

## *Ossuarius*

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Sedlec, Kutná Hora, the 1870<sup>th</sup> year of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Schwarzenberg family—a family of Franconian and Bohemian aristocrats—has commissioned Czech woodcarver František Rint with an intriguing task. See these bones lying here in the Sedlec Ossuary? See these bones, organized by a sixteenth-century, half-blind monk? See these bones? Make something of these bones. Look at the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and Saint John the Baptist. Look there at the bejeweled and clothed relics of the saints. But do not bejewel or clothe these bones. No. Instead, *make* something of these bones. And Rint, quite literally, makes something of them.

But Rint's craft leads him to produce something altogether different from the winding walls-of-bones pathways of the *Catacombs de Paris*, different from the 'archway-altarpiece' in Faro's *Capela dos Ossos*, different, also, from the circular geometric bone-designs at Lima's *Convento de San Francisco* catacombs, different, also, from the ornate bone-adornments of Rome's *Santa Maria della Concenzione dei Cappuccini* crypt.

It is possible that no one would have ever heard of František Rint or his crafts had he not, rather fortuitously, been commissioned to further elaborate on the work of his predecessors at the *Kostnice v Sedleci*. There is little remaining documentation of his employment there, and even less about his life and work. When Karl Joseph Adolf von Schwarzenberg hired him for the task, Rint was met with what had already been eight-hundred years of death—a veritable history of decay. Eight-hundred years of death and decay, that is, where the last three of those centuries were dedicated to, paradoxical as it may seem, the preservation of that decay.

For Rint's passage into human history, into the earth, *under* the earth, was a path well worn. From the tenth-century, the two faces of Kutná Hora were the Cistercian monastery with its cemetery—the first Cistercian monastery in Bohemia—and silver mining. An increasingly pockmarked city, Kutná Hora was held aloft over the centuries, both literally and financially, by the silver mines that had been discovered under the city's skin. From these subterranean beginnings, too, it was said that an abbot from the monastery had travelled to Golgotha—*place of the skull*—and returned with a handful of soil, which he had sprinkled through the monastery's burial grounds.

Five centuries of pestilence and warfare saw to the populating of these burial grounds. We know that the 1318 outbreak of plague in Bohemia did not bring Kutná Hora to a complete halt—an unusual narrative, perhaps, for a medieval plague story, but nonetheless accurate. It is, of course, impossible to know what measures the city took against the plague. But whatever *did* happen, Kutná Hora did *not* crumble, the Prague *groschen* was still minted, and silver continued to be mined. The Great World continued to spin. And like these mountain-dwellers of the fourteenth century, Rint, in his own time, would have known the *coldness* of history, the coldness of death: that it made little sense that the Christian purgatory should be a place of fire and brimstone when, in Czech folklore, death was also the personification of winter—the grip of chill, the chattering of teeth. This personification, the old woman Morana, whose grass-stuffed effigy is still, on the first day of spring, paraded through town, whose effigy is beaten and burned and drowned. But even the fifteenth-century effigy grass-fires of spring could not cover the smoke of Hus burning, which blew eastwards from Konstanz and choked the anti-Catholic Taborites. Kutná Hora was not spared the bloodshed of the Hussite wars—the second installment of the anti-Hussite Crusade saw to that. But for all the carnage, Kutná Hora prevailed. The soil was fertilized with human remains; the monastery's cemetery—that great wound in the earth, still raw and fresh—welcomed dead Hussites and anti-Hussites alike; did not discriminate against the flesh that wrought its debt to nature. Only twenty years before the wars of the Hussites, sometime in 1400, a two-level Gothic church had been built in the middle of the cemetery:

the lower level an ossuary, the upper a cathedral. The percussion of history, captured in the steady construction of new buildings, stamped out in the sound of tumbling corpses, bodies shifted from the cradle of the earth to the tomb of humanity. *Remember, remember.*

And then, in the 1511<sup>th</sup> year of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so the rather unlikely story goes, the task was given to a half-blind monk of the order, for he was the only one who would not avert his eyes in horror: the task, Sisyphean in quality and seemingly unending, of stacking all of the bones of all of the bodies that had ever been interred in the crypt; stacking them—femur with femur, fibula with fibula, tibia with tibia—meticulously in the Chapel. It is unknown, exactly, who it was that first thought to *make something* of these bones, to turn these bones into anything other than charnel mounds. For, though he would come to make something of them later, it was not Rint who constructed the six—today, four—bell-shaped bone pyramids at the corners of the ossuary. Perhaps it was the work of this legendary blind monk? Or, perhaps it was the work of the eighteenth-century Italian-Czech architect, Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel, who also reconstructed part of the upper chapel. Yes, six bells cast entirely out of bones, two-men tall, four-men wide. Silent and holy mountains that skirted the ceiling of the ossuary. Constructed we know not by whom. And perhaps it was these silent bells, these holy mountains, that captured the Schwarzenbergs' attention in the mid-nineteenth century. The Schwarzenbergs who, since the twelfth century, had risen as an imperial force, were steadily taking control of the Catholic churches in the parts of Bohemia that they owned. Like the Schwarzenberg family's coat of arms, which would be altered and added to over time, so too would the cathedral and ossuary under their ownership. The six silver and blue stripes of the family crest cut back to four, and so, too, at Rint's hand, the demolition of two of the six bells in the ossuary. The 1599 addition to the family crest, a quarter depicting a Turk's decapitated head and a raven plucking out his eyes, would later be reproduced, too, through Rint's work. This church of All Saints, this pit of preserved human detritus, would become home for the perceived rightness of God and the Schwarzenbergs alike. *Nil Nisi Rectum.*

Rint's descent into the underground—here, where the air is thicker, where it is impossible to burn frankincense because the air is so damp, where it is impossible to blot out the smell of decay—will be a living committal to history. Strange that the air down here should have more the texture of something living it, breathing it. Strange that the air itself should impress upon the living the sensation of breathing in the grave soil, the soil that is so afflicted with several lifetimes' humors: black bile and phlegm, the cold and dry, the cold and wet. For the soil is both of these things—cold and wet, cold and dry—periodically. From down here, the plague has never left its victims; the air is still corrupt with the breath of their expiration. But the dead, it is said, may breathe freely, even those whose mouths are filled with dirt. And it is something in these bones, something in their unwillingness to retain a human form, which produces the sensation of *starving*. Bones are all that are left after a feast, that which may be chewed but never devoured. It is in these bones' persistence that the sense of starving overwhelms, even after the death and the world's devouring of the flesh. These bones, feasted on by the sight of those who reach them, the touch of those who cannot see. Bones, intended for devotion and prayer, intended as a *memento mori*, that all shall die, and that death, the great leveler of all things, will plateau feeble human hierarchy. The Great World will take humanity in its mouth and indiscriminately chew through us all. That in life the body is an object of work and production, that in death, too, the body should be rendered to administer a chaste reminder of the dissolvability of all things seemingly solid and certain.

Rint, below the ground, beneath the skin. Here, where every noise will rupture the air, puncture bone, where echo alone will render the sensation of something shattering within the body. How many bones will break during his labors? How many will splinter beyond use? How many will be cast aside? Here, Rint enters at the top of the stairs, begins his descent—lone footsteps, remarkably like the sound of water striking the tiled floor. Here, too, Rint will count the bell-shaped mounds of bones, six in total. More footsteps, or the

sounds of the dampness? His sons have arrived. With his sons, he will dismantle two of these holy mountains. Rint and his sons will balance atop unsteady ladders on uneven floors, they will hoist one another up on rope pulleys so that they may pluck, like the Schwarzenbergs' raven, the bones at the very tops of these mounds. These trembling walls of bones, and the meticulous demolishing of history.

But this is merely the beginning. Even a felled tree must be treated, steamed, or dried. Rint, with a woodcarver's knowledge, will treat these bones, too. It is unclear exactly where he would have derived calcium hypochlorite—a local apothecary, perhaps?—but, nevertheless, in it will go, into a bronze cauldron. In, too, the bones will go. The bones of these unhinged bells, singing for the first time: the sounds they will make as they float and bob in that limewater broth, striking the sides of the pot, striking one another. These bones, in their milky soup, being washed of original sin, though not in the blood of the lamb. And then, with his sons, Rint will organize these bones again, leave them to dry in the blue light of the Czech summer sun. Perhaps he will line the chapel's stairs and walkways with these bones so that the sun may bleach them. While the bones dry, Rint will take measurements of the inside of the ossuary, he will make notes, he will quarrel with his sons about his designs, the mathematics, the proposed constructions. When they are collected—though we may wonder whether any of the bones were perhaps stolen by a stray and ravenous dog?—these bones will leave powdery white residue on the hands of those who touch them. The sounds of Rint's constructions will echo through the cathedral, where the remaining four bells persevere in their silence: the echo of his striking his chisel with a hammer. Striking into the base of skulls, or through spongy bone, or through chalky marrow. Typically, it will take three blows with the hammer, three blows for a defined hole to emerge in the bone. Rint, we might imagine, could have sat on the steps of the ossuary so that he might look in at the space that his work will fill. Sitting on these steps he might have also contemplated the wooden crucifix at the far end of the room, may have regarded the nails that were driven through Christ's hands and feet. He may have imagined Christ, falling for the first time, on his way to Golgotha. He may have thought of the story of Simon of Cyrene who was appointed to help the Son of Man bear the weight of sin, even if only momentarily. The Son of Man, bearing his own instrument of execution before he should be strung up by it. And with his sons, Rint will sit on these steps and slot together bones on threads of wire. He will clamp these bones in place. He will marvel at how light the human body is, freed from the flesh—the weight of death without resurrection. And, like the Son of Man, Rint and his progeny will raise their work off the ground, contemplate their adorning of the ossuary as a jeweler might reflect on his bejeweling an otherwise plain gold ring. And while these bones will not cry out, as Christ did, that they have been forsaken, they will utter their own death rattle as they strike against each other, knock against their vertebral and pelvic counterparts. Here, now, Rint will glance over the gaudy jewelry he has constructed for his famished god. A god, famished, yet gluttoned on the history of human demise. And Rint, whether working through the clatter of his constructions or clutching a bouquet of femurs, will be offering oblations to God and the Schwarzenbergs alike, holding out these offerings in his hands, these hands which, someday too, will be stripped to the bone.

Woodcarvers are not known for having smooth, manicured hands. Their hands—certainly those from the nineteenth century—would be covered with brands and abrasions, scratches and scars, sores from unexhumed splinters. But these bones, at least, are not like wood. While the material of both shares a particular fragility, these bones are twice as hardy, and each one of them is, possibly, administered with equal attention. With these hands, these 1870 hands, Rint puts his woodworking skills to task. He does not *carve* these bones, as a woodcarver fashions wood. Instead, he *constructs* them. He constructs an enormous all-human-bone chandelier—a chandelier some three meters in diameter, a chandelier, it is said, which contains at least one of every bone in the human body. Not a small undertaking. Think of the chandelier at the *Palais Garnier* and then imagine this chandelier assembled

entirely of human bones. The chandelier, which Rint hangs at the nave of the ossuary, is surrounded, at floor level, by four pylons or miniature obelisks. These obelisks are built of a procession of skulls resting atop tibiae. A melancholy skull and crossbones. But Rint does not stop there. He builds human-bone urns, and he forges a shield—the Schwarzenberg coat of arms—yes, entirely out of bones. He even builds a bone monstrance, its solar-design made of the remnants of humans: a skull, of course, at the monstrance's center, the jagged rays of the sun—the rays of the monstrance—articulated through the juxtaposition of exulted femur and inward-curving coccyx. And, at the end of his labor, Rint even takes the time to write his name on the wall at the entrance of the ossuary, with these bones. An ulna here, metacarpal and phalangeal bones there: *1870 F. Rint z Českè Skalice.*

Today, a ten-minute walk north from the Kutná Hora-Sedlec train station will take you to the *Kostnice v Sedleci*—the Sedlec Ossuary. On its upper level a cathedral, on its lower an ossuary. All surrounded by a cemetery. All surrounded by high walls. Opposite the *Kostnice v Sedleci* is a *Keramika Suvenyry* tourist shop that sells, as its name suggests, ceramics, bohemian glassware, and crystal. Pass through the entrance gate. Make your way through the cemetery and into the cathedral. Pay the small tourist fee—a small sum that has become a profitable endeavor, with some 200,000 tourists visiting the bone church each year. Pay the small fee, avoid the gift store, and begin your descent—Katabatic and curious—into the ossuary, into the gaping mouth of death.

