

Zacharias Mbizo: The Agnesbründl (The Agnes Well)

5. Journey into the Underworld



"In the catacombs of Vienna, the skeletons of people were shattered into countless splinters, into a chaotic quarry of human fragments. How was I to find a remedy for transience here, of all places?"

Table of Contents

The Emperor's Secret Message	3
A Chance Aquaintance	6
New Insights.....	8
In the Catacombs of Vienna	11
Picture Credits.....	15

The Emperor's Secret Message

Anyone who has ever stood in front of the imposing tomb of Frederick III in St. Stephen's Cathedral will have wondered what this emperor did to deserve the honour of such an outstanding resting place. If you then take a closer look at this ruler, you will sooner or later come across his habit of marking private and official things with the inscription "A.E.I.O.U.".



This is exactly what happened to me when I went to the cathedral for one last sidetrip before leaving Vienna. Of course, the countless attempts to decipher the ominous sequence of letters, most of which refer to the supposedly unchangeable global significance of "Austria", have not escaped me. However, I, whose thoughts still revolved around the water of life, involuntarily asked myself whether the initial letters could also have another meaning.

A.E. – couldn't that also be an abbreviation for "aqua eterna", water of eternity? After all, the



king had already made the mysterious lettering his emblem before he ascended the throne. And why, if he wanted to refer to something as obvious as the splendour of his empire, should he have made a secret of the letters' meaning?

Didn't this rather point to a mystery that was difficult to express in simple words? Was it perhaps about alchemy, with which this ruler had demonstrably occupied himself? And didn't the water of life also play a central role in alchemy? Of course, all these adventurous speculations were of no use to me as long as I could not interpret the other letters of the sequence. After all, I couldn't lift the monumental tomb slab to see if the emperor had taken a small bottle of "aqua eterna" with him on his last journey – which, by the way, was relatively unlikely. If he had possessed the aqua eterna, he would hardly have agreed to be laid to eternal rest.

No question, there was no other way: if my interpretation was to have any practical use for me, I had to translate the remaining letters into words as well. Unfortunately, I didn't have the slightest idea of how to do that.

A Chance Aquaintance

Disgruntled, I turned away from the tomb and trotted back to the entrance. In a few hours my train would set off, and then I would leave Vienna without having achieved anything. My whole stay there would only have served to chase a mirage.

The lumbago I had caught on my nightly excursion to the Agnesbründl caused me additional discomfort. I dragged myself forward with difficulty, every step painfully reminding me of my private mystery play. Instead of eternal youth, I had been given a taste of the hardships of old age. Groaning, I sank down on a bench not far from St. Stephen's Cathedral.

"Also suffering from b-b-back pain?" asked a man with a long white beard who had made himself comfortable on the bench next to me. His worn shoes, stained coat and the collection of plastic bags around him suggested that he was homeless.

"Yes, unfortunately," I replied curtly. I didn't feel like getting involved in a longer conversation.



But the man continued to stammer blithely to himself. "Well, that's how it goes when it's so c-c-cold ... and so d-damp ... But better a back-k-k attack than a heart attack-k-k, as I always say ... Get it? Back attack-k-k – heart attack-k-k: a word game!" His laughter turned into a rasping cough that

sounded suspiciously like pneumonia.

"That doesn't sound good at all," I said spontaneously. "You'd better see a doctor." A stupid remark – I knew very well that medical care was a sore point for homeless people!

The man just shrugged his shoulders. "S-spare me with the d-doctors! They would even make up c-c-complications just to make money off you."

New Insights

His stutter reminded me of something – this "k-k-k" ... I just didn't know what it was. "Isn't there something like a social center in Vienna where you can get free treatment in an emergency?" I asked cautiously.

My neighbour did not answer immediately. When I looked over at him, I saw that his lips were trembling.

"You know," he sniffed, "nobody ever asks about us t-tramps ... Well, in the -p-past, with F-Franz Josef, it was c-c-completely different. But he's been lying in his c-c-coffin for three years now."

Franz Josef? Had I understood him correctly? Had the man perhaps also suffered some mental harm from life on the street? Did he really believe that he had lived to see the last Austrian emperor? Or was "Franz Josef" for him simply a symbol of a paradisiacal primordial state?

"You're right," I philosophised into the blue, "everything used to be better in the old days.

Although the emperor has been gone for quite a long time now."

The man laughed again in his rattling way. "The emperor? Are you k-k-kidding? I'm t-talking about my b-buddy, who used to run the T-Tramp T-Tavern. You know, with him you c-could even d-drink a f-fruit brandy from t-time to time. T-t-today it's all very strictly regulated."

He reached for a bulbous bottle that he had put down next to him and took a big swig. Then he held the bottle out to me: "W-want some?"

I politely declined. "Thank you ... So you sleep outside every night? Isn't it getting too cold now?"

"Yes, it is," nodded the man. "But you know – in V-Vienna there's still the underworld – the c-catacombs and so on. So you will always find some k-k-kind of refuge."

Now I knew what the man's stammering reminded me of – of the last sounds my grandmother had given off. Hadn't my mother told me that the last thing she had uttered was a helpless "k-k-k"?

Suddenly everything seemed to fit together: Vienna, the water of life – and the "k" stood for "king" and "catacombs". I had a new starting point for my search again!

I stood up and pressed a 20-euro note into the hand of the baffled tramp. "Here," I said generously, "so you can at least afford a proper hot meal."

"Thank you, thank you so much," he stammered, "that's really a great p-p-pleasure."

He made an effort to embrace me, but by then I had already turned away from him and headed back to St. Stephen's Cathedral.



In the Catacombs of Vienna

The entrance to the catacombs, located in the left aisle of the cathedral, was not difficult to find. But to my regret the underground world could only be entered on a guided tour. This would make it more difficult for me to follow my own intuition.

What proved much worse, however, was that I had just missed the tour – and yet I wanted to leave Vienna the same day! I begged the woman at the ticket office to let me follow the group, but she categorically refused. Too dangerous, she said, and besides: the rules ...

"Why don't you go and see the crypt under St Michael's Church?" she finally recommended when I didn't let up. "That's much more interesting anyway."

Actually, that was not what I wanted. After all, I was not looking for some random scary thrill, but hoped to walk in the footsteps of my deceased grandmother in the catacombs. Never-



theless, since I had no other choice, I decided to follow the advice.

So I walked through the large pedestrian zone called "Graben" in the direction of the old imperial residence, the Hofburg, and thus got straight to St. Michael's Church. There things worked out better: the guided tour was due to start in a few minutes, and I could still join the group.

The uneven steps and the musty air were of course anything but the right therapy for my lumbago. But what disturbed me even more was the guide's manner of talking. He was an archaeology student with nerd glasses, who ap-

parently saw himself more as an entertainer than as a provider of information.

"Here you go – picture puzzle with ancestor", he said when we arrived in front of one of the large piles of bones. Here the remnants of those who had been buried in the tombs under the Inner City had been swept together.

However, his comment, I had to admit to myself, pointed to something very true. One skull looked like the other, the bones lay one on top of the other in hopeless disorder, as if after a feast of giant cannibals.

Nothing reminded of the people whose inner framework the bones had once formed. Chaotically jumbled together, they waited for a demiurge to assemble them into a new order.

If I had been shown only a single skull, even a single finger bone, I would probably have started to think about what kind of person these



bones had once belonged to, what kind of life the person had led and what death had been like in this special case.

But as it was, with the piles of bones heaped up as if in a quarry, death had lost all individuality. It did not matter what fate was connected with the individual bones, what kind of person had once walked the earth with them.

One person was like the other, and when one was dead, another took its place. No one left a gap, just like the mosquitoes that an angry hand snatches from their swarm.

How, I asked myself, could I find a remedy for mortality in this place permeated with vanitas?

But then I remembered Persephone, all the myths that tell of how it is precisely in the night of death that the light of new life awakens. From that perspective, this was perhaps exactly the right place for my search.



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Illustrated information on the catacombs of Vienna can be found in: Der schwarze Planet (The Black Planet): [Die Wiener Unterwelt](#) (The Underworld of Vienna); January 31, 2016