



**Francis Neník**  
translated by Katy Derbyshire

# **Journey through a Tragicomic Century**

**The Absurd Life of  
Hasso Grabner**

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Francis Nenik is a pseudonym; the author prefers to remain anonymous. He was born in the early 1980s and lives in Leipzig. Nenik boasts numerous publications in renowned magazines such as *Merkur*, *Edit* and *Words Without Borders*, some of which were produced for radio. His debut novel *XO* was published in the form of a loose-leaf collection. His award-winning essay 'The Marvel of Biographical Bookkeeping' (tr. Katy Derbyshire) was published by Readux Books in 2013, *Coin Operated History* (tr. Amanda De-Marco) by Fiktion in 2016.

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The Absurd Life of Hasso Grabner  
*by Francis Neník*

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# Journey through a Tragicomic Century

*The Absurd Life of Hasso Grabner*

Francis Neník

*Translated from the German by Katy Derbyshire*

**V&Q  
BOOKS**



*What a life story.*

*It is both astounding and regrettable that it has never been documented, but perhaps also understandable at a time seething with hurriedly written memoirs which barely tell us about history and hardly tell a story.*

Daniel Flügel in the *Potsdamer Neuesten Nachrichten*,  
on the centenary of Hasso Grabner's birth, 2011



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## Setting Out

21 October 1911 is not exactly an outlier when it comes to dates in world history. In Vienna, an archduke marries a princess, and the local emperor makes an amusing toast. In Utica, New York, a gigantic Mississippi farmer and a puny travelling-circus employee empty the contents of their revolvers into the body of a lion clutching its 12-year-old girl tamer in its jaws, and in Leipzig, a boy is born by the name of Hasso, who would later claim not to know the slightest thing about his father.

A mother, of course, is present in the case of young Hasso, as is right and proper, and the father is to emerge later on, albeit from a heap of files. And why not? The men in the family have an obsession with paper, after all; the boy's great-uncle even wrote the second volume of Marx's *Capital*.

That is, he didn't write it exactly, more transcribed it, which is no mean feat either, when you consider that Marx, on his death, left not a finished book but a manuscript so hieroglyphic that his companion Friedrich Engels needed not just a whole year, but also a personal secretary to get the papers Marx bequeathed him – 'barely grouped, let alone processed' – even approaching print ready.

That very secretary, it turns out, was the great-uncle of the little boy who has just been born here, on this page, and while the one is called Hasso Grabner, the other is called Oscar Eisengarten. Incidentally, that name, garden of iron, is one of those benevolent contradictions that only the 19th century could produce.

In any case, when the publisher Otto Meissner ran the presses at Leipzig's Reusche printing plant in July 1885, it was Eisengarten's transcription of *Capital* that served as the source.

A quarter of a century later, little more is left of the great-uncle than a small gravestone weathered by English rain, and all that young Hasso has left is a mother who earns a meagre living as a salesgirl and a christening certificate that reveals to him that his father was not only unknown but also unmarried to his mother, for which reason the pastor felt obliged to prefix 'extra' to the pre-printed word 'marital' on the certificate.

In short, the family has seen better days and money is tight, even with his grandmother and aunt supporting his mother, so at the age of 12 Hasso Grabner is sent away to the nearby town of Halle and then on to various foster families in Gera, where he perhaps finds a roof for his head, if not a home. What the boy does not manage, however, is to complete school. By the time he returns to Leipzig in 1926, just turned 15, his mother is on her deathbed.

Politically, though, Hasso Grabner is almost an old hand by this point. Not only is his family – at least as far as their memory serves – part of the original lineage of Saxon social democracy, oh no. Hasso Grabner himself has also done something for the revolution already, stealing ammunition at the age of 12 and 'spying' on the despised *Jungstahlhelm* junior paramilitaries, so it comes as no surprise that, in a narrative résumé composed for the Socialist Unity Party's\* regional directorate 45 years later, he declares outright that he 'took part in the Armed Struggles of 1918 to 1923 as far as my childish capabilities allowed.'

Memory, as every child knows, is the basis of history. Ideology, however – as will become clear later on – is the form in which history is expressed.

In 1926, though, the Socialist Unity Party does not yet exist, and Hasso Grabner's progression in life does not yet require safeguarding in writing. History will have to seek some other medium; though no one would imagine it to be a magazine about psychic powers.

Admittedly, the *Zentralblatt für Okkultismus* is not exactly what the common or garden social democrat keeps on their bedside table, and the communists with their striving for scientific precision generally give a wide berth to the *Monatsschrift zur Erforschung der gesamten Geheimwissenschaften*. Hasso Grabner, however, spends day after day with the aforementioned Central Journal of Occultism and the Monthly Periodical on Research in the Entire Esoteric Sciences. He has to: Max Altmann's publishing house, where Grabner has found work as a gopher, has made it its purpose to bless humankind with spiritualist literature by the ton. And indeed, Leipzig's eager readers practically begin baying for the extrasensory, and since the police have lifted the ban on the fiddle-faddle of fortune-telling, business has been all the better.

And so it transpires that Hasso Grabner, the bespectacled young communist with his neatly parted hair, provides local marketgoers with articles on telepathic plants, recruits admirers for the miraculous Brazilian medium Mirabelli even among university professors, and in the process also learns about seeing humans as antennae, after which he receives pages and pages of clairvoyants' impressions on the future of Germany – just as his own future is gradually ticking away, attempting to tiptoe past him unnoticed.

Essentially, Fräulein Future has already made it out of the door by the time an unpredicted event occurs in Max Altmann's publishing house on Leipzig's Frommannstrasse, on 23 May 1928. On that day, just before five thirty in the afternoon, an elderly gentleman enters the building and asks to speak to Max Altmann

in person. He does not state a reason for his request, but it appears so urgent that he is let through. When the gentleman arrives at the publisher's desk he introduces himself as an envoy of the Association of German Booksellers and asks, still slightly out of breath after running the 800 metres from Platostrasse to Altmann's villa, whether the good publisher might suggest someone to be trained at the German Booksellers' Academy. The starting date, however, is soon, in essence that very day, hence the urgency and the rather improper perspiration...

Max Altmann thinks it over, mentally going through all his junior staff. Then he says no.

In the next room, Hasso Grabner has been eavesdropping. There's no time to think it over, that much he knows. So he opens the door in front of him, enters the publisher's office – and suggests himself as a trainee.

The gentleman from the Association has no idea that the 16-year-old lad standing before him hasn't even finished school. And Max Altmann consents, for better or worse. Twenty years ago, he published a paper on clairaudience, and it would appear that Hasso Grabner has just come across it in the next room.

Two years later, in April 1930, Hasso Grabner passes his apprenticeship with flying colours, the best in his year. His prize: a trip to Brazil to gain work experience with a German-speaking bookseller in Blumenau. But Hasso Grabner turns it down. A convinced leftist, he is afraid of missing the revolution in Germany. Aside from which, the miraculous medium Mirabelli has already told all there is to be told in Brazil, *foretold* it even, and had it relayed and confirmed via the Central Journal through the Leipzig philosophy professor Hans Driesch:

I would like to mention another very impressive phenomenon: a door 'closed' itself at a distance of circa five metres from the medium. The light was always good, in some cases very bright.

4. VIII 1928

Signed: Professor Hans Driesch