

0. TRAGEDIES - Story Preface

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The roulette wheel at the casino in Bad Homburg, where Dostoevsky used to play, is depicted here based on an original sketch by W. Hilliger (1849). From the Bad Homburg City archives; online via Wikimedia Commons.

Only a catastrophe could pull Dostoevsky away from the roulette table. Even losing the advance (for his unwritten novel) to the [Bad Homburg](#) casino was not enough to make him go home. But when he learned that Maria was dying, he returned to Russia.

During the winter of 1863-1864, Dostoevsky worked on *Notes from the Underground*. In the background, he heard Maria's pitiful, hacking cough. No one could help her. And although Dostoevsky was never really happy with his first wife, he loved her.

When she hemorrhaged to death on 15 April 1864, he was distraught. He later wrote to his friend, Baron Wrangel:

Oh, dear friend, she loved me boundlessly and I loved her infinitely, and still we were unable to live happily together...We could not stop loving each other; the more unhappy we were, the more tied we felt to each other. It may seem strange, but that was the case.

She was the most honest, noble, and magnanimous woman I have ever known. Even though I suffered terrible agonies as I watched her slow death, even though I fully appreciated her worth and knew what I took to the grave, I still had not imagined how empty and painful it would be when the grave was covered with earth. And now it has been a year, and I still have this feeling; it has not diminished in the least. (Dostoevsky's letter, translated and quoted in "A Writer's Life," page 170.)

Dostoevsky's pain was dramatically worsened when his beloved brother [Mikhail](#) died three months after Maria's death. The brothers' successful journal, *Vremya* ("Time"), had ended because of a misunderstanding with the censor. Their plan to start *Pravda* ("Truth"), another journal, never passed muster with the authorities.

When Mikhail finally got permission to publish a journal called *Epoch*, it was on condition that the new magazine would effectively serve as a government mouthpiece. But antiquated equipment, a lack of subscribers, creditor battles and the very real threat of debtor's prison took their toll on Mikhail. He died of liver infection on the 10th of July.

In a letter to his brother Andrei, Dostoevsky shows his utter despair:

That man loved me more than anything in the whole world - even more than his wife and children, whom he adored...now what lies ahead of me is epilepsy and cold, lonely old age. (Translated and quoted in "A Writer's Life," page 172.)

But what was in store for Dostoevsky was much more than life alone as a sick, lonely man. Short of money, he couldn't get a loan big enough to help him flee the country, one step ahead of his creditors.

He agreed to sell a new three-volume edition of his finished works to Fyodor Stellovsky for three thousand rubles. Never mind that the speculator made all his money back in days. Lurking in the agreement was an untenable provision: Dostoevsky had to produce a new novel within one year (by November 1, 1866) or Stellovsky had the rights to publish all his works for nearly a decade.

By the time he paid expenses, the writer barely had enough money to travel to Wiesbaden. When he arrived, he lost the rest of his advance at the roulette table.

Down on his luck, and with little food to sustain him, Dostoevsky began to write *Crime and Punishment* in his horrid Wiesbaden room. When he returned to St. Petersburg, he sold the serialized rights for the unfinished novel to *The Russian Messenger* ([Russkii Vestnik](#)). Publication began in January of 1866 to generally good reviews.

As the year progressed, however, and he was still working on *Crime and Punishment*, the looming date of

November 1st constantly reminded him of the one bet he absolutely could not lose.

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Media Stream



Bad Homburg - Panoramic View

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Mikhail Dostoevsky

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Vremya (Time): A Journal Written by Mikhail Dostoevsky

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Russkii Vestnik

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