

Humanism and Bureaucracy – The Good Soldier Schweik

Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923) was a Czech anarchist and writer who served in the Austrian army in World War I. His satirical account of Army life, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, published in 1921-23, is probably the most popular work of Czech literature, having been translated into 50 or 60 languages.

Before World War I Schweik was a journalist and anarchist who found comedy in making fun of everything, including anarchism. In 1911, as now, most political parties in the German speaking world had three letter abbreviations.



Jaroslav Hašek

Hašek founded the PFGFIDSDG, a German acronym for “Party For Moderate Progress Within The Bounds of The Law“. The party platform was a series of jokes. Hašek’s contemporary, Franz Kafka, reportedly attended one of the party meetings, but did not join. Hašek’s ebullient personality apparently did not fit well with the reclusive Kafka. Hašek died of heart disease in 1923. His character Schweik, representing the average person caught up in incomprehensible events and somehow remaining human, has for years resonated with Czechs who have been oppressed by German nationalism, German Nazism, and Russian Communism.

The excerpt below is the entire first chapter of the novel. It starts at the beginning of World War I, with the shooting of the Austrian emperor’s nephew Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Schweik’s prediction of the coming war is not accurate. Austria was allied with Germany and Turkey against France and Russia while Schweik predicts the opposite. Readers in 1921 would have noted that Schweik’s prediction, although wacky, wasn’t any wackier than what actually happened. The reader wonders if Schweik isn’t a lot more aware than he lets on.

SCHWEIK, THE GOOD SOLDIER, INTERVENES IN THE GREAT WAR

“So they’ve killed Ferdinand,” said the charwoman to Mr. Schweik who, having left the army many years before, when a military medical board had declared him to be chronically feeble-minded, earned a livelihood by the sale of dogs — repulsive mongrel monstrosities for whom he forged pedigrees. Apart from this occupation, he was afflicted with rheumatism, and was just rubbing his knees with embrocation.

“Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Müller?” asked Schweik, continuing to massage his knees. “I know two Ferdinands. One of them does jobs for Prusa the chemist, and one day he drank a bottle of hair oil by mistake; and then there’s Ferdinand Kokoska who goes round collecting manure. They wouldn’t be any great loss, either of ’em.”

“No, it’s the Archduke Ferdinand, the one from Konopiste, you know, Mr. Schweik, the fat, pious one.”

“Good Lord!” exclaimed Schweik, “that’s a fine thing. And where did this happen?”

“They shot him at Sarajevo with a revolver, you know. He was riding there with his Archduchess in a motor car.”

“Just fancy that now, Mrs. Müller, in a motor car. Ah, a gentleman like him can afford it and he never thinks how a ride in a motor car like that can end up badly. And at Sarajevo in the bargain, that’s in Bosnia, Mrs. Müller. I expect the Turks did it. I reckon we never ought to have taken Bosnia and Herzegovina away from them. And there you are, Mrs. Müller. Now the Archduke’s in a better land. Did he suffer long?”

“The Archduke was done for on the spot. You know, people didn’t ought to mess about with revolvers. They’re dangerous things, that they are. Not long ago there was another gentleman down our way larking about with a revolver and he shot a whole family as well as the house porter, who went to see who was shooting on the third floor.”

“There’s some revolvers, Mrs. Müller, that won’t go off, even if you tried till you was dotty. There’s lots like that. But they’re sure to have bought something better than that for the Archduke, and I wouldn’t mind betting, Mrs. Müller, that the man who did it put on his best clothes for the job. You know, it wants a bit of doing to shoot an archduke; it’s not like when a poacher shoots a gamekeeper. You have to find out how to get at him ; you can’t reach an important man like that if you’re dressed just anyhow. You have to wear a top hat or else the police’d run you in before you knew where you were.”

“I hear there was a whole lot of ’em, Mr. Schweik.”

“Why, of course there was, Mrs. Müller,” said Schweik, now concluding the massage of his knees. “If you wanted to kill an archduke or the Emperor, for instance, you’d naturally talk it

over with somebody. Two heads are better than one. One gives one bit of advice, another gives another, and so the good work prospers, as the hymn says. The chief thing is to keep on the watch till the gentleman you're after rides past. . . . But there's plenty more of them waiting their turn for it. You mark my words, Mrs. Muller, they'll get the Czar and Czarina yet, and maybe, though let's hope not, the Emperor himself, now that they've started with his uncle. The old chap's got a lot of enemies. More than Ferdinand had. A little while ago a gentleman in the saloon bar was saying that there'd come a time when all the emperors would get done in one after another, and that not all their bigwigs and such-like would save them."

"The newspaper' says, Mr. Schweik, that the Archduke was riddled with bullets. He emptied the whole lot into him."

"That was mighty quick work, Mrs. Müller mighty quick. I'd buy a Browning for a job like that. It looks like a toy, but in a couple of minutes you could shoot twenty archdukes with it, thin or fat. Although between ourselves, Mrs. Müller, it's easier to hit a fat archduke than a thin one. You may remember the time they shot their king in Portugal. He was a fat fellow. Of course, you don't expect a king to be thin. Well, now I'm going to call round at The Flagon and if anybody comes for that little terrier I took the advance for, you can tell 'em I've got him at my dog farm in the country. I just cropped his ears and now he mustn't be taken away till his ears heal up or else he'd catch cold in them. Give the key to the house porter."

There was only one customer at The Flagon. This was Bretschneider, a plainclothes policeman who was on secret service work. Palivec, the landlord, was washing glasses and Bretschneider vainly endeavoured to engage him in a serious conversation,

"We're having a fine summer," was Bretschneider's overture to a serious conversation.

"Damn rotten," replied Palivec, putting the glasses away into a cupboard.

"That's a fine thing they've done for us at Sarajevo," Bretschneider observed, with his hopes rather dashed.

"I never shove my nose into that sort of thing, I'm hanged if I do," primly replied Mr. Palivec, lighting his pipe. "Nowadays, it's as much as your life's worth to get mixed up in them. I've got my business to see to. When a customer comes in and orders beer, why I just serve him his drink. But Sarajevo or politics or a dead archduke, that's not for the likes of us, unless we want to end up doing time."

Bretschneider said no more, but stared disappointedly round the empty bar.

"You used to have a picture of the Emperor hanging here," he began again presently, "just at the place where you've got a mirror now."

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Mr. Palivec, “it used to hang there and the flies left their trademark on it, so I put it away into the lumber room. You see, somebody might pass a remark about it and then there might be trouble. What use is it to me?”

“That business at Sarajevo,” Bretschneider resumed, “was done by the Serbs.”

“You’re wrong there,” replied Schweik, “it was done by the Turks, because of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

And Schweik expounded his views of Austrian international policy in the Balkans. The Turks were the losers in 1912 against Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. They had wanted Austria to help them and when this was not done, they had shot Ferdinand.

“Do you like the Turks?” said Schweik, turning to Palivec. “Do you like that heathen pack of dogs? You don’t, do you?”

“One customer’s the same as another customer,” said Palivec, “even if he’s a Turk. People like us who’ve got their business to look after can’t be bothered with politics. Pay for your drink and sit down and say what you like. That’s my principle. It’s all the same to me whether our Ferdinand was done in by a Serb or a Turk, a Catholic or a Moslem, an Anarchist or a young Czech Liberal.”

“That’s all well and good, Mr. Palivec,” remarked Bretschneider, who had regained hope that one or other of these two could be caught out, “but you’d admit that it’s a great loss to Austria.”

Schweik replied for the landlord :

“Yes, there’s no denying it. A shocking loss. You can’t replace Ferdinand by any sort of tomfool. If war was to break out to-day, I’d go of my own accord and serve the Emperor to my last breath.”

Schweik took a deep gulp and continued :

“Do you think the Emperor’s going to put up with that sort of thing? Little do you know him. You mark my words, there’s got to be war with the Turks. Kill my uncle, would you? Then take this smack in the jaw for a start. Oh, there’s bound to be war. Serbia and Russia’ll help us. There won’t half be a bust-up.”

At this prophetic moment Schweik was really good to look upon. His artless countenance, smiling like the full moon, beamed with enthusiasm. The whole thing was so utterly clear to him.

"Maybe," he continued his delineation of the future of Austria, "if we have war with the Turks, the Germans'll attack us, because the Germans and the Turks stand by each other. They're a low lot, the scum of the earth. Still, we can join France, because they've had a grudge against Germany ever since '71. And then there'll be lively doings. There's going to be war. I can't tell you more than that."

Bretschneider stood up and said solemnly :

"You needn't say any more. Follow me into the passage and there I'll say something to you."

Schweik followed the plainclothes policeman into the passage where a slight surprise awaited him when his fellow-topper showed him his badge and announced that he was now arresting him and would at once convey him to the police headquarters. Schweik endeavoured to explain that there must be some mistake; that he was entirely innocent; that he hadn't uttered a single word capable of offending anyone.

But Bretschneider told him that he had actually committed several penal offences, among them being high treason.

Then they returned to the saloon bar and Schweik said to Mr. Palivec:

"I've had five beers and a couple of sausages with a roll. Now let me have a cherry brandy and I must be off, as I'm arrested."

Bretschneider showed Mr. Palivec his badge, looked at Mr. Palivec for a moment and then asked :

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"And can your wife carry on the business during your absence?"

"Yes."

"That's all right, then, Mr. Palivec," said Bretschneider breezily. "Tell your wife to step this way ; hand the business over to her, and we'll come for you in the evening."

"Don't you worry about that," Schweik comforted him. "I'm only being run in for high treason."

"But what about me?" lamented Mr. Palivec. "I've been so careful what I said."

Bretschneider smiled and said triumphantly :

"I've got you for saying that the flies left their trademark on the Emperor. You'll have all that stuff knocked out of your head

And Schweik left The Flagon in the company of the plainclothes policeman.

And thus Schweik, the good soldier, intervened in the Great War in that pleasant, amiable manner which was so peculiarly his. It will be of interest to historians to know that he saw far into the future. If the situation subsequently developed otherwise than he expounded it at The Flagon, we must take into account the fact that he lacked a preliminary diplomatic training.



Schweik with an officer (Illustration by Joseph Lada in original edition)