

# Ladislav Fuks The Cremator

Translated by Eva M. Kandler



# The Cremator

Ladislav Fuks

---

Cover illustration by Jiří Grus  
Designed by Zdeněk Ziegler  
Set Karolinum Press  
Second English edition, first by Karolinum

Text © 2016 by Ladislav Fuks - heirs, c/o DILIA  
Translation © 2016 by Eva M. Kandler  
Afterword © 2016 by Rajendra A. Chitnis

ISBN 978-80-246-3290-2  
ISBN 978-80-246-3875-1 (online : pdf)



Charles University  
Karolinum Press 2018

[www.karolinum.cz](http://www.karolinum.cz)  
[ebooks@karolinum.cz](mailto:ebooks@karolinum.cz)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ladislav Fuks** (1923–1994) was a Czech writer known for his brilliant psychological novels.

The son of a police officer, Fuks was born and raised in Prague—the capital of the newly independent Czechoslovakia, yet he turned fifteen only days before the Munich Conference and the subsequent Nazi occupation of his country. The deportation of his Jewish classmates (coinciding with a homosexual awakening that could have landed him in a concentration camp) profoundly affected Fuks.

After the war, Fuks enrolled in Charles University where he studied Art History, Philosophy and Psychology. His first novel, *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* (1963; English, 1969), a schizophrenic masterpiece that Life magazine described as a “minor miracle,” explores the anxiety of a Jewish man as he tries to steel himself for life in the concentration camps. *The Cremator* (1966), was adapted in 1969 into the acclaimed film, which Virginie Sélavy describes as “disorientating, disquieting and darkly humorous... one of the most richly resonant celluloid nightmares,” while *Of Mice and Mooshaber* (1970; English, 2014) combines dystopian science fiction with elements of the fantastic and grotesque.

A prolific author who expertly employed disparate styles, Ladislav Fuks remains one of the finest writers to portray the psychological fragility of those living under totalitarianism.

*The Devil's neatest trick  
is to persuade us  
that he does not exist.*

Giovanni Papini



# I

'*My gentle one,*' Mr. Karel Kopfrkingl said to his beautiful, blackhaired wife on the threshold of the Predators' House as a faint early spring breeze stirred his hair, 'so here we are again. Here, on this dear, blessed spot where we met seventeen years ago. I wonder whether you still remember *where* it was, Lakmé?' And when Lakmé nodded, he smiled tenderly into the depths of the building and said: 'Yes, in front of that leopard over there. Come, let's go and have a look.' After they had crossed the threshold and were walking towards the leopard through the heavy, sweltering stench of the animals, Mr. Kopfrkingl said:

'Well, it seems to me, Lakmé, that nothing has changed in these seventeen years. Look, even that snake in the corner over there is where it was then.' He pointed to the snake in the corner gazing down from the branch at *a very young pink-faced girl in a black dress* outside the cage, 'I wondered then, seventeen years ago, why they put the snake in the Predators' House since there's a special house for snakes . . . and look, even that railing is still here . . .' he pointed to the railing in front of the leopard which they were approaching. Then they reached the leopard and came to a halt.

'Everything is as it was seventeen years ago,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl, 'except perhaps for the leopard. The one we saw has probably been called to meet his Maker. Gracious Nature probably freed him from his animal fetters long ago. Well, you see, my dear,' he said, watching the leopard behind the bars who had its eyes half closed, 'we always talk of gracious Nature, merciful fate, benign God. We weigh and judge others, censure them for this and that - that they are suspicious, slanderous, envious and I don't know what, but what we are ourselves, whether we ourselves are kind, merciful, good . . . I always have a feeling that I'm doing awfully little for you. That article in today's papers

about the father who ran away from his wife and children in order not to have to support them, that's terrible. What's that poor woman and her children going to do now? Perhaps there's some law which will protect her. Laws at least should protect people.'

'There is bound to be such a law, Roman,' Lakmé said quietly. 'I am sure they're not going to let the woman and her children starve to death. You keep saying that we live in a decent humanitarian state where justice and goodness reign. Yes, you say so yourself. And I suppose we're not badly off, Roman . . .,' she smiled. 'You have a decent salary, we have a large, beautiful flat, I look after the household and the children . . .'

'No, we're not badly off,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl, 'thanks to you. Because you had a dowry. Because your late mother supported us. Because your aunt from Slatiňany is supporting us, who, had she been a Catholic, would certainly be canonized when she dies. But what have I done? I've perhaps furnished that flat of ours, but that's all I have done, even if it is a beautiful flat. No, my dear,' Mr. Kopfrkingl shook his head and looked away at the leopard, 'our little Zina is sixteen, Milivoj fourteen, they're precisely at the age when they need most, and I have to take care of you all. That's my sacred duty. I've had an idea how to increase my income.' And when Lakmé looked at him in silence, he turned to face her and said:

'I'll get an agent and give him a third of my commission. Mr. Strauss will do it. It will help you as well as him, my heavenly one. He's a good, tidy fellow. He's had a shocking life. I'll tell you about it later. Who wouldn't help a good man? We'll invite him to The Silver Casket restaurant.'

Lakmé pressed herself against him, her eyes smiling and gazing at the leopard behind the bars whose eyes were still half closed like a big good-natured dog. Mr. Kopfrkingl, too, was looking at the leopard with smiling eyes. Then he said:



'Do you see, my gentle one, animals can feel tenderness. They can be nice when we are able to reach out to them and enter their sad, reserved souls. How many people would become good, nice, if there were someone to comprehend them, to understand them, to caress their withered souls a little. Why, I suppose everybody needs love, even the police who clamp down on prostitutes need love; evil people are evil only because nobody has ever shown them a bit of love. Of course, this particular leopard is different from the one seventeen years ago, but even this one will be freed when the time comes. He, too, will see the light one day when the wall which surrounds him collapses, and the brightness which he's not yet able to see will illuminate him. Did our enchantingly beautiful one get her milk today?' he asked, thinking of the cat they had in the flat, and when Lakmé nodded without a word, Mr. Kopfrkingl smiled at the leopard for the last time. Then they slowly walked back towards the exit through the heavy, sweltering stench of animals from the dear, blessed spot outside the leopard's cage, where they had met seventeen years ago. Mr. Kopfrkingl glanced at the corner towards the snake, which was still watching the pink-faced girl in her black dress outside the cage, and said: 'It's strange that they've put a reptile with the predators, perhaps it's here only as a decoration or a complement . . .,' then he tenderly led Lakmé over the threshold onto the path bordered with shrubs, at which point Lakmé smiled and said:

'Yes, Roman, ask Mr. Strauss to come to the restaurant. But give him the *correct* name of the restaurant, so that he won't have to search for it.'

And Mr. Kopfrkingl halted there, in the faint early spring breeze, which had stirred his hair, there on the path bordered with shrubs, and nodded kindly. His soul was at peace, as is the case with people who have just held a service before the altar. He looked up at the clear, sunny

sky, stretching far and wide. He gazed at it for a while, and then raised his hand and pointed vaguely at it as though drawing attention to the stars, not visible in daylight, or to a magnificent picture or an apparition. . . . And next Sunday at noon . . .

Next Sunday at noon, during the lunch he was buying at the Silver Casket, Mr. Kopfrkingl said to a small, stoutish gentleman who had a good-natured look about him:

'Mr. Strauss, did you have to look for this restaurant?' And when Mr. Strauss, the small, stoutish gentleman, shook his head good-naturedly, Mr. Kopfrkingl gave a sigh of relief, and Lakmé, so it seemed, did likewise. 'I'm so glad that you haven't been looking for the restaurant,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl, 'you know, if one says The Boa . . .' Mr. Kopfrkingl glanced fleetingly at the signboard of the restaurant by that name, behind the tree-tops, 'if one says The Boa, it's quite clear. Everybody knows beforehand what to expect from a boa. Why, its very name indicates it, I suppose, unless it's a tame and trained one. Not long ago I read in the papers about a trained boa which was able to do sums; *divide by three*. But a silver casket is a mystery. Nobody knows until the last moment what such a casket might contain until it's completely opened and examined . . . well, Mr. Strauss, I've a little, modest proposal.'

Mr. Strauss, the small, stoutish gentleman, smiled unassumingly at Lakmé, the blackhaired beauty, and at Zina, who was also blackhaired and beautiful. He obviously derived pleasure from their beauty; they were sitting at the table in a graceful, indeed tender manner, if it is at all possible to sit tenderly. He smiled at Milivoj too, who was also blackhaired and good-looking, but probably still somewhat dull; he was sitting and gaping a bit. Mr. Kopfrkingl joyfully called for the waiter to bring more drinks and sweets.

The sun shone from the tree-tops onto the table on that warm, early spring Sunday at noon. The Boa, otherwise The

Silver Casket, was, in fact, an open-air restaurant. Even a band played there, and in the front there was a parquet floor on which one could dance. Into the sunshine breaking through the trees on this early spring Sunday the waiter brought drinks and sweets. Mr. Strauss and Zina had a glass of wine, Lakmé had tea. 'You know, Mr. Strauss,' smiled Mr. Kopfrkingl glancing at an adjacent tree where a small notice hung on a hook: *Drapes and Curtains repaired by Josefa Brouček, Prague-Hloubětín, 7 Kateřinská Street*, 'you know, Mr. Strauss, my dear one comes from a German family really, from Slatiňany, and in her home they used to drink tea, she likes tea . . .' Mili took a lemonade and a sweet. 'Mili likes sweets, Mr. Strauss,' smiled Mr. Kopfrkingl and glanced again at the small notice with Josefa Brouček's advert on the adjacent tree. 'Milli is particularly fond of choc-ice, he has a sweet-tooth, the little brute.' Then he looked at his hand with its pretty wedding ring, which rested alongside a small cup of coffee, and said: 'And I'm abstemious. I don't drink. I don't drink, and if I do, then only a drop, just symbolically. Nor do I like cigarettes. I didn't even get used to them in the war when we were fighting for Austria. I don't like alcohol or nicotine. I'm abstemious.' Mr. Kopfrkingl had a sip of coffee, and glanced at the bandstand where the musicians were taking their seats. At a table near the parquet floor he caught a glimpse of an *elderly woman in spectacles* with a foaming glass of beer beside her and said:

'Well, Mr. Strauss, you're a commercial traveller in confectionery. You're in regular contact with shop-assistants and shopkeepers and that in itself must be an extremely pleasant job. People who deal in confectionery must be gentle, kind, good. You know, Mr. Strauss, I can't help it, but I feel quite sorry for them. What if you offered those nice people something else beside your firm's goods? It's not the sweets I'm concerned about, but they themselves, those gentle, kind, good people . . . But have no fear,' he

gave a quick smile, 'no insurance companies, no insurance policies, but something entirely different. While you are offering them sweets, you could dive into your brief-case again and take out application forms for the crematorium. Five crowns commission for every subscriber to cremation.'

The band began to play some lively music, clarinets and fiddles struck up, the double-bass as well, and three couples went onto the dance floor. One of the couples consisted of a *little old fat man in a stiff white collar with a red bow tie* with a very young, pink-faced girl in her black dress. The little man grabbed her back and began to circle with her on the same spot as though he were in a cage. Sitting at the table near the dance floor was the elderly woman in spectacles with the foaming glass of beer beside her; she was shaking her head with a bitter smile. Then she blew the foam to the ground and took a swig.

'You know, Mr. Strauss,' Mr. Kopfrkingl smiled at the table, lit by the sun behind the tree-tops, 'God arranged it very well for people. The fact that some suffer, that's something else. Animals suffer too. At home I have a splendid book in yellow cloth. *It is a book about Tibet*, about Tibetan monasteries, about their highest ruler, the Dalai Lama, about their fascinating faith. It reads like the Bible. Suffering is an evil we are supposed to eliminate or alleviate at least, to *shorten*. But people commit evil because they're surrounded by a wall which prevents them from seeing the light. However, God arranged it well. He did well when he said to man 'Remember that dust you are and to dust you shall return.' He did a good thing when he formed man from dust, but mercifully granted him the opportunity to turn into dust again. After all the hardships and torments life brings, after all the disappointments and imperfections of love . . .' He glanced at the elderly woman in spectacles with the glass of beer beside her, sitting by the dance floor, 'God granted in his mercy man the chance to turn to dust again.'

A crematorium, Mr. Strauss, is greatly pleasing to God. Why, it helps him to *accelerate* the transformation of man into dust. Just imagine, if man were formed from some flame-proof material. If he were, well . . .’ Mr. Kopfrkingl shrugged his shoulders looking at the elderly woman in spectacles with her glass of beer beside her, ‘then you’d be welcome to put him under ground. Fortunately, he’s not flame-proof. Do you know how long it takes before man turns to dust in the ground? Twenty years, but even then the skeleton does not disintegrate completely. In the crematorium it takes a mere seventy-five minutes even with the skeleton, now that they have installed gas instead of coke. People sometimes object that Jesus Christ was not cremated but buried in the ground. Well, Mr. Strauss,’ said Mr. Kopfrkingl with a smile, ‘that was something else. I always tell those nice people: the Saviour was embalmed, wrapped in linen, and buried in a tomb cut in the rock. Nobody’s going to bury you in a cave, nor embalm nor wrap you in linen . . . Arguments, Mr. Strauss, like the one that the coffin will split under the weight of the soil, and how painful it would be should the earth fall on the head, such arguments, of course, won’t stand up. Why, when a person is . . .,’ Mr. Kopfrkingl gave a nod, ‘dead, he no longer feels it . . . But there is another reason for cremation. Look, Mr. Strauss, if people didn’t have themselves cremated but were buried in the ground, what would the furnaces be for?’ After a moment of silence, Mr. Kopfrkingl glanced towards the dance floor and said:

‘We live in a good, humanitarian state which builds and furnishes crematoria . . . for what? For no earthly reason? So that people visit them like museums? Why, the sooner man returns to dust, the sooner he’ll be liberated, transformed, enlightened, be reincarnated. Besides, the same applies to animals. There are countries, Mr. Strauss, where it is the custom to cremate animals after death: in Tibet for example. That book of ours about Tibet is amazing,’

Mr. Kopfrkingl glanced at the tree where the notice 'Drapes and Curtains repaired by Josefa Brouček, Prague-Hloubětín, 7 Kateřinská Street' hung on the hook, and added: I had no idea that there's a Kateřinská Street in Hloubětín. I only know the Kateřinská Street in Prague II.'

The band finished playing. The clarinets and fiddles fell silent, the double-bass as well, and the couples left the parquet floor. The little old fat man in the stiff white collar with the red bow tie left with the pink-faced girl in her black dress, and the elderly woman in spectacles nearby took a swig. Mr. Kopfrkingl called the waiter, paid and everybody got up.

'You're fond of music, Mr. Strauss,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl with a smile as they were leaving The Boa, otherwise The Silver Casket, Restaurant. 'Sensitive people love music. Wretched and poor are those, I once read, who die without having learnt the beauty of Schubert or – Liszt. Are you, by any chance, related to Johann or Richard Strauss, the immortal creator of "Der Rosenkavalier" and "Till Eulenspiegel"?''

'Unfortunately not, Mr. Kopfrkingl,' said Mr. Strauss good-naturedly, looking at the restaurant's signboard, under which the pink-faced girl in her black dress was talking to a young man and the elderly woman in spectacles was slowly approaching them from the direction of the tree. 'I'm not, but I like Strauss's music. Not because of the name, though,' he smiled, 'I'd probably like it even if my name was Wagner, for example. Which way would you like to go . . .'

'We're not going home yet,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl with a kind smile, 'it's an early spring Sunday, and I'd like my family to have a bit of fun. I'd like *to refresh them a bit, divert their thoughts, so I'm taking my dear ones* to Madame Tussaud's . . .' he gave a smile.

'Oh, Madame Tussaud,' said Mr. Strauss.

'Of course,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl apologetically, 'it's not the real Madame Tussaud. It's just a tawdry sort of imitation, but what do I care? It's better to see a commonplace, tawdry imitation than nothing. *It is,*' he said and pointed beyond the trees and shrubs, 'over there . . . Mr. Strauss, how glad I am . . .'

'A nice, witty fellow,' said Lakmé after Mr. Strauss had taken his leave with a polite word of thanks. They were then walking slowly to Madame Tussaud's under the trees and shrubs in the sunny afternoon of an early spring Sunday. 'If you think that it will be worthwhile . . .'

'It will, my dear,' smiled Mr. Kopfrkingl, 'I get fifteen crowns for every subscriber, but I can't go round and see people like a pedlar. I work long hours. Sometimes I have a lot of duties in the evening. Where would I get time for the children, for you . . .? Mr. Strauss has far more opportunities in going round the confectionery shops. He can kill two birds with one stone. I'm only sorry I offered him one third of the commission and not half. I wouldn't like to cheat him. I wouldn't like to be like that trained boa which was able to divide by three, but no longer by two. Indeed, my dears, you have no idea,' he said, 'what Mr. Strauss has been through already. First some evil person deprived him of his position as porter in the porter's lodge. He retired. He was there because there was something wrong with his liver,' he smiled sadly at Zina who was walking by their side, 'this is sad, indeed. Our Mr. Vrána, our watchman from the lodge in the courtyard, has got something wrong with his liver as well, and that's why he's there. Then Mr. Strauss lost his wife, she died of *consumption of the throat,*' he smiled sadly at Lakmé, 'then he lost his son, he died of *scarlet fever,*' he smiled at Mili, who was walking slowly behind them. 'What hasn't he gone through already! Actually, I'm surprised that he hasn't gone mad yet. Well, he's survived everything, thank God. And I'm going to increase his commission on the grounds

that he's successful,' Mr. Kopfrkingl said resolutely. 'I'm sure he's going to be successful.'

'Yes,' Lakmé gave a nod, 'he's certainly a good businessman. He's Jewish.'

'Do you think so, my dear?' smiled Mr. Kopfrkingl. 'I don't know. His name doesn't prove it. Strausses are not Jewish. Strauss means ostrich.'

'Names do not mean anything,' smiled Lakmé, 'after all, you know yourself how they can be changed. You yourself call The Boa The Silver Casket: lucky that Mr. Strauss didn't look for it . . . You call me Lakmé instead of Marie and you want me to call you Roman instead of Karel.'

'That's because I'm a romantic and I love beauty, my dear,' Mr. Kopfrkingl smiled at his darkhaired beauty and took her tenderly by the arm, smiling at Zina at the same time.

'I didn't know,' said Zina, 'that people would be sitting outside under the trees at the restaurant already. After all, spring hasn't come yet. I didn't know either that you can dance there at lunchtime. I thought you could only dance at 5 o'clock tea parties and in the evening.'

'People dance in the middle of the day at The Silver Casket, and people already sit outside because it's warm,' said Mr. Kopfrkingl glancing at the trees and shrubs under which they were walking. Then he turned round to look at Milivoj who was still walking slowly behind them, and added with a tender smile:

'So that we can have a bit of fun for once, refresh ourselves a bit and divert our thoughts . . . We're here already.'

They had just reached a tent with a wooden box-office and a coloured signboard which said:

WAXWORK A LA MADAME TUSSAUD  
THE GREAT PESTILENCE - BLACK DEATH  
IN PRAGUE 1680.



In the wooden box-office by the tent sat a little old fat man in a stiff white collar with a red bow tie. He was selling tickets. The entrance to the tent was covered by a fringed, red curtain, and a small group of people was standing in front of it, apparently waiting to be let in. Mr. Kopfrkingl bought the tickets at the wooden box-office and then joined the group with his dear ones.

'Is it going to be something dreadful?' asked Mili uncertainly, gazing at the tent, at the painted skeletons on the side and at the entrance with the fringed, red curtain, and Mr. Kopfrkingl nodded his head sadly.

'Suffering,' he said to the boy quietly, 'but suffering against which man is armed nowadays. You're not going to be frightened, are you?' he said. 'After all, it's just a tawdry sort of imitation.'

A hand with large sparkling rings emerged from behind the fringed, red curtain. For a while it rested motionless on the red cloth with fingers spread as though making a parade of them. It then drew the curtain aside and an elderly, dark-skinned woman in a shiny red-green-blue dress with large earrings and beads made her appearance. She looked like an old American Indian or Greek woman and mispronounced her "rs" a little.

'Would you like to come in, ladies and gentlemen,' she sang out, bowing deeply, 'children as well. The show has much to tell.'

'It's probably the proprietress,' Mr. Kopfrkingl told Lakmé and tenderly asked her to go into the tent.

They found themselves with the other spectators in a kind of enclosure which was apparently meant to be an apothecary's shop. In the weak yellow light there hung a coat-of-arms with a coiled snake. Around them were painted shelves, chests of drawers and cupboards with earthenware jugs, flasks of pewter and tin, gilded boxes, kegs with

small bags, and on the counter there was a gigantic book, scales, basins, pans, funnels and sieves. Behind the counter stood a bearded old man with long hair. He had a black coat trimmed with threadbare fur and a beret. He had rosy cheeks, sky-blue eyes and pearl-white teeth in his slightly opened mouth. He was holding scales with something in them. By the window a woman in a smock and apron was bending over a mortar, squinting slightly at the spectators. In front of the counter stood two middle-aged men. One of them, very beautifully dressed with gloves and a hat adorned with a long feather, was watching the apothecary weighing his goods. The other one, in a black, shabby hood and frock, was holding a coin in his hand and gazing towards the woman by the window. At the back among the shelves there was a kind of niche, covered by a net curtain, behind which the contours of a motionless shadow could be seen.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to behold are terrible things,’ said the proprietress rapidly, mispronouncing her “rs”. ‘It is the year 1680 and Prague is being swept by dreadful tidings; there’s no escape for the human race from the dread Black Death which people face, blasted by its breath. An ominous conjunction of the stars has occurred and poisoned wells were common. Nature moved and evildoers heard, forgetting they were human. Misfortune looms large over Prague – alas for the city. We are now in the apothecary’s shop on the Old Town Square – oh, the pity.’ Then she went on, mispronouncing her “rs”:

‘On the shelves and in the cupboards you can see spices for various pains and diseases. Here you can observe cinnamon, nutmeg, saffron and a keg of pepper.’ The proprietress pointed to the bowls, jars, jugs, and the rings on her fingers sparkled. ‘And here are sweet-flag, ginger, sulphur and the tooth of the wether. Over there is white sugar, brown sugar, Venetian soap and caraway seed. Here are rubber, petroleum, fennel and bottles of mead. Here you can ob-