

## The Murder of Zorran the Magnificent

Two shots to the chest, or head, or back is what killed McKees Rocks resident Vladimir Trifkovic, age 61. Newspaper reports weren't entirely consistent, but the fact remained: Mr. Trifkovic, better known by his stage name "Zorran", was dead on arrival at Ohio Valley Hospital. Done in by a .357 magnum revolver wielded by Richard Tegtmeier, age 42, of Bellevue.

One of the first mentions of the murder was noted in a "Postscript" of the January 8, 1976 edition of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette newspaper: *"Vladimir Tripkovic [sic], fatally shot in McKees Rocks Sunday night, was known in local entertainment circles as Zorran. He had performed tricks and pickpocket stunts on many Pittsburgh stages, and was a participant in the big entertainment benefit held at the Playhouse last year for Jack Hickton's district attorney campaign."*

No details as to the motive, no mention of a suspect or known perpetrator, no context; just a quick blurb that the locally well-known man was no longer going to be appearing live on stage.

Mr. Trifkovic's own obituary was similarly just as vague. In late January his brief obituary appeared in the Pittsburgh Press: *"ZORRAN. On Jan. 4, 1976 Vladimir Trifkovic, member of A.G.V.A., age 61, of McKees Rocks; father of Mark Trifkovic. Friends received at L. Beinhauer & Son Co. Mortuary, 2630 West Liberty Ave., Sat. & Sun., 2-4 and 7-9., and where Blessing Services will be held on Monday afternoon at 2 o'clock. Interment Mt. Royal Cemetery. Donations may be made to the Zorran Memorial Fund. P.O. Box 10440, Pgh., Pa, 15234."*

But the brevity was not a spill over from his life of on-stage deception and slight-of-hand trickery. It stemmed from necessity.

On January 21 the Pittsburgh Press headline declared: *"Donations May Finance Zorran Rites":*

*"Zorran the Magician may finally get a funeral. The area entertainer's body was picked up at the county morgue yesterday, 16 days after he was fatally shot in his McKees Rocks apartment.*

*The body was claimed by Albert Liddell, a local attorney, who was given authority to work out funeral arrangements by Zorran's ex-wife, Barbara, of Kansas City. It was delivered to L. Beinhauer and Sons Funeral Home on West Liberty Avenue in the South Hills.*

*The arrangements are being made by Don D'Carlo, Zorran's former agent, and Peg Lanigan, secretary for the Actors Association. D'Carlo said the group is accepting donations to help pay for the funeral. They should be sent to Zorran Fund, P.O. Box 10440, Pittsburgh 15234.*

*According to Liddell, who inspected Zorran's apartment on Chartiers Avenue last weekend, the magician - whose real name was Vladimir Trifkovic - had "little or nothing" in his estate when he died.*

*Richard Tegtmeier of Swissvale faces grand jury action on a murder charge on the case.*

*Zorran, also known as the "Gentleman Pickpocket," played many area clubs in the 1950s and 60s and later in his career, he performed at many banquets and parties."*

A member of the AGVA (*American Guild of Variety Artists*), Zorran performed in the Pittsburgh area for decades. Advertisements in local papers included mention of him in their upcoming shows. From "Zorran, the Gentleman Pickpocket" and "Zorran the Magnificent" to "Zorran - Master of Deception; Favorite of Steve Allen Show" his name was a selling point in the acts for a variety of entertainment establishments. In 1952 he even played the Copa. The February 7 issue of the Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph declared, *"Zorran, the 'gentleman thief', who 'steals' from the patrons, sold himself to Lenny Litman on a casual visit to the Copa, where he opened Tuesday night. A right slick act."*

But despite his local popularity, and occasional broader appeal, his career was not financially lucrative. By the end of his life Zorran essentially lived from performance to performance. Therefore, at the time of his death there weren't any funds available to cover the cost of his funeral, and as such, his body languished at the mortuary until January 26.

The headline in the January 27, 1976 Pittsburgh Press read: *"Show Business Friends Help Bury Magician Zorran"*.

*"An era passed with Zorran. He was in great demand when he came to Pittsburgh 20 years ago. In those days, entertainers were needed for banquets, and Zorran fit the bill because he had a very entertaining magic act, and supplied a great deal of humor with a pickpocket routine. Most important, he could set up in five minutes and required neither music nor a rehearsal.*

*But the nightclubs started wooing banquets, using their regular acts as entertainment... Novelty acts, and Zorran, were out.*

*The man liked Pittsburgh. He was married and divorced here. So he stayed and took what bookings he could find."*

Thanks to donations from his entertainment career connections and donations to the "Zorran Fund", Mr. Trifkovic was laid to rest in a Shaler cemetery and his resting place adorned with a unique headstone. His name, stage name, birth and death years adorn the plaque. But in lieu of typical headstone images stands a rabbit on its hindlegs looking over a dove ascending from an upside-down magician's hat.

A man murdered, a suspect identified, arrested, and charged. But there seemed to be no interest or intrigue about the case and only a scant mention of Zorran himself or the motive for the murder. That all changed months later when Zorran's murderer, Richard Tegtmeier, decided to make additional headlines.

The initial reports were simply vague with headlines like *"Man Held in Slaying"* (January 6; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) and *"Man Charged with Murder"* (January 14; *Latrobe Bulletin*). But in May Mr. Tegtmeier made headlines with *"Inmate 'Stable' After Death Try"* (May 26; *The Pittsburgh Press*). The headline in June read *"Slaying Suspect Flees Mayview"* (June 27; *The Pittsburgh Press*) when he escaped Mayview State Hospital. Then to outdo himself in July, after three weeks on the loose, he turned himself back in to the police but only after a 3.5 hour standoff where he held his sister-in-law at gunpoint. That headline blared, *"Hostage Safe in McKees Rocks Siege"* (July 20; *The Pittsburgh Press*).

The majority of information regarding just how Mr. Trifkovic was tragically murdered appeared in the subsequent stories about Mr. Tegtmeier. Often the articles mentioned Zorran only in passing, as the article focused on Mr. Tegtmeier's latest escapades. But a few articles did provide additional details surrounding the initial crime for which Mr. Tegtmeier was imprisoned.

The July 20 edition of the Pittsburgh Press referenced Mr. Tegtmeier's signed statement in minimal detail as its primary focus was on the hostage situation. But fortunately the May suicide attempt lacked intriguing enough details to fill the paper and so more room was devoted to details around Zorran's murder. The May 20 Pittsburgh Press stated:

*"Tegtmeier, in a signed statement, said he had gone to ask his estranged wife, who lived in the apartment next to the victim's, to go to church with him. He said that when he pounded on the door and got no answer, Trifkovic came out of his apartment and told Tegtmeier, 'You're not supposed to be here.'"*

*When Trifkovic went back into his apartment, Tegtmeier broke the latch on the door and followed him inside. When he knocked a telephone from the victim's hand, Trifkovic started toward him and the gun he was holding went off, the statement said.*

*Tegtmeier's wife was visiting at the home of a sister in Bellevue the night of the shooting."*

The articles focused so much on Mr. Tegtmeier that sometimes the details surrounding the murder were incorrect or inconsistent. The majority of articles stated that Mr. Trifkovic had been shot in the chest, but a few articles said it was his head or his back.

One article from the Washington Observer-Reporter on June 28 was even so vague as to why the shooting occurred that one might make assumptions as to why exactly Mr. Trifkovic was murdered. *"Police alleged Tegtmeier shot the magician twice in the chest during an argument at the victim's residence in McKees Rocks."*

In all the newspaper articles available via newspapers.com and Google news regarding the murder of Zorran only a few attempted to provide any clarity and context as to why this murder even occurred in the first place.

The day after Mr. Trifkovic's murder (*January 5*) the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's article *"Man Held in Slaying"* provided some detail as did the Pittsburgh Press story titled *"Rocks Man Slain Aiding Neighbor"*. Similar information was included in each article. Quoting the Pittsburgh Press:

*"A McKees Rocks man was slain, when, according to police, he tried to keep his neighbor's estranged husband from breaking down her door while she was away. Dead on arrival at Ohio Valley Hospital last night was Vladimir Tripkovic [sic], 62, of 715 Chartiers Ave.*

*According to McKees Rocks police Capt. Anthony Konkiel, the suspect, Richard Tegtmeier, 42, of 80 S. Euclid Ave, Bellevue, went to the apartment building to see his wife. When he received no answer, he tried to break down the door, Konkiel said.*

*The victim was shot twice in the chest with a .357 magnum revolver, said Konkiel, before the suspect fled. Konkiel said Tegtmeier turned himself in to No. 1 police station Downtown early this morning."*

So why was Zorran the Magician murdered? He was murdered for being neighborly. He knew his neighbor well enough to know that her estranged husband should not be there (*"You're not supposed to be here"*), but perhaps not well enough to know that she had gone out to visit her sister. Or perhaps he did know that she wasn't home but was looking out for her anyways.

Either way, in the end Mr. Trifkovic's off-stage actions paid homage to his on stage moniker as he lived up to the name *"Zorran the Magnificent"*.

\*\*\*

*[Tegtmeier's last headline-making appearance came in 1979 after he was found dead in his bed at Fairview State Hospital; "it was not a natural death" (November 7, 1979; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette).]*

\*\*\*



*Why my interest in Zorran?* I like to walk through cemeteries. There are often lots of German and English names. On a recent day my eyes caught sight of the name "Vladimir". That stood out enough for me to examine the headstone closer. I then saw "Zorran" and the engraved rabbit, hat, and bird. It was unique and intriguing and so I went home and Googled "Vladimir Trifkovic" and "Zorran". I found one publicly available article on Google News. So I started a trial on newspapers.com to learn more. The same day I located all the newspapers.com articles I wrote this blog post. Perhaps I could craft this story more (*and maybe someday I will*), but what you read above is my initial summarization of what I have learned about this otherwise forgotten man. Forgotten no longer, Zorran once again takes center stage.

