

# The Official Zeal of Mr Stepan Brych,

*Toll-Collector on a Bridge in Prague (1911)*

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It can be asserted with absolute confidence that anyone who set foot on one of the bridges of Prague with the intention of proceeding across it was conscious of the solemnity of that moment. The sternly official faces of the men sitting inside and standing outside the toll-booth, the grave and dignified figure of the policeman standing in the thoroughfare and the placard outside the booth with its cold recital of the complete range of charges that applied equally to every man and beast that ventured onto those bridges, all this inspired a feeling of sublime awe. And looking more closely at those figures outside the booth, men impervious to corruption even by the seductive smile of womanhood, you felt the urge to kiss the hand that stretched out towards you, ready to receive your kreuzer. You sensed the love they bore towards the City Council, their sense of official duty, their incorruptibility and when you recalled that according to the law, these men in their flat official caps were protected by the sections covering the pursuit and punishment of all those guilty of the Molestation of an Official Person, then you delayed no longer but hat in hand, deposited your kreuzer into the palms of those Implacable Ones, the Brutuses of the City of Prague.

Pre-eminent among these was Stépan Brych, the toll-collector on the Emperor-Franz-Joseph Bridge.

Every 'civilian' (non-official person) who wished to cross the bridge was subjected to the hawk-like scrutiny of those official eyes.

He would brook no banter, tolerate no delay.

As soon as some civilian (official persons do not pay bridge-tolls), some idiot of a civilian found himself a nose-length away from the outstretched hand of Stépan Brych, there was no quarter given, no excuse taken. You paid up or you were lost beyond redemption.

A wave of Stepan Brych's hand, and the policeman at the entrance to the bridge knew all he needed to know.

He would approach, his hand on his revolver. Stepan Brych would indicate the person who was not forthcoming with his dues and utter the simple phrase: 'Take him in!'

And the policeman would grasp this person by the shoulder and say with equal simplicity: 'You coming quietly, or do I have to persuade you?'

Most people chose the first method of getting to the police station. There, the arrestee would be stripped, searched, measured, photographed, interrogated and placed in solitary confinement and in a day or at most a week it would have been ascertained whether he did in fact live at the address that he had given. Then they would either let him go or if he had given any sign of dissatisfaction with all these legal procedures, send him to the Provincial High Court on Charles Square whence,

once he had served his term, he would be compulsorily returned to his parish of origin. All of which was a comparatively light penalty to pay for a crime that the prisoner had attempted to perpetrate against the financial interest of the Buildings Department of Prague City Council. And the Marat of the Prague bridges, toll-collector Stepan Brych, sat calmly watching as all this went on.

One day, Councilor Pojsl, the Head of the Buildings Department, came up to the toll-booth and said to Mr Stepan Brych: 'Would you let me across the bridge without paying, old chap? I'm in a hurry to get to Smichov and I've left my purse at home.'

Mr Stepan Brych recognized his Chief, of course he did. He had a great liking and respect for him. And now, a fierce struggle broke out between affection for his Chief and devotion to his official duty.

The City Councilor stepped across the borderline denoted by the abruptly extended hand and Stepan Brych tugged at Mr Pojsl's coat. Duty had prevailed.

'Back you come, or you pay a kreuzer,' he said in a dry official tone.

'Not on your life!' Stepan Brych signed to the policeman who was lying in wait beside the toll-booth like a spider waiting for a fly, and called out that simple phrase of his: 'Take him in!'

And when the policeman, after his customary conjuration 'You coming quietly or do I have to persuade you?' was leading the City Councilor away, a tear appeared in Brutus's eye and for the first time in his life, Stepan Brych wept.

A fortnight later, a moving little ceremony was held in the Central Office of the Buildings Section. The Council had awarded a bronze medal for faithful service to Mr Stépan Brych, collector of bridge-tolls, for having challenged City Councilor Pojsl himself (who had not been compulsorily returned to his office of origin in the City Council after his little problem).

This distinction made Stepan Brych stricter than ever.

On the night of 2nd May of the same year, he was standing by the National Theatre on the right bank of the river when all of a sudden, what seemed like the figure of a man ran at full pelt past the toll-booth and across the bridge. There was no policeman on the bridge, as the officer was just taking some non-payer to the police-station, upon which Stepan Brych set off after the offender, shouting: 'Stop! I want a kreuzer from you! There's a toll to pay here!' The unknown man seemed not to hear and raced on. After him dashed Stepan Brych, calling into the darkness: 'Police! Grab him, he's got to pay a kreuzer!' Then they were in the Mala Strana, careering down the Ujczd, across Radetzky Square, down Valdstyn Street, on and on round the Chotek Gardens. The terrified stranger in the lead and Mr Stépan Brych struggling along in his wake, shouting in a loud voice: 'You there! Give me that kreuzer, or I'll shoot!'

And on they went, up past the Dejvice Gate, along the Podbaba Road and when the moon came out, the fleeing man looked round for his pursuer and saw a man in the cap of an officer of the City Council, foaming at the mouth and rolling his eyes in a manner horrible to behold. Seized by a mortal fear, he ran to the river and, to save himself, leaped into the stream.

A second splash, and Stepan Brych was swimming after the escaping criminal.

In the middle of the river, he caught up with him and with a cry of ‘Give me that kreuzer!’ took him in a firm grip.

A huge wave swept them both into a whirlpool.

Three days later, two drowned men, locked in a convulsive embrace, were dragged out of the Vltava at Klecany.

In the clenched fist of one of the corpses, they found a kreuzer. And this was the body of Stepan Brych who had succeeded, in his death throes, in extracting a kreuzer from the pocket of the man he had pursued.

From that time, the Vltava has been haunted between Podbaba and Podhofi.

Every midnight, a voice can be heard crying out of the water: ‘Give me a kreuzer!’

The ghost of Stepan Brych walks the bed of the River Vltava.