

A FIGHT IN KREUZBERG

By Robert Rigney

(...) **Robert Rigney:** I interviewed Balkan Beat Box in 2008. A month before the band was scheduled to play in Kreuzberg, I had a little touse in a bar on Oranienstrasse called Luzia.

Mostly I steer clear of hipster bars - but for whatever reason I chose the bar to while away a couple hours working on a story based on a Serbian small-time gangster friend, or shall we say loose acquaintance, named Sasha.

If everything Sasha said was correct then he had been a paramilitary soldier in Bosnia, had owned casinos in Belgrade, had been a pimp, a jewelry thief in Vienna and a jailbird in Berlin. I figured about half of what Sasha said added up. What I knew was true about Sasha was that he made his living here in Berlin by scamming gullible Germans out of their money. However, Sasha also claimed to be a devout Orthodox Christian, and as if to prove this to everyone he wore more crucifixes on his body than an Orthodox pope.

I had one, two, three, four double vodkas and suddenly I was Sasha.

"Give me another vodka," I slurred at the barkeep, a Brit, new in town, fresh off the boat, as it were, who didn't speak a word of German; that was reason enough to despise him.

The barkeep slid me my drink.

"Put it on my tab," I said.

"No tabs," he barked.

Why the hostility? I still don't know how it happened. There was an exchange of words. I may have insulted him. He called me an asshole, and - it was no doubt the spirit of Sasha that had entered me - I vaulted over the bar and tried to slug the Brit, and missed fractionally.

In a matter of minutes the cops arrived and asked the Brit if he wanted to press charges. He said he did indeed.

As a parting shot the one cop said: "And a word to the wise: Take it easy on the white stuff."

Later I met Sasha and explained to him what had transpired. His response was predictable.

"Bravo, my American friend. You have held yourself like a man. When I first met you, you were a poodle. Now you are a pit-bull. Would I be wrong in saying that it is the influence of Sasha that has filled you with a new spirit? Just tell me where this pussy Englishman works and I will rough him up for you till he agrees to drop the charges."

I told Sasha that wouldn't be necessary. Instead, I wrote the barkeep a letter, apologizing for being such an asshole, and eventually persuaded him to drop the charges.

A month later, Balkan Beat Box came to town, and I managed to set up an interview with the band in Kreuzberg. They were scheduled to play in Festsaal Kreuzberg, the old Festsaal, the one that burnt down, on Skalitzer Strasse, next door to the Mevlana mosque.

I met the band outside of the Festsaal before the show, and took them down Oranienstrasse. I had forgotten entirely about my little incident in Luzia, and decided Balkan Beat Box would get a kick out of the joint. The manager recognized me instantly and showed me the door.

"Out!" he said, "And don't you show your face here again."

"What's the deal?" said Ori Kaplan, saxophonist of Balkan Beat Box

"Oh," I said. "It's nothing."

Ori looked at me askance as we walked up Oranienstrasse. I must have cut a slightly dubious figure in his eyes. Added to that I had a knocked out tooth and scar on my temple from a bike accident coming home late from one of Nicolai Marakov's famous Wedding cockroach races.

read more in the upcoming Balkan Beats BOOK