

*Mass Death in Venice**

by Alexander Kluge

In the summer of 1969 the sun weighed down for weeks on the city and waterways of Venice. The steamers and motorboats ploughed through the green waters of the lagoons which surrounded the houses like thick soup. Over 100 old people were lodged in the San Lorenzo Old Age Home, a palace of stone. They could not breathe. On one of the last days in July, 24 of the old people died within a few hours. Those who remained — caught unawares by these sudden events which they had no time to assimilate — refused to tolerate the removal of the dead. They killed the director of the institution, Dr. Muratti, a venerable gerontologist, and grabbed knives, clubs, and also two revolvers which they found in the room of the director. Then the ringleaders herded all the inmates of the old age home, the cooks and nursing personnel into a spacious hall which was on the ground floor and still seemed relatively cool. Here some of the old people, those who were physically strongest, established their despotic rule, proclaiming themselves Popes and Cardinals.

Police squads from Venice encircled the palace of stone. In one of the surrounding houses the prefect took charge as commander-in-chief. Hoping that hunger would bring the desperate old people out of the institution building within the next days, the police command planned to arrest some of them, but the large majority was to be transported to shaded houses on the mainland and near the Alps. The officers had succeeded in occupying the kitchen annex built onto the side of the old age home, and they took over the storerooms as well. The starvation crisis, which led to the death of additional members of the home, did not bring capitulation but rather frenzied attacks by small battalions of extremely overaged fighters against the police forces occupying the kitchen and storerooms. Other fighters sallied forth from the palace's rear exits, pelted the chains of policemen with various dangerous objects, and attempted to use long spears as weapons. The police officers were forced to shoot in self-defense.

*The text is taken from Alexander Kluge's *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) and published here with permission of the author.

Editor of the newspaper *Gazzettino*: Mr. Prefect, you're known as a liberal, so why are you allowing these innocent old people to be shot at with live ammunition?

Prefect: These old people are by no means harmless. They have wounded my officers with dangerous objects.

Editor: How do you explain this sudden fanaticism?

Prefect: It's apparently directed at all sides simultaneously.

Editor: Do you possess any evidence as to the inner motives of this fanaticism?

Prefect: We called in a psychologist from Milan. He said: "It's as if they had lost their minds."

Editor: That doesn't seem to me much of an explanation. What is your personal viewpoint?

Prefect: I believe that they developed, in their younger days, a trust in the world which was shattered by the inexplicable deaths this month.

Editor: And with that you'd like to explain that the director of the institution, so highly respected by us all, was killed by the inmates of the institution? This seems to me a cloaking of events.

Prefect: Then you must offer another explanation.

Editor: What further measures do you plan to take?

Prefect: We don't plan. We just wait and react. We're here to help.

Editor: For the tourist traffic to Venice these incidents are, of course, negative. People may get the idea that one travels to Venice to die here.

Prefect: I would request, as you can well understand, that you depict that otherwise. In no way do statistics show that more foreigners die in the hotels, restaurants, or pensions of Venice than those who die in other Italian cities. It is my duty to make that absolutely clear.

Editor: Anyway, this incident has nothing to do with tourists.

Prefect: You know, we're ordering a news blackout here.

Until these events occurred, the majority of the old people in the San Lorenzo Old Age Home had thought of themselves as good-natured. Now, in their confusion, they doubted their good-naturedness. Incited by their *Cardinals* and *Popes*, they tied up two screaming young cooks. These young women were dragged this way and that over the tiles of a former reception room, and two of the old people opened the jugular veins of the bond persons with a shard. When the police, observing this scene from neighboring houses with field glasses, attempted to shoot their way into the room, 18 of the old people "fell," while the rest crouched anxiously in a corner; yet, they still made lunges with and without weapons whenever policemen came near them. All of these persons were bombarded with tear gas and overcome by the thick air.

As a result, more of the old people, who couldn't bear this torture, died. Throughout the events announcements were made over the loudspeaker by the prefect, who tried to make himself understood right up to the end. Of the old people who remained after the death of their ringleaders, some were brought in vehicles to a spa near the Alps. They died there as a result of the sudden exposure to cold.

Prefect: What do you think the last impressions of these old people were?

Criminal Investigator: They went so quickly and in such a mass that we didn't get a chance to observe. Before we could even ask any questions, they were already dead.

Editor: Would it be proper for me to speak here of an anonymous death? Although there were so many, they died all alone.

Prefect: Well, we were all around here the whole time, Anonymous is exaggerated.

Criminal Investigator: But you can never know whether or not they perhaps saw something particularly beautiful in their minds while they were dying in this undignified manner.

Prefect: I don't want to exclude that possibility, but altogether it was not a very personal way to go if you consider how many dead people there were.

Translated by Jeffrey S. Librett

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