

Chekhov's Last Minutes

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov died on 15 July 1904 at Badenweiler, a small spa in the Black Forest in southern Germany.

Unexpectedly and quite by chance I was also in Badenweiler then with my brother. We were both students at Moscow University, and after we had finished our exams at the end of May and been safely admitted to the next year's courses, our mother, who was very anxious that we should have a broad education, insisted that we go to the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland for the summer term to take a course there in French literature.

But when we got as far as Berlin, my brother fell ill and the German doctor who was called in said he was suffering from extreme general exhaustion. He advised him (and me too) not to go ahead with our summer studies in Switzerland, but to take advantage of the vacation to have a good rest and build up our strength for the coming winter term in Moscow. He advised us to go on from Berlin to Badenweiler, among the pine trees of the Black Forest, and place ourselves in the care of that same Dr Schwörer, who was then also looking after Chekhov.

On our arrival in Badenweiler we put up quite by chance at the Hotel Sommer where the Chekhovs were staying.

When we left Moscow, we knew, as did many others, that Anton Pavlovich and Olga Leonardovna had gone abroad, but we did not know where to, so that when on the morning after our arrival we ran into Olga Leonardovna in the dining-room (Anton Pavlovich did not come down to breakfast), we were pleasantly surprised to discover that the Chekhovs were in Badenweiler and staying in the same hotel as us.

After chatting to Olga Leonardovna and giving her the latest Moscow news, we said goodbye, having received an invitation to drop in and visit Anton Pavlovich, who was feeling very homesick for Russia and Russian company.

I should mention that we already knew Olga Leonardovna – and indeed all the Knipper family – very well in Moscow, and were quite close to the Art Theatre, because of our great friendship with the Alekseyev family, of which Konstantin Sergeyevich Alekseyev (or Stanislavsky, to give him his stage name) was a member.

In summer we would often ride over to the Alekseyev estate of Lyubimovka outside Moscow and stay there, sometimes living for weeks with Stanislavsky's nephews, who were our age. It was there that we met Anton Pavlovich, who was

spending the summer of 1902 on the estate, and we often used to see him going off for a walk in the nearby birch wood, wearing a hat, carrying a stick and with the inevitable pince-nez on his nose.

Vishnevsky, the Moscow Art Theatre actor, would stop us young people when we were bothering Chekhov too much and say: “You’re disturbing Anton Pavlovich, he’s come here to hatch out his new play for our Theatre!” This play was his last, *The Cherry Orchard*, put on with such huge success by the Art Theatre in January 1904. At the end of the first performance the Theatre honoured Chekhov, and in the spring, after the Theatre had closed for the summer, Anton Pavlovich went abroad with his wife to Badenweiler “for treatment”.

Thinking back now to that distant past, I have a clear picture in my mind of friendly little Badenweiler, situated on the gentle hills of the Black Forest, and of the Hotel Sommer facing the beautiful Badenweiler Park.

The summer of 1904, I remember, was sunny and very warm, and there was a feeling of peace, joy and contentment about everything.

Anton Pavlovich had arrived in Badenweiler only a short time before us, but judging by his outward appearance, he seemed very much better, and Vishnevsky told me later in Moscow that Chekhov had written to him in the Caucasus from Badenweiler, assuring him that his health was “returning by the hundredweight”.

But this recovery was only apparent, in reality his illness was following its prescribed course. When I visited Anton Pavlovich on the day after our arrival, I was struck by the difference between this apparent recovery and his generally wasted condition – though he had a good complexion and was very sunburnt.

As I sat talking to him, I noticed that he had frequent bouts of severe coughing and spat into a small blue spittoon that could be sealed tight, and which he carried round in his jacket pocket. It was, incidentally, as a result of this sensible precaution, taken by Anton Pavlovich for the sake of other people, that the management of the first hotel where the Chekhovs stayed in Badenweiler found it necessary to withdraw their hospitality, since they reckoned that the presence in their hotel of such a very sick person might drive many of their other visitors away.

At the Hotel Sommer, to which they then moved, the Chekhovs took a rather noisy, unrelaxing room overlooking Badenweiler’s main street. Anton Pavlovich felt on edge there and was very insistent that they should move to another room. But it was the height of the season and they had to wait for a quieter, more comfortable,

room to become free. At last the chance came: a wonderful large room with a balcony and a view over the shady Badenweiler Park fell vacant. The Chekhovs moved in.

I remember Anton Pavlovich's joy when I went to see him in this new room. He had at once become somehow calmer and more cheerful.

After Chekhov's death, when Olga Leonardovna and I were going over all the events that had recently happened, she said to me: "Remember how Anton kept pressing me to move him to another room and how on edge he was, just as if a man approaching death is in a hurry to find his last earthly refuge."

I used to visit Anton Pavlovich almost every day, taking him the Russian newspapers and often reading them aloud to him. He was terribly interested in all the events in the Far East. The war with Japan disturbed him: our failures at the front distressed him deeply and he grieved over them.

There seemed to be no hint then that his end was imminent. He was making plans for the future and had decided to return to his home at Yalta in the Crimea by steamer from Naples. He even asked Olga Leonardovna to go to the nearest town of Freiburg and order him two flannel suits, for the journey and for the Crimea: one white with a blue stripe, one blue with a white stripe. Olga Leonardovna decided to go to Freiburg and invited me to accompany her.

So one fine morning we set off, taking an old suit of Anton Pavlovich's with us for the tailor to use as a pattern. After reaching Freiburg and ordering the suits, we decided to take advantage of the wonderful day to look round this old German town and its surroundings.

Returning home at about 6 p.m., we found Anton Pavlovich strolling quietly round the hotel garden accompanied by my brother. There was a large crowd of very noisy, sweaty Germans sitting in the garden, drinking endless quantities of beer. Seeing how cheerful and happy we looked on our return, Anton Pavlovich came up to us and glancing at me through his pince-nez said: "I bet you've been paying court to my wife all day" – which threw me into great confusion. Then, without waiting for my reply, he turned to Olga Leonardovna and said: "You know, darling, I kept feeling that sooner or later those Germans were going to beat me up."

None of us that evening could have imagined that within a few days Anton Pavlovich would be in his coffin and being taken on his last long journey back to Moscow. When I was talking to Dr Schwörer after Anton Pavlovich's death, he told

me that Chekhov had been very seriously ill and he was amazed by the irresponsible attitude of the doctors who had advised him to leave Russia and undertake such a long and exhausting journey abroad when he was in such a condition.

This Dr Schwörer was a comparatively young man, good-looking and with a pleasant manner. The traces of duelling scars on his cheek showed that in his student days he had belonged to one of the German student corps. Since he was also treating my brother, I was able to study him closely, and I came to the conclusion that he was a knowledgeable and conscientious doctor. Remarkably, he had a Russian wife, a Muscovite like us, Yelizaveta Vasil'yevna Zhivago. Even more surprisingly, Dr Schwörer's great friend, Dr (later Professor) Determann, who had a practice in a spa not far from Badenweiler, was married to the same lady's sister. Thanks to their Russian wives, these two German doctors often visited Moscow and loved everything Russian.

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On the night of 14/15 July my brother and I were fast asleep after returning late in the evening from a long excursion in the mountains. Through my sleep I suddenly heard a loud knocking at the door and the voice of Olga Leonardovna calling my name. Jumping out of bed I ran over to the door and saw the scared look on her face. She was in her dressing-gown.

“Leo dear, please get dressed straight away and fetch the doctor – Anton's ill.”

I dressed at once and rushed off to the doctor's house about ten minutes' walk from the hotel.

It was a warm balmy night and at the doctor's they were all sleeping with the windows open. Hearing the bell at the gate, the doctor called out from his bedroom: “Who is it?” I shouted back that I'd been sent by “Frau Chekhov”, as her husband was ill. The doctor immediately put a light on in his room, came over to the window, told me he'd be at the hotel in a few minutes, and asked me to pick up a cylinder of oxygen from the chemist's on my way back. From the doctor's I rushed off to the chemist's, woke him up, too, and got the required oxygen. By the time I returned to the hotel, the doctor was already in Anton Pavlovich's room. I went in and handed him the oxygen. Anton Pavlovich was sitting up in bed, propped up on pillows and supported by Olga Leonardovna. He was breathing heavily and with difficulty. The doctor began giving him the oxygen. After a few minutes he whispered to me to go downstairs to the hall porter and fetch a bottle of champagne and a glass. Once more

I disappeared and returned some time later with the champagne. The doctor filled the glass almost to the brim and offered it to Anton Pavlovich. The latter accepted it with pleasure, smiled his attractive smile, said "It's a long time since I last drank champagne" and gallantly drained the glass in one go. The doctor took the empty glass from him and handed it to me, I then put it on the table next to the bottle.

At the very moment when I put the glass on the table, with my back to Anton Pavlovich, there was a strange kind of gurgling noise from his throat, rather like the noise that a tap makes when the air has got into it. When I turned round, I saw that Anton Pavlovich, still supported by Olga Leonardovna, had turned on to his side and was resting quietly on his pillows. I thought he wanted to lie down for a bit after his spell of difficult breathing.

The room was quiet, no one said anything and the shaded light of the lamp made everything in the room look gloomy. The doctor did not move away from Anton Pavlovich and held his hand in silence. It never entered my head that all this time he was feeling his pulse. Several minutes passed in complete silence and (not having the faintest idea that Chekhov might be dying, I felt that now, thank God, everything had calmed down and our previous anxieties were already past history.

The doctor then quietly released Anton Pavlovich's hand, moved over to the foot of the bed where I was standing, led me to the back of the room and said softly:

"It's all over. Herr Chekhov is dead. Please be kind enough to tell Frau Chekhov."

I was stunned and all I could say was:

"Are you quite sure, doctor?"

"Unfortunately, yes," he replied, visibly suppressing his emotion and deeply moved by what had happened.

The whole of our conversation had been conducted in a half-whisper. Olga Leonardovna paid us no attention and went on leaning across from her own bed supporting Anton Pavlovich, not guessing that it was all over. I went quietly up to her, touched her on the shoulder and signalled to her to get up. She carefully removed her arms from behind Anton Pavlovich's back, got up and came over to me. With difficulty restraining my own emotions, I said to her in a half-whisper:

"Olga Leonardovna, my dear, the doctor says that Anton Pavlovich is dead."

The blow was so terrible and unexpected that poor Olga Leonardovna seemed at first to be turned to stone, but then she threw herself on the doctor in a kind of

frenzy, seized him by his jacket collar and began shaking him with all her strength, repeating in German through her tears:

“It’s not true, doctor, say it’s not true, doctor.”

With great difficulty the doctor and I gradually succeeded in calming her down and bringing her to her senses. The doctor stayed in the room for some time afterwards, and before he left, conscious of how badly Olga Leonardovna was taking her husband’s death, he asked me to remove all the sharp objects, like knives and so on, from the table, and not to leave her alone, but to stay with her until morning. He promised to return early in the morning with his wife to take Olga Leonardovna back to their house, while the dead man was washed and dressed.

I have to say that Anton Pavlovich’s death affected me deeply. I was a very young man, and at that age such events impress themselves on one very strongly, for the whole of one’s life – much more so than in later years. It was the first death I had witnessed and it upset me a great deal. I ought to have turned Anton Pavlovich, who was lying on his side, on to his back. This I failed to do and next morning the doctor and I had to make a great effort to straighten out the body which had stiffened in the wrong position. We were not entirely successful, since the dead man’s head remained tilted slightly to one side.

That afternoon my brother and I took photographs of the dead man lying on the bed in his room. These photographs were then published throughout the Russian press, and I remember how puzzled many people were by the tilt of the dead man’s head.



After the doctor had left, I persuaded Olga Leonardovna to sit out on the balcony. I fetched two armchairs and we sat down. The night was pleasantly warm. Dawn had already broken and the birds were beginning to call to each other in the park. There was a wonderful sunrise, then early morning arrived.

We sat there in silence, shaken by what had happened, only now and then exchanging recent memories of Anton Pavlovich. Olga Leonardovna suddenly remarked: "You know, Lyovushka, those weren't suits you and I ordered for Anton, they were funeral shrouds."

Early in the morning the doctor and his wife came to fetch Olga Leonardovna. It was difficult to persuade her to leave the dead man's room. I promised to keep an eye on everything and to call for her when it was all over.

At about 5 p.m. I arrived at the doctor's and walked back with Olga Leonardovna to the hotel.

We went into the dead man's room. The evening sunlight barely filtered through the Venetian blinds which had been lowered over the windows and the balcony door.

The dead man was lying on the bed surrounded by flowers, his arms folded on his chest and an expression of complete calm on his face. I left Olga Leonardovna alone to say farewell to Anton Pavlovich. It was late evening when she reappeared, looking somehow calmer and more refreshed. I saw her back to the doctor's where she was to spend the night.

... That night (15/16 July) Anton Pavlovich's body was to be transferred from the hotel to a small local chapel. Everything had to be done very late, when the hotel guests were all asleep.

The night porter came in to inform my brother and me that the bearers had arrived. We went into Anton Pavlovich's room. In our presence these people brought in not the usual bier, but a large long linen-basket. I remember how deeply offended my brother and I were by this way of doing things. We had to look on in silence as the remains of our beloved Russian writer were carried off in a linen-basket.

The bearers carefully lifted the body and began placing it in the basket, but to their astonishment the basket was not long enough to allow the body to lie completely flat and it had to be propped up in a half-reclining position.

Watching the bearers trying to fit the body into the basket, I felt for a moment that I could see a flicker of amusement on Anton Pavlovich's face and that he was

smiling at the thought that in arranging for him to be carried in a linen-basket instead of in the usual way, fate had once again linked him inseparably with humour. We carried the basket with Anton Pavlovich's body out into the street. It was a dark night. The bearers began moving along the road to the chapel. Our way was lit by two torch-bearers walking on either side. On reaching the chapel, my brother and I put the body of Anton Pavlovich down at the place prepared for the dead, surrounded it with flowers and after saying a farewell prayer went home.

... On the morning of 16 July Yelyena Ivanovna Knipper [Olga Leonardovna's sister-in-law] arrived in Badenweiler from Dresden. It was another hot, airless day. Olga Leonardovna's first meeting with someone close to her was painful and moving.

That same evening we all made our way to the chapel to say prayers and pay our last respects to the dead man.

Several days later we accompanied Anton Pavlovich's coffin from Badenweiler to the railway station. The carriage with the coffin was coupled to a passenger train for Berlin. Olga Leonardovna and Yelyena Ivanovna left by this train on their way to Russia, taking Anton Pavlovich back to be buried in the soil of his native Moscow at the Novodevichii Monastery.

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