

# The Bachura Scandal

Young Bachura, a Probationer Clerk in the City Council Offices, was an inexperienced soul who did not know that in the City Council a thousand dangers lie in wait for people of his sort and that a Probationer needs to be a man of strong character if he is not somehow to become entangled in a corruption scandal, either with or without the involvement of his superiors.

Probationer Bachura was not aware that hydra-headed Mammon lurks there, ready to swallow up the tender souls of Probationers, just as it has already swallowed that of many a grey-headed pillar of society.

None of the other great Town Hall scandals that have excited public opinion\* can be put on a par with the Bachura Scandal.

Today, the tainted Bachura roams the world like Judas Iscariot, for he has soiled the pure banner of Public Administration anew, he has dragged it through the muck and the mire, he has . . . well, he has totally befouled it.

To get right to the heart of this story, we have to begin with that disgusting business in the Malá Strana.

Set in the tangled web of the narrow, old-fashioned streets of the Malá Strana, you will find the inn belonging to Mr Šedivý.

Mr Šedivý was one of those large, jolly old gentlemen who paid no heed to the health regulations laid down by the City Council of Prague and who had for decades, probably, had their air-pipes coming out in the urinal.

His customers never complained, for the beer was strong stuff and it was always dark in the urinal.

That urinal, which has such an important part to play in the Bachura Scandal, had no window giving onto the airshaft, no opening through which at least a gleam of God's good daylight could penetrate into this dark, dank place and bring into its gloom a little light and cheer.

But the beer-drinking patrons were quite happy, the conservative

\* By which I do not mean *Public Opinion*, the journal edited by Mr Šašek. [J.H.]

Malá Strana, in its stony torpor, made no protest: an indifference to change sure to gladden the reactionary heart of Mr Luboš Jeřábek.

There came a day, however, when the mad rush of modern life burst even into Mr Šedivý's urinal.

The Buildings Department ascertained these two appalling facts: the air-pipes came out in the urinal (this was immediately passed on to the Public Health Department) and the urinal had no light and no outlet into the fresh air.

And that was how Probationer Clerk Bachura, in his capacity as a minute-clerk in the Buildings Department, first made the acquaintance of Mr Šedivý.

On the inspection visit, he returned a withering look to every one of Mr Šedivý's manoeuvres. The latter argued, robustly and defiantly, that people had been performing their minor bodily functions in this urinal before a single member of the august Buildings Department had been born. It was perfectly all right, he said: you didn't need to see what you were doing. As long as there was a channel to carry the water away, that was enough. There was a door, and that sufficed as an opening into the outside air.

'Just you calm down,' he was told, 'or you might end up insulting an official person. Do you think it's a joyride for us, going round looking into urinals?'

Then he was ordered to knock a hole in the urinal wall and put a window in and since this meant an alteration in a structure forming a part of licensed premises, he would have to submit plans and a request for permission to make this hole.

That was in the morning. In the afternoon, the people from the Public Health arrived. They ordered him to take the pipes through the opening (the opening having been made) into the airshaft.

He was driven half-way round the bend by all this. He had to make the hole as directed but he also had to submit a plan and a request for permission to make the hole and then, for health-reasons, take his air-pipes out into the airshaft, on to which the window of every toilet in the house opened.

He didn't sleep a wink that night, and next morning he went to the master-mason and asked him to draw up plans for a window, and using the services of a professional penman from the Hradčany, sent in a request to the august City Council for speedy approval of the plans drawn up in connection with his urinal and for permission to knock a hole in the wall of said urinal, the which being granted, he promised to

show his gratitude by the exemplary behaviour of his declining years.

Three weeks went by and no decision on his request had arrived. So innkeeper Šedivý betook himself to the City Council, to press for more urgent action. In the Buildings Department he found only Probationer Bachura, since all the others had been in the Corinth Restaurant over the road since nine o'clock, having a snack. It was now precisely twelve.

'What can I do for you?' asked Bachura in a lofty tone.

'Well, young man, I've come about that urinal of mine. Šedivý, you know, the urinal in the Malá Strana.'

'Oh yes, I remember,' said Bachura in a lordly manner. 'I do seem to recall something about that. But what exactly is it that you want?'

'Well, you see, it's been three weeks now and it would be very nice if you could speed things up a bit. My customers are looking forward to having that window as eagerly as little children. Nothing much happens down our way and it would be an event.'

Bachura recalled that the request had already been processed and was lying ready in a drawer. It needed only to be sent off. But the Head of Section had said to him: 'Don't send it yet. It's only an innkeeper: let him wait a bit. We in the City Council have got to keep these people firmly in their place.'

He was silent for a while and then said: 'Well, we'll see what we can do.'

Two weeks later, innkeeper Šedivý was back again and for a second time, Bachura pronounced with pompous solemnity: 'Well, we'll see what we can do.'

About a week after this last encounter, Bachura was walking along the František Embankment, not on official business, but to keep a rendezvous with a certain young lady who was delighted to have a young man who worked in the City Council.

It was a lovely afternoon, warm with a clear sky. Bachura stopped at the soft-drinks kiosk and bought himself a raspberry- and a lemonade and walked on with his mind full of longing thoughts about the girl whom he was shortly to meet.

There on the horizon was Hradčany; the Petřín Gardens were swathed in greenery, the chestnuts were in blossom on Střelecký Island. But in the middle of all this beauty, he began to feel the pangs of bellyache. Before leaving home, Bachura had eaten a glass of yoghurt, the national dish of our defeated enemies, the Bulgarians. The raspberry and lemon drinks had put the finishing touches to the

process which was progressing on its inexorable path through the intestinal labyrinth of the Probationer-Clerk from the City Council.

In the gardens on the embankment opposite the Hradčany, there stands a little building. Such a tiny structure, and yet it towers in significance above all the others in the vicinity. 'Often a tiny shepherd's hut can do more good than the mighty camp where warlike Žižka stood': words that come into my mind every time I pass that humble cot.

It bears two inscriptions. From the embankment you can see the word 'GENTLEMEN', and from the children's playground in the park which borders the embankment, the more discreet message 'LADIES'.

Bachura burst into it like a roaring lion, like an Arab hurling himself on a spring in an oasis or a recruiting-sergeant on a potential new recruit.

'Number One, or Number Two?'

'Two,' said Bachura, shyly but hastily.

The Latrine-Lady took a look at him and said: 'I know you from somewhere, young sir.' She tore off a ticket. Bachura dipped into his purse and exclaimed in dismay: 'It can't be! I was sure I still had change.'

The old girl looked at him again and said slowly, dragging out the agony of Bachura's predicament: 'Do you know where I know you from? From that time you came to see my brother Šedivý, the innkeeper in the Malá Strana. I was home that day when you came with those officials who were on about our urinal. Go on, here's a ticket for you; I'm sure it won't be wasted on you.'

Bachura leaped into the little cubicle and when he emerged, a happy and carefree man, the old woman called after him: 'And you won't forget, will you, sir, to sort out that little matter of my brother's toilet?'

The first thing Bachura did next day, without asking his superior's permission, was to send off the decision on that request for the authorisation of his plans, which had been lying about ready for the last five weeks, to Mr Šedivý and heave a sigh of contentment.

Every morning, before nine o'clock, Councillor Staněk from the Town Hall was in the habit of dropping in at that little house on the František Embankment where Probationer Bachura had committed his disgraceful act of corruption, to have a chat with the Latrine-Lady and bring himself up to date on what the public thought of the city administration. For him, the Lady of the Latrines was the Voice of the

People. It was a little quirk of his.

'Well, I dunno, Your Honour, this corruption-lark seems to be spreading down to the juniors as well,' expatiated the old dear. 'These people from the Town Hall, if you let them do it for nothing, they're at your service. Like the time my brother . . .'

And she related the story of Probationer Bachura's corruption to the Councillor in all its horrific detail.

Today, another Probationer is sitting where once Bachura sat. When the official disciplinary investigation, in which he was found guilty of taking a bribe in the matter of the innkeeper Šedivý, was over, he was dismissed from the Council's service.

Now he wanders about Europe like a Judas. He was last seen in Hamburg, staring in a suspicious manner into the black waters of the canal.

Someone overheard him talking to himself: 'If only I'd bought a subscription ticket for a whole year! Oh dear, oh dear! . . . It's always the little villains that they hang!'