

This report started out as a straightforward analysis of the ideas in Saki (Hector Hugh Monrö), about whom I wrote a dissertation in 1968. But as I worked on a draft, I could not keep out of my thoughts the subject of my current project, a book about teachers' lives. So I quit resisting impulse and let my life as a teacher remind me that Saki might now be censored for his ideas that are not currently in fashion. I am not apologizing for mixing literature and life. I have been trying to do that in the classroom for years, and I believe in it. But I do warn those readers who turn to this article to study literature that you will also hear about life.

Saki seemed like an innocent dissertation topic. When I told the family that it had been approved by my distant Ph.D. committee, even my youngest child had heard of the author. When she mentioned "The Open Window," in her sixth grade reader, and told the story, the older kids remembered that one and one or two others, probably "Sredni-Vashtar" and "The Lumber-Room." — As you know, each of these stories presents a juvenile protagonist: Vera (15), Nicholas (?), and Conradin (10). That protagonist is in a dependent state and seizes an opportunity to strike back at the race of adults, the power figures in an adult-dominated world. The juvenile usually strikes back by a lie that causes one adult to have self-inflicted discomfort. Sometimes the trouble is temporary, as with Conradin's aunt; sometimes more dangerous, as with the neurotic Mr. Nuttel; sometimes permanent, as in the death of Nicholas's guardian. — But we hasten to point out that Saki makes it easy for us to suspend our belief in seriousness of death. We may be disturbed and sickened by the violence of Gremlins or of a Saturday morning cartoon hour for children, but Saki's deaths do not disturb us. Instead, like the conclusions of his nonviolent stories, they are likely to cheer us up.

So my children, the three of them at home, all laughed when I told them about my topic. — My oldest was in the artillery in Viet Nam at the time. — If my kids could enjoy Saki, the topic must be innocent enough. Even I had no idea of the controversy that might be involved in Saki's ideas.

But I did know that the selection of the topic had been entangled with controversy. Four years before, at forty, I had decided to move to junior college teaching and leave behind some of the petty annoyances of high school: lunchroom duty, little time for preparation, discipline details, and so forth. Once in junior college, I elected to start again on a Ph.D. program I had dropped twelve years before. At once, I talked with the chairman at USC about a topic for my dissertation. He approved and agreed to supervise a study of the effects of nineteenth century religious turmoil on the work of certain Victorian writers. I completed the course work, took a job in a Presbyterian college in Illinois, and prepared to begin on the dissertation.

Unexpectedly, I confronted a rather serious problem. My first reader had resigned the chairmanship of the department in one of those recurring squabbles pitting the old against the young. Now, with administrative responsibilities behind him, he was prepared to enjoy some of the leisure of the theory class; so he was off to Turkey for a year. The second reader would take over.

It was 1967. The second reader was a popular young orator with high ratings from students who liked his political and social ideas. The first reader was one of those old-time scholars with a national reputation who believed in the tolerance preached by John Stuart Mill and by Milton and Jefferson and others in the humane tradition. — If I seem more sympathetic to the older man, it is only in part because I am now old myself. The bogey-men of my youth were people who knew the TRUTH, the one TRUTH, and were intolerant of any rival claims to truth, people like Hitler. — The second reader knew the TRUTH. The topic that had been approved for three years was simply not appropriate for a dissertation in English, he said; it belonged

in religion or philosophy. I had no choice but to scramble for a topic that would meet his individual standards of appropriateness.

When I settled on Saki, then, it was not the result of long study of the man and his works. I chose him only because no one else had previously tried the topic and because Saki was acceptable to the second reader; I could live with the topic for two summers.

When the first reader returned from Turkey, he was in for a surprise, but I am sure had had been through enough departmental political skirmishes to accept it with tolerance. In any case, he also found Saki an interesting writer.

So in the summers of 1967 and 1968 and the college year between, I used the great and uncensored library at the University of Illinois and the adequate and uncensored library at Washington University, as well as smaller collections, to investigate the development of method and meaning in the fiction of Saki.

The method was fairly easy to trace. He had learned verbal wit from Oscar Wilde and others and had exhibited his skill in that direction in his nonfiction Rise of the Russian Empire. (Reviewing historians said humor was out of place in history writing, however.) His juvenile protagonist observing an improbable world came from Lewis Carroll; he displayed his understanding of the method in a series of newspaper articles, illustrated by Gould, called The Westminster Alice. After various experiments with different juvenile protagonists of different degrees of action-ability, he had developed the characteristic Saki plot, the kind we find in The Open Window. He used the methods he had developed quite successfully in about fifteen or twenty short stories, with less success in a few other stories and in one novel. He also produced short stories on entirely different models, reflective essays, and one serious novel that only occasionally and incidentally included humor. His plays were not markedly successful. His peak as a fiction writer lasted about a dozen years. He was killed at the age of forty-

six in the trenches of World War I.

I explored all of this as President Lyndon Johnson fumbled on in Viet Nam, as campus riots occurred at large universities, as the mood of college teachers and students became more and more ugly.

In the mid-sixties in California, I had gone to dinner with my office mate and another young English teacher at Cerritos Junior College, and they had kept me informed of the progress of eruptions at Berkeley. They were single, a dozen years younger than I, and they drove to Berkeley one weekend each month to take part in the demonstrations. They laughed a bit and told me they really went there to meet girls. (The term "girls" was still used then.)

But early in 1968 Gene McCarthy ran against the President in New Hampshire; although he did not win, he did take forty-two percent of the vote. Four days later, Senator Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for the nomination. Two weeks afterward, President Johnson informed the nation that he would not run for re-election. Four days later, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Two months and two days later, Robert Kennedy, apparently on the way to the nomination, was fatally shot.

It was a bad time to be writing a dissertation, particularly one about a Tory who thought of war as exciting and believed in honor, duty, country.

That summer my own son came back from Viet Nam. He had been wounded, but he was well now. He was non-political and quietly began his classes on a church campus where the chaplain and the political science and sociology and philosophy teachers taught everyone that our soldiers in Viet Nam had been murderers. My son got good grades and was soon ready to begin life again. With that anxiety passed, we could once more face social engagements without worrying too much about what might be said. We, too, had learned to keep our cool. It is a thing to learn in any McCarthy era.

I had been there before.

Back in the spring of 1951, my principal at Washington



Irving Junior High in Des Moines called me into his office to tell me as casually as he could that the school nurse had informed him that one of the new teachers was a dangerous subversive: me. The principal was active in the Navy Reserve, and he knew that I was still active in the Army Reserve; this was fortunate, for he told her that the government had checked my background and had given me an excellent security rating. When he had asked her for more details about my subversiveness, he had discovered that she had heard me state at lunch my support for President Truman's so-called socialized medicine program. That statement was enough to condemn me, in her eyes; for she taught in her girls' hygiene classes that Franklin Roosevelt had been one of the monsters of history. It was early in the McCarthy era, the Joe McCarthy era. Even after that incident, I was unable to be discreet. In 1952, I even admitted to my students that I was the precinct committee chairman for the Democratic Party; since I was poor enough to live in the school's neighborhood, their parents already knew it, anyhow.

So I had been there before.

But now it was the summer of 1968. I was studying Saki's meaning. The little college campus was absorbed in American politics, but I was absorbed in completing an acceptable manuscript of a dissertation on an early twentieth century British Tory. When I had settled on the topic, I had not even known Saki's politics. Now, however, I wondered if teachers would stop using his fiction in class if they discovered where he stood on matters that were vital to them. It was the second McCarthy era, the Gene McCarthy time; a clear majority on my campus supported Gene, not Humphrey. Once again, people who knew the TRUTH were on the alert for political heretics. Fortunately, I was no longer an Army Reservist. Yet I was a heretic; I was for Humphrey.

As one gets into Saki, though, it is difficult to see how the militant young teachers and students of the 1960's could find much fault with Saki's meanings, particularly if they read only his most often anthologized short stories.

His protagonists are all either young or, as in the case of Lady Carlotta, young at heart. One of them, Reginald, concludes a piece entitled "Reginald on the Academy" by saying, "To have reached thirty is to have failed in life." In the sixties, it was popular to repeat the fashionable slogan "Don't trust anyone over thirty". (Notable exceptions were made, of course: Gene McCarthy, Herbert Marcuse, and most of the new left college teachers I knew.)

Saki's targets, adults who are temporarily upset by the actions of the young protagonists, are almost always middle-aged or old, and they are part of the establishment of his time: from duchesses and prime ministers down to dull middle-class persons who live too quietly for their own good in modest but unimaginative patterns of life. Some of them, of course, are aunts or the equivalents, for the tyrants of Saki's own youth were the aunts who raised him. Surely the 1960's would have considered such straight arrows as fair game for attack.

And to the youth of the Gene McCarthy era, the methods of attack in Saki's stories would seem inoffensive: lying to older people, making fun of them, embarrassing them, leading them into traps, even using an occasional bomb or vicious animal to remove them from an earth they are polluting. Anyone who saw television shots of students at the University of Wisconsin refusing to permit Hubert Humphrey to speak in the campaign of 1968 would understand Saki's youthful protagonists. It was generally agreed in the sixties that there were some people, like a boy in a Saki story, who would be improved by death. Lyndon Johnson would probably have headed the list. But there were many more; for example, Dean Rusk, who somehow could not requalify for his old professorship after being an academic heretic in Johnson's cabinet. Denying a teacher his or her career rights is a long-sanctioned way of murder, even though the murder does not include the body. All people with power who know the TRUTH use that means of murder.

November 6, 1968, was the day of the election. The

choice was between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey. A few days before the election, our small faculty met for some sort of luncheon, and I sat at a table with two of our most outspoken new left politicians. They informed me that they were voting for Nixon. When I expressed surprise, they explained that it was necessary to punish Humphrey for not condemning Lyndon Johnson.

Nixon carried Illinois by a few thousand votes, the nation by about nine hundred thousand. Heresy in Humphrey had been thoroughly punished.

-- Now the censors of our time would probably not object to those elements of Saki's fiction that I have described up to this point. Nor would they object to some of the other specifics of his fiction. He was opposed to giving power to merchants; he frequently sneered at shopkeepers and made fun of something then called "the romance of business." (See "Clovis on the Alleged Romance of Business.") -- Now, no self-respecting English teacher would quibble with this attitude. No matter how many new cars we have in our garages, we like to think of ourselves as symbolically identified with the poor, and we wear blue work shirts to prove it as we drive away from our bilevel shacks and on to class. So we have no quarrel with Saki there.

We do not really quarrel with Saki's call for noble, aristocratic, stylish leaders to replace the mediocrities who win elections but lack decisiveness. However much we may praise a contemplative Hamlet, we admire the Renaissance Kennedy men and the Rockefellers, either Nelson or Jay, knowing that they are true aristocrats and, therefore, capable of decisive action. We understand that portion of the Romantic era that Saki brought into the twentieth century. We do so in part because the sixties and seventies continued or revived such romantic attitudes. The Ph.D. may have replaced the baron of Medieval romance; we may even send the Ph.D. to government, or try to: McGovern, Kissinger, Galbraith, and so on. Our democracy in academia permits allegiance to a class system, if it is the right one. And we expect our leaders to know the TRUTH, to be decisive and

Saki wanted leaders like that.

In addition, we respect good taste, as Saki did. He was shocked by slobs who could not appreciate a gourmet soup, for instance; he objected to the low artistic level of popular songs, popular performances, popular singers. He appreciated an order of monks because they had produced a fine liqueur. He thought good taste in clothing was essential. -- Those who have been fans of Jackie Onassis will understand, I am sure. People of the academic world generally prefer a practiced snob to a poor slob.

But scattered through his work were little bits of nastiness that most of us would find unpleasant. Some would be unpleasant enough to warrant censorship, particularly if we wish to rewrite history and if we know the TRUTH. As teachers, we must ask ourselves whether the students who absorb Hefner's Playboy philosophy and Fortune's power philosophy, and read Cosmopolitan, MS, and the editorial page in the Minneapolis Tribune are strong enough to read Saki.

He thought of war as a test of one's manhood. In his own life, he volunteered for a place as an ordinary soldier (refusing commissions) in a fighting unit; eventually he died in the trenches. Again and again, he lampooned pacifism and all pacifists. In a short story called "The Toys of Peace," he seemed to say that war was natural to human beings (as an anthropologist suggested sixty years later). He more or less admitted to acting under the influence of Nietzsche, and the reader can identify that influence often in his stories. His final novel, When William Came, published in 1913, was a warning against Britain's lack of preparation for war with Germany (a problem J. F. Kennedy's Harvard thesis dealt with, but about a later war); he chauvinistically dramatized his message by depicting the lowering of standards of taste if the Germans were to occupy England. Now and then, he pecked away at any threat he could find to traditional British standards, whether from Americans, Germans, or Jews, all of whom he more or less grouped together. We may remember that T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, and others of



the time did much the same.

Some of his stories seem to be attacks on unions. They are. More accurately, however, we can say that they are attacks on government and business leaders who are too weak to control the power of unions. (See "The Unkindest Blow.") He attacks with humor, of course.

He also attacks with humor the suffragettes of his time. This may be very hard for us to take, and on this matter we are currently involved in the most delicate of negotiations between and about men and women. Do we dare to submit even this problem to the caprice of the god Humor? Perhaps we do not. -- Here again he is attacking weak government leaders. In this case, he does so by dramatizing actions of strong, decisive leaders. In the story "Hermann the Irascible--A Story of the Great Weep," he has an effective British ruler meet the demands of the suffragettes by causing the Parliament to pass a law requiring all women to vote, then making innumerable additional offices elective rather than appointive. We know enough about human nature to realize that once we have the right to vote, we are not likely to be over-zealous about exercising that right. -- In a later story, "The Gala Programme," Saki goes farther. Dropping back to the days of Rome and an imaginary emperor, he causes the suffragettes to be thrown to the lions; that is, when the suffragettes threatened to stop the races by a protest, the emperor simply changes the order of the programme and brings the lions on instead of the races. -- Are we secure enough to joke about such issues today?

Saki has something to say about the Anglican Church of his time, much of it relevant today if we can keep our sense of humor. He has much to say about the poor quality of education in Britain; the modern British and we, as respectful cousins, may not choose to look at that. Most of all he believes we should make our lives creative and break out of the grooves we settle into far too soon. On this theme, we might find some of his less popular stories worth reading again.

But this is not a paper about literature. It is about

life. On the whole, Saki is a relatively harmless writer. He does entertain. He can even make students think, particularly if they have been taught by us that there is only one side of each issue, the TRUTH as we teach it. I would hate to see his stories removed from anthologies and from libraries. My students, and yours, need to encounter a few heretics.

On the other hand, I am neither a fascist nor a member of the extreme left. When I am being honest, I don't think much of the rigidity of people like me, in the middle. Not one of us has the moral stature to determine what our kids should be free to learn. All of us need to question the tolerance of our own teaching practices. Bad teaching begins this way: "I know the TRUTH. Therefore, anyone who teaches otherwise should get out. And so on . . . "

If there is another McCarthy waiting to give his or her name to an era of censorship and repression, I sincerely hope that it will not be in our country. I also hope that the name, instead of McCarthy, will not be my name, or yours, whoever you are. But on the question of freedom for others, we'll walk a difficult path. We most endanger our students and other teachers when we think that path is easy to follow.

Nevertheless, I am prepared to survive, no matter who wishes to censor and repress ideas. I hope you will be prepared, too. Survival is essential in teaching, not just for the teachers, but for the benefit of our kids.