

The Fourth Prague Defenestration: 11

by Jerry Ratch

Many weddings took place at the foot of the Astronomical Clock Tower. One every hour, on the hour. It turned out these were set-up photo shoots for things like men's cologne, brocade bridal gowns, and smoked carp. At night we wandered around the many crystal shops that were everywhere around our hotel, because it was such a heavy tourist hot spot. My family was involved in hand-cut crystal during the Soviet era. They used to send us wooden crates packed with this stuff, beer steins, bowls and such, all in exchange for chewing gum and cigarettes, which were otherwise unobtainable under strict Soviet rule. No wonder people rose up and tried to throw the apparatchiks out the castle window. What kind of reasonable regime withholds chewing gum, and cigarettes, for God's sake? And well, of course, they withheld any suggestion of God as well. So... out the window with them, no?

“Okay, Mr. Prince and Princess, are you ready to see the real Lenin's paintings?” asked Vladimir.

I glanced at Ellen of Troy. She immediately perked up her ears. “Oh, yes,” she said. “They are real? Not this John Lennon stuff on the wall?”

“Ees real,” said Boris. “They are near old Jewish cemetery.” Both of our guides snickered. They were having a real good time together, these Russians. Of course, they were slugging down one beer after another. And it wasn't even happy hour in the U.S. I think every hour is Happy Hour in Prague. Why wait, right?

“Feenish up your duck and we go. You missed something in your cabbage there,” said Vladimir. He reached over with his fork and flicked out another piece of bacon that was hidden but peeking its pink head out.

“Wissout peeg, ist gut, no?” he mocked. They both burst out in laughter, and swucked down their steins of lager. “Okay, we go now. C'mon.”

We walked through the huge crowds of tourists, from China, Germany, Russia, God knows where else. They took us to the old Jewish Cemetery. This was really run down. The gravestones were all tilted at every imaginable angle. “The corpses are piled seven deep here. They run out of room, but they still kept dying, so...” Boris looked kind of sad when he said this. He shrugged his shoulders, then we turned and went up an old alleyway to the entrance of a narrow five-story building with a dark entry. They pushed a buzzer, and immediately a window swung open above us. An old man's head poked out. “Who ees there, ringing bell? What do you vant? Go away! Get!”

“Jacob, ees Vladimir, and Boris. We come about the paintings.”

There was dead silence. It took a minute, but then there was a buzz at the door, and Boris grabbed the handle and in we went. Then up four flights of creaky stairs, to a darkened door. He knocked, and the door swung open. And there stood a hunched-over figure of what was once a very tall man, with a crooked nose and wiry white hair. He looked the spitting image of Albert Einstein.

“Mr. Janov, this ees Einstein. Not Thee Einstein, distant relative.”

Einstein stuck out his huge old mitt and I shook his hand. He was all bones, no muscle anymore. “Janov,” he said. “Any relation to

Janovsky here? Like the street? His name ees made up, you know. Ees not real Janovsky, like the street. That ees old Prague, Janovsky.”

“Yes, I know. I am related to old Janovsky.”

“Like the castle Janovskys, at Krivoklat?”

“Yes. That was my mother's mother's family.”

He shut the door and stared at all sides of my face. He took my chin in his hand and lifted it up. “I see the resemblance. What was her name, this Janovsky?”

“Barbara.”

“No. Ees impossible. I know this woman, Barbara. She was the youngest of seven children, no? I know her. Sad story.”

He sat down on an old brocaded couch, just like my grandmother used to have in her living room in Chicago, when I was very young.

“How did you know her?” I asked.

“She was my ... my first girlfriend,” he said. He looked down. “My very first love, ever. Many, many years ago. But she ran off to America with a gold-leafer.”

“That was my grandfather, Lawrence.”

“Yes, yes, that was his name, that was heem! He marry first two of her sisters, but they both die in childbirth. Then he run off to America with my Barbara. The family ran the inn there, at the castle. I know this woman. Was my Barbara. I suffered when she left me. That bastard! He stole her from me.”

“Well, if it was any consolation, she was wonderful. Also my own mother. Wonderful.”

“That ees no consolation. But, so it goes. So it goes. At least he was also Bohemian, not Russian.”

Both Boris and Vladimir bristled a little. They glared at Einstein.

“Your brain is too big,” said Boris. They both laughed at their own joke. “We need drink.”

“Yes, yes, in a minute. A gold-leafer yet! Not even real artist, like Lenin.”

“We are here to see the paintings.”

“Yes, yes, the paintings. One minute, please.”

“You have Lenin's paintings?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Can we see them?” asked Ellen of Troy. “I am an artist.”

Einstein took a good long gander at my Ellen of Troy. Then he looked at me. “Very pretty,” he said. “I see what you see in her.”

Ellen turned red. “The paintings. Can we see them?”

“Yes, yes. At least I can spot a real artist, and real painting. Gold leaf! Aye!”

He opened a closet and pulled out a set of small paintings that were all cracked with age.

"Thees, thees are real," he said.

"But there's no signature on them," Ellen said, examining both front and back. "How do you know they are by Lenin?"

"Thees are the real Lenin, you know. Not John Lennon the Beatle."

"But how do you know that. Nothing is signed."

"Do you think Soviets would allow their great orator to paint? Too busy making Revolution to paint. They would laugh at heem. So he does not sign anything, just paint in his closets. That is how I discover them, in Berlin. He make trip to Berlin, and painted there. I open closet of his apartment, and they are hidden in trap door behind his overcoats. I was granted special permission, and discover them myself, then sneak them out of Germany right under nose of Hitler."

"Lenin," said Ellen. "Thee Lenin, as in Vladimir?"

"Same as this Vladimir here, Vladimir. Yes, yes."

Ellen began to re-examine the paintings closely. "They are in terrible shape. All cracked up."

"Must have been in hurry," Einstein said. "KGB watching everything all the time. KGB ees watching us, still."

All the men laughed now. It was a great joke among them. It made them all feel like comrades, or at least a men's club. Myself, not so much. I wasn't into men's clubs.

Ellen would be into men's clubs only if it included an actual club and you could club certain men over the head.

