the Dnipro against the rocks of the rapids. The golden standard of the Kyivan prince fluttered strong and unbowed amid the Rus' host.

In the end, the Polovtsian horde yielded. The frightened chiefs came running to Otrok one after the other: many warriors had fallen; more were falling still, while the Rus' were standing as before! Otrok himself was losing courage, and doubts seized his heart in a vise. When the Rus' made another push forward and the horde was thrown into confusion, he was the first to leave the battlefield, his routed horde fleeing behind him from the Prince's dreaded standard.

Otrok returned to the steppe filled with shame, passionate hatred, and an even stronger thirst for revenge. And again he began to contemplate a

campaign against the Rus'. Furious and bloodthirsty, he assembled all his hordes and allies, a tremendously large multitude of horses and wagons, and set forth. Rus' villages went up in flames, cities could not withstand the onslaught, smoke and cries rose across the Rus' land. Otrok laid siege to golden-domed Kyiv and struck the Golden Gates with his spear. In his mind's eye he could again see the princely palaces, St. Sophia, and the entire Rus' land as the new homeland of his tribe and kin. The Polovtsian host seethed and churned like a dammed flood of the furious Dnipro, ready to inundate the fertile Kyivan meadows at any moment.

Again there was a furious battle such as Kyiv had not seen since the times of the Pechenegs. Enraged by the previous failure, fired by the thirst for revenge and booty, the Polovtsians attacked Rus' in a final deadly thrust. Wherever the thrust weakened, wherever the persistence of the steppe waned, there was Otrok leading his army, paradigm of confidence and courage.

But the wall of Rus' troops stood strong, and the Polovtsian waves broke against it like the waves of the Dnipro against the rapids. And when Rus' counter-attacked, the hordes collapsed, and again Otrok had to flee, leaving behind not only booty, but countless Polovtsian warriors in the ravines and gullies of the Rus' land.

The Rus' troops pursued the fleeing enemy into the steppe. Where they came upon a Polovtsian encampment, they destroyed everything in sight. Otrok attempted to check the Rus' troops, but they advanced like a wall of shields, over which fluttered the horrible and unwavering standard with the severe, dark image of the Savior so hated by the steppe. Otrok was forced to flee to the Polovtsian Sea itself, while the scent of *ievshan-zillia* contracted his chest and clouded his judgment with impotent hatred.

When the remnants of the routed Polovtsian host reassembled, great lamentation filled the encampment. Many of the glorious and mighty khans were missing. Although the thirst for revenge burned in Otrok's heart, although the scent of the magic herb rose to his brain and excited his blood, the war cry "At Rus'! At Rus'!" did not rise in his chest. Silently he scanned the assembly of disheartened chiefs sitting in a semi-circle in the khan's yurt.

Finally, Kobiak rose from the circle. He was khan of a distant horde that dwelt by the Polovtsian Sea, and he rarely appeared in Otrok's yurt. Perhaps it was the long distance he had to travel, or perhaps because, having once been imprisoned in Rus', he had taken a Rus' girl for his wife and had adopted many Rus' habits, and now took part only reluctantly in the campaigns against the Rus'. When he spoke, his words were given an intense attention that was rare among the steppe warriors.

At first, Kobiak recalled all the chiefs and commanders who had fallen during the last campaigns. He mentioned them and then was silent for a moment. There was no response. Those present looked about the assembly

and, seeing how many friends were missing, pushed their caps lower over their eyes.

Then Kobiak began to recall the glorious days of the Polovtsian victories, when Rus' paid tribute to the free people of the steppe, and each chief had more slaves and captive maidens than he needed. The glory of the steppe people had spread beyond the Polovtsian Sea and reached the lands of the Romei. Again Kobiak heard not a word in response, as the eyes of his listeners flashed passionately like Polovtsian knives and their marten-fur caps were pushed back onto their heads.

Now Kobiak's speech became bolder. He said that the gods had already forgotten the Polovtsian people. They no longer gave them the courage or desire they once had. No longer did they bestow on the steppe the bounty enjoyed, for example, by the Rus'! How could anyone compare the Rus' gods to the Polovtsian ones? The Rus' gods were mighty and strong! Didn't they help Rus' acquire stone palaces, powerful weapons, cities and temples? That is why Rus' stood like a wall against its enemies! Because it had treasures to defend! And no sooner had the enemy attacked than the steppe people had taken flight, along with their gods and miserable tents. That is why Rus' pushes further and further into the steppe and, behind its armies the walls of its churches and fortified settlements extend deeper and deeper into Polovtsian land.

As Kobiak continued to speak to the attentive assembly, it seemed to Otrok that he had found the reason for the defeat and decline of his people. Indeed, it was the Rus' God! It was the God who dwelled in their golden-domed churches, the God to whom he had learned to confess while he had been a prisoner in Rus'. It was the dark Savior on their banners, the kindly Virgin in their churches, the brave Archangel Michael with his fiery sword. It was they and a great number of other prophets, saints, and martyrs who kept their protecting hand over Rus', giving it power, endurance, courage, and wealth. The Polovtsians should seek the protection of this same God and accept Him as their own. He would help the steppe people finally become equal with the Rus' and even surpass them in power and courage. Once that strength was gained, the steppe would seize the wealth, temples, and stone palaces of Rus' and turn the Rus' people into slaves. That would be a much sweeter revenge than any arms or bloodshed could achieve.

When Kobiak finished speaking and looked around, it was evident from the glistening eyes and tense breathing that his words had not fallen on deaf ears. Then the chiefs spoke one after the other. Unanimously they agreed that the gods of Rus' were more powerful than the gods of the steppe and it would be good for the Polovtsians to accept their assistance and protection.

When news spread through the steppe encampments that the khan and chiefs had chosen different gods, more powerful and well-disposed than the previous ones, almost no one resisted. After all, everyone expected the Rus'

gods to bring wealth, a comfortable life, victories without battle, and glory without struggle. The old black idols that had felt the touch of so many hands over the centuries were thrown out of the yurts; sacred tambourines were burned, and amulets and magic bags were torn from necks. Ever more changes were made in the Polovtsian land. The Rus' gods did not want to dwell in dark and smoky yurts that always reeked of sheepskin, milk, and horse sweat. They needed bright, tall, and sturdy buildings adorned with paintings and carvings, filled with the fragrance of incense and the sound of sweet song.

After the new Rus' gods were introduced, first the khans and then the commoners came to dislike their yurts, wagons, and food. Stonecutters, masons, carpenters, wood carvers, weavers, and all sorts of other craftsmen and instructors were lured to the Polovtsian land from Rus'. Now the Polovtsians gladly received all of them, because many temples needed to be built for the Rus' gods, as well as palaces for the chieftains and khans; brick had to be baked, stone cut, wood carved, and cloth weaved.

Observing how easily the new gods accepted the Polovtsian land and how gladly they adjusted to the steppe people, Otrok peacefully inhaled the steppe air, and in its breezes he could already imagine acrid smoke from future conflagrations in the Rus' land.

Oh yes, the Rus' God will grow accustomed to this steppe land. He will have his fill of incense and songs, after which He will surely make the power of the Rus' fall prey to the power of the Polovtsians, who will, at long last, rise over Rus' like a terrible, tailed star. The great khan himself urged his people to accept the faith and the customs of the Rus' without delay, so as to win the favor and kindness of the new gods quickly. The scent of *ievshan-zillia* intoxicated him with the joy of future glory.

But when the Rus' craftsmen and instructors finished their work, they were reluctant to leave the Polovtsian land, because the customs of Rus' were spreading ever farther through the steppe. Along the slopes of valleys rose the khans' palaces built in the Rus' or the Romei style; near them crowded the houses of their subjects. The Polovtsians began to forget their yurts and covered themselves with blankets, just like the Rus'. And the Rus' forgot their enmity toward the steppe, because they had already subdued it, not with swords, spears, or arrows, but with the power of their God, the words of their instructors, and the skills of their craftsmen. The Polovtsians did not realize this and gladly continued to accept ever more gifts from the Rus' land.

Not everyone bowed eagerly to the new gods, however. They were few, but nevertheless some did not want to throw their old gods out of the yurts or exchange their creaky steppe wagons for white homes along the steppe valleys. They took their gods and left. They were not many, and nobody stopped them when they left their native encampments for lands far beyond the Polovtsian Sea.

As the years passed, peace and bounty filled the Polovtsian land. Settlements multiplied, temples grew, and the customs of Rus' replaced the former savagery of the Polovtsians. Rus' girls now went into the Polovtsian steppes voluntarily and not as captive maidens. Likewise, Polovtsian girls went to Rus'. Peaceful relations had developed to a point where the steppe seemed to have forgotten why it had invited the Rus' gods.

Only Khan Otrok did not forget. The war cry often rose to his lips, but he held it back. It seemed to him that his people had not yet multiplied enough, they had not yet gained enough strength to launch a struggle against the Rus'. Khan Otrok was patient and wise. He even put away the sachet with the magic herb, lest it excite his soul before the time was right. He was patient, like a steppe hawk that soars over the steppe all day, watching its wary prey. Finally, when it seemed to him beyond any doubt that the hour was ripe, he convened the great council.

The khans and chiefs of the entire steppe assembled in Otrok's palace, as they had not done for a long time. The great khan spoke to them. He recalled the bygone glory of the Polovtsian people, their campaigns against the Rus' and the Romei, and the victories they had won. He expected that their eyes would flash like those of a wolf pack in a winter night. But their eyes remained calm and dark like steppe ponds overgrown with reeds. As he recalled the enemies of the Polovtsian tribe he expected white teeth to flash with the fury of a boar's tusks, but the lips of those present twisted in suppressed yawns. He thought that he was just imagining this. But when he began to speak about Rus' and all the injustices it had inflicted upon the Polovtsian people, and its eternal enmity with the steppe, he could hold back the sharp war cry no longer. Filled with a thirst for revenge, he cried out "At Rus'!" Instantly, however, it broke off. Not a single voice joined him, not a single warrior rose to his feet. Stunned by this unexpected response, the great khan—now he understood!—froze amid his chiefs, who, one by one, turned their eyes away from the khan's fiery gaze.

The assembly was silent for a long time. At last, a young khan rose and began to speak. What Otrok heard bore down on him like ice chunks crushing a misguided boat. He looked around like a cornered animal, without any hope of escape; he sought friendly eyes, but everyone turned away from him. To them he had become a strange, incomprehensible, and even hostile herald.

The young khan said that the times had passed when the steppe was an enemy of Rus'. Those times had passed and would never return! Polovtsians had no reason to rise against Rus'. Aside from gratitude, no other emotion should excite the Polovtsian heart. Rus' had brought to the steppe their kind and mighty God. He was followed by Rus' homes, which were so convenient, by bread and roast meat—tastier than millet and raw meat—and by Rus' songs, sweeter than Polovtsian dirges. Peace and quiet now prevailed in the Polovtsian land, and it was a crime to call upon the

Polovtsians to fight their dear Rus' brothers just because of some forgotten glory of the Polovtsian tribe.

The young khan said much more, but Otrok did not listen. A beastly fury seized his body, rising to his heart and flooding his eyes with blood. He tore open his shirt and snatched the *ievshan-zillia* from his neck. He wanted to let this insolent Rus' slave and this cowardly, enervated assembly inhale its magic fragrance. But the *ievshan-zillia* no longer had any fragrance. It had become mere grass—the steppe's most plentiful hay. Otrok was dumbfounded. He threw the sachet to the ground and left the council on unsteady feet. No one stopped him, no one hindered him from untethering his mount, and no one saw the khan off when he rode south in the direction of the Polovtsian Sea.

Just as years ago he and Or had wandered back to his ancestral encampment to find his father's faded glory and honor, now again he hurried through the steppes and valleys. He sought out those who had not submitted to the Rus' gods and to Rus' peace and tranquility. He found them! Far away, beyond the sea, an insignificant remnant of his Polovtsian tribe. They were still like the Polovtsian tribe of bygone days—like the *ievshan-zillia*, they still exuded the strong fragrance of the steppe's power and glory. They kept their old gods and their old songs, their customs and their yurts—the habits that had already died away among their brothers in the north. And again the forgotten scent of the *ievshan-zillia* greeted Otrok's nostrils.

When the exile humbly told the elders of this small tribe what had transpired in the steppes to the north, there was only silence in response. At long last, an ancient warrior who seemed covered from head to foot with the moss of the steppe came up to Otrok, looked intently into his eyes, and then sat down again. Others approached him as well, peering closely at the exiled khan. Afterwards, the eldest tribesman spoke.

He did not address Otrok or any of those present. He spoke as if there were no one else in the big yurt. He was confessing to himself under his breath. His words echoed the thoughts he had when he and a handful of his tribesmen had left the dear steppe, because they did not want to adopt a foreign god. No, it was not the new god he had been afraid of. He had feared that with the new god the Polovtsian tribe would lose its ancient soul, that it would be replaced by the soul of the Rus' people.

That is exactly what had happened! They had learned to eat the soft Rus' bread, and the courageous Polovtsian heart had softened. They had begun to sleep on soft down beds with Rus' girls, and Rus' had ceased to be their enemy because their own children were already half Rus'. They had begun to tend wheat, and they had become plowmen for the Rus', their drovers and slaves. They had not wanted to be lords of the steppe, because the duties of a steppe lord were difficult and demanding! It was much easier and more convenient to live as servants of the Rus', under a foreign lord and a foreign god.

As the old man was concluding his whispered speech, Otrok's head hung lower and lower with every word. Yes, there was no doubt whatsoever: his guilt was enormous! He had succumbed to doubt in his own powers and had put his people under the protection of a foreign god, thereby wasting both the Polovtsian spirit and the Polovtsian soul. He thought he could achieve his revenge by embracing the power of the Rus' gods. But he hadn't noticed that he did so because it was easier and more peaceful than relying on his own sword and his own gods. He had been fooling himself—and fooling others!

After a lengthy silence, when even the breathing of those present in the yurt was inaudible, Otrok went up to the old man and bent his head in anticipation of the verdict. He calmly listened to the judgment.

It was midnight, but the encampment was not yet asleep. Screams and laments rose toward the sky, fearfully bewailing what must pass for all time into the astral steppe. But when Otrok, in ceremonial dress, was led out of the yurt to the horse with the "saddle of the dead," everything fell silent. When he was put on the horse and tied to the high back of the saddle like a limp corpse, and when the horrible train galloped off into the dark steppe, neither the victim nor the guards nor the spectators uttered any breath of a moan or whisper of pain.

Like many years before, the horrible train raced through the nocturnal silence. The only sounds were those of hoofs striking hoofs, of grass rustling, and saddles creaking, as the millwheel-shaped moon rose over the edge of the steppe. Otrok's mind was bereft of every thought: this was a cortege of the dead for a soulless victim!

Only when the victim of repentance for the past and sacrifice of hope for the future of the Polovtsian tribe dropped into his grave under the sacrificial knife did a drawn-out scream resembling the cry of a wounded animal rend the silence of the steppe—a scream of alarm and pride and the eternal thirst for revenge.

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