

Samiilo, or the Beautiful Brigand

Yuri Andrukhovych

Samiilo (Samuel) Nemyrych, this inappropriately forgotten and prematurely extinguished shoot of the tree of our national banditry, attracts attention first and foremost for stylistic reasons. The style of his crimes is based on absolute freedom. Even the most frightening of the murders and robberies he committed can be boldly described as executed with outstanding aesthetic sensibility and imparting an impression of free, inspired creativity.

The life of this Podilian petty nobleman, largely wasted in the 1610s in Lviv, has to this very day been largely ignored by our historiographers, despite their occasional executions. Indeed, what we encounter in Władysław Łoziński's *Prawem i lewem*—or, to render it in Ukrainian, *By Sword and Epistle*—is written tendentiously: the author finds Nemyrych unpleasant merely for not being Catholic and Polish. Besides, he hailed from the same Nemyrych clan as Yurko Nemyrych, the future colonel of the Cossack Army, pitiless hero of the 1648–49 campaign, poet, philosopher, and heretic. (In general, the Nemyrychs often fairly willingly went over to Arianism—a trait characteristic not only of them but also of such age-old Ukrainian families as the Potockis, the Wiśniowieckis, and the Tatomys).

As for the poem allegedly written about Samiilo Nemyrych in his voice and published in the book *Exotic Birds and Plants* by Yuri Andrukhovych, one should note that the author did not burden himself with any significant effort to plumb the depths of ages past and draw a historical type that would be somehow multi-dimensional and edifying. The core of this poem is, in effect, the so-called “potato pancake incident”—abnormally emphasized, torn from its biographical context, and hypertrophied; while it did take place in the biography of our hero, it was, one should note, entirely accidental and uncharacteristic.

We now believe it necessary to relate the full truth about this outstanding personality, so little known to modern-day descendants of that heroic time, and thereby liquidate yet another blank spot in the ocean of national history and struggle for liberation.

Samiilo Nemyrych settled in Lviv beyond the Cracow gates in 1610. The precise date of his birth remains unknown, but we are certain that by this time he was slightly over twenty years old. Brilliant in fencing and horseback riding, impeccably dressed, he takes to buying expensive fabrics from Venetian and Genoese merchants, and he's fond of sherry, Malvasia, good music, and Madeira. His house soon becomes a haven for eccentric

exiles from all corners of the Old World—foremost among them, well-known men of ill repute, perverts, circus clowns, serial killers, philosophers, occultists, celebrated alchemists, sodomites, Protestants, fire-worshippers, Lilliputians, and robbers. Leisure time is spent in banquets, blasphemous singing, and religious disputes. Almost every day Nemyrych, accompanied by his cohort, journeys through the noblest of the city’s taverns, where with great gusto and enthusiasm he makes merry: he shoots musket balls at the bottles and hourglasses, nails visitors’ beards to counters, breaks their arms and legs, shakes gold and silver coins out of their weighty pockets, shows them his bare behind, smashes windows and mirrors, drowns the police magistrate Szczepiurski in a vat of freshly brewed coffee and the judge Gołąbek in the toilet, punches out the eyes of the most insolent, breaks their ribs, pisses in their beer, forces them to eat their own excrement, while loudly singing, dancing, and otherwise amusing himself.

A contemporary reader might fail to understand—or, perhaps, even condemn—such expressions of Nemyrych’s vital force and healthy spiritual energy; therefore, it is necessary to say a few words here about the customs of that era.

Murder or violence in general, according to the Constitution of 1577 then in force, was not considered something unusual or illegal. Judges in that era treated the crimes they examined in a philosophical fashion rather than from a legal standpoint, and added a significant degree of humor, irony, and Christian mercy towards the violators. Terms of imprisonment were surprisingly short and often conditional. Thus, for the murder by a nobleman of a fellow nobleman (and, at the time, the nobility constituted a good three-fourths of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s population), one had to spend a year and three weeks in the castle tower and pay two thousand gold pieces to the treasury. The same murder, but with the murderer caught *in ricenti* (that is, red-handed), was given a doubled punishment: two years and six weeks in the tower and the monetary payment of four thousand gold pieces. (For some reason, being caught red-handed was considered an aggravating circumstance—as if to say, don’t get caught, you fool, but be smart about your killing, so that no one sees.)

Moreover, no trial of a murder could take place if the family of the victim could not drag his dead body to the courthouse (this was a special legal procedure known as “presentation of the corpse”). Therefore, the main goal for any gentleman who thought of murdering someone was to hide, reliably and in a timely manner, the body of the one done in: to dispatch it with a stone to the bottom of the Poltva, burn it in an oven, bury it deep in the darkest corner of a forest, chop it into small pieces, etc. By the way, in the case of Judge Gołąbek, whom Nemyrych, as it was mentioned above, drowned in excrement, the body of the judge was never found and therefore the case was closed, owing to the absence of a *corpus delicti*, that is, of the judge’s corpse.

Murdering came easy, torturing was carefree—in secret and *in ricenti*, in front of society—for even if a trial did take place eventually and a verdict was issued, the convict did not necessarily have to go obediently to the tower; most often he went home or out with his friends to drink wine. The fact is that although there was a strict division between the judicial and executive branches of power, the executive could not, in the end, execute anything, for it was catastrophically short of executors—more precisely, policemen—while each defendant arrived in the company of buddies, relatives, and servants, armed to the teeth with sabers, swords, chains, cues, brass knuckles, halberds, and scimitars; hence only someone insanely zealous for justice or someone with clear suicidal tendencies would try to take the defendant to jail by force. Such an attempt undoubtedly would have yielded rather sad consequences for the justice system and its defenders.

Thus, in July 1612, some good friends ran into Nemyrych in Makolondra's tavern in Zamarstyniv. He was in a good mood, with a glass of sherry in one hand and a corpulent wench in nothing but Turkish pantaloons by his side, and to their question as to what he was doing there he responded, "Ha-ha, I am doing my time in the tower, gentlemen! I killed old Isakovych and got my three weeks and a year. And do it I must, gentlemen, and that can't be helped."

(Isakovych, a baptized Karaite, traded in counterfeit Lviv rugs, which he would pass off as Persian, since you truly could not tell them apart in any way from Persian ones. One day Nemyrych, together with his closest desperado buddies—Yatsko the Wart, Genyk Schulerman, and the Portuguese Moor Joelinho—caught Isakovych's son Zachariah at the Four Tits bordello, where the young Karaite was squandering his daddy's fortune. They forcibly pried him away from the bordello employee Susanna Waligóra and dragged him to the Vynnyky forest, where they deposited him, bound and gagged, in a cave, leaving behind the half-blind Lilliputian Ptuszek as a lookout. In the meantime, they telephoned old Isakovych, demanding five thousand Austrian gold sequins from him, threatening otherwise to chop young Zach into eleven pieces and later mail the old guy his (his son's, that is) head, stomach, and genitals. Old Isakovych, having grabbed his prized coffret with sequins, hurriedly set off in the direction of Devil's Rock, where the meeting with Nemyrych and his team was to take place. In the meantime, young Isakovych managed to free himself from the ropes (he had seen this trick performed many times by wandering magicians and thus executed it with ease), stunned—that is, killed—the sleeping Lilliputian with a stone, and set out on foot, crossing the forest and the Halych-side suburbs, back to the Four Tits bordello, since he felt he had not yet partied to his heart's content. Angered by his escape, Nemyrych & Co. riddled old Isakovych with bullets, spending all of eight magazines on him. To top it all, in the coffret they found not gold sequins but silver thalers, worth much less on the hard currency market of the day, which the old man had in the dark, no doubt, mistaken for sequins. The ending of this story is

already familiar to the reader: the city courthouse and Nemyrych’s banquet with friends at Makolondra’s tavern in Zamarstyniv.)

Between the killing of old Isakovych and the robbing of a Wallachian diplomatic mission headed by the boyar Gheorghîța, which in the fall of 1615, was en route to the encampment of the king of Sweden, carrying valuable papers pertaining to the Transylvanian succession, Samiilo Nemyrych dedicated himself to science and the arts. In 1614 he published in Dresden a treatise in verse titled *De Papavere Curatione et Natura Cannabis* (*On the Medicinal Use of Poppies and the Nature of Hemp*), which was highly praised by his contemporaries but, sadly, was irrevocably lost. He played musical instruments a lot, traveled around the environs of Lviv on a proto-bicycle he had invented, hunted game on occasion, and wrote polemical epistles denouncing the Uniate bishop Ipatii Potii, unaware that the latter had left the realm of the living more than a year earlier.

The robbing of the Wallachian envoys turned out to be the most notorious of Nemyrych’s transgressions, excepting, of course, the story of the lady with the potato pancakes mentioned by Łoziński—the story that led to Nemyrych’s arrest and imprisonment in the tower. In our days of unrestrained political correctness and the triumph of the Internet hashtag #MeToo, even a cursory mention of that episode is far too risky. Therefore let us move away from it and back to safer ones.

Having sprung a trap in the notoriously thick Black Forest, which in those days began near Halych and Kalush in the east and, with a few gaps, stretched all the way to Munich in the west, Nemyrych & Co. lay in wait for the Wallachian mission and, having met them with a wall of tear gas, managed to leave the boyar, the other envoys, and their guards lying face-down in the muddy autumnal road, paralyzed either by the tear gas or by fear. Having filled their sacks with Wallachian ducats, topazes, and amethysts, as well as the secret papers sealed in an ebony box inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl, having ripped the hats and furs off the envoys, Nemyrych and his friends disappeared into the depths of the Black Forest. Joelinho the Portuguese Moor also grabbed a nine-year-old muleteer to whom he had taken a great fancy, but the latter soon died from abuse. Nemyrych adroitly returned the diplomatic papers to the Transylvanian court, demanding twenty thousand Swiss francs for doing so; but Prince Rákóczy did not express much enthusiasm for such an arrangement, so they had to settle for eight and a half thousand.

By then the king and the Diet of the Commonwealth had already thrice declared Nemyrych *infamis* (that is, deprived of political rights and the status of a nobleman) and twice declared him an outlaw (that is, deprived of all rights and protection by the state and society). This meant that anyone at any moment could rub him out without facing any responsibility in the eyes of the law and even earning His Majesty’s gratitude. However, those eager for such gratitude were, for some reason, hard to find, and Nemyrych wandered insolently about Market Square in a gold-embroidered *kontusz* in

the company of the valiant cutthroats Schulerman and Joelinho and the former theology student Innocent Sylvester Kotsky, dismissed from college for masturbation and freethinking. (Yatsko the Wart was by then already at the Zaporozhian Sich, where he would soon become hetman by deposing Sahaidachny. Eventually, however, he would lose his head near Khotyn, having brought the famed Zaporozhian Cossack army to the edge of collapse.)

The last in the series of banishments received by Nemyrych was announced in connection with the so-called "case of the menagerie," a story reeking with colorful exoticism. In 1616, around May or June, Pohulianka Park witnessed the arrival of a travelling bestiary owned by a certain Michelagnolo Romano (this was an alias used by the well-known counterfeiter and poison-maker Gustav Suppe, originally from Thuringia, to hide from the Inquisition). It included fourteen cages with various kinds of Indian beasts, namely, lions, panthers, lemurs, rhinoceroses, unicorns, giraffes, antelopes, hippopotamuses, baboons, zebras, echidnas, vampires, incubuses, etc. Daily and especially on Sundays, the most refined specimens of Lviv society gathered in Pohulianka Park, where for a fairly high fee they could look at all this exotic fauna, which, truth be told, also stank a great deal.

One Sunday, Nemyrych and his friends, descending like a whirlwind on the bestiary, opened all the cages and set free all the unfed animals. Joelinho the Portuguese Moor unfortunately perished during this operation: the old lecher and zoophile was trampled to death by a female rhinoceros that he had very imprudently tried to seduce, having just let it out. The frightened residents of "Leopolis, the most faithful among the Crown's cities," ran for their lives in all directions, while the released animals, having torn a few of them to shreds and satisfied their hunger, streamed down Lenin Street (today's Lychakivska) towards the town center and soon occupied the abandoned city, amusing themselves in flower beds, fountains, and monastery gardens and snacking on the occasional passerby. The menagerie's owner, Michelagnolo a.k.a. Gustav Suppe, was beside himself with grief, and so Nemyrych asked for a thousand Sicilian ducats to put all the animals back in their cages. Suppe gladly agreed and placed an advance of three hundred ducats on top of a barrel (the conversation took place at the Headless Fish Brew Pub). The following day, the beasts were indeed all returned to their cages. Using curare poison from Brazil, which they had purchased earlier in van der Vanden's pharmacy at Hetman's Ramparts, Nemyrych and his band sedated all the monsters with well-aimed arrows and brought them, still sleeping, to Pohulianka Park. This was one version, but there was another one, according to which the animals obediently returned to their cages, yielding peacefully and quietly to the tune Nemyrych played on an end-blown flute. Whatever the case, Suppe did pay the remaining ducats to Nemyrych and the same day left Lviv in a hurry, together with his entire caravan. The ducats turned out to be counterfeit,

each and every one, and so, on the night of June 22, Nemyrych and his boys caught up with the swindler on the Great Silkworm Road, where they chopped everyone to pieces and transferred the animals together with their cages to the Vagabundo Circus: Nemyrych and its director were linked by some dubious schemes.

The aforementioned pharmacist, van der Vanden, was likewise quite closely connected to Nemyrych, since he prepared for the latter various narcotic potions and pills. Being the main supplier of opium to the court of the Turkish padishah and of cocaine to the caliph of Baghdad, the clever Dutchman was a connoisseur of forbidden substances of every kind. Following his advice, Nemyrych started shooting up and remained a junkie for several long years, chasing away all his pals and girlfriends and spending his time in melancholy solitude. He did not rise from his bed for days, lost a lot of weight, and seemed to waste away, but never missed a vein when injecting. He watched endless mysterious, colorful visions and kept rereading the latest work of the famous Saxon theologian Abraham von Aschenbach, *The Divine Egg, or the Instrument of Sinful Tortures*, which he had preordered from the Sorbonne. His notes in the margins of this quarto evidence his profound mastery of the subject and possible intention of composing a polemical response.

But the true reason for his generally melancholy—indeed, depressed—state was his love for thirteen-year-old Amalka, daughter of the city executioner, Stefan Neboraka. Nemyrych saw her for the first time from behind bars when he was doing time in the tower for—let us mention it for the third and last time—the notorious “potato pancake incident.” The girl took daily walks to her daddy’s workplace, which was located close to the tower: she brought him hot lunches in pots wrapped in woolen kerchiefs. Once, while on her way, she squatted to pee in the bushes next to the tower. This was when Nemyrych noticed her and immediately fell in love more completely than he had ever fallen in love with anyone before. The walls of his cell were soon covered with Amalka’s name; additionally, he used a chip of a brick to draw countless hearts pierced with arrows, female lips, other body parts, etc.

The tragedy of this affair lay in the fact that young Miss Amalia scorned his love. On leaving prison, Nemyrych confessed his love to her in writing, offering to take her hand in marriage. He added to the letter his acrostic sonnet, “Amalia Neboraka.” Alas, the girl replied in a rather cutting way that she would never think of marrying such a delinquent and debauchee; moreover, she was from an esteemed, respectable family whose dignity would suffer from such a shameful union; and, besides, she had long been in love with her fiancé Piotrus, the butcher’s son, whom she loved for his curly hair, cheerful disposition, and incomparable skill at turning animal guts into blood-and-buckwheat sausage. The following evening, Samiilo Nemyrych met Piotrus the butcher’s son in Kulparkiv and disemboweled him, but this was of no help: to the end of her days—and she lived to be

ninety-three—Amalia was in mourning, remaining faithful to her fiancé and keeping her virginity intact.

Gradually coming to the conclusion that all efforts and attempts at changing something for the better in this absurd world were futile, Samiilo Nemyrych turned passive and withdrawn. It seemed that he had finally understood several simple but depressing things. Back when he punished the rich and took possession of their wealth, he only redistributed it, but this did not save the needy from need and the hungry from hunger. Women offered themselves to him willingly and often, but not because they appreciated his mind or his heart, but because he could satisfy them. His contemporaries generally did not understand his scholarly and artistic efforts, and more often than not his writings were burned, on the orders of the Inquisition or the tsar of Muscovy. His brilliantly executed, artistic crimes produced in response only denunciations, a failure to understand, yet another suspension of rights or banishment, yet another court verdict and jail term, but never became a subject of the dignified aesthetic interpretation and thoroughgoing moral analysis for which poor Samiilo so desperately longed. He had to drink to the bottom that bitter cup of tragedy that all great men share: incongruity with the time into which they were thrown by Providence.

But the bitterness of Nemyrych's cup is of a double nature: one not only of time but also of place. Samiilo Nemyrych had the misfortune of being a Ukrainian and living in a Ukraine devoid of its own statehood, jurisprudence, its own history, and, finally, of its own criminal world. In America, he could have become a president; in Rome, a pope or, at least, a cardinal; in England, he could have been Robin Hood; in Germany, Bismarck or even Goebbels. But in Ukraine he could only be a bandit and a pogromist. There was indeed a ring of truth to the Polish saying from that era: "Sow Jesuits in Ruthenia, and you will still reap thieves!"

Samiilo Nemyrych was tonsured as a monk on 18 October 1619, and under the name of Brother Theodosius he quietly spent the rest of his years in a cell at the Pochaiv Lavra. After his death in January 1632, from an unknown nocturnal illness, documented minute-by-minute by a hidden camera, with the intention of a future upload to YouTube, his body did not decay, and on the fifth day, retaining its resilience and warmth, it began to smell of hollyhocks. He was not, however, canonized, despite the expressiveness of this unambiguous anomaly. Allegedly the reason was that his birth certificate was nowhere to be found. Gradually people stopped believing in the very fact of his existence.

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T.v.o./... /ry, Lviv: Kameniar, 1995, pp. 29–38. A revised version, under the title “Samiilo, abo prekrasnyi rozbyshaka” became the opening chapter of Andrukhovych’s novel *Kokhantsi iustytsii* [Darlings of Justice], Chernivtsi: Meridian Czernowitz, 2018, pp. 7–24. The translation above reflects this revised version.

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