

# The Austrian Customs (1912)

*By Jaroslav Hašek*

I was on an excursion to Dresden and one day, as ill-luck would have it, I was rambling about in the environs of the city when I got run over by an express train. I was so thoroughly mangled that it took them a year and a half to put me properly together again. I had planned to return to Prague from my Dresden trip in four days, but it took more than eighteen months.

We are all in God's hands, of course, but I had been in the hands of the doctors as well.

I was a fearsome sight. To this day, I don't know how much of me was mine. All I do know is that I had been artificially reassembled by eighteen doctors and fifty-two assistants. And a fine job they had made of it. I was given a certificate detailing the parts from which I had been reconstituted, so that I would qualify for support as an invalid, and that certificate was fourteen pages long.

The only bits of me that remained were a segment of brain, some part of my stomach, approximately fifteen kilograms of my own flesh and half a litre of my own blood. All the other parts were foreign, except that they had stitched the heart together out of some bits of my own and some from an ox. I was a real triumph of medical science.

Externally, I was totally artificial, as the certificate also made clear. It was a fine example of the miraculous power of medicine to construct a new man out of a variety of parts, like a child making a castle out of building-blocks.

When I was discharged, I went to the Central Cemetery to visit the last resting-place of my remains in the section where they sent human parts from the hospital for burial, and then I made my way to the station and set off for Prague knowing that I had perhaps got more out of my visit to Dresden than any other tourist who had ever come to that beautiful city.

In Děčín, we had to submit to examination by the Austrian Customs. After they had hauled out our luggage and ferreted about in it for a while, the eye of one Customs official fell on me. That special look I had of a man who had been artificially put together seemed to have aroused in this official the impression that someone who looked like that must at the very least be trying to get saccharine through the Customs. I had the look of a really hard-bitten smuggler.

“Let's have your case over here,” the man said to me, “and you come along with me to the office.” In the office they opened my case, searched it and found nothing suspicious, until they noticed among my papers the certificate that had been issued by the hospital in Dresden and signed by eighteen professors of medicine and fifty-two assistants.

“Good Heavens!” they said to me after they had had a look at the certificate. “You'll have to go and see the Chief. You can't enter Austria in this state.”

A model of rectitude the Chief Customs Officer is, a man acutely aware of his responsibilities. After

examining the certificate, he said: "First of all, according to this certificate, you've got a silver plate in place of the back of your skull. That silver isn't hallmarked and that means that you pay a fine of twelve crowns. There's a hundred and twenty grams of that silver and according to sections VI and VIII (b) of paragraph 946 of Customs Regulations (knowingly attempting to smuggle unhallmarked silver), that's a triple fine. Three times twelve, that's thirty-six crowns.

"Next, the duty on a hundred and twenty grams of silver (sections (b) and (f)/ (g) on the Schedule of the International Convention of 1902) is ten hellers per gram, so a hundred and twenty grams makes twelve crowns. Then you've got a horse's bone in place of your left femur. We shall have to classify that as importation of an undeclared bone. And that, my friend, is a stab in the back for the Austrian animal-bone industry.

"For what purpose are you walking about with a foreign horse's bone inside you? So that you can walk? Right, we'll put that down as employment of a horse-bone in pursuance of trade. We'll have the truth out of you, my fine friend!

"Pursuance of trade is all very well, but it won't get you anywhere, because we have a heavy duty on failure to report animal-bones imported into Austria. That'll cost you twenty crowns.

"And then there's a note here that you've had three ribs replaced with platinum wire. Good grief, man! You're bringing platinum into Austria? Do you know what you've got coming to you? Three hundred times the normal fine! Let's see, now: if those three bits of wire weigh twenty grams, that comes to 1,605 crowns. You've really been wickedly irresponsible.

"But what's this I see?

"It says here that part of your kidneys, the left one to be exact, has been replaced by a pig's kidney.

"My dear sir! The importation of pigs into Austria is prohibited. And that applies to parts of pigs as well. So if you want to enter Bohemia, that kidney has got to stay in Germany."

And since I wouldn't agree to that, I've been hanging about in Saxony for ten years now, waiting for the Agrarian Party (I'm an Agrarian voter) to permit the importation of pigs into Austria. Then I'll return to my native land.