

Döden i Reval

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Those rather forgotten stories were written by a somewhat forgotten author in an old-fashioned style that makes you think of the 19th century. It comes as a shock to learn that he is fairly modern (1892-1964) but yet he has already been dead for over fifty years and this is a period that is more than enough to condemn a person, even one once very much alive, to obscurity not to say almost obliteration. As the title indicates the stories are connected under two themes, Death and the city of Reval. Death is a universal theme, while Reval is a very specific local, and most people may not know of its existence. It is now, and was between the world wars, the capital of Estonia, a small obscure country along the Baltic; but for most of its existence it had no such formal position. The history of the Baltic states (and before that you could not speak about Baltic states at all) is intimately connected with the Teutonic Knights a crusading organization of German provenance ('Deutsche Ritter' in German) whose *raison d'être* to a large extent was the Christianization of the last Pagan people in Europe. This made for a deep German influence. In addition to that one should add Danish (Reval is actually the German word for Tallin, the modern name of the city, which in the native tongue means the Danish city¹) and later the Swedish. But as a result of the Great Nordic War, political suzerainty went over to Russia for an indefinite period². As a result Reval, alongside with Riga, were cosmopolitan Baltic cities with strong German and Russian elements. In fact many of the leading commercial cities in Eastern Europe were German set in a Slavic sea, Danzig maybe being the most notable example.

The first of the stories concerns a certain officer Croce at the time of the Great Nordic War. Peter the Great abandons his army as the Swedish King approaches, maybe because he does not want to be connected to and thus considered responsible for the expected debacle, instead he gives the command to the good-for-nothing Croce, and predictably the Russians suffer a catastrophic loss at Narva, and Croce is taken prisoner and brought to Reval. But as was the custom in those days (and still often is) he is treated well and has a very good time incurring grand debts well beyond his capacity to pay. But he is of course a charmer, as such people usually are, otherwise how would they get any credit in the first place? In spite of his reckless abandon as far as money and having a good time he is very popular, and besides owing everybody a lot of money, people take good care of him, in the forlorn hope that eventually he will pay and anything that threatens to interfere with this hope is taken care of. Eventually Death catches up with him and he is felled by a stroke, a favorite way of killing people off in literature. But then what to do? A suggestion is footed

¹ Rather Danish castle or fortification as in 'Burg' a common suffix in city names, such as Hamburg. One may compare with the Finnish city Savonlinna and make 'Tallina'.

² The periods of political independence in the 20th century (and beyond?) are seen as tenuous parentheses.

to keep him as a hostage, not to give him a regular sending off until his relatives pay. But the relatives do not want to have anything to do with him, especially not with his body, and as a result he is put in a coffin in the church indefinitely. Many years later another good-for-nothing suspects after finding about of the story, that some riches may be gotten if his coffin is looted. He hides in the church and at nightfall makes a move opens the coffin and runs away scared to death. It turns out that in spite of all those years the body has not decomposed, instead it looks fresh with an ironic smile, as if he still would be alive. The commonly accepted explanation being that his body had been pickled in alcohol from all his drinking and wild living.

The idea of a pickled body is taken up quite literally in the next story when the wife of a captain dies en route. Instead of burying her at sea, which is usually done, the captain feels bound by a pledge to her, to have her buried on land, in fact in a famous cemetery in Reval, a cemetery which will reappear in the subsequent stories. To keep the body from decomposing she is put in a vat filled with strong spirits. She was never popular among the crews, to some extent due to her prohibition of serving alcohol, so when the supply of the latter is running low one of the crew starts to dip into the pickling liquid, which as a result of its purpose is bestowed with a peculiar taste. As taste is no impediment to those hooked on alcohol, its peculiarity becomes rather an asset than a defect. The story, in time-honored tradition which nowadays has come out of fashion, is told as a story within a story, in which an old bachelor treats his friends to some flavored akvavit and asks them to identify its taste, which causes one of his guests to recall the story of the pickled wife of a captain just referred to.

A grimmer story concerns the poor fisherman whose wife regularly cuckolds him and treats him in a mean way. She is gone for some time and he is unable to locate her, until he brings in her body from the wake he had cut out for his nets, in which she has accidentally, drunk as she no doubt was, fallen while trying to pilfer some of the catch for her own ends. But her heavy body brings recompensation, never before has he had such a catch of eels, and he decides that he could as well take advantage of the death of a wife, who had not served him well when alive. So he keeps the body in the sea, acting as a potent bait. Eventually his neighbors become suspicious of the absence of his wife and eventually he had to confess, but the elderman of the village has pity on him and his desperate pleas and he is not brought to justice be it for murder or defiling a corpse. A more humorous one concerns the doctor who had an obsessive fear of apparent deaths, something that caught the imagination in the past but no longer. He bequests in his will his savings to the establishment of a hotel for apparent deaths who have woken up in their crypts and slunk away. A widow is handsomely compensated for holding a few beds available for such unfortunate people in limbo between definite death and the comforts of life. Eventually she finds herself drifting into other uses for the unused beds and runs an establishment that can only be called a house of ill repute, until one day a miserable individual half naked and covered in mud shows up. He tells her that he had just escaped from the confinement of a coffin, in which he had mistakingly been put and demands the services of the house. Loving couples need to vacate their beds and the horrified mistress of the place is busy bringing back the bibles to the bedsides. The next morning the unexpected guest is gone and it transpires that he was simply an escaped convict cleverly taking advantage of the

situation.

A charming story concerns a young couple besotted in each other, but as often happens in fiction, one of them dies prematurely, in this case the young woman. The young man is, what one calls inconsolable and promptly erects an obelisk on her grave, on the eastern side adorned with a portrait of herself. Worried that inclement weather may interfere with the single-mindedness of his grief he has a small building erected around it, so he can be with her in great comfort be it rain or shine. But the reason for this step, namely his comfort, ends up taking precedence over his grief and he makes it into a smug habit. One day a brother and sister knocks on his little graveyard house to escape the weather. The sister is pretty and they all immediately take to each other having a common interest, paying homage to the diseased wife. After a while the sister and the widower marry, but still keep the habit. She brings some money to the enterprise, which needs to employ a book-keeper. The former widower dies and his widow puts up his portrait on the south side and marries, of course the book-keeper. Then she dies rather suddenly and unexpected and her portrait is put up on the west side of the obelisk. The book-keeper marries, I guess, and dies in his turn ending up on the north side. And as an obelisk has only four sides the story must end.

The penultimate story is about a man who has some initial literary successes and fancies himself a real writer, 'Ein Dichter'. Unappreciated at home he eventually settles and dies in Italy but in his bequest he demands that his head be severed from his body and sent balsamated to a literary society in Reval. The barber of the little village is entrusted with the gruesome task he manages to do with the aid of a lot of grappa. He is also sent to Verona with his 'trophy' to have it balsamated according to a previously set up contract. It is carried in a cubic box, the kind of which is very popular, and during transit he manages to mislay it and take another one identical looking. What happens to the missing head? This makes for a good story? Is it delivered by a husband to his wife on an anniversary of their wedding as a token of love? The possible opportunities for unpleasant surprises are many, but the author decides in the end, somewhat spitefully one would think, to opt for none. The cubic box containing the macabre object is simply thrown away in a cleft for ever inaccessible to man by a cultivator of bees with a penchant for mountaineering. While that of the barber is found to contain four jars of delightful honey.

The final story is of a demented old woman who always heads every funeral procession walking in a military stride. Why she does it, she has long forgotten, but she becomes an institution in Reval, named after the yellow dress she is always appearing in. A funeral without her presence at the very front is not a proper one in Reval. But what happens when she herself dies? Will she be able to have a proper funeral? A little bit like the Russell paradox in its popular retelling involving barbers.

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