

3. A Prague Restaurant Owner

I parted with the Bártases and I went to see Emraiz. They called him Onkel Reiser. He was around seventy-five – an old man at the time. I said to him: “Sir, we didn’t find an agreement when you offered me a place at your restaurant Evropa. But the situation has changed. I would be interested in buying the place.”

“Yes? In truth, it is for sale,” he told me.

I asked: “How much are you asking?”

He sighed and said: “You know that my dearest nephew took his life there. He hanged himself.” This is how the family put it: “He converted to Catholicism and went mad.” In fact, it was probably due to lack of success in business.

I said: “Sir, you make excellent malt. I used to work at Paclts’. I know how much of it you make. But you shouldn’t have ventured into the restaurant business.”

“Young man, this is exactly what I’ve been telling them, not to get involved in that business. But tell me how much are you offering?” I offered him 200,000 crowns. “That’s madness! How can you undervalue it so much? The owner wants one and a half million for it.”

“He may want that,” I said. “But you have an agreement with Maceška that you will be paying him rent.”

He nodded: “That’s true. But he’s in Switzerland now, why don’t you wait until he comes back?”

I said: “You know what, call him at my expense.”

He shook his head furiously: “Young man, Emraiz and sons have never made a telephone call at somebody else’s expense. Always at our own. Come back tomorrow.”

I went to see him the next day and he told me: “He would like to be rid of it. He’s asking for a million.”

I insisted on my original offer, however: “Sir, I said 200,000.”

He cried again: “You’re mad!”

“Maybe, but do you have another bidder? Call him again.”

He called him and then came to me again with an offer to sell it for half a million.

“Sir, you’re wasting your time as well as mine,” I said. “I will have to look elsewhere.”

He gave up: “You know what, I will sell it to you for the 200,000 and pay the remaining 300,000. I will do that because I need to get rid of it – it’s eating at me...”

So I bought it for two hundred thousand. I have one hundred thousand straight away and then fifty thousand every half year. I was giving the money away as I was making it. Emraiz agreed to it so we shook hands on it. Back then, when people shook hands on something, it was as good as any written agreement.

I bought Evropa on February 8, 1936 and on that day, I got drunk for the first time in my life – but capittally! The following day, I went to sign the contract. But as soon as I got on the tram, I had to get off because I was feeling so ill. I then took a taxi, but I also had to get off. I ended up walking across the park and when I arrived, they were already there. It was at Dr. Eisner’s whom I later met in America. It was in February and I asked him: “Doctor, please could you open the window?”

Later on, Onkel Reiser told me: “You looked so unwell that I also wanted to ask Eisner to open the window.” He told me: “Go to the window and get some fresh air. I don’t want you to pay with your own health. I don’t want you to end up like my poor nephew.” He did not know the real reason why I was feeling so ill.

Now the issue was that the price was two hundred thousand crowns. However, this did not include a 3% tax, so in this case the price would have been 206,000 crowns, not the two hundred thousand I had indicated. But Emraiz said: “Doctor, do as Mr. Vašata says.” In short, he wanted to be rid of it and didn’t want to start on a bad foot.

So we bought the place and I could tell my employees that we had a new restaurant. Forty people were going to work there and we had not even opened yet. I went from the solicitor with my signed agreement straight to Evropa, which people called the “goose den”.

The place was a shop selling geese at the time. They were behind the shop window with mice running all over them – a terrible mess. I went over to the counter where a young lady was standing. Next to her stood a young man who was patting her on her back and even her behind.

I said to him: “Please, I would like to have a word with you when you have a moment.”

“What is it? What do you want?” he wanted to know.

“The key.”

“What key?” he asked, surprised.

“The key to the entrance.”

“It’s true, the lock isn’t working properly,” he retorted.

“I don’t know about the lock, but I want the key.”

He asked: “What does this all mean?”

I said to him: “This is my business, I bought it and I must have the key.”

He said: “You are crazy!”

I replied: “Maybe – now let’s go to the office.”

At the office were *Messrs.* Vulterin and Veis. I told them: “Gentlemen, I bought this place and I want the key. What time are you closing?”

“We close at one.”

“Then please close at midday today and tomorrow you won’t be opening at all, this place belongs to me now,” I said.

“You’re crazy!”

“The young man in the shop told me the same thing,” I told them and I added: “You may be right, because this place is such a mess that I find it hard to believe.”

“That’s not our fault.”

I said: “In short, I will come back at midnight for the key and if you want, I will come with a policeman, because I have a contract that says I bought this place.”

“Show it to us,” they insisted.

“I will show it to you, but I will hold on to it.”

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” they asked each other.

I said: “No, I really haven’t. But now I have to leave on an important business.” And I went home to lie down, because I really needed to get some sleep.

I went back there at around quarter to midnight and they started telling me: “We hope that you’ve changed your mind.”

“Absolutely not, tell your staff not to come tomorrow. This business is now closed.”

“But what are we going to do with our employees?” they asked.

“You can do whatever you want with them. That’s your problem.”

“Why don’t you lease the place to us at least for a month” they said, hopefully.

“That’s out of the question.”

I told myself that we’d have to open within six weeks so we worked night and day. We had to do many things ourselves – paint the place and scrub the floors, which were particularly dirty.

When I was going through the inventory, I found out there were several cash registers, so-called “nineteen-hundreds”. They were American-made National Cash Registers. I was also surprised to find that despite being very dirty, most of the pots and pans were made out of stainless steel. This still wasn’t as widely used at the time and it was also quite expensive. I thought to myself that I hadn’t made a bad deal after all.

In the meantime, I sued Mr. Procházka because he reneged on the year of service he owed me. The whole dispute went to an employment tribunal. The judge was earning five thousand a month, so when he was deciding a case of a young man and I was compared to him, earning twice as much as he did, he ruled that I should be given only fifty thousand. I disagreed, but I didn’t have time to deal with it. In the end, it was them who sued me as well.

Winternitz talked Procházka into suing me for unfair competition, but it was practically Winternitz who was behind it. The case went to the Commercial Court where it was said that if this turned out to be a case of unfair competition, I could go to prison for it. The judge's reasoning was that I wooed away forty employees from Procházka's. Except I didn't woo them away – they came to me themselves. I wasn't going to stop them – I was happy to have them. Out of sixty people working at Procházka's, forty came over to me so I had a good core group of employees.

When we opened the restaurant formerly known as Evropa at Václavské náměstí, I already had a group of reliable and loyal people around me. But I had to spend all my time going around courtrooms. I was chasing Winternitz around the corridors of the Commercial Court at Ovocný trh. I had a lawyer that cost 120,000. His name was Dr. Josífko – he worked with Dr. Harman. Josífko was one of the greatest lawyers in Prague. He even represented Dr. Beneš against some man in a case of defamation. He asked me to explain about the charges that I stole the employees that I brought over with me. I told him: "It's simply not true."

He asked me to write an answer to the prosecutor. I answered: "Just write this to them: Dr. Winternitz is a scoundrel and a felon, despite being a member of the Prague Chamber of Advocates."

This shocked him: "I cannot write such a thing. You'd have to sign it."

I called my secretary: "Miss, please write this down." She wrote it down and I signed it. This caused a scandal. Dr. Winternitz was a well-known Prague lawyer and a board member of the Prague Chamber of Advocates.

But I had materials against him that Mrs. Procházková had given me. I was at Černý pivovar when she came to me and told me that if I went back, Procházka would give me half of their house and half of the business. However, I told her that I couldn't do it, Procházka had made a choice between me and Winternitz and nothing could be done.

The presiding judge, Dr. Solnář (there were three judges in total), told me: "Come, Mr. Vašata, I see you are from Rychnov – just like me." My father came from Rychnov so I belonged there as well despite living in Prague – people were considered to belong where their fathers were from. This was their hometown and mine was Rychnov nad Kněžnou.

The judge went on: "Mr. Vašata, yours is a very difficult case."

I said: "I know, your Honor."

He asked me: "Who wrote this? All these things in this contract?"

"This is a draft of a contract written by Dr. Josef Winternitz – with his own hand."

The judge cried: "He will lose his diploma if this turns out to be written by him."

The other two judges were visibly nervous. I was the one sitting in the dock. The presiding judge said: "Before I commence the proceedings, I have to make a few remarks. The person sitting in the dock is Mr. Vašata. However, it will be Dr. Winternitz who will come out as the condemned." He then turned to Winternitz: "Doctor, your only option is to ask the

defendant not to insist on the continuation of the proceedings. Ask him as follows: 'Mr. Jaroslav Vařata, I ask you (if I were in your place I would say I kindly ask you) not to insist, etc.' Sir, I warn you that otherwise you will leave here a ruined man – both in legal and moral sense."

Dr. Winternitz hesitated and then he said: "I don't insist..." But doctor Solnář warned him: "Not you, but the defendant has a right not to insist." Later, Dr. Solnář told me: "You cannot push this to the very end, you would completely destroy him. He would end up a ruined man."

In the end, the presiding judge decided to adjourn the case for another three months. Winternitz objected to this, but the judge explained to him: "Doctor, every word that you say is further damaging you. I recommend that you agree to the adjournment. You will have enough time to find out what your situation is."

However, there was another negotiation outside the courtroom. When I was at Černý pivovar, the company representing Pilsner brewery was called Driml. The meeting therefore took place at Mr. Driml's office. Present were Mr. Driml, my two lawyers, Procházka's two lawyers, Winternitz, and Procházka. We were all sitting around a round table and Procházka said: "Gentlemen, I am sorry to inconvenience you. I wouldn't make you come here if it weren't for one young punk..."

The moment he said this, I jumped up and grabbed him by his tie – they had to cut it off. I pulled on it so hard that he had started to choke. After that I got up and left.

I don't know what was said there after I left, but the Pilsner brewery offered to pay me half a million a year for ten years if I were to settle. I had no idea how all of this was connected.

Later on, the Bártases also offered to extend my contract from five to ten years and that I would get fifty thousand a year from the brewery. I told them no. Everybody knew what was going on and what a fighter I was. They told me they would pay me an extra hundred thousand if I gave them the documents I had in my possession. I answered: "No one will get them – not even a look. I will insist that the judicial proceedings are carried out." This wasn't my original intention but this is how it ended up.

Once, an employee told me that Winternitz was at Černý pivovar. I was at my office, but as soon as I heard this, I ran straight there and when he saw me coming, he ran away.

I would have had the opportunity to take my revenge during World War II. We once ran into each other at a tram stop. As soon as he saw me, he started to run but I went after him and told him: "Doctor, now the times are different. I will settle my scores with you when things go back to normal. You don't have to be afraid of me now. Do you need anything? Do you need money?"

He said: "No, I have enough money." For a long time, he was a member of the council of the Jewish community that was based near the synagogue. It was a sort of council of elders. Germans had left these people alone for some time, but then one day they rounded them up and murdered them. In short, he came to a bad end and they killed and burned him in

Auschwitz. I would have never wished him to suffer such a sad fate. I was willing to help him in such a terrible situation and I would have if I had the opportunity.

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And so it was that I started my business in Evropa in the year 1936. These were very uncertain times. We had a large sign made across the whole building that said: “Young people will finally sort out Evropa”. We called ourselves a “young people’s business” – I was the eldest and I was thirty-one.

I was the one who came up with the idea and it was the first thing I had done. Soon, Onkel Reiser asked me to come see him: “Listen, young man, I’d like you to come over.”

I answered: “With pleasure, but I have very little time.”

He said: “I know, but you have that sign up on the restaurant. I know that the place was a mess, but we are a well-known family. In short, it reflects badly on us, as if we are a messy lot.”

I countered: “Well sir, that’s a shame because the sign has been there for two weeks. I think that within two weeks, every person in Prague would have passed through Václavské náměstí.”

“How much did it cost you?” he asked.

“I will tell you in all honesty. I paid eight thousand for the design and seven for the execution.”

He said: “Take the money off your first installment and take that sign down.” This happened in April and in August, I brought him thirty-five thousand in cash.

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One time, when it was Mother’s Day, I was speaking to a journalist – he was a friend of the conductor, Rafael Kubelík – how I went to see my mother and how she asked me where my wife Linda was. I told her: “She’s in the shop.” And I also told her that the business was not going so well. We were one thousand crowns short every day. We were very close to breaking even, but despite that I thought to myself that we might go bankrupt.

My mother told me: “It’s four in the morning and you left that girl on her own? Your business is going bankrupt and you come here? You’re not going to sleep anyway, I will make you a cup of coffee, get in the car and go back. You’re a resourceful young man, a good manager, you can sort the place out.” And then she told me: “Look at these apple trees. You bought them four years ago and only this year they are bearing fruit. Any you expected that your business will make money after six weeks? That’s not like you at all – and now go back.”

She literally threw me out. I got in the car and drove home. I told the journalist about this conversation. His name was Šlajs, but he went by the name of Koval. So I told this story to Karel Koval and he wrote about Mother’s Day for his newspaper. He wrote how wise a mother can be. And in that article I admitted that I was near bankruptcy. This was on a

Sunday and from Monday onwards, our place was constantly full of customers. And all of this thanks to one small newspaper article.

Time went by and business was good. We were doing extremely well and I had enough money to think about investing it. I was gaining self-confidence and was thinking about further enterprises. When the opportunity arose for me to lease such a large space as was the Prague Municipal House, I didn't hesitate and decided to do it.