

0. DOSTOEVSKY, THE GAMBLER - Story Preface

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Harper's Weekly published this interior view of the Gambling House at Wiesbaden in its October 7, 1871 issue. Fyodor Dostoevsky spent a great deal of time gambling at this establishment.

After completing four years as a penal colony prisoner, Dostoevsky was conscripted as a private with the Siberian Seventh Line Battalion.

When he was first sent to Semipalatinsk, not far from the Chinese border, he had no idea how long he would serve. One thing he did know: To get out of the military, he would need the Tsar's pardon.

As it happened, Dostoevsky served four years in Siberia. While there, he married his first wife, a widow with consumption named Maria Dimitrievna Isayeva. Never really suited for each other, Dostoevsky still loved her in his way. (As one readily learns from the author's novels, loving - for Dostoevsky - always included large doses of self-sacrifice.)

Church records, signed on February 6, 1857, state:

The groom is thirty-four years old, the bride twenty-nine, and both are in command of their full faculties.

With the marriage came Pavel, Maria's son, who added no joy to the writer's life.

Once freed from his sentence, Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg where he and his new family lived in an apartment. Not long after, he joined with his brother, Mikhail, to produce a literary journal called Vremya ("Time").

During a trip to Europe (taken, ostensibly, to deal with his increasingly severe bouts of epilepsy), the married novelist (who was once again writing noted works such as The House of the Dead) fell madly in love with a young woman named Apollinaria ('Polina') Suslova. And he developed what would become a financially disastrous addiction to the roulette wheel.

Some Dostoevsky scholars believe that Polina was the love of Dostoevsky's life. Twenty years old when they met, the red-headed beauty was a complicated woman. She brought the writer enormous pleasure and gut-wrenching sorrow. After they became intimate, likely in 1862, Polina toyed with Fyodor's emotions as though that were her favorite sport.

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, toyed with the roulette wheel. He studied everything about it. He came to believe he could master it. Time and again, while playing at the Wiesbaden casino, he would win vast sums but then gambled them away. He felt compelled to win more. Or maybe, as scholars suggest, he felt compelled to lose as a way to punish himself.

Agreeing to meet Polina in France, Dostoevsky delayed his trip as he continued his bets on the Wiesbaden roulette wheel. Not one to wait for something that may never happen, Polina turned her amorous attentions elsewhere - and fell in love with Salvador, an unfaithful Spanish medical student.

When the writer finally left Wiesbaden for Paris, he was too late. Crying over the situation he had caused did little good. Polina - who well knew the writer was obsessed with her - flaunted her power over him.

Maria, meanwhile, never got used to St. Petersburg. As her illness worsened, she spent summers in the provincial city of Vladimir. While her separated husband gambled in the West, she was losing her battle with life.

Because he was married, Dostoevsky did his best to conceal his relationship with Polina. That, undoubtedly, was humiliating for the proud, strong-willed young woman. She did agree to meet him in Baden-Baden where the writer wanted to play the roulette tables at Germany's world-famous casino (which still exists.)

In Baden-Baden, the two were often at odds. The more Polina spurned him, the more Dostoevsky gambled. The bigger his stakes, the worse his losses.

The writer, capable of producing some of the greatest literature the world has ever known, was incapable of walking away with his winnings. He was, experts say, pathologically obsessed with the roulette wheel. When his self-described (but inaccurate) 'fail-safe' system helped him win 600 francs, he turned the win into a 3,000-franc loss.

When one studies Dostoevsky's novels, it quickly becomes clear that the writer believed suffering is the essence of life. Perhaps he came to that understanding in the penal colony. Perhaps he learned it at the roulette wheel.

One thing is sure: He brought the story of his love for Polina, and his addiction to gambling, into his novel, *The Gambler*.

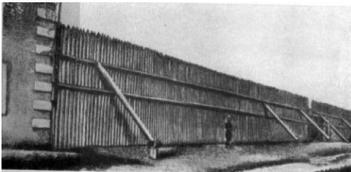
See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DOSTOEVSKY-THE-GAMBLER-Alex-and-Emma>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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Media Stream



Penal Colony at Omsk

Image online, courtesy the [dostojewski blog site](#).

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Map of Russia-China Border

Image online, courtesy the [factmonster.com](#) website.

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Maria Dimetrieveva Isayeva

Image online, courtesy Dartmouth College website.

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Pavel Dostoevsky

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Dostoevsky - Drawing of the Author as a Young Man

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Apollinaria Suslova

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Wiesbaden

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Vladimir, Russia - Provincial Town

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Baden-Baden - Aerial View

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Baden-Baden Casino

Image online, courtesy the University of Virginia website.

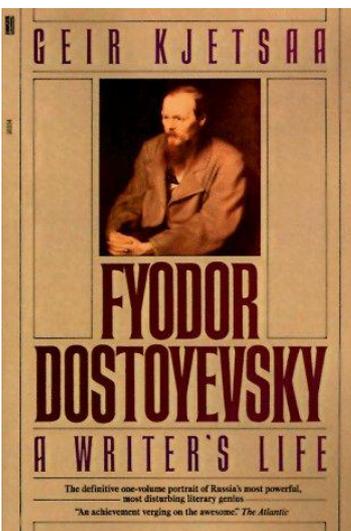
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Entrance to Baden-Baden

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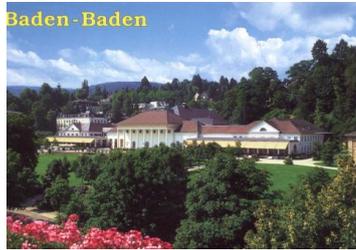


Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Writer's Life

Image online, courtesy [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) website.

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Baden-Baden Casino - Exterior View

Image online, courtesy the [University of Virginia](#) website.

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Roulette Table

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