

Death of a Playwright

It was a warm afternoon in early September. Georgi Markov sat inside his London office watching the patterns of sunshine spill through the curtains onto his desk. It was too much! He had to go outside. Why waste such a beautiful day cramped indoors? Markov rose from his chair, fetched his hat from the stand in the hall, and informed the security guard that he was leaving.

Once outdoors, Markov inhaled deeply. London wasn't exactly famous for its air quality, but Markov appreciated the sense of freedom he had living in England. His home country of Bulgaria was too dangerous for him now, especially after having written all those stage plays criticizing the Soviet generals and their decadent way of life. After the first assassination attempt by the KGB, the Soviet secret police, he had asked for political asylum in England.

As Markov walked through the narrow streets of Westminster, he reflected on how much his life had changed since leaving Bulgaria. He had found a good job at the World Service section of the British Broadcasting Corporation, where he helped write articles about Eastern Europe for the international news programs. He had found a lovely house in Clapham in southwestern London, where he lived with his three cats. He loved taking walks in Clapham and nearby Sheen, enchanted by the little shops and the shopkeepers.

Not even the last assassination attempt in London two years ago made Markov want to give up his new home. "They won't try again," he thought to himself as he crossed historic Waterloo Bridge. "The KGB must have forgotten all about old Georgi by now," he chuckled.

Markov stopped for a moment to watch the water flowing below him under the bridge. The Thames River at high tide was filled with debris, and he spotted an old boot carried by the current, riding the waves. Once, twice, the boot submerged, only to resurface unexpectedly. Just as the boot passed by under the bridge, it sunk beneath a wave and he lost sight of it.

"Come on, Georgi!" Markov said, shaking himself. "Let's get going, old man, or you'll miss the bus." He walked the last few metres to the bus stop at the end of the bridge and waited for the number seventy-seven that would take him home. Several people were in line ahead of him as the red double-decker bus pulled up.

Suddenly, Markov was pushed from behind and felt a sharp prick in his leg. He turned around angrily, but couldn't tell who in the crowd waiting for the bus had shoved him. Then he noticed a man in a dark overcoat with an umbrella hurrying away. "Why is he carrying an umbrella?" he wondered, "The weather is beautiful, and we haven't had rain now for three days."

Markov climbed onto the bus and sat down, suddenly feeling quite ill. He remained seated until the bus stopped outside his home. As he stepped off the bus, his legs trembled. With great difficulty, he walked the short distance to his front door. Once inside, he reached for the telephone on the table in the front hall. His hand shook as he dialed. "Come immediately," he gasped. "I think they got me." Then he abruptly hung up.

Within an hour, several MI5 secret police agents and doctors arrived at Markov's house. They opened up the wound in his leg to find a partially dissolved pellet of lethal ricin. The pellet must have been hidden in the end of the umbrella that the strange man in the crowd had been carrying. Markov had been the target of a third assassination attempt.

"We'll do all we can," Markov was told. He smiled weakly. He knew that this time there was no hope. Three days later he was dead.