

How I met the author of my obituary

IN THE COURSE OF THE FIVE OR SIX YEARS I SPENT IN RUSSIA I was several times killed and liquidated by various organizations and individuals. When I returned home to Czechoslovakia I found I had been hanged three times, shot twice, and quartered once by wild Kirghiz insurgents near Lake Kale-Yshel. Finally I was definitely stabbed to death in a wild brawl with drunken sailors in one of the Odessa taverns. I think myself that this was the most likely possibility.

My good friend Kolman shared that sentiment. He found an eye-witness to my ignominious and heroic death and wrote an article for his paper about that whole affair which was so unpleasant for me. But he was not content merely with that tiny scrap of news. His good nature drove him to write an obituary of me, which I read shortly after my arrival in Prague. With great elegance he vilified my posthumous memory, being convinced that the dead do not rise from the grave.

I went to look for him to convince him that I was alive, and that is how this story came about.

Not even that master of horror and dread, Edgar Allan Poe, could think up a more grisly subject. . . .

I found the author of my obituary in one of the Prague wine taverns exactly at midnight, the very hour when it closed according to an Imperial and Royal decree of April 18, 1856.

He was staring at the ceiling. They were stripping off the stained tablecloths from the tables. I sat down at his table and said affably, "Excuse me, is this place free?"

He continued to observe some given spot on the ceiling, which appeared to interest him very much, and replied, logically, "Of course but they're just about to close. I'm afraid they won't serve you."

I took him by the arm and turned him round so that he faced me. For a while he stared at me in silence and said at last very quietly, "You haven't been in Russia by any chance?"

I smiled. "So you recognized me after all? I was killed in Russia in a low-down tavern in a brawl with rough drunken sailors."

He turned pale. "You are, you are. . . ."

"Yes," I said emphatically. "I was killed in a brawl with sailors in Odessa, and you wrote my obituary."

A faint gasp escaped his lips. "You've read what I wrote about you?"

"Of course I have. It was a very interesting obituary except for one or two small misunderstandings. And an unusually long one too. Not even His Imperial Majesty the Emperor himself, when he died, got as many lines. Your journal devoted 152 lines to him and 186 to me, at 35 hellers a line (that was the miserable rate they paid journalists then!), which made 55 crowns and 15 hellers altogether."

"What exactly do you want of me?" he asked in horror. "Do you want those 55 crowns and 15 hellers?"

"You can keep them," I answered. "The dead do not accept fees for their own obituaries."

He blanched.

"Do you know what?" I said nonchalantly. "We'll pay the bill and go somewhere else. I'd like to spend this night with you."

"Couldn't we put it off till tomorrow?" I stared at him. "The bill!" he called out.

At the corner I hailed a fiacre. I ordered him to get in and in a sepulchral voice told the driver, "Drive us to Olšany Cemetery!"

The author of my obituary made the sign of the cross. For a long time there was an embarrassing silence, broken only by the cracking of the whip and the snorting of the horses.

I leaned over to my companion. "Do you have the feeling that somewhere in the quiet of the streets of Žižkov the dogs have begun to howl?"

He trembled and drew himself up in the cab, stammering "You really were in Russia?"

"Slain in Odessa in a tavern in a brawl with drunken sailors," I answered drily.

"My god," my companion exclaimed, "this is worse than Erben's *The Spectre's Bride*."

Once more there was a painful silence. Somewhere dogs really did begin to howl.

When we got to the Strašnická Highway I ordered my companion to pay the driver. We stood together in the darkness of the Highway. "Isn't there a restaurant here by any chance?" He turned to me helplessly and pitifully.

"A restaurant?" I gave a smile. "Now we are going to climb over the cemetery wall, and on a gravestone somewhere we shall have a nice little chat about that obituary. You go first and then give me your hand."

Without a word he quietly gave me his hand and we jumped down into the cemetery. Beneath us the cypresses crackled. The wind moaned mournfully among the crosses.

"I am not going any further," my friend blurted out. "Where are you dragging me to?"

I held him up and said cheerfully, "Now we'll go and look at the tomb of the old Prague patrician family of Bonepiani. It's a completely abandoned tomb in the first section of row number six by the wall. It's been abandoned from the time they buried the last descendant there. They brought him in 1874 from Odessa, where he'd been killed by sailors in a brawl in a low-down tavern."

My companion crossed himself a second time.

When at last we reached the gravestone covering the dust of the last descendants of those Prague citizens, the Bonepiani, and sat

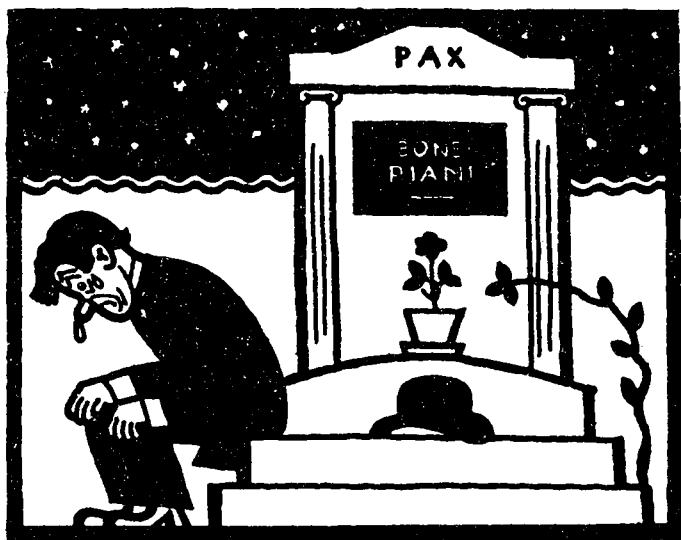
down, I took him gently by the hand and talked with him quietly.

“Dear friend! In the secondary school our teachers taught us a beautiful and noble slogan: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. But the moment I was dead you tried to write as nastily as you could about me. If I’d written my own obituary, I’d have written that no death left such a tragic impression as that of Mr. So-and-So. I’d have said that the dead writer’s finest virtues were his positive love for good and for everything which is sacred to pure souls. But of my death you wrote that I died a rogue and a buffoon. Don’t cry! There are times when the heart burns with desire to write about the most beautiful moments of the lives of the dead — but you wrote that the deceased was an alcoholic.”

He began to cry all the harder. His wails resounded mournfully in the silence of the cemetery and were lost somewhere far away in the distance near the Jewish Furnaces.*

“Dear friend,” I said firmly, “don’t cry. Now it’s too late to put it right. . . .”

* A quarter in Prague.



On saying this I jumped over the cemetery wall, ran down to the gate-keeper, rang the bell, and reported to him that as I was returning from my overtime night-work, I had heard the sound of sobbing behind the cemetery wall in the first section.

“That’s probably some drunken widower,” the gate-keeper answered cynically. “We’ll have him put behind bars.”

I waited round the corner. In about ten minutes guards led the author of my obituary out of the cemetery in the direction of the guard-house.

He was resisting and shouting, “Is this a dream or reality? Gentlemen, do you know Erben’s *The Spectre’s Bride*?”