

Beethoven and Goethe meeting the empress

object no. 05 | the place is indicated by a plate at the crossing of paths, Chateaux garden

One real and famous legend took place at the crossing of two promenades in Teplice's chateaux garden. On 23rd July 1812, two giants of European Culture – “prince of poets” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and a brilliant composer Ludwig van Beethoven – met with Empress Maria Ludovika and her suite.

Bettina von Arnim, lioness of the saloons of the early 19th century, a few years after the death of both artists, cited in a letter to a friend of hers the following testimony, allegedly revealed to her by Beethoven himself: *“While we were returning from an evening walk, we met the whole emperor’s family. Goethe released my arm and stepped aside from the path. I could not push him even a step further. So I pushed my hat towards my forehead, fastened my coat, folded my arms at the back and went through the densest crowd. The princes and the courtiers created a lane, Duke Rudolph raised his hat and the empress saluted first ...,”* while Goethe was reverently bowing down to the procession.

The legend of a proud composer and a servile poet was later made famous by a German painter Carl Röhling’s lithography from 1887 called Incident in Teplice. The only spot on the beauty of the whole story is the fact that it probably did not happen as described. Bettina von Arnim was a very self-confident young lady from high society; she personally knew Liszt, Schumann and Brahms. She experienced a platonic relation with Goethe which started in 1806 when Bettina was 21 and Goethe 58 years old. She remained his muse till the end of his life. In spite of the fact that she herself composed and wrote, she became famous after publishing her letters with Goethe with the title of Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde, Correspondence with a child. It is unclear whether these are citations of real letters of Bettina’s fabrications in order to make the story more interesting.

There is the same uncertainty about the presentation of the famous meeting. Nobody has ever seen the original letter in which Beethoven describes the meeting for Bettina. That is why she is suspected of embellishing of the story so that Goethe would look like a coward. We can only speculate what personal motives made her do it.

Apart from the famous legend the meeting of both men did not amount to anything. Their worlds were so distant that nothing more than a formal conversation at the spa promenade can be expected from their mutual meeting. Beethoven stayed in Teplice in 1811 and 1812; Goethe visited Teplice in 1810, 1812 and a year later for the last time. But the story which Bettina von Arnim released many years later lives long. Its interpretation can be found in Milan Kundera’s novel Immortality.