

FROM BUSTING FACES TO BEING GHOST BUSTED



THE LIFE OF WILHELM VON HOMBURG

By Vincent T. Ciaramella

On June 8, 1984, Columbia Pictures was about to release a film that would become a pop culture juggernaut. Featuring three scientists who start a business of “paranormal investigations and eliminations,” they took on a giant marshmallow man along with a Sumerian deity atop a skyscraper in Manhattan. If you haven’t guessed already, that film was *Ghostbusters*. What followed was a craze for anything and everything that had the famous logo emblazoned on it. From an animated series on Saturday mornings, to Halloween costumes, to a toy line, *Ghostbusters* was everywhere. So, like any good company that wants to capitalize on its own success, Columbia Pictures released a follow up on June 16, 1989, simply titled *Ghostbusters II*. While the film failed to capture the magic of the original, a new villain, Vigo the Carpathian, stepped out of his painting and into the public’s imagination. Even today, almost 35 years later, replicas of the portrait of Vigo can still be purchased online. While most people will recognize the 16th century magician that almost reentered the world on New Years Eve, few know the story

of the actor who portrayed him. His name was Norbert Grupe, but fans of the squared circle knew him in the 60's and the 70's as "Prinz Wilhelm Von Homburg," a counterculture mitt slinger, who as author Patricia Nell Warren put it was, "the German answer to Muhammad Ali." What follows is his life in retrospect.

As World War II heated up, Norbert Grupe entered the world on August 25, 1940, in Berlin, Germany. He was the son of Richard Grupe, a baker, turned policeman who worked at the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp. Richard would later claim he was never a Nazi and that he had no idea what was going on in the facility he patrolled. After the war, he boxed professionally from 1946-1952 and later became a professional wrestler with his son, the future Wilhelm Von Homburg

With Hitler dead and Berlin split, the Grupe's made their home in West Germany. However, times were tough in post-war Europe and making money wasn't easy. In 1950, Richard and Norbert emigrated to the United States and the father/son duo began wrestling under the name "The Vikings," complete with horned helmets. Later, they would switch up the gimmick and rename themselves the Von Homburg brothers, with Norbert metamorphizing into Prinz (Prince) Wilhelm Von Homburg. His character sometimes wore a monocle and a German eagle on his chest, creating a villain worth booing as World War II and the atrocities of the Nazi party were still fresh in the minds of most Americans. Later, the tag team would disband with Richard and Norbert becoming estranged. Not through with combat sports, Von Homburg traded in his wrestling trunks for boxing gloves.

Beginning at the age of 10, Von Homburg trained in the art of the sweet science and won several amateur bouts. With the end of his wrestling career, it was a natural move into the world of boxing where he carried over the bravado and showmanship of his past profession into the arena, outraging conservative fans of the sport all the while gaining new ones with his counterculture persona.

Von Homburg, the 6-foot 1 heavyweight, began his professional boxing career on the West Coast of the United States on July 20, 1962, at the L.A Sports Arena. The main event that evening was Alejandro Lavorante VS Cassius Clay. In a preliminary four round bout against Earl Wilson (though BoxRec lists Sam Wyatt), the *Independent Press Telegram* (Long Beach) wrote:

A wild-looking redhead from Germany with the unlikely name of Wilhelm Von Homburg earned a draw in another heavyweight prelim. Coupling the fact that he needs a haircut and possessed whiter skin than a washed sheet, Wilhem looked more like a burlesque comedian than boxer.

In another bout on September 21, 1962, Von Homburg kayoed Al Cummings in the third round, though Cummings decided he still wanted to go at it and tried attacking Von Homburg after the bell. Cummings was escorted out of the ring. Later, a riot broke out between fans, police, and ushers in an alley outside Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. Peace was eventually restored.



*Photo dated October 25, 1962.

Taken at the *Citizen-News* (Los Angeles).

The press over the years became obsessed with his appearance. In an article published on November 17, 1963, author Jim Murry writes that:

The first look you get at Wilhem Von Homburg, you're not sure whether that's a name or description...

Murry goes on to say:

Wilhelm looks as if he just arrived by the last swan. He looks out of place without a helmet and horns growing out of it. The hair is lank and blond, plastered over the side of his head like a wet dust mop. The gaze is imperious, the manner is arrogant, spoiled somewhat by the fact that he has to sniffle a great deal. Wilhem has a perpetual cold.

Von Homburg went with it and when he returned to his native Germany in 1964, he would enrage the conservative German boxing crowd by adopting an almost Gorgeous George like persona. He would wear trunks trimmed with mink, arrive at the ring with a cigarette or cigar in

his mouth. Always the showman, Von Homburg would even go as far as wearing a fur coat. He then grew his hair even longer and became known by fans as the “Beatle Boxer.” In an era before televised boxing in Germany, “Der Beatle” as he was also known in his homeland, put butts in the seats when he was on the card. He also became synonymous with the seedy underground counterculture of the late 1960’s/early 70’s and became as Warren called him in her article, the “Bad Boy Boxer.” This would later lead to his undoing.

Throughout the mid-60’s, Von Homburg’s star was on the rise and his record earned him a title shot against Italy’s Piero Del Papa for the European Light Heavyweight Championship. On November 19, 1966, Von Homburg came to the ring, ready to take the title. Alas, what happened that evening would haunt Von Homburg for the rest of his life. In the first round, he knocked Del Papa to the mat with ease. Ahead on points throughout the fight, it looked like this was going to be his night. Everything was going his way. Then the unthinkable happened. The ref disqualified him in the 11th round, claiming that he head butted Del Papa. Von Homburg would later say:

“I was the best thing German boxing had back then, and then I had a 70-year-old Frenchman as the referee. We all know what the Germans did to his parents and his sister.”

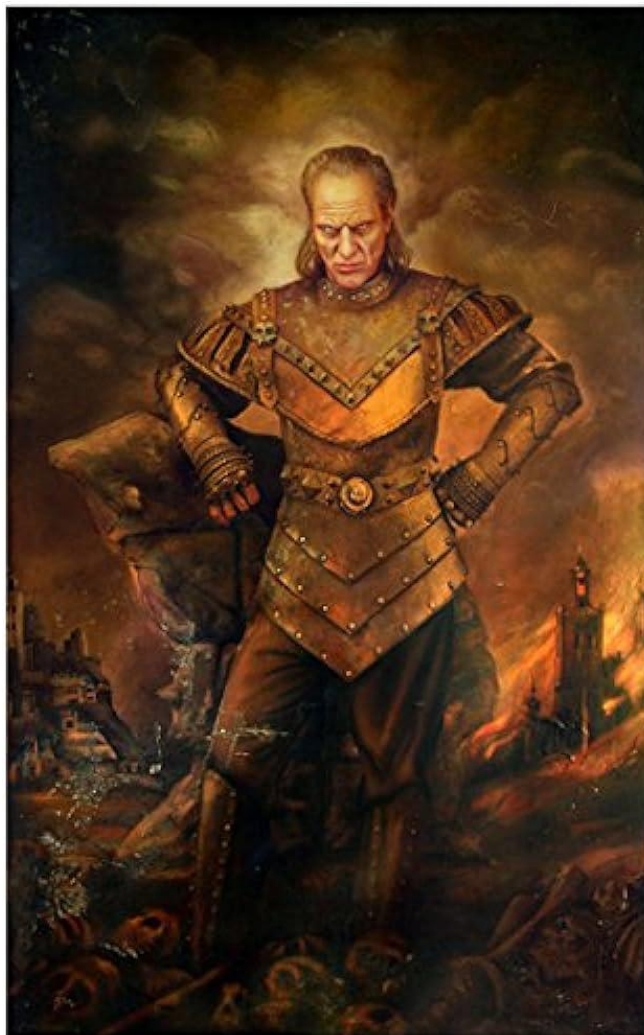
This would be the top of the mountain for Von Homburg. After his loss to the Italian, his later fights were a mixed bag. At that time, he moved to St. Pauli Kiez, the red-light district of Hamburg, Germany. Already associated with the counterculture movement, Von Homburg would hang out with pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, and even the local chapter of the Hells Angels. Boxing took a back seat to partying and his career ended with a loss to Rudiger Schmidtke on December 11, 1970. Later, the counterculture lifestyle he reveled in landed him a five-year sentence in a German prison on charges of extortion, drug-dealing, and promoting prostitution. With his savings from his bouts drained due to legal fees, Von Homburg was broke and without his freedom.

After his release, he came back to the United States where a new career in acting took the place of combat sports like boxing or professional wrestling. Von Homburg never became a leading man. However, he landed roles in films like *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis, *The Package* with Gene Hackman, and of course, *Ghostbusters II*, which became the movie that made him famous. His final appearance on film came in the form of a documentary about Von Homburg himself called *Der Boxprinz*. (The Boxing Prince).

As roles and opportunities dried up, misfortune befell Von Homburg. In an article titled *The Hateful Life And Spiteful Death Of The Man Who Was Vigo The Carpathian*, author Shaun Raviv wrote:

Norbert spent the last years of his life effectively homeless, alternately sleeping at the YMCA, crashing on couches, or living out of his van.

Later, after being diagnosed with prostate cancer, Von Homburg had a bit of luck and was able to live out his days on an old friend’s ranch in Mexico where he died on March 10, 2004. The whereabouts of his final resting place are unknown at this time.



* The painting of Vigo the Carpathian from Ghostbusters II

In the end, it's safe to say that Von Homburg will be remembered more for his iconic villain, Vigo the Carpathian, than his in-ring bouts. Who knows though, with the resurgence of interest in Ghostbusters, fans of the film might start looking beyond his acting and discover that he had a fascinating career as a pugilist, but only time will tell. Will Von Homburg have a resurgence in the public eye? Maybe. His character, Vigo said it best:

"Death is but a door. Time is but a window. I'll be back."

*The author would like to dedicate this article to his son, Enzo Michael Ciaramella, a Ghostbuster mega fan.