

Curly Schwartz

I'm not the type who clips newspaper articles. Especially not obituaries. But I knew the gang downstairs would want to hear about this particular piece, so I cut the obit out of the Post-Gazette with my orange grip scissors, folded it up under the button of my shirt-pocket, and smuggled it down to the tavern.

It turned out that the gang hadn't arrived yet, so, with my fingers around a pint glass, I sat between two empty barstools, squinting at the news strip unfolded before me, and waited for companionship. If a guy can't depend on regulars, who can he depend on?

We all know there's an inky, underwater world of fact and perspective swirling within all reportage. Dr. Konrad Lorenz's obituary notice was no exception.

The application of casual scrutiny might lead you to believe that the Times offered a reasonable summary of Dr. Lorenz's career. Their dedication begins with his early days in Altenburg studying jackdaws and continues on to his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, where the ethologist famously stated that "wartime killing has become so impersonal that face-to-face inhibitions no longer apply." Lorenz concluded this observation by saying, "Wolves are more restrained."

In the obituary's attendant photograph, Konrad Lorenz peers at the reader from an Austrian pond, submerged to his beard and surrounded by his "children", the ducklings and goslings seduced away from their mothers' nests.

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Curiously, the Post-Gazette makes only a brief mention of eugenics. Three short sentences. With none averring that Lorenz was ever a member of the Nazi Party. But Lorenz not only joined the Party shortly after they took control of Austria, but he was also a member of its Office for Race Policy. The only connection the newspaper of record makes between Lorenz and the Nazis is when they mention that Lorenz conceded that one of his papers, written way back in 1940, reflected Nazi views and that he and other decent scientists had hoped that good would come from National Socialism. But, like the other decent scientists, Lorenz would later turn away from Nazism in horror.

The Post-Gazette plummets deeper into the murk by reporting Lorenz's death as "a freak accident."

Dr. Lorenz's body was discovered washed from his boat, bobbing in the thicket along the edge of his favorite pond. His nose was broken. Nearby, the mortal remains of a northern shoveler, a drake, its neck broken, was also found. The Post-Gazette accepts that Lorenz, standing afloat on his skiff, was knocked unconscious and into the drink by this duck along its errant flight.

I happen to know this duck. His name is Curly Schwartz, and I was his only friend. I also happen to know that the death of Konrad Lorenz was no accident.

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Curly Schwartz lived in the basement unit of my apartment building. On what was to be his last night in America, we slurped down bottles of sour apple

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Mad Dog and talked. Of course we talked about women. Curly said he'd never had any luck with them and I believe him.

In the center of Curly's room, two bronze folding chairs (the kind you'd borrow, without asking, from a basement that hosts meetings for recovery groups) flanked a Graflex 16mm film projector. This film projector aimed its lens at a baby blue blanket that hung from a pipe screwed to the wall over Curly's only window. On each of the film projector's two spools sat an enormous reel of film. I have no idea how Curly, with his wispy, feathered arms, was able to lift them onto the projector.

I feared Curly might share with me some part of his past I had no interest in seeing, so I avoided the question of the giant projector.

Still, Curly showed me his film.

Curly chugged the spools into motion. The projector beamed, through a dirt-flecked shaft of light and upon the baby blue blanket, the image of the man I now know to be Dr. Konrad Lorenz. The doctor crouched in his laboratory with a pellet-filled palm hovering beneath the bill of a gently pecking shoveler duck.

"That's my mother," Curly tells me.

"This footage is all I've ever known of her."

The projector shuddered and slapped, and Dr. Lorenz, now in a different sector of his laboratory, converses with the camera while handling an egg. Lorenz places this egg, the egg from which Curly is to later emerge, into the care of a mother graylag goose. After another shudder of the projector, we watch

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Curly break through his shell and poke his head through the neck of his swaddling cloth. Curly said it was him. I took his word.

On the suspended blanket, we watched the young Curly skim along the pond's surface and through adolescence, pursuing his adoptive goose mother and siblings.

The projector clacked again and showed us a mature Curly cruising the pond at Altenburg, skronking obscenities to himself in the bitter sunshine. Curly paddles up to a striding lady goose. She ignores his proposition and swims across the pond to sidle next to a cocksure graylag gander. Curly skronks and mumbles. Later, possibly that same day, a shoveler hen approaches the lonesome Curly. Curly screams at her, hoisting himself from the pond's surface with outstretched wings and furious feathers. The frightened shoveler scurries away.

Lorenz stands on the shore and calmly explains to us what we'd observed. Curly outstretched his wing toward the screen, extending his middle feather at the image of the doctor and spit, "Why don't you tell us about the 877 children of mixed marriage you shipped to concentration camps, you son of a bitch?"

In the distance, behind Dr. Lorenz, Curly dirged a mournful song. The camera zoomed into the heartsick Curly as the credits scrolled.

Curly talked to me about the filmstrip, how he recently found it buried in the dark attic of the community college where he taught anthropology.

"I watch this often."

"Why do that to yourself?" I asked.

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“Because I’m an idiot. Thought I’d find answers about my mother.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. But for every question answered two new ones replaced it. All you get from questions is more questions. Or a sock in the gut. I got my fair share of answers. I did further research on Dr. Lorenz. Turns out he’s really got it in for shovelers. He wrote a piece in some obscure journal of comparative psychology. Apropos of nothing, he made mention of the shoveler duck’s ‘ugly Jewish nose’. He was directly telegraphing to me his disdain.”

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I left Curly late in the evening to tromp upstairs and struggle in bed with my own pain. I never saw Curly again. He left town without a goodbye.

I’d heard talk at the tavern of Curly hooking up with some migrating ducks who were making the trek to Norway. I didn’t believe this because I knew Curly to be a duck who hated other ducks.

But after reading this morning’s Post-Gazette, I became a believer and put it all together. Perhaps Curly *did* join these ducks on their journey—at least as far as Altenburg and Lorenz’s pond.

Amid the currents of conversation in the tavern, I sat alone with Lorenz’s obituary, now folded back into the pocket of my shirt.

How I wanted to collar the patron beside me and pour out my story. Curly’s story. The story as I imagined it—of how I’m sure it went down. The story of Curly floating atop the surface of Altenburg Pond, watching his nemesis laze in his canoe and break off bread and Lüneberg cheese to toss into the clapping bills

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of his “children”. Meters away, Curly plunges his face in the water to take one last drink. Like a prizefighter, he shakes his head and beads of water fly from his bill. Curly thrashes his wings, now rested after the migration back to Europe, and upsoars from the water’s surface, skimming mere inches from the top of the pond. Curly levitates and cruises, dead set on the doctor.

Konrad Lorenz watches the kamikaze duck bear down on him at full speed. Odd behavior. Quite odd, Lorenz observes. The doctor stands in his canoe, his hand a visor over his brow. Lorenz recognizes the shoveler. But before he can curse through his grit teeth, Curly imprints himself on Lorenz’s face, knocking him underwater, where, before he wakes up, it’s too late.

There’s the decent scientist, floating near Curly Schwartz’s broke-necked body. A stream of the doctor’s blood swirls between them.

In the boat, Dr. Lorenz’s children steal breadcrumbs and fight each other for pieces of Lüneberg cheese.