The life of Hermann Ungar 1893 – 1929

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The Ungar family of Boskovice

My grandfather, Hermann Ungar, was born in 1893 in Boskovice, Moravia. Located in the eastern part of what is now the Czechoslovak Republic, but what was in Hermann Ungar's time the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it lies 35 kms north of Brno, nestled between several other prominent Jewish communities, in between fertile farmland and forested hills. In the 18th century it was one of the largest Jewish communities in Austria and centre of Talmudic Studies with several renowned Rabbis, the most notable of which was Samuel Ha-Levi Kolin, also known as Machazit ha-Schekel, a direct ancestor of Hermann Ungar.



The gateway to the ghetto

The town itself was – and still is – divided into the Christian quarter and the Jewish ghetto, which by the mid-19 century comprised one third of the town. It was dominated by the Empire Chateau, elegant and French-inspired, home to the Mensdorff-Pouilly family. The Jews were confined to the ghetto where they carried out traditional trades – tailor, butcher,

sword-maker, tanner, cabinet maker, barber, carpenter, furrier and farmer: Jews owned up to 23 hectares of the fertile farmland that surrounded the town and also managed estates of wealthy Hapsburg landowners, as in the case of Hermann Ungar's uncle, Ludwig Kohn, who lived in nearby Jemnice.

The Josef Reforms of 1782, which effectively made Jews equal to all other citizens and allowed freedom of movement, including the right to attend German schools, had a huge impact on the strictly orthodox community who had only spoken Yiddish and Hebrew and had confined themselves to Jewish names. It also allowed for a wider range of occupations – in textiles, clothing and distilling, which became the Ungar family business. Most important for the young Hermann Ungar was the 'Hapsburg-isation' of the ghetto via the spread of German as a first language, and the introduction of classical literature, such as Schiller and Goethe, both of which were his childhood favourites.

These reforms culminated in the 1848 revolution which gave further freedoms to the Jews, including access to 'Royal' towns, no longer having to wear special insignia on clothing and the relaxation of the Familial Laws, which had restricted marriage to the first son of any Jewish family. This had resulted in younger sons being forced to move away from their home communities in search of work, or to become itinerant Rabbis and seek marriage in other areas not so regulated.

That is not to say that life for the Jews was totally transformed: in many ways the new culture of assimilation, of being treated as an integral part of the German as opposed to the Czech culture, led to many problems, and was in fact one of the driving forces behind Ungar's tortured writings later on. The Czech Christians in small towns like Boskovice had always

only spoken Czech while their Hapsburg masters spoke German and only used Czech for communicating with tradesmen. The Jews soon switched to German as a first language and this gave them enormous commercial advantages: they were already carrying out trades but were now able to break out of the ghetto, using their links to other Jewish communities to their advantage.



The old Fountain Square or Brunnenplatz

As a result, there was no little enmity between the Czech Christians and the Jews which gave rise to undisguised anti-Semitism, fuelled by the German orientation and arrogant intellectualism of some of the town's most influential Jewish citizens. By 1852, 27 Jewish communities, including Boskovice, were allowed to have their own political administration and elect their own mayors. Boskovice not only had its own mayor, a splendid synagogue but

also its own police force, fire brigade, savings banks, hospital, bathhouse and an elementary school to accommodate the large numbers of Jewish children in the town.



The old fire station shed and shops in Boskovice's Fountain Square, now long gone

By 1900, when Ungar was a baby, the liberalisation had resulted in many Jews moving away, to Vienna in particular – like Hermann's Uncle Max Ungar - so Christians were able to move into and occupy houses in the former ghetto: of the 1204 inhabitants of the Jewish Town 426 were Christians. The lines were now blurred and Czech nationalism on the rise. In 1918, after the end of the First World War, Tomas Masaryk became the President of an independent Czechoslovakia and the hated Austro-Hungarian rule was history.



The main square in Boskovice

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This is the Boskovice that Hermann Ungar was born in. His antecedents can only be traced back as far as the mid 18th century when German names were coming into use amongst the Jewish population. The first Ungar in Boskovice was Rabbi Mose ben Hirsch ha-Levi Ungar. He had left Boskovice because of the Familial Laws and travelled to Slovakia where he married and had a family, which he brought back to Boskovice at the end of the 18th century; he was probably homesick but also attracted by Boskovice's elevation to the Talmudic centre of the region under the Rabbi Samuel Kolin. The name Ungar, meaning Hungarian in German, was adopted by Hermann's great-great-grandfather Rabbi Mose ben Hirsch ha-Levi Ungar in deference to his peripatetic preaching lifestyle in other parts of the Empire. On his return he was senior Rabbi from 1811-14, as well as head of the schoolhouse.

His son, Markus (Mordechai) Ungar was Hermann's great-grandfather; as well as inheriting the family tradition of being a Rabbi and master of the schoolhouse, he was also the founder of the Ungar distillery, which was later to expand into a large and prosperous business for the extended Ungar family. His marriage to Rosalie (maiden name unknown) produced four children, Israel, Samuel, Michael and Rebekka (Rosa). After she died in 1804, he married Jetty Ruhmann and they had Herrmann, after whom his grandson, my grandfather, was named.

Herrmann Snr took over the family business (the older half-brothers moved away, and Rosa married Joseph Kaufman) and expanded it not only to Brno, but also added another lower-class bar in the Christian part of Boskovice, The Parliament, described by Ungar in his story *A Man and A Maid*:

The long, dark guest room was not a picture of polite society. People with their hats on, the stink of pipes, spittle on the floor, yelling card players, on top of it all a nickelodeon trying vainly to shriek down the noise. In a corner The Widow Glenen sat in state behind the little counter, surrounded by bottles, glasses and gleaming tobacco pipes.

He also managed taverns and distilleries in neighbouring villages, including one belonging to his brother Samuel, whose grand-daughter Eva Rotter moved in with my grandfather's parents and eventually took over the family business on their retirement.



This jar celebrating the family business sits in the synagogue in Boskovice today

Herrmann Snr was a prime example of an assimilated Jew of those times: not only was he an extremely religious man, well educated in Judaism, but he was also successful in business and consequently of some social standing. He moved the family from their small house in the Brunnenplatz to a larger residence, in the Judengasse, where he extended into the neighbouring house and built an upper story, comprising a roof terrace and an arbour, which later became the focus of several of Ungar's writings. My father remembered it well when interviewed by Sudhoff:

Emil [Herrmann Ungar's son and my great-grandfather] only had a rooftop garden, which was located above the warehouse – the store – behind the house. All sorts of plants grew there and in the arbour – which we always referred to as the veranda – I used to watch the spiders. I remember my grandparents as very old people and

grandmother was, of course, blind, had diabetes and spent her time listening to the radio using headphones. Sometimes she sat and prepared beans on the stairs which led from the house to the arbour.

The house itself also inspired much of the 'place' detail of Ungar's fiction and from this we learn much about what the family home was like. Again, in *A Man and A Maid* Ungar describes his home:

There were tablecloths, family photos, a sofa and upholstered chairs. To me these rooms were the height of earthly luxury.

and later, in his diaries, he recalls an 'enlarged photo painted over in oil paint, framed and hung in the living room' and 'a large green board on which the names, heights and dates of birth of various members of the family were listed.'

One can imagine the rather dark and old fashioned upper middle-class heavy furniture of the drawing room, with anti-Macassars on the chintzy chairs, topped by a rabbit warren of bedrooms upstairs, rather complicated by the combining of the two houses and the resulting differing floor levels and difficult access. With such a large house it was easy to accommodate not only the parents and their children, but also the three nieces, who Emil took under his wing, and Eva Rotter without it seeming crowded



View from Kaiser Haus to Synagogue in 1929

This, then, was the Kaiser Haus or Emperor's House, named in gratitude after imperial permission to start the distillery, and it sits today in the centre of the old ghetto, an imposing double-fronted building overlooking a small square. There is a grand main entrance in the centre, to the left of it was the staff door, and to the right the distillery itself, which until very recently served as a bar. My father was fascinated by the pub as a boy, on his frequent visits to his grandparents, as he told Sudhoff:

An old man visited the bar room on a daily basis to drink his koralka (schnapps) – he called himself 'the Knight of the Mountain' and looked a bit like a dissolute version of my grandfather. I think I must have been slightly afraid of him, for he was mysterious – that is what I thought. I often went into the 'business' and served the customers – I liked taking the money and when I went into the liqueur-store I always ran my finger along the taps on the little liqueur barrels and then licked the liquid off my finger.

It was here that Hermann Ungar was born.



Kaiser Haus in 1964



The Kaiser Haus today, hosting a creche and a jeweller's shop. The Hermann Ungar plaque is just above the black car on the left of the picture

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Herrmann Snr married a much younger woman, Jetty Biach, also from an orthodox family.

They had four children: Markus (Max), Emil (Hermann's father) and two girls Fanny and

Rosa. Another son Michl died in childhood. Hermann was fond of his grandmother Jetty, who lived with them, and remembered her in his surrealistic sketch *Dream*:

Grandmother baked an apple for me and just as I was about to eat it, I remembered that my grandmother was dead and that when she died my father and Uncle Max had cried. I hadn't believed it and hadn't wanted to believe it. Grandmother startled me but I laughed at the same time, because she had probably only appeared because I had hiccups... which would stop if someone startled me.

Max was to become a maths and physics lecturer in Vienna, but returned to Brno when he was refused a Professorship on account of his Judaism. He married a girl from Boskovice, daughter of the Catholic mayor, and converted to Christianity, though sadly this was not enough to save some of his children and grandchildren from deportation and death in 1942. You can read his memoirs translated into English from the German (*Tradition und Entfremdung: die Lebenserinnerungen des Jüdischen Privatdozenten Max Ungar 1850-1930*) for the first time on www.hermannungar.com The two sisters married and moved away, but both became widowed and Rosa returned to Boskovice to run The Parliament, while Fanny went to live in Brno near Max. Her daughters Margit, Ilona and Blanka came to live with Emil and his family in the Kaiser Haus.

Max had been supposed to take over the family business while Emil was destined for the rabbinate and was trained in the Talmud –Torah school and even studied Sanskrit. He was a consummate intellectual, much more interested in the secular, read the bible in French, and spent two hours daily 'relaxing' by reading Homer and Shakespeare in their original languages; when he had finished he would simply start all over again. Like his father, Emil was torn between the two worlds of strict Orthodoxy and the intellectual world of art and

literature, which he veered towards in order to escape the mental and physical confines of the ghetto. Likewise he was conflicted in his duties as a father and guardian, thus distancing himself from his own children, especially the sensitive Hermann, who felt excluded from his father's attention and affections with the arrival of his girl cousins.

Emil was forced to take over the family business, rather against his will, when Max left for Vienna. His commercial status resulted in his election as Mayor of the Jewish community between 1903-5, and later as a governor of the local school and a member of the community board and its accountant. All this he found very difficult as he much preferred his other, cerebral life. His son later caricatured his father in his notes to his stage play *The Arbour*:

He dressed with discerning elegance, with French nuances although also lightly provincial. His hair is oiled and combed carefully over a pink-shimmering bald pate. A little, well trimmed pointed beard, a moustache just below his nostrils winging outwards and forming twisted peaks. Red cheeks. A beautiful silk handkerchief peeping out of his jacket pocket and white spats. All these give Colbert's appearance something special, which one can only describe as 'soignee'... His love of all things French...

And in a thinly disguised portrait of his father in *Colbert's Journey*, Ungar writes how 'He boasted French blood and interspersed his speech with French words... and smiled patronisingly at his fellow citizens' manners and mores and let his superiority show outwardly'.



Emil Ungar c 1900

Emil married Jeanette Kohn, daughter of Samuel Kohn who was in turn descended from a long line of respected Jewish scholars, including Rabbi Yekhezkel Halevi (Noda b'Yhuda) Landau (1713-1793), the High Rabbi of Prague. She came from neighbouring Jemnice, from a liberal Jewish family and was therefore a perfect match. Her brother Ludwig was to become close to Hermann, and his son Richard even closer.



Photographs on display in the Old/New Synagogue of the Kohn forefathers: R Shmuel ABD Prague Halevi Landau 1756-1834, and his father Rabbi Yekhezkel Halevi (Noda b'Yhuda)

Landau (1713-1793), both High Rabbis of Prague (top left).

Jeanette was an avid reader of Goethe and Schiller (the young Hermann's favourite authors), had a great interest in western culture, spoke beautiful French and was totally immersed in the German way of life. She was the perfect companion to Emil, who was remembered by Hermann's friends Lela Dangl and Ludwig Pinner as an 'extremely well-educated man, somewhat estranged from the world', 'a crank, but in the nicest possible way, in a way in which scholars sometimes are', a person who 'does not often mix with adults' but 'spends his time with young people with whom he communicates easily and well' and as being 'reserved and distant throughout his life.'

Emil and Jeannette Ungar had two other children in addition to Hermann, the oldest: Felix, born in 1894 and Gertrude (Gerta) born in 1895. Felix was to remain in Boskovice, where he married the daughter of one of Emil's neighbours, Marianne Knopfelmacher; they lived in the Knopfelmacher family home in the main square and he helped her father with his distilling business. They had two children, Hans Georg and Otto. Unlike at the Kaiser Haus, they had a large garden and after Hermann's death, my grandmother would often stay there during their visits so that the young cousins could play together.

Felix's business was badly affected by the 1938 annexation of Sudetenland and he moved back into the Ungar household to manage affairs for his father until the distillery closed in 1941, meanwhile apprenticing as a carpenter in preparation for departure to Palestine, where his sister Gerta had emigrated in 1926. However, finalising financial matters and collecting outstanding debts, together with the failing health of his elderly parents, delayed the move. In 1942, when he had papers to leave for England, he felt unable to abandon the by-now very ailing Jeanette. This indecision was to cost them their lives as, on March 19th 1942, the whole family including Jeanette (Emil had died earlier in the year) were taken first to Terezin, and thence on April 25th to Warsaw.

There is no further trace of Jeanette so we can assume she was gassed on arrival in Auschwitz. Felix and his two boys were on the same transport from Terezin and were held in Warsaw for three weeks, in the Great Synagogue, and then the SS began rounding the men up and taking them to Treblinka, where they were forced to build the concentration camp. It is not clear at what stage Felix and his young sons Hans-Georg and Otto were murdered (nine and eight years old respectively).

Marianne, Felix's wife, was also transported from Boskovice to Terezin on 19 March 1942. She survived the war but it is likely she died shortly afterwards as there are no records of what happened to her. Of the 458 Jews deported from Boskovice in 1942, only 14 survived.

Gerta was a delicate girl, pretty, very clever yet reserved, and looked like Hermann. She was idealistic and an ardent Zionist. She trained as a doctor in Vienna and emigrated to Palestine in 1926 to work as a paediatrician, first on a kibbutz and later, after her marriage to Amnon Rudolf Kleiner-Zair, in Tel Aviv. They had a son, Petr, who they felt they could not take with them to Palestine and so he was adopted by Hermann's first love and cousin, Blanka Totis.

It is thought that Gerta's constant letters to Hermann from Palestine stoked his Zionism and adherence to the cause. Indeed, he considered either or both visiting and emigrating to Palestine on several occasions, but his total immersion in his writing prevented it. My father, however, recalls going to Boskovice after his father's death and being measured up for a leather coat to take with him for his planned emigration to Palestine, as it was thought that was what Hermann would have wanted. Interestingly, Hermann's best friend, Gustav Krojanker, remembers Gerta as making a terrible impression on the young Tomy, my father, who was at that time also flirting with Zionism – although he always claimed to have no recollection of this:

It was interesting to note that the Zionist Aunty was the reason for Tomy's change of heart and present dislike of Zionism. Tomy told me time and time again what a revolting impression she had made on him, with her advancing decrepitude, and that this impression had coloured his thoughts about everything and everyone over there.

Years later my father put it like this:

My memories of Aunt Gerta were those of a skinny, scruffy woman, who smoked continuously and sat on a bed with me somewhere, going through my stamp album. Spectacles and messy hair.

Poor Gerta, divorced and devastated by the news of her family's murder in the camps, committed suicide in 1946.

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Hermann adored his mother but the loss of a close maternal bond due to her blindness and the addition of his cousins to the household was to play havoc with his psyche during his teens.

Arthur Loebl, his childhood friend and roommate at Brno recalls the family relationships:

Hermann's relationship to his parents was excellent. He loved and respected both father and mother, I never once heard a word of criticism from him about them...

The bonds between the individual members of the family were very strong and loving. The children revered and loved their parents very much and had very close ties to each other, too. They felt a very deep affection for their mother, without this in any way detracting from the authority of their father. The mother ... was a focus of the boy's life ...In the Ungar household there was no lack of family warmth ... It is however possible that the parents were far too soft-hearted and indulgent which was detrimental to their fitness for life.

And here, in the autobiographical *Fragment*, Hermann Ungar describes his parents and himself:

That was my father: grey-haired, kindly and clumsy. That is he. And this is her, my mother, who clasped me in a tearful parting embrace. And this was just me, the son of these parents, and this ruddy-cheeked son of a thankful father, who was born in this house with its iron balcony and in no other, it is here that I grew up and became the person I see in the mirror: pale cheeks, lean, brown hair streaked with grey, pursed upper lip, spectacles balanced on a long, thin nose.

Both Emil and Jeanette isolated themselves from day-to-day life in Boskovice – in Emil's case he was able to escape through delegating his business responsibilities, and in Jeannette's, in addition to her feeling of social superiority, she was able to isolate herself because she also suffered from diabetes as well as the inherited and debilitating eye disease, which was to render her blind in later life, and distanced her from her children during their childhood. This isolation was to have a great effect on their lives, especially Hermann.

As Hermann had the brains, Emil decided early on that he should follow an academic and cerebral path and he put great pressure on him. As a governor of the local school, and with the assimilated feelings of superiority intermingled with the wish to avoid a conflict of interest, he had the boys home-schooled until they were sent off to grammar school (*Gymnasium*) in Brno. He also tightly controlled which children they played with, confining their friends to those from similar affluent and well-educated families. This feeling of living in a ghetto within a ghetto made a lasting impression on the young Hermann, who recalled his feelings of isolation in several of his works. In *The Dream*, he writes of his brother Felix 'standing on the balcony and pointing down onto the street, the group of boys were whistling the signal for us to come down as the doors were locked, bolted from inside or chained,' and in *The Story of a Murder* he remembers, 'From very early on in life I avoided any intimate

friendships. After school I neither visited the homes of my school friends nor did I play with them'.

Even the piano lessons that Emil allowed him left a bitter memory that became subverted in his writing: Ungar never wrote as a first-person Jewish narrator, always as a Christian in a vain attempt to hide the autobiographical nature of all his work. In *Alexander* he re-lives the feelings of inferiority he felt scurrying to his lessons:

When I think about our Jewish boy, even today, I always see him wearing little black boots and a blue suit, hurrying along to the schoolmaster with his notebook under his arm, although I must have seen him daily in other situations. I tell myself it is risible to hate someone for such a foolish reason. But even today my blood still boils and I clench my fists in my pockets in rage when this memory comes to mind.

Emil, who adored children and was a loving father, encouraged creativity and was supportive of the plays that the boys and their cousins put on, offering friendly advice and was quick to provide family audiences for the grand performances. Perhaps Hermann was already rehearsing for his future career as a writer, but it is astonishing that he put on his first play at the age of eight; years later wrote about it in *Wallenstein by Me*. Here he is writing about his directorial debut, in 1928, in his normal sparse and detached style. The piece also gives insights into the Ungar family 'at home'.

I was eight years old when I experienced my first premiere...I was not only the author, but also the producer and took the main role of the play, so that all the usual conflicts between author, producers and key actor were played out within my own

heart (what a horrible thought!) The largest room in my parent's home was the stage.

The anteroom was where the audience sat, the door between both rooms was the curtain. The stage was connected with another room on the other side by means of three ascending steps. This little stairway seemed to me to be particularly attractive as an entrance/exit for the actors. It also played a major role in our other entertainments.

And there was a real audience at the performance, a paying audience, and, if I remember correctly, there was also a great number of our school colleagues, plus parents and siblings of the cast... The performance was not the sole event on the festive afternoon programme, in fact there was a gymnastics show, which my brothers' friends had insisted on. My brother and his friends were more talented gymnasts than actors and they wanted to demonstrate their superiority over me and my friends in their particular interest area on the same afternoon. I wrote the play during rehearsals. It was an historical drama... The Duke of Friedland had three scenes. In the first scene the Duke sat alone in his room and spoke about his intention to leave the emperor and take up the Swedish offer and make himself King of Bohemia. It was a monologue and didn't require any rehearsals, as I was going to play it myself and I depended on my knowledge of the material, the atmosphere of the moment to put the right words into my mouth. The scene closed with the statement from the Duke that he was now going to visit his astronomer, Seni, in the tower to ask him to forecast his future by the stars. In the second scene the afore-mentioned Ernst as Seni is sitting at my childhood desk, looking out at the window towards the sky now and again, holding a rule and a triangle in front of his eye. This had the appearance of the instrument which was shown on the front cover of my Wallenstein book. Wallenstein entered the room and a dialogue developed. Unfortunately I cannot remember whether Seni advised against or encouraged Wallenstein – probably he stuck to the author's text. In any case the dialogue was full of dark forebodings and death.

The last scene was played out in the Duke's bedroom. The Duke once again held a monologue, gazed out of the window towards the star-studded heavens, named the stars by their romantic names: Cassiopeia, Jupiter, Saturn then his glance fell upon the night Eger (?), I seem to recall that there was some talk about the church towers -Saint Nicolas or Saint Thomas – the mention of which seemed appropriately poetic to me. And then I had to find the link to the murder and conclusion. Every theatre person knows how important the last moments are for the fate of a play and which difficulties are frequently faced by the author, producer and actors. With all three functions combined within me, I plumped for what seemed the most normal ending. Wallenstein's servant, my brother, who had been secured for the cast by means of decisive parental words, entered the room and gave voice to the unforgettable words: 'Wallenstein, it is time to go to bed. It has just struck eight.' Obediently I lay down on my bed (two chairs pushed together) after having pulled my nightgown over my head. Just as my deep, regular breaths assured the audience that I was asleep, when Buttler rushed in with the murderers, stabbed the servant who was standing in the way and then the Duke whilst shouting 'Die, you traitor, die!' The curtain fell. The gymnastics show followed.

His childhood friend Alfred Ticho also remembers Hermann's early directorial efforts,

Around the age of fourteen we played scenes from 'Faust' and 'Maria Stuart' on the roof garden of the Ungar home under the direction of the teacher Josef Mayer. The

audience was made up of the parents of the 'actors' but mostly it was the Ungar family. Emil Ungar often attended the rehearsals and made suggestions. A year later we performed short comedies directed by Hermann, with the help of his father.

Hermann's career as a writer was in motion.

Schoolboy, student, soldier

In 1903, at the age of 10, Hermann was sent to the grammar school in Brno and his brother Felix followed a year later. The headmaster was a friend of Emil's and told him how happy he was when they left, for the two boys were great pranksters and practical jokers.



The grammar school in Brno

Some of their antics are remembered in interviews recorded with Hermann's cousin and onetime fiancée, Blanka Totis, one of the three nieces taken in by Emil when their mother, his sister Fanny, died. Hermann was 'not an inhibited or timid child, but lively and bright, full of exuberance and boisterousness' who loved playing tricks especially on Blanka, her sisters and even his own sister Gerta. 'For example, during the dancing classes in Brno it was traditional that the male dancers (and secret admirers) sent flowers to their "beloved" partners. Hermann took great pleasure in ringing the doorbells and then hiding away to watch the girls expectantly rushing to answer the door to see who had received flowers and from whom.'

This sense of fun was one of his most attractive qualities and stayed with him throughout his life, but frequently it morphed into rather callous and cruel teasing, probably caused by his own feelings of inadequacy; he enjoyed making jokes at other people's expense.

Many of Ungar's books contain both psychological and even physical torture, and to understand how the seemingly jovial Ungar could write of such evil, one has to understand the many sources of his anxiety. The joker persona was a camouflage to hide his deeper feelings of insecurity which only come to the fore in his later life and in his work.

His room-mate in Brno, Alexander Loebl, had fond memories of Hermann and his practical jokes, which are usually only funny to the perpetrator:

How do I remember Hermann? A distinctly handsome young man of average height, with red cheeks, beautiful blue eyes, always good-humoured, laughing, bubbling up with humour, always ready to play tricks on his older friend (I was three years older). He reminded me of a happy, good-natured leprechaun. I really liked him and I called him 'the leprechaun'. Even today I remember well how Hermann sprinkled sneezing powder in my room. It made me sneeze so hard and so long that my stiff, hard,

upright collar popped open! Hermann watched and nearly split his sides laughing!
...As far as I was concerned, Hermann was a happy person with a sunny disposition
and how I envied him his carefree attitude.

But there was more to Hermann than the 'carefree, happy' practical joker: he was extremely clever — 'one of the most talented pupils in the whole school', according to Loebl - and found learning easy, something that has been passed down through all the generations, to my father, to me and my children. This quick-wittedness gave him ample time to critically observe his schoolteachers and store up their idiosyncrasies for his writing. Like many writers he gained his literary inspiration from real life and his main protagonist in *The Class*, teacher Josef Blau, is modelled on his own schoolmaster Rinesch, whom Ungar loathed and feared in equal measure but who, according to Loebl, was 'a gravely neurotic man, who suffered from severe inferiority complexes and who must have been afraid of his students who did not respect him. He often lectured with a comical pathos which caused a lot of hilarity in the students.'

Hermann's upbringing as an assimilated Jew gave him feelings of superiority over the Czech teachers, who became the butt of his rather cruel jokes, and allowed him centre stage amongst his fellow pupils. As Alexander Loebl remembers,

Amongst the teaching staff of German secondary schools were a number of older gentlemen of Czech origin. At that time there were as yet not enough Czech higher education establishments and so some of the Czech student teachers studied at German universities and went on to find teaching places at German secondary schools. Some of these teachers had harsh accents, used Czech terms in their lectures

and made major grammar errors. All this was grist to the mill of the pupils' mockery and ridicule, but his was a youthful reaction and not malicious nationalism.

Hermann's resentment of his treatment in the ghetto by the Czech Christians made him quick to criticise because, as he wrote in *The Class*, 'the boys had all the arrogance of the well-fed, the self-assurance of the well-dressed, their laughter – had they been able to seize the weaknesses they sensed – would have destroyed [the teacher]'. The young Hermann was always extremely smart, with suits by the best tailor in direct contrast to the rather shabby schoolmasters.

But with the cruelty of youth, he turned on another Jewish pupil, Karl Blum, also bright, but from a poorer family. Like Hermann he had literary ambitions, and later Ungar was to write a short story about him, *Mellon, the Actor*, describing his thwarted career, and he also named one of his Jewish boys in the novel *The Class* after him. His actions probably stemmed from his own insecurity – better to join the aggressors than to become a victim, or a laughing-stock for his own literary ambitions. In his books, as in life, he was similarly damming of the Jewish characters, born out of his deep feelings of inadequacy and displacement as an assimilated Jew.

It was while he was at grammar school, that Hermann began to develop his life-long neuroses, starting with problems in puberty – 'ejaculations occasioned by his nervous disposition' according to his friend Felix Loria - which necessitated consultations with a neurologist. Nowadays early onset of sexual maturity (Hermann was 13) would not occasion such treatment.



Hermann Ungar (left) with Felix Loria around 1908

Hermann it appears was highly sexed. Not only did he have relationships with girls from a young age, but he also enjoyed an intense relationship with a young German student, Viktor Klettenhofer, which had homoerotic undertones, many of which are reflected in the relationship between the self-portrait character of Franz Polzer in his later novel, *The Maimed*, and the Jew, Karl Fanta, where the two boys 'hugged and kissed each other in tears'. This strong feeling for members of the same sex continued throughout his life, especially through his membership of other all-male Zionist organisations, such as Barissia in Prague, and possibly in his relationship with Thomas Mann. Hermann claims he did not see it as a sexual issue, however, more as a feeling of brotherhood and unity through shared beliefs and idealism, although there is little doubt about the intensity of these friendships.

Felix Loria recalls that after the neurology treatment Herrmann began an affair with a local schoolgirl, a relationship 'purely based on sex'. Loria was shocked and accused Hermann of being 'sadistic' as Hermann denied any feeling at all for this girl. The parallels in his writing

are clear to see; in *A Man and a Maid* and *Story of a Murderer*, both of which centre round depraved sexual relations, the causes stem from inferiority complexes rather than sheer sexual predation.

Hermann tried to escape the turmoil of his tormented teenage years through writing: he was seeking recognition and flight from his feelings of inner self-loathing. During his latter years at school, he turned to writing poetry (none of which survives), which he would read to his friends Viktor Klettenhofer and Felix Loria, and in 1910 sent a volume to the esteemed Austrian publisher Hermann Bahr who replied encouragingly to him. Like his character in *Mellon, the Actor*, who carried his single review with him at all times, so Hermann kept the letter from Bahr on his person.

Dieter Sudhoff, author of the massive tome *Hermann Ungar: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, believed his anxiety stemmed from a mixture of his feelings of rejection – first by his mother's illness, then by his father seeming to push him to one side by taking in his three cousins into the family home and, finally, by the overt anti-Semitism he had encountered, first in Boskovice, and now in Brno, where the Jewish students were in the minority. In Boskovice and Brno, for example, there were numerous instances of anti-Jewish sentiment ranging from social exclusion to violence and scapegoating.

Consequently, he rejected his parents' assimilation and joined the Zionist organisation,

Veritas, where he became the de facto leader of his Jewish classmates. They held lectures on

Jewish history and discussed issues such as the creation of Palestine. During the holidays in

Boskovice he joined a secondary school fraternity called Lätitia. He thought that by

becoming a Zionist he would solve the identity issues that had been plaguing him since

childhood. His friend Felix Loria introduced him to the concept of socialist Zionism yet,

unlike Loria, he saw no conflict between his Zionism and his assimilation. For Hermann it

was a political statement, rather than a religious one. Rejecting the religious aspects of Zionism laid the foundations for what I perceive to have been his later agnosticism.



Herman Ungar, bottom right, around 1908 in the Boskovice Jewish sports team Makkabi
In contrast to this serious side, Hermann took delight in all the normal activities of rich young men of the time: dancing, fencing, 'always tastefully and elegantly attired' and 'generally admired and popular, welcome at every event' thanks to his 'intelligence and sense of humour'. He hid behind this veneer of sociability, relished being the clown and the centre of attention. He believed that a life of jollity would help him escape his inner demons and the ghetto that confined his body and his mind.

* * *

In the summer of 1911, Hermann left the grammar school in Brno – he passed all his exams with distinction - and shortly after departed for Berlin where he seemed to be following his father's intellectual bent and studied Hebrew, Arabic and Egyptian grammar in preparation for his emigration to Palestine. His father, however, was determined that he should study Law, and he transferred to Munich after the first year to fulfil his father's wishes: after all his

father paid the bills. He only lasted a year there before returning to Prague to complete his legal studies, as he felt overwhelmed by the very German anti-Semitism which underscored his insecurities; according to a friend from the Zionist organisation Barissia, Hugo Brauner, he was 'unable to bear the German way of life for longer periods and that even Jewish friends from Germany began to get on his nerves with their blinkered, bigoted seriousness'.

Even in Berlin, where he associated with other Zionists, it was clear that being a German Jew and an assimilated Jew from the Empire were two completely different things, and Ungar felt alienated and uncomfortable so he returned to Prague to complete his studies.

In Berlin he met two men who were to become his life-long and closest friends – Gustav Krojanker, son of a wealthy shoemaker from Burg, and Ludwig Pinner, son of a successful Berlin banker and grain merchant. Both were Zionists so the trio had much in common and together they joined Hasmonäa, a post-assimilation Jewish nationalist fraternity. There is a marvellous life-size photograph of Krojanker in the Berlin Jewish Museum, taken in 1910, in the uniform of another Zionist student organisation, Jordania.



It was in Berlin that Hermann began to write seriously, though none of the early work survives. Krojanker remembered their first meeting which he described in his obituary of Ungar in the *Jüdische Rundschau* (Jewish Review), Berlin, 17/12/1929:

Before my eyes is the image of him, as I first saw him. It would have been towards the end of 1911. One day he appeared in my room — his appearance was comic. A blond, rosy-cheeked lad with soft features, dressed in celebratory dark robes with a top hat in his hand. He came from a good home in Boskowitz [sic] and had attended school in nearby Brno. From there he had come to Berlin as a student and was making his introductory visits with all the attributes of a respectable home...In those days...he seemed half comical, half festive.

At this first meeting Hermann revealed his ambition to become a writer: 'he had hardly sat down in the corner of the sofa and already he had produced a voluminous manuscript and confessed to me his dream, at the age of twenty, nothing less than becoming a writer'.



Gustav Krojanker in 1922

Before enlisting in 1914, Hermann had moved to Prague to complete his law degree. He immediately joined the Zionist movement Barissia, whose objective was 'to instill the Zionist way of life in as many local groups in the whole of the republic', while its purpose was 'to be a fighting force against the German-Bohemian liberalism'. Within a short time, he became, first, its secretary and, later in 1914, its President. Part of the Barissia tradition, in addition to marching with colours, was fencing with sabres, something Hermann was good at, although it didn't prevent him from gaining a swashbuckling duelling scar on his cheek – which merely added to his attractiveness. This was the happiest time of his short life so far – he felt at home amongst a sympathetic Jewish brotherhood who for the most part shared background and culture, and he was madly in love.

For five years, Hermann and his cousin Blanka enjoyed a close and passionate relationship, unlike the village girls Hermann had toyed with while at school and probably at university. The only person to whom he wrote about this pure form of love, 'the hours of joy, which I, as a youth, experienced without inhibition', was Thomas Mann; otherwise his books all revel in relationships fuelled by lust, greed and inadequacy. The distance between the two of them while Hermann was at university meant that their entire relationship was built on fantasy – in fact the two were complete opposites as Blanka was not at all literary (neither was future wife Grete) and by her own admission they were too different for the marriage to have succeeded. None of the love letters or poems he wrote to Blanka survives.



Emil front left, Jeannette front right, Gerta is next to her and, standing behind the two, is Blanka. Two of the other three women are probably nieces, Blanka's sisters, who lived with the Ungars. Hermann Ungar stands at the back in his army uniform

But the young Hermann was also plagued by doubts surfacing from his orthodox upbringing, where incest is a sin; and he had difficulty calibrating his pure love for Blanka with an inner revulsion of breaking the taboos and fretting about what lasting result this might have on any children they might produce. There is evidence of this turmoil in his controversial book, *The Maimed*, where Polzer is haunted by images of his father having sex with his aunt and, later, by a 'huge, incredible and horrifying' dream, where he wakes up next door to the 'soft and dark body of his sister'.

The happy times in Prague as a student and integrated part of the Barissia brotherhood were not to last. In 1914, Hermann decided to enlist to try to overcome feelings of inferiority and to prove himself, to become a man and to escape the shackles of his upbringing, as he said in *Story of a Murder:*

It seemed to me as if only the most reckless actions, relentless exertions, sufferance of wounds and injuries, unquestioned and immediate obedience to orders, would liberate me from the shame and taint which my father had brought upon me and others.

Like many Jews, he was also terrified of the pogroms that might follow a Russian Tsarist victory, so joining up chimed with his burgeoning Zionism. Initially he was a one-year cadet and was posted to Loskovice in north-west Bohemia. This was essentially a training forum and he saw no action until 1915. He recorded his attempts to compete with his fellow cadets and achieve recognition amongst his peers in *Story of a Murder*:

I carried out my duties with passionate dedication and in no way was I more drawn to the theoretical subjects than to the physical activities. Quite the opposite: I set my targets on carrying out the exercises and gymnastics to compete with the biggest and strongest of my comrades and would rather than fainted or collapsed than to admit I was exhausted and tired. It did not require much to exhaust me. But I clenched my teeth, suffered in silence and just kept on going. I was delighted when an officer gave me a direct order.

Hermann was horrified by what he encountered when he did finally join the front line as an officer for the final stages of the assault on the Russian armies in Eastern Galicia. Life on the front was hell: horse cadavers in their thousands littered the roads, interspersed between the smoking shells of vehicles, while the soldiers were exhausted, underfed and overstretched, and prey to the vagaries of the weather – boiling hot sun, sandstorms and violent rainstorms. Dysentery and typhus decimated the troops. Hermann was well out of his comfort zone.

The physical and mental strains of the fighting took its toll on Hermann who was admitted to

hospital in Podcamia suffering from muscular rheumatism. It was here that he first encountered poor Hasidic Jews, whose beliefs and lifestyle contrasted hugely from the wealthy Western or assimilated Jewish traditions. The experiences were to make a lasting impression on his literary output: he later used Podcamia as the setting for his play *The Red General* (loosely based on the life of Trotsky) and became fascinated by the eastern Jewish traditions such as kabbalah. He was impressed by the sense of belonging of these people, something he had always missed, and their belief systems, in particular those of good and evil, were to influence his later writing.

In addition to *Story of a Murder* and *The Red General*, Hermann wrote two further pieces based on his war-time experiences, a play entitled *War*, set in Napoleonic France containing revolutionary-pacific themes, and the feuilleton *Do Horses Really Scream*, in response to Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Both reflected his horror of war which changed his life and orientation of belief, as he wrote to Thomas Mann in 1921, whom he had met in the early 1920s while he was attached to the Embassy in Berlin,

I was a soldier and at that time – on the frontlines – sighed more heavily over the fate of the many others than over my own sufferings. At that time I became an antimilitarist, a revolutionary.

Again, according to Mann, he 'remained a good chap...always keeping others amused', despite his inward anguish. He bumped into his old friend Alexander Loebl on the Russian Front at Lublin who found him in 'scintillating mood and merry company ...just as in earlier times' – a typical Hermann performance. He gave thanks for the fact that he did not die in the war like his cousin Fritz Sonnenschein, 'Am I Hermann Ungar because I did not fall in the war like Fritz? Or did I not fall in the war so that I could become Hermann Ungar?'

While at the front he wrote a series of poems, under the *pseudonym* 'Sum' [I am], reflecting his *cri de couer*, 'I am Alive!' As he wrote in his diary, 'During the war I was faced with the immediate danger of death every hour, but when I prayed, I prayed that God may only let me live if I was meant to be a writer.' He sent them to Max Brod, later Kafka's literary executor, who was asked to pass them on to the editor of a Zionist magazine, *Selbstbewehr* (Self-defence). Lacking in specific references to Judaism, they remained unpublished.

He did not survive the war unscathed. In December 1915, he broke his leg after a fall caused by a grenade explosion in an artillery dug-out in Koeniggraetz on the Russian front. Even after his fall he defended his unit's position and was awarded the Silver Medal for Bravery – First Class; the citation described him as an 'industrious, conscientious soldier, and a well-loved comrade.'

He was sent to Brno to recuperate and there was nursed by his beloved Blanka and his sister Gerta. But he was never fully to recover from his injury – the leg was badly set – and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He was also not deemed fit enough to serve at the front again. As a result, he was able to continue his studies on and off until he graduated in 1918 with a doctorate in law.

There is no doubt that Hermann Ungar ended the war a changed man – he had shed his youthful and rather childish exuberance: the horrors he had witnessed had heightened his bubbling neurosis and depression and his physical health was permanently damaged. A much more serious and determined man emerged: one who wanted to find his place in the world through his writing and his Zionism.

Lawyer, diplomat, writer

The end of the war gave new hope to Hermann. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was disbanded and Tomas Masaryk, who was tolerant towards Jews, had become state president. Moreover, his experiences at the front, fighting side-by-side with his fellow Czechs, had shown him that nationalism was a unifying factor that overarched the bounds of religion. This was to lead to his eventual acceptance of a role within the recently-formed Czech Foreign Ministry and a posting to Berlin, something of a contradiction for an assimilated Jew in 1920, whose first language was indeed German, but whose leanings were to the Czechoslovak Republic and to Jerusalem.

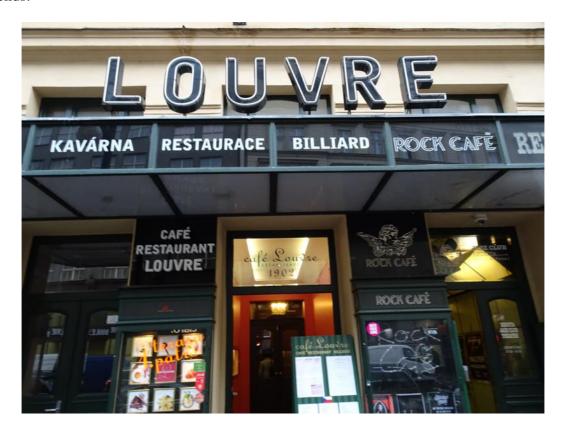
This did not happen immediately. In deference to his father's wishes he became a trainee lawyer in the respected chambers of Dr Froeschl in Prague and moved to Hopfenstockgasse in the Old Town. Despite his utter boredom with his new job and his dry colleagues – he was later to satirise this period in his short story *Tulip* - he managed to squeeze in some time for writing, but not nearly as much as he would have liked, for he was determined somehow to fulfil his dream of becoming a full-time writer. *Letter to a Woman* and *Sanatorium* were published in *Prager Tageblatt* in 1919, and in his scant free time Hermann would frequent the café society of the Prague writers' circle – sessions in The Arco, the Louvre, and the Continental, hobnobbing and discussing idols such as Grabbe and Dostoyevsky, with writer such as Johannes Urdizil, Ernst Weiss and Hans Demetz.





Ungar's digs in Hopfenstockgasse (now Navratilova) in 2012, and its art nouveau interior

Kafka was also still in Prague but it is not known whether they were acquainted despite having many mutual friends such as Max Brod. Although critics see great similarities in their writing, Hermann claimed never to have read any of his work. On Sundays, his only day of respite, he would take a walk across the *Karlplatz*, along the quays and then follow the river bank before going to a café in the Old Town, often the Continental, partaking of two eggs in a glass, reading the newspapers, in those days hanging up and attached to long sticks – the Louvre café still keeps its newspapers like this. He would watch the billiard players attentively, never daring to play himself, sipping his coffee, perhaps seeing some of his friends.





The newspapers hanging in the Louvre



The billiard room at the Louvre, where perhaps Ungar sat and watched the players

The life of a lawyer was not for him and after a few months he abandoned his secure job and disappeared from view for the best part of a year (May 1919 - March 1920), his heart and mind in turmoil: he felt stifled – all he wanted to do was to become a writer. He surfaced in Eger, Sudetenland, now the Czech town of Cheb, where he joined the provincial theatre as a dramatist and actor, but it appears that it was not a great success, although it liberated him

from a hated career. A great mimic and observer of traits and character, he was not formally trained and so he did not receive plum roles, and his writing skills were not really used – the repertoire was operetta, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe.



Hermann Ungar in 1919

But it was not a complete waste of time, because at some stage during 1919 Hermann had completed the two novellas, *Story of a Murder* and *A Man and a Maid* which were to be published as a single volume entitled *Boys and Murderers* in 1920 by EP Tal, and which Germany's most famous 20th century novelists, Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig, were to review so enthusiastically.

Short of money, in September 1920 he returned to Prague and joined the Escompte Bank which, if anything, was even more unsuited to his character than Froeschl's chambers. It was during this time he invented the doomed character Franz Polzer, the protagonist of his first novel *The Maimed*.

Reading Polzer's daily routine brings home just how ground down Hermann felt. Every detail

reflects his way of life, down to the route he walked from his lodgings in Hopfenstockgasse, where he returned after Eger, to the description of his landlady whom he used as a model for Frau Porges. Here I am quoting the first-person version contained in the short story, *The Bank Clerk* – he later rewrote *The Maimed* in the third person so that readers would not associate him with the monster he created; though outwardly unlike him, in fact Polzer reflected his inner turmoil. Later, he confided to Ludwig Winder, 'I cannot run the danger that people think I am always talking about myself. This thought paralyses me, I just cannot continue to write'.

From the age of twenty onwards I worked for a bank. Every day at quarter to eight I walked to my office. I left home at the same time day after day, never a minute earlier or a minute later. When I walked out of the side street in which my home was located, the clock in the tower struck three times.

During the whole period of my employment, I changed neither my job nor my home and I still live in the same house today. I moved in when I graduated and started work. My landlady was a widow, similar in age to me. When I moved into her house, she was still undergoing the year of mourning for her spouse.

In all the years in which I was employed, I never spent a morning on the street – except for on Sundays. I never experienced weekday mornings when the shops were open with the hustle and bustle of the crowds. I never missed a day's work in the bank.

The streets I walked on during the early mornings always looked the same. The shutters were being drawn up on the shop windows. The commissionaires stood around in front of doors awaiting the arrival of their bosses. Every day I met the same people – schoolboys and schoolgirls, ageing and jaded clerks, ill-tempered men

hurrying to their offices. I walked amongst them, the people of that time of day, hurrying along, detached and ignored, just one of many.

And the whole time I never gave a thought to the fact that I had never actually fulfilled the hopes and aspirations which connected me to my career.

I had told myself that with effort, application and hard work I would achieve a high management position in my profession. But this ambition is now forgotten. I forgot it with all the little, unimportant activities which had taken over my days from the very start.

I got up in the mornings, washed, dressed, scanned the papers whilst eating my breakfast, then walked to the bank. I sat down at my desk on which reams of paperwork were piled, and reconciled the figures with the entries in the books on the shelves all around me. I had to initial every sheet of paper I read and then place it in a file. In my room and in other rooms around me men and women sat at desks like mine. The smell of these men and women, the sounds of their boring activities and conversations droned through the whole building. I was eminently capable of carrying out my work. It offered no opportunities of showing ability or excellence and therefore no chance of attracting the attention and recognition of my superiors.

At lunchtime I ate at a small inn close to the bank. My afternoons were spent in the same way as my mornings. At six in the evening I tidied the documents and pencils on my desk, locked the drawer and went home. My widowed landlady brought a simple supper up to my room. I took off my shoes, jacket and collar. After eating my supper I read the newspaper from front page to back page. Then I went to bed. I seldom had dreams. But when I dreamt, I dreamt that I had forgotten my initials, which I had to write hundreds of times every day, that my hand was paralysed or that my pencil

would not write. I remember the latter most of all, as it was probably my most frequent dream.

The next morning I got up as I had got up every other previous morning and began my day again, a day which was spent like every other day.



The site of the Escompte Bank in 2012

The howl of anguish Hermann felt is palpable: he was unable to see any escape from such drudgery and despaired of achieving his ambition of being a writer. Quite by chance, he hit a stroke of good fortune when, travelling to Vienna to discuss the publication of *Boys and Murderers*, he was introduced to a Dr Havlicek from the Czech government and who was due to move to the Berlin Embassy as Councillor. A literary and educated man, he had little difficulty in tempting Ungar to resign and join him in Berlin as a junior member of staff, as after Masaryk became President, Jews were allowed to work for the civil service. Hermann paid tribute to his saviour in the character Dr Ehrmann in *The Maimed*, who takes pity on

Polzer and buys him some new clothes which help 'make [his] vision come true and to find employment which would guarantee an income appropriate to [his] standard of living and background'.

Despite his rather miserable time as a student in Berlin, Hermann was returning a changed man with some status. His short stories had been published to much critical acclaim, he was working on his first novel, and Berlin remained the centre of German literature and culture. In addition to the financial security of the new role, he had the added bonuses of his two soulmates Gustave Krojanker and Ludwig Pinner, although the latter emigrated to Palestine in 1921, shortly after Ungar's arrival.



Hermann, centre, with Pinner, left and Krojanker, right, in Berlin

He decision to move was also influenced by the Prague riots which took place in November

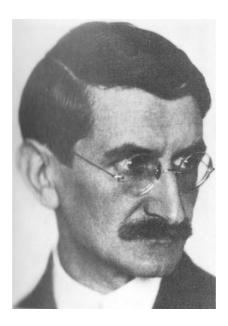
1920. Czech nationalism, which had been unleashed after the end of the war and fueled by

Masaryk's failure to deliver on his promises to rectify the Hapsburg legacy of social injustice

and class division, exploded into angry mob protest against German language and culture and, by association, against the Jews, who were regarded as German by the Czechs. As Hermann was to discover in Berlin, the Germans did not regard the Jews as German either, which contributed to his feelings of alienation. Despite all this, he remained committed to the Czech Republic and did not therefore feel conflicted in taking up his new role.

* * *

Hermann was to spend the next seven years of his life – on and off – in Berlin working for the Czech Embassy. He soon had a growing circle of friends to add to Krojanker and Pinner; Hans Gerke, an Embassy colleague, remembered Hermann as having 'an excellent sense of humour...we were both young at the time and had a lot of fun with the bureaucratic Czech diplomats.' Gerke, like Ungar, was a German–speaker and so we see this sense of superiority continuing even within the confines of the Embassy where the language was primarily Czech. His other great friend and mentor at the Embassy was the Jewish poet, Camille Hoffman, who was the Press Officer.



Camill Hoffman in 1918

Hoffman took the young writer under his wing and introduced him to his circle of friends, including Stefan Zweig and Egon Erwin Kisch, whose wife probably typed Hermann's manuscripts, adding to his Prague friendships with, among others, his hero Jaroslav Hasek (author of the classic Czech post-First-World-War comic novel, *The Good Soldier Schweik*). Later Ungar joined and became active in the literary association Group 25, founded by Alfred Doeblin whose members included Bertolt Brecht and Max Brod, a close friend of Kafka and later his literary executor. Their aim was to protest against the increasing censorship of *avant garde* works. Ungar often met another writer, Leopold Schwarzschild, and formed a close relationship with his wife – with his good looks and ready wit, he was a great womanizer in his Berlin years. It is not known whether this was a full-blown affair, but it is likely.

Thomas Mann's positive review of *Boys and Murders* raised Hermann's popularity among the Berlin literati and he soon joined the coffee house set that frequented the Café West, or Café Megalomania as it was nicknamed, sitting there for hours with Ernst Weiss, Paul Adler and Berthold Viertel. It was here he met the actress Olga Vojan who was appearing in the Wedekind's scandalous *Franziska*, where she appeared almost naked. Although she was the writer and critic Otto Flake's mistress, Hermann developed a close relationship with her. When Flake returned to his wife she committed suicide, and Hermann was devastated that he had not been able to prevent it: he had not felt adequate enough to ask her to marry him. He tried to atone for his feelings of guilt by organising the funeral together with Camill Hoffmann and making the arrangements for the body to be transported to Prague. He also tried to protect her reputation from the press's indiscretions.

Somehow Hermann found time to work on his new novel despite the rigours of his day job and the excesses of his social life. But he was beset with doubts and fears of not fulfilling expectations (his own as much as anyone else's), following on from the success of his first

publication. The anxiety was so great that he fled to Garmisch Partenkirchen in Germany on extended sick leave suffering from a nervous disorder. Here he confided his inner demons to Otto Flake, who welcomed him, but was later to betray Hermann's confidences and damn *The Maimed* saying 'the erotic coarseness' of the book stemmed from the 'urges and imaginations of the author himself'. Ungar never forgave him.

While in Garmisch, Krojanker had asked Hermann to pay his compliments to Ella Kohn, the object of his affections, who was staying there, and to present him in a favourable light.

Ungar was jealous of this woman whom he described as an 'intellectual of a mannered fashion' getting in the way of his relationship with his best friend, and could not help himself from behaving badly, although he obviously found it highly amusing. Ella described his schoolboy prank thus:

One night, in the little, highly respectable hotel where I was staying, I heard someone calling my name from the street; it was quite late and people up and down the street would have been asleep. Then the bell rang persistently and soon the lady of the house appeared, visibly put out, upstairs in my room. A young man, a Dr Ungar, had come to call to tell me something very important, explained the lady, but she had - at this time of night - sent him away. It must have been a big joke for him, annoying petit bourgeois people, a habit I observed often in subsequent years. On the next day he showed up at my hotel to take me for a walk. Then we sat in a Cafe; his manner was light, uninhibited, relaxed ... not at all like a writer.

This incident did nothing to damage his friendship with Krojanker, who was able to write to him that he hoped 'in the interests of all the countries ever involved, that he fulfilled his commissions in a more diplomatic manner'.

There are numerous examples of his pubescent humour coming to the fore even in illustrious

diplomatic circles. Ella remembers his Berlin antics vividly:

His position as a diplomat in Berlin necessitated a range of social obligations. Ungar played a lively part in the social life and his love of excesses and outrageous dancing made him famous in a very short time. In society, during important embassy receptions for example, where all the guests were refined and exceedingly polite, he took the role of the 'enfant terrible' and behaved badly. During these receptions he would greet the lady of the house with a kiss on the hand, whilst enquiring 'And does your spouse satisfy you?'



Ella Krojanker c 1930

On another occasion, Ella remembered, they were going out for a meal when Hermann noticed a prostitute, 'heavily made-up, neither young nor pretty' crying on the street corner (he lived adjacent to the red-light district in Kufürstendamm, with all its clubs and nightlife). Ungar went back find out what was wrong and discovered that all her money had been stolen. He gave her a huge note which Ella remarked probably cost him more effort to earn than the prostitute had expended in making her fee. 'We didn't speak about it, we just walked on. He

did it spontaneously, in passing, he recognised her problem, as far as he was concerned it wasn't an act of charity.' He had empathised deeply with her position as an outcast.

Hoffman introduced Hermann to Lela Dangl, his mistress, who was to become a close friend of both him and, later, his wife Grete. In fact, it was Lela to whom Greta entrusted Hermann's diaries when she left Prague in 1939, and who burned them out of fear of discovery by the Nazis. Even my father (in the 1960s he and my mother both met Lela Dangl, who had survived the war unlike her lover Hoffman, who died in Auschwitz in 1943) knew the story of an evening in an expensive restaurant where she asked the waiter to pack the left-overs for her cat. Much to her embarrassment, Hermann declaimed so that everyone in the room could hear, 'But Lela, you don't have a cat!'.



Lela Dangl, Hoffman's mistress, around 1930

Despite Hermann's joviality, Ella wondered if there was a deeper meaning to his shenanigans and dire warnings about 'intellectual men' who behaved no better than normal mortals in the bedroom, and 'concentrated only on themselves' – a canny observation of the narcissism that dominated his life. Even after Krojanker and Ella married (she did not heed Hermann's

words) they kept a cool distance between them, although Hermann and Krojanker remained the dearest of friends.

Nevertheless, Ella's memories of Hermann provide real insights into his character. She noticed 'when he thought himself unobserved, he seemed quite different. The expression in his eyes was almost tragic – dreamy and tragic – but when he was with the others, he was always happy, amusing other people'. A real Jekyll and Hyde character. She noted also his insecurity and his ambivalent attitude towards the middle-classes – for instance he was able to 'recite the most banal conversations held by a fine society lady at the dinner table in such a comic way that we all laughed, [a woman] whose invitations he readily accepted but could not wait to poke fun of later'. One episode always had him in stitches: they had been invited to dinner with a very rich man who pompously observed that 'nothing disturbs me more than pecuniary losses'. She noticed how he 'soaked up these traits in people' which normally went unobserved.

He also had an innate jealousy of any woman who threated to come between him and his male friendships, as she saw clearly in Garmisch. His lack of self-confidence led to a deep-seated fear of being disliked, and his jocularity was the flip side of that – the desire to be liked, if not loved. For instance, he was convinced that Ella preferred Pinner to him, despite her reassurances to the contrary; he was irked also by the fact that the porter in his apartment block did not like him and asked Ella if she ever had a similar feeling. Hermann Ungar was indeed a complicated character and it was little wonder that he spent much of his working life on sick leave.

It was while he was in Garmisch that he first visited Thomas Mann, who was to become his mentor and godfather to his son, named Tomas after him. Mann is one of Germany's most celebrated and influential novelists, winner of the 1929 Nobel Prize, and by this time had

already written *Buddenbrooks*; he had just completed *The Magic Mountain* when they met.

Hermann had begun a correspondence with him when he had asked Mann to review *Boys and Murderers*, and now confided his anxiety about the difficulties he was having with the narrative voice of *The Maimed*, and it is likely that this was the reason for their meeting.

They were to correspond over next few years – Hermann's worshipping letters survive in the Mann archive but Mann's to him were lost along with all his other papers at the outbreak of the Second World War. Hermann's devotion to Mann is childlike and enthusiastic – he writes a blow-by-blow account of his reading of *The Magic Mountain* in breathless and awed tones:

7. XII. 24.

Respected Master!

I have just begun to read Magic Mountain, am about a third of the way through, but still I feel the urgent need to tell you how much happiness this book gives me. It delights with its irony, its excusing smile, its supreme tranquillity, in the detached way in which it is written, so lively, so three-dimensional, every word is reality, nothing is illusionary, I feel so paltry in comparison, I have the feeling that the person who wrote this novel is free and creative, whilst I, myself, am dragged down by my dirt-covered boots and feet of clay. I have only one consolation: that I am your contemporary and that you will provide me with maturity and — with the risk of being regarded by you as presumptuous — I feel very close to you, despite everything that they say about me, I feel that we are swimming along the same stretch of water and, whereas I am fighting with the bindweed and the algae, you are swimming calmly and peacefully in the middle where the water is endlessly deep but so clear that you can decipher every grain of sand on the bottom.

The Magic Mountain entrances and enraptures me. No other words can describe the impact. I read it: my cares and worries disappear...

...Please excuse my intrusion, I wrote without first formulating the ideas in my mind. I solely wished to tell you how delighted I am.

Always respectfully

Hermann Ungar

Vereleter Meister Al labe den Janber lerg erd zu lesen Legonnen, Kanen I tale and hister mir, aber i'll Jethe wich gedraugt, Threen men, rie flicklist will dieses full wall to it so My hand in der Tronie, in dem verger henden läckelen, in A some anen Rishe, in der Eutfernung, dus der ergestrieben and thendig, so plantisel, jedes You ist wisklish, Keines int the " wingefaller," wan kommot sil so armselij vor, wan John I als scheite da liver, der freich und bilder under and will die Grech Klumpen an den klobigen Tursen hat. Nur my hortet wil; dad il In Zeitgewore bin und dat il an merde und, - and the pefale das sie und fur Mand were latter - wooddas iil with Threw troty allen, was what an mir selen kann, made fishle, it hale day geforte, in demselben Harrer am Upr cutlany wii alling oflangen me dem ta primed puhing in der dis to, da vo das Harrer and the fif it aber doct so klar, dast to jedes landkorn and Miller Annel acteu, stationderimmeres. In fantierbery had beglinkender His Knoy, il kann Kin Hard dafin finden, Til lese ihn und il hille Keine Jorgen, Mil mil jang Klar darriber, wie das Konnel, das mean von me fruit foorts jeden tings lendlend, weil Ihnen gegeben Hen Herentlilen, segel dem frock, hinterallen state sellen La sela Nachsill gavalren, etora vienin Kluger Lohor reinem harristen den Vater vergelbt. Then hie, das it so, show so noch redt formulier to haben, wie il will freme. Hermann Ungar

Hermann's letter to Mann describing his reaction to Magic Mountain

He honoured his 'respected master' by writing a long essay intended to demystify the writing style of Mann, entitled Manuscript of a Playwright, which was published in The Literary World. Hoffmann's daughter Edith remembers Hermann being worried about being unable to live up to expectations, as Mann's manuscripts (Mann had given him Buddenbrooks, Death in Venice and The Magic Mountain for this task) were almost perfect in their first draft and

gave little hint of the author's creative process. This was an extraordinary gift by Mann to Hermann – especially as their politics and styles were the complete opposite, Mann's long and complex sentences contrasting with Ungar's crisp, sparse style.

Thomas Mann's hidden homosexuality (he acknowledged this in his private diaries, going so far as to chronicle his inappropriate love for his son Klaus – also homosexual - and, later, his grandson) might explain the close relationship that developed between this celebrated novelist and an unknown one: he would have been attracted to this clever, charming and attractive young writer, and Hermann would have been flattered, given the homoerotic friendships of his youth. This friendship would not however spare Mann's revulsion for *The Maimed* when it was published.

* * *

Hermann finished *The Maimed* in early 1922. The process had so drained him that he suffered a relapse from the influenza he had caught in December and collapsed with 'general physical exhaustion which had affected the heart', according to Foreign Ministry archives. Camill Hoffman recommended he recuperate at the renowned society sanatorium, The White Stag, near Dresden. After his initial cure, the doctors advised him to go to southern Europe to recover his health more fully. Despite anxieties about leaving the safety of his known world, which are reflected in *Colbert's Journey*, his satirical story of an elderly assimilated Jew (based on his father) making preparations for such a journey, he travelled to Italy in April 1922, where he visited Florence, Fiesole, Rome and Naples.

He kept a dairy, which he intended to publish, but later thought better of it in case he appeared too bourgeois, and wrote frequently to his friend Ludwig Pinner about the effect Italy had on him. To begin with he was bowled over by the beauty of Italy, not least the 'the women, above all the women', but also found it 'impossible to describe. You have all seen it.

I cannot find the words. My pen is not practiced enough for such matters'. But after a while he began to see there was more to the simple beauty of his surroundings; he recognised that such beauty is deceptive and hides the misery of human existence, the main theme of his now completed, but as yet unpublished, novel *The Maimed*:

All of this cannot be expressed... I have a strange feeling. The idea that there were people who attempted works of art in a separate sphere of quiet and peace, in spite of suffering from haemorrhoids, in spite of bunions, in spite of cold food on their table. Works of art which are pure, chaste, of eternal peace - but far from our haemorrhoidal world, to which they bear no similarity. They degrade man by letting him see the incommensurability. I for one have seen Raphael and Michelangelo. But can you believe that I have been bitten by bedbugs in the Holy City? I stood in front of Christ with the cross (Michelangelo) in the Dominican church Sta Maria sopra Minerva, where there is also a picture of our old friend Torquemada. Next to me stood a man who offered to be my guide. On his right cheek there was a bloody, open tumour, as big as a fist, like the flesh wound of a wild animal, covered in flies, shreds of tissue hanging from his cheek. I will remember Christ (by Michelangelo) forever. I will think: this is our world, ce notre monde: ce notre! It is those things to which you close your eyes and your mind ... that there stands a man with an abscess in front of Michelangelo! ...Sometimes I feel like crying.

He published *Colbert's Journey* in August 1922, on his return from Italy, to much critical acclaim. In the introduction to the eponymous posthumous collection of his work, Thomas Mann called it 'a little masterpiece...which would take a place of honour' amongst the classics.

It was quite clear to those who knew Hermann that he was poking fun at his own love of Italy

via the bourgeois art-loving character of Colbert, but at the same time personifying his own ambivalence to his assimilation by creating the monster Czech servant Modlizki, whose rebellion against his master symbolises 'the protest against humanity'. He created in Modlizki a mouthpiece for his inner feelings and resurrected him in both *The Class* and his posthumous play *The Arbour*. For Hermann, though, the publication was something of a letdown because Rudolf Kayser, editor of *Neue Panorama*, removed the ending without consulting him: Kayser thought Modlizki's huge fart – the satirical sound of the collapse of the social system – too vulgar for literary audiences. Ungar was so distressed that his story did not end with its anticipated 'bang' that he was tempted to sue Kayser, but was talked out of it.

* * *

The publisher's concern about the public's reaction to a fart was but a tiny ripple in the pool of revulsion that greeted *The Maimed* when it was finally published in November 1922 by Rohwohlt (his original publisher Kurt Wolff had rejected it for fear of offending the public).

Even today it is hard not to read Ungar's first novel without some form of disgust. Stefan Zweig described it as 'magnificent and monstrous, alluring and abhorrent, unforgettable although one would like to forget it and escape its abusive oppression. Its sheer unpleasantness comes first'. Hermann himself had 'mixed feelings about the book. Will it not, so say I, cause a scandal?' he asked. In fact, Ungar had already mutilated his own book before it was published as, according to his friend Kurt Pinthus, it contained 'brutal [physical] scenes, the like of which has never been seen in black and white before in the German language'. Even his master Thomas Mann called it 'that revolting book...sexual hell, full of filth, crime and deepest melancholy - a monstrous aberration, if one wishes to view it as such' and the majority of critics loathed it for its exploration of the psyche, its attempt to

reveal to the reader how most normal people are plagued by hidden torments and sexual fantasies - in the protagonist Franz Polzer's case, driven by Oedipal, incestuous and homoerotic tendencies.

In a nutshell, the plot revolves around boring bank clerk Polzer, a shy failure tormented by nightmares of his father's incest with his aunt, and the childhood predations of a nanny, who comes under the sexual thrall of his widowed landlady, Frau Porges, from whom he finds it impossible to escape. His best friend Karl Fanta is a rich Jew whose body is consumed by a suppurating gangrene and who takes his anger out on his wife. In true Ungar style, the roles are reversed and the autobiographical character is the Christian, Polzer, although Fanta has some of Hermann's traits too. The stomach-churning and sometimes violent tale is narrated in sharp clear sentences, making the hell unfolding all the more shocking. In 1920s Berlin, despite the popularity of expressionism, of Freud and psychoanalysis, Ungar had gone too far: no one wanted to read such a 'sexual chamber of horrors'.

His friends and colleagues were all asking about the inspiration for the work; they found it hard to believe that the intelligent, good-looking, genial, witty diplomat could write such a disgusting book. Kurt Reinhold's review in the *Danziger Rundschau* (14.1.1924) was damning and typical of its general reception yet recognised that, despite its filth, the book was also a 'work of art':

This book reeks of pus, just like the cynical torso of Karl Fanta, whose body is being consumed – limb by limb – by boils and ulcers: it seeps from the body of the faded widow Klara Porges as an odour of congealed fat, who forces the obsequious bank official Polzer out of his path in a most brutal way, virtually rapes him erotically. It spreads an atmosphere of the herculean carer Sonntag, the former slaughterer, who now distributes little religious tracts, advising repentance, frequently displaying an

old apron bearing fearful washed-out blood stains from his last victims.

A shamelessness is in the air, too intense to be frivolous or sensuous, and which carries aloft the single cry of tortured confusion emanating from all these 'fettered creatures'. The individual sentences stand alone, naked... Despite everything, it is the intensive burden of literary experiences and the terrible outline of the human figures dangling helplessly in space which allows us to regard this book as a work of art.

He did have some other supporters, however, and some positive reviews. Hoffman's friend Berthold Viertel took on the devastating review by Hermann's former friend Otto Flake to defend Hermann's intent in writing 'a catastrophe' and drew parallels with the works of the writer George Grosz and artist Otto Dix.

Fellow Moravian writer and journalist, Ludwig Winder, writing in *Deutsche Zeitung Bohemia* in 1923, was 'entranced by its suicidal honesty which can only lead to the heights of perfection' and there were others who applauded his skilled use of language to portray these 'terrible events'. They saw what Ungar was trying to do – to create an allegory of middle-class life and a 'way forward that goes beyond heaven and hell'. Even Zweig's review was turned to advantage, with the book being banded with his words, 'This book must be loved with horror', although cleverly left out the rest of the quote, 'read with repulsion and digested with abhorrence'.

Hermann was so devastated by the monster he had unleashed and the sense of failure and depression that accompanied it that he got writers' block and was not to publish anything else for two and a half years. Stefan Zweig's wish that 'the book was the cleansing fire, the purgatory for its author and that from now onwards his powerful and creative hand will never again lead us down into the depths of darkness, where one's senses freeze and the soul struggles for air, for a breath of humanity' was to be realised.

Marriage, birth and death

1922 was a momentous year for Hermann Ungar. He had published his first novel and the popular *Colbert's Journey* and in between his breakdown and his travel to Italy, he had met Margarete Weiss, nee Stransky, in Prague. He was under pressure to abandon the life of a man about town, as he had just been promoted to Consular Attaché, and the powers that be felt a wife would keep him under control.

He had aired his critical attitude to the middle-class institution of marriage in *Colbert's Journey*, probably playing out the anxieties he was feeling about his own impending nuptials. His parents' marriage, while content enough, was not a role model for a united and happy family – Emil was lost in his own intellectual world, and Jeanette was half blind and unwell. Ungar had cause therefore to feel afraid of what it might augur for him, in particular because it meant losing his independence, and represented a new form of assimilation - into bourgeois society.

My grandmother, Margarete, was the daughter of wealthy Jewish parents, Heinrich and Paulina Stransky. They lived in Smichov, a largely Catholic district, where Mozart had composed the overture to Don Giovanni. Heinrich owned a factory where they manufactured briefcase locks and fastenings, and they lived on the premises, sadly knocked down and rebuilt in 1939. He was a devout Jew who rather extraordinarily made icons of the Virgin Mary which he sold to his neighbours, much to the disapproval of the local Rabbi. The family was musical and held soirees, Grete at the piano – she was an amateur operetta singer – and Heinrich and her brother Otto on strings. Family and neighbours would drop in and be entertained while sipping wine and enjoying snacks. This habit continued long after Hermann was dead, and my father remembers it well.



Heinrich and Pauline Stransky, Grete's parents

She had been married before to Rudy Weiss, a wealthy Prague silk merchant known in Prague as 'Silk Weiss', and had a son Hans, nicknamed Hunza (later John), from that marriage. There is some mystery as to exactly how they met, although it could have been as early as 1920 before Hermann went to Berlin; there were even rumours of an abduction. Others said that Weiss divorced her when he discovered her affair. She simply said of her marriage to Hermann, 'Before I met Ungar, I was married to an industrialist from Prague. He brought Ungar to the house, said he was the most amusing and charming person — I thought that too, divorced my husband and married Ungar.'



Rudi and Grete Weiss, with their son Hunza

There is little doubt that Hermann enjoyed the challenge of seducing someone else's wife, and such a rich man at that. It must have bolstered his ego enormously, although it is less clear whether he was entirely delighted that his escapade succeeded, as Grete was not to move to Berlin until 1924, a year after their son, Tomy, my father, was born. On the plus side she was considered a great beauty. According to letters from Lela Dangl and Ludwig Pinner she was a 'healthy, happy, powerful and earthy person', 'statuesque, somewhat taller than Ungar, very attractive appearance', 'a very beautiful woman, richly endowed with female charms', and 'a force of nature'. Hermann himself reported to his friend Hoffman (who was in fact their best man), that Grete was 'a beauty'.



My grandmother, Grete Weiss, in 1920

This is in contrast to Hermann's perception of himself. He had a very poor opinion of his own looks, which Camill Hoffman's daughter, Edith, reported as being 'sickly, with a yellowish appearance', no doubt due to his nervous disposition. Another friend, Eric Cohn, described him as having 'the knotty, wrinkled, boyish face of the young writer, who actually always looked like a pupil about to take his school leaving exams on the following day' – his anxiety apparently etched on his face. He described himself in *Story of a Murder* as 'short, slight, scrawny, my face was always pale as wax, my shoulders so high I gave the impression of slight deformity. I had perpetual dark blue rings round my eyes, my joints and bones were fragile, and are to this day'. I think he was hard on himself as he looks perfectly normal, attractive even, in photographs catching him off-guard; in others where he is posing, he looks every inch the serious author. His charisma, sense of fun and constant joking made him irresistible to women despite his reservations.



Hermann Ungar as a diplomat

He must have felt enormously boosted to have captured the heart of such a beauty although, like Blanka Totis, she was no intellectual. My grandmother remembered he once wrote to her saying, 'whatever you lack in intellect is compensated for by your earthy instinct', and even she admitted she 'had too little time for reading and Ungar said: "My wife has one virtue — she never reads, for reading ruins the character!"' Perhaps he was rather relieved that, unlike Ella Krojanker, she posed no competition.

Despite his alleged antipathy towards the married state, Ungar was insanely jealous as a husband. He articulated this jealousy in his next and final full-length novel, *The Class* (1927). In real life his friend Felix Loria remembers an incident, which says much about his postmarriage sexual bravado, always making himself out to be a great Lothario, his cruel sense of humour and, of course, his jealous nature:

Hermann was making fun of people who expected their future spouses to be virgins, pointing out to me during the conversation that he himself was far beyond such

laughable prejudices, that fidelity as such did not exist for him in his sex life, etc. We went to a cabaret with our wives. Mrs Ungar was extraordinary, a beauty, possessed huge amounts of sex appeal and Hermann became visibly annoyed when the men around us attempted to flirt with her. He made a scene, she answered back and Hermann fell into a rage. Finally she asked me, mockingly, if I would change places with her so that Hermann could regain his balance. Hermann quietened down and became his normal sarcastic self. A man performing in the cabaret was shaping a story from sentences called out by the audience. Hermann called out to him 'Goodbye Marie – your money is on the windowsill'. The man had trouble incorporating that sentence into his story.

Later (1928) he was to write disparagingly about marriage in his dialogue between a husband and wife, *Little Lies*, which centres around a husband's suspicions about his wife, who fobs him off with fibs which, the wife tells him teasingly at the end, she uses to 'test his intelligence'.

That is not to say their marriage was unhappy – Hugo Brauner, Hermann's Barissia friend from Prague, said the marriage was happy enough, apart from 'the few minor crises that arise in any marriage.' This perception was to be shattered when I found a letter from Hermann to his best friend Krojanker in the Jerusalem Zionist Archive written shortly before his death. 'Please forgive me but I can't write about the things you want to know and about which I should talk. The whole relationship with Grete, who cannot be shown to be at fault, has broken down badly. I don't know how this will end.' Hermann seemed oblivious as to why Grete was sick and tired of him. One has to assume that his infidelities and roving eye contributed to the near breakdown of the marriage.

But reading between the lines, even before I discovered this letter, their relationship must

have been very up and down, due to his nervous temperament and his sexual appetite which, by his own admission, he did not keep in check.

* * *

Writers' block afflicted Hermann for the whole of 1923. Whether living apart from Grete was a contributory factor is hard to know. He had not moved her to Berlin due to the high cost of living as a result of the Weimar Republic's inflation, but he did manage to find the time and money for another trip to Italy, unaccompanied by Grete, who was pregnant with Tomy. In September 1923 he visited his sick mother in Boskovice and shortly after that, in October, procured more leave to be in Prague for the birth.

There is no record of how Grete, who had left her wealthy husband and first-born son for Hermann, felt about being abandoned so soon after she gave up everything for him, but the mother-son bond was to remain strong throughout their lives.

My father, Tomas Michael Ungar, was born on 25 October 1923. Hermann idolised his son, despite not seeing him much. His new novel, *The Class*, which he began at this time, reflected his anxieties over the father-son relationship. Here Josef Blau, the insecure schoolmaster, who is terrified of his pupils (he was modeled on Hermann's experience with his own Czech teachers in Brno) has a beautiful, adoring, pregnant wife, whom he is convinced is having an affair with the statuesque, popular and confident gym master, Leopold. It was safe to pay tribute to Grete and put her on a pedestal from a distance.

Subconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, he believed that his father's status as an assimilated Jew and his paternalistic attitude to him was to blame for his failures and inadequacies; now, as a father himself, he was terrified he would inflict the same legacy on his own son.

The bond between father and son was a theme Hermann was to return to in later works – *The Caliph* (1928), *The Wine Traveller* (1929) and in the prose piece *Tomy Helps to Write* (1929). My father was so tickled by this story that he translated it himself. It provides a rare glimpse into the intimate and loving relationship between the two – the naughty little boy and his doting father, who found it hard to say no.

Tomas, known as Tomy, five years old has written a story to help his father. Father complies with Tomy's wish and sends the story to a 'paper for grown-ups'. But one wish of Tomy's Father can't comply with: Tomy asks his father not to say who wrote his story, 'If they know its' written by a little boy, they won't pay as much.'

I make use of the opportunity to tell you something about Tomy just as it comes into my head. Tomy is just like other children of his age who are healthy and normal. I talk about Tomy because I can't talk of others. Tomy is my only acquaintance of that age group.

So: Tomy is a little numbskull on whom any attempt to bring him up properly is wasted. In any case I have given up trying. I leave it to fate to decide what is to become of him. I admit openly that I envy Tomy his unyielding nature. He is not to be deflected from his aim: there is no bending, no being-got-down, nothing stops him doing what he has made up his mind to. A little while ago I heard an infernal row coming from the nursery, not the usual daily row, and I knew at once this was something special as I heard the sound of breaking glass. I rushed to help. I saw immediately, without waiting to ask questions, what was up. He was cross at being disciplined by his superiors and so my ever-hopeful son smashed the pane of a glass door with a building brick. Without saying a word I put him across the table. I was as furious as only a grown up can be and beat Tomy accordingly. I only interrupted this

educational process to catch my breath and to ask my son 'Will you do it again?'. The little one replied, steadfast to the end, time and time again, 'Yes!' His eyes were full of tears but he suffered the execution without uttering a sound. And as he – rightly I fear – does not take me seriously as an educator he had forgiven me my folly by the time I had finished beating him.

It's no good trying to get anywhere with Tomy with grown-up logic. It is quite hopeless to try and prove things that are fun e.g. to tricycle through all the rooms - are harmful (for the carpets), senseless and unreasonable. How can anything which is so much fun be harmful, senseless and unreasonable? Only when he has become as foolish as grown-ups will he realise that carpets are more important than enjoyment; it is only when we let our much-prized commonsense spoil so much fun in our lives which are not all that full of it. Only when Tomy has become as hard as an adult will he realise that one cannot give a beggar the entire contents of one's pocket. That is how we parents are supposed to guide him. If he remained as he is Tomy could become a saint who gives away his coat and his shirt; and that is something we don't want. To us the business of being a saint seems a bad business. We don't think that nowadays a saint would be capable of looking after himself and his family properly.

Tomy loves the female sex, Breh's Life of Animals, steam-engines, roundabouts, fairground rifle ranges, Granddaddy's dachshund Waldi (who is old and fat and puts up with anything from Tomy), Daddy's typewriter — and this one most of all. As I am not good at bringing up children I let him play with it without supervision. He is proud that Daddy lets him 'work' at the machine without being afraid he'll mess up and treats it like a mother with a new-born baby. Naturally he understands perfectly how to work all the levers — the up and down of the Remington portable, and all the

letters. He has taught himself to write on it and daily writes letters to grandparents, friends and acquaintances. His spelling is purely phonetic. I'm afraid he will never learn to wield a pen. He refuses to try: 'But Daddy, we've got a typewriter'. Who am I to contradict him?

Now Tomy has decided to help his father. He does not realise how much he helps him anyway. I shall never forget what he told me when he asked me to write something for his puppet theatre. 'How should I write it, Tomy?' I asked.' You know' he said, 'something to laugh at and something to make you cry, and then make you laugh at and something to make you cry, that's what I like best.' Is this not the quintessence of dramatic wisdom?

Tomy really wants to help. He wants to write a story for the papers. He sits down at the typewriter. On the empty sheet he writes first: First Act. 'Because' he says, 'It's meant for the puppet theatre too'. Then he writes and, while writing he stops to think 'just like Daddy'. The story is only a short, simple story for us grown- ups. For Tomy it is a story 'to make you laugh and make you cry', a big exciting tale. For him the words have not yet lost their secret, great meaning. For him they are still living things and mean exactly what they say with their plethora of gay and dark imaginative events.

Tomy's story for the papers

There was wunc a poor widow hoo had a chaild wich ranawy from hoam and stret into the wood in the wood was a bit of the ocean but the littel chaild did not see it and fell in this chaild wich was in the forest and fell in the water only looked at clouds and swallows for it was johnny headinair

My father can have been no older than five when this took place; he turned six only a few days before his father's death. He remembered the glass door incident and the beating, a rare event for Hermann only meted out punishment when he felt he ought to. My father's precocious intelligence and love of the typewriter, resulting in a virtual inability to write legibly, obviously stemmed from this time. I still have my battered copy of *StruwelPeter* (Straw Peter) that he bought me, with its story Johnny Head in the Air that young Tomy refers to, also one of my favourite childhood books.

* * *

Hermann recovered his muse around about the time the family moved to Berlin in 1924, when Tomy was one. He and Grete were to stay there until the summer of 1927 when they spent their customary holiday in Boskovice and remained there. My father claimed to be unable to remember much about his childhood in Berlin where he lived until he was four; he only remembers sitting at a white bench in the kitchen with the nursery maid, being forced to eat his daily ration of spinach.

Hermann became prolific during this period: *The Brothers*, an autobiographical tale of the reunion of two brothers in Moravia, and *The Murder of Captain Hanika*, the psychoanalytical account of a notorious Brno murder case, were published in 1924 and 1925 respectively, both in Berlin newspapers. This was followed by what Hermann called a 'merry sketch' *Tulip* 'which described the strange death of a civil servant and the grief of his widow'. It was anything but merry and a return to the incisive and cruel satire of his earlier work.

He was overstretched by both his work and writing: he was winning plaudits from the Czech Foreign Ministry who wrote, 'Ungar is well known as one of the best writers of the young German generation'. The Viennese newspaper *Freie Neue Presse* called him 'the most important writer in German literature of the last decade'. As well as writing, he was

reviewing plays and novels for the Berlin papers, though found himself fired after critiquing the work of a well-known playwright by calling it 'pulverized Billy goat manure' – the *enfant terrible* was back.

But he was already beginning to feel alienated from Berlin and longed to return to his homeland; consequently, they spent their summer holidays from 1924-26 back in Moravia, in Brno, Jemnice and Boskovice staying with relatives. His membership of the embassy and Group 1925 gave him insights into the socio-political trends of the Second Reich and he foresaw its collapse. His Jewish friends such as Krojanker, yet to emigrate to Palestine and Pinner, who had already gone, fed his pessimism.

In 1926 he was promoted to Legation Secretary, but became ill again, this time with appendicitis. He was in the middle of writing *The Class*, which he undoubtedly found stressful. The doctors were misled by Hermann's carefree attitude, did not take him too seriously and decided not to operate. His hypochondria was legendary, his friends believing it to be attention seeking, which indeed it was. It was to become a family characteristic, with my father also suffering from a 'nervous stomach' and his younger brother, Alec, travelling the world with a briefcase full of pills. As my father recalled to Sudhoff:

I had always heard that my father was such a hypochondriac that the doctors never believed him when he said he was ill – and that probably cost him his life ... My mother once told me a story about being in a Berlin nightclub with him. Hermann Ungar had been eating whipped cream and it stuck in his throat – he almost choked to death. There was complete silence – Ungar lay in the middle of the dance floor and appeared to be in the throes of death. But he survived.

Despite these setbacks, 1926 saw the publication into French of *Boys and Murderers* and an invitation for Hermann and Grete to visit Paris as guests of Pen International for the launch in

early 1927 – one of the first German-speaking authors to be invited to read his works aloud in Paris. The visit was a tremendous success and fed his burgeoning desire for public acclaim, the *Prager Tageblatt* reporting that 'critics have been praising and honouring him widely', and he was overwhelmed by the ecstatic reception he received – so much so that he wrote a letter to Ernst Rohwohlt, his publisher, demanding that he should do more in marketing terms for his authors, himself in particular. He ends with a rather heartfelt and prescient sentence:

May I finish by saying that I tasted acclaim in Paris, which we in Germany are only accorded when it is too late, when we are dead. It was delightful to experience lively feedback from the readers, to feel that one has achieved a position in this world rather than just being the most unimportant cog in the machinery, to be asked questions and have one's answers acknowledged with thanks. It was an experience which gave me encouragement – something we all need if we are to work well, author, publisher and booksellers. We, here in Germany, are beginning to feel totally superfluous.

More important for Hermann was the publication of *Boys and Murderers* into Czech. It had always upset him, as a nationalist and believer in the new Republic, that his works were only available in German and he was not recognised as a Czech author. During his lifetime he was to also to see translations of *The Class* and *Little Lies* into Czech, and *The Maimed* into French, which occasioned another visit to Paris in 1928.

After the excitements of Paris and the serialisation of *The Class* in the *Berliner Boersen*Courier in May 1927, he retired to Boskovice with Grete and Tomy for the summer months to work on his new play, *Podkamjenski*. Hermann was disturbed by the fate of Trotsky and his eventual banishment to Alma Ata; the play was intended to be a warning to German socialists against anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism. It was not to reappear until 1928,

now called *The Red General*, when it was rapturously received by its Berlin audience, but still divided the critics.

Back in Berlin after the summer of 1927, Hermann was run over by a bus which fractured his hip, broke his femur and injured him with shards of glass. He spent six weeks in hospital but he was never to recover fully from this injury – both physically (it had exacerbated his previous femoral fracture: one leg remained shorter than the other and he walked with a limp) and mentally. His nerves were shattered just like his leg, and soon the stomach ulcers and grumbling appendix returned. He was offered an operation but accordingly to Ella Krojanker, a palm-reader had told him he would die following an operation, so he refused. Had he not let superstition rule his head, he would have survived, for the next operation was indeed to kill him. He now lived in the hypochondriac's constant fear of death, and began to have premonitions, recorded in the macabre story Death Advertises (1929), published shortly before his own death a month later, concerning a man planning his own funeral (see below). In November 1927, shortly after the accident, Rohwohlt published The Class to much critical acclaim, although Hermann was too weak to send out personally-inscribed copies, not even to Thomas Mann to whom a typewritten note with a shaky signature had to suffice. It seems the publisher's marketing strategy paid off: Rohwohlt had successfully sought to allay the fears of the public that the book might continue in the same warped vein as *The Maimed*. Hermann had cleverly disguised his tormented world and his worries about the paralysis of Zionism in the 1920s by introducing some comic figures, such as the gluttonous Uncle Bobek, who later graduated to his own short story *Bobek Marries* (1928), which was

Various Jewish critics understood the novel completely, such as Manfred Rosenberg, who

borrowed by Brecht in his play Schweik in the Second World War.

wrote:

Hermann Ungar's characters are spirits from his soul. It is hardly surprising that these characters also become Jews, even though they have been originally identified as Christians, probably to allow for generalisation. Schoolmaster Blau, however, embodies the heritage and fate of the exiled Jewish nation. Indeed, more than that, this person has all the traits of the exiled person, presumptuous and pushy. Many unknown factors of our national existence seem to be explained by Schoolmaster Blau's actions, the way he leads, manages and enforces. The constant watchful state, wittering potential dangers, the possibility of accepting friendly advances of foes and repulsing those of friends — this is the depiction of morbid 'galuth' or exile mentality, an example of self-psychoanalysis.

Otto Pick, writing in the *Prager Press*, admired the work from 'this strict, self-critical writer who makes no concessions':

...which at first glance is a novel about a school, about the struggle of the schoolmaster against the perceived hatred of the pupils in his class. In reality, however, this is a shocking episode from a guerrilla war fought by slaves of fate, the intentionally shackled people, against all others, against the demons incumbent in humanity. This battlefield report is factual, given in brief, abrupt sentences, which, like Schoolmaster Blau's susceptible feet, tiptoe through the minefields of the battle zone. But then, as disaster looms, restless yet commanding, when the final hour of introversion arrives, the weathered campaigner voices a powerful, stirring, redeeming monologue. He sees the dismal veil of his future disappearing, giving way to love, to the experience of love, recognition of love and a love for God. Hermann Ungar has been able to create a factual and illuminating novel rising out of the

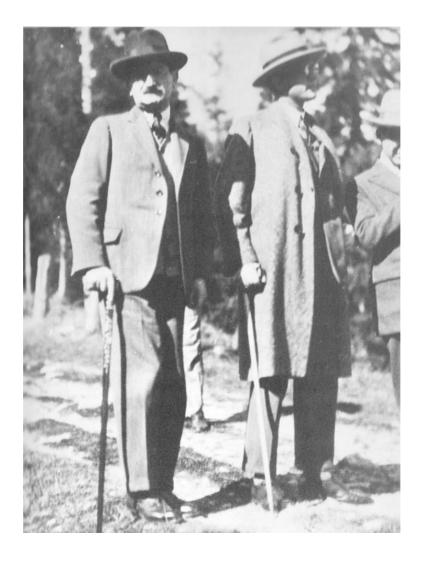
depths of a confused, narrow-minded person's fate – which shows he excels when recording social environments and creating drama from explosive, everyday life stories.

Many critics, for example Ludwig Winder, thought that this was Hermann's finest work, the zenith of his career. Writing in *Bohemia*, he recognises the 'dismal blinkered world, in which the fear of life is the dynamic force which then manages to overcome the inevitable destruction... Ungar has completely mastered his subject and material and has created a novel which far outweighs his past successes.' For the ordinary reader the novel redeemed itself by having a positive ending, unlike his previous work, and marked a stylistic departure.



The positive reception to this latest novel, together with the various translations that were appearing, finally gave Hermann the confidence to consider leaving the diplomatic service and becoming a full-time writer. But it was not that simple. First he had a wife and child to support, who were still in Boskovice and, in addition, he had not fully recovered from the accident. He was granted sick leave until 1928; the Foreign Ministry had promoted him in January of that year and posted him back to Prague, but he was unable to travel until much

later that summer. No sooner had he arrived than he took his annual leave and travelled to the Swiss mountains with Grete and Tomy, and his 'wonderful Remington typewriter (marvellous for writers, as it is not just portable, but potentially produces the greatest literature. One only has to hit the write keys. I will do my utmost)'.



Ungar with Hoffmann in Berlin, 1928, note the stick

After the holidays he returned to Prague alone. Grete and Tommy had continued their holiday in Boskovice with Hermann's parents and Tomy's uncle Felix and his cousins, where he tried to settle in at his new offices in Prague Castle. But it was to be short-lived, as his health continued to be a problem and the work stultifyingly boring, draining him of any remaining

energy for writing. He wrote searing letters describing his plight to Krojanker:

17 July: The disruption to daily life caused by my spouse's absence, with the loss of all the family pleasures and diversions, plus the tropical heat and the oppressive air in this abysmal house [the one in Fibichova, now Matousova] which smells of antimoth treatment, have totally robbed me of all incentive to deal with my correspondence. I write to you today from my office in the ministry, where I sit from 9 am to 2 pm in complete boredom. In fact, life is so tedious that I was hardly able to make the decision to start this letter...



The apartment block in Fibichova, now Matousova, Smichov



The author in the interior of Fibichova apartment in 2016, showing period detail ...Tomorrow Grete and Tomy will return from Boskowitz. I am so looking forward to having some order in my life again. The bed and breakfast life is really unpleasant in high summer.

28 July: For 5 hours every day I sit up here in the Prague Castle, an office which could hardly be more attractive and beautiful. Every day, when I walk up the hill and stare down at Prague veiled in the morning mist, I say to myself: it must, must, must be a pleasure to work here. And then I take my seat in the room together with three other slaves - and even the thought that perhaps the pages of the powerful friends of Rabbi Loew, Kepler, Tycho and Emperor Matthias spread out their sleeping mats here has lost its attraction. The work is tedious, as you will know. But that is not the main problem, there is something far worse – there is absolutely nothing to do! Yesterday, despite all my efforts, I only wrote 3 lines in 5 hours in the office.

Sometimes, when things are really going well, I manage three pages. There are various reasons why I cannot take something into the office to read, or continue with my own personal writing — but these reasons are just too boring to discuss. At three o'clock in the afternoon I walk home, a broken man. Add to this my other personal torture — the fact that I have had no ideas, no creative ideas for weeks on end. I really need some new ideas, some inspiration. I feel empty, beaten. Everything is just too much for me, I feel so terribly miserable

4th August: I would so like to write a new play, but no ideas have come to mind – perhaps a novel? Maybe some inspiration will come... I have already put some lines on paper. Wait and see! If only I could escape from this office! Tell me, is it really worth selling your soul for 250 M[arks] and ruining your life? Half of the time – and in a certain sense this also means one hundred percent of the time – is spent in this soul-destroying and mind-numbing environment: whereby there are much better things to do, things have been started and perhaps there is very little time left. It is a question, which is perhaps better answered by the person in question, who has to find the courage to make the first step, to forget all the other issues and constraints. One has to find the courage to acknowledge one's desperation, the courage to place all one's trust in one's talent – otherwise one is truly unworthy of the gift of such talent. Who will offer advice? If Pinner knew that I was contemplating such a change he would certainly come straight back from Palestine, to knock it out of my head. And you? You will probably say that I still have plenty of time for my writing and, unless matters are really urgent, that the situation should remain as it is. Especially as I have a wife and child to support. And what would happen if I became ill, you might ask? And when inspiration fails me or success evades me? These are all very sensible questions you put to me. And I have no other answer other than the one given by

Tomy after he was lectured for hours upon end using commonsense and threats: 'But I WANT cucumber salad!' And I feel that I, too, now want my cucumber salad, despite all the medical warnings and exhortations.



Hermann sent Krojanker this 'view of Prague Castle from my window' that he sketched from his desk

* * *

Weighed down by his depression, in September 1928 Ungar requested and was granted another six months' unpaid leave. He seems to have stopped worrying about his wife and child and became increasingly morose and depressed, although he makes a self-pitying passing reference to Grete and Tomy in a letter dated 28 July 1928, 'My lot are quite all right; Tomy is growing nicely, touch wood, but his voice is a little too strong for our living quarters, whereas his appetite is disproportionate to the income of a civil servant'.

As he rather pompously noted in his introduction to *The Arbour*:

I have six months of leave. Nobody should hear anything from me during this time.

Either I will have created something real or I give it all up. Perhaps not life, but art.

But without it there is no life for me. This is the danger.

At the beginning of September 1928 he travelled to Berlin for the première of *The Red General*. Despite its rapturous reception by the general public, the critics, including his old friend and writer Ernst Weiss took it at face value and caused the closure of the play, much to Ungar's dismay. By far the most damaging critique came from one Josef Goebbels, the recently appointed Nazi Gauleiter for Berlin, who accused 'this Jewish drama by Czech author Hermann Ungar' of encouraging 'the thought that the persecution of Christians could break out at any moment... Oh, they feel incredibly safe these nouveau-riche Jews'.

He was devastated by the critics' reaction and felt compelled to counter this with a new play – but was looking for inspiration for a subject matter. But this disappointment was more than that – it led to the severe depression that rekindled the deep-seated insecurity of his childhood. A quick trip to Paris for the publication of *The Maimed* in French provided momentary respite, and perhaps caused him to revisit the idea for a dramatisation of *Colbert's Journey*, which he transformed into *The Arbour*, where he noted that with *The Red General* he had 'succumbed to a reckless underestimation of the theatre. I did not see that the theatre requires at least as much effort as a novel' and he was determined not to make the same mistake.

He extended this leave for a further six months in March 1929; Hermann's ambition was to write two books 'one a ripping novel and the other a flowing play': one became *The Arbour* and the other a new novel, a Moravian epic centering on the plight of the peasantry. He completed *The Arbour*, his dramatisation of *Colbert's Journey*, in early December but it was not to be performed until after his death; the novel was lost.

It is clear from the central themes of *The Class* that he was still much concerned with the Zionist cause and on his return to Prague he re-joined Barissia and seriously contemplated a visit to Palestine. He met frequently with his friend Hugo Brauner, the new fraternity head who published the second scene from *Podkamjenski* in Barissia's 50th anniversary issue, but on the whole shunned the company of his fellow writers and visited cafes rarely, usually only on Sunday. His depression was all-consuming.



Ungar in 1928, the height of his depression

He also quite extraordinarily joined the Freemason's – a secret that even Grete was unaware of and which only became widely known when a deputation from the lodge appeared at his graveside. In some ways it is not surprising as Hermann had an ambivalent attitude towards religion throughout his life – he did not bring up his children in the faith despite being a Zionist, and assumed the persona of a Christian narrator in much of his writing: a compassionate vision of humanity was far more important to him, and the Freemasons represented this. He was always seeking answers to the plight of mankind in his writing, but seemingly neglected his own family in the pursuit of his higher ideal.

* * *

The accident in 1927 had left scars on his mind as well as his body, and he began to have premonitions of his death. Despite paying lip-service in this *Self Portrait* in 1929 to his devotion to his son, there is little evidence that either Tomy or Grete occupied his thoughts:

I am 35 years old. My pride and joy is my son, Thomas, who is just learning to read. My sorrow is the theatre. I consider a critic, when he writes good things about me, to be a genius — but an idiot if he writes a negative critique. Stated simply: I am no different from other authors. I am a diplomat by profession. My critics constantly stress my excellent qualifications as a diplomat when they review my plays. My professional qualifications have nothing to do with my plays, but the critics enjoy noting them.

After suffering epic purgatory, I transferred my attention to the theatre. At the moment I am working on a comedy.

The time and place of my burial will be advised in due course by my widow in the name of all my impoverished children.

His morbid introspection continued in *Death Advertises* where he is plagued by the funeral salesman Sommer. Ironically he hopes that by leaving his 'immortal works to my children... (please regard this as a prestigious type of advertising!) hundreds and thousands of copies of these will be published after my death, allowing me to remain uninsured'.

He is persuaded that this is cloud-cuckoo land and to take the insurance. Sommer has 'all the arrangements for my funeral in hand', which he envisaged as a grand affair suitable for a prestigious author:

The coffin is 100 cm high, with eight handles, the sheet, the shroud and cushion

fashioned out of satin, laying out, the first-class hearse, decoration of the cemetery chapel, double quartet, organ player.

You have to have a proper burial, said Sommer. For the sake of your children. So I will be buried in this manner. I will leave all the arrangements to Sommer, he will choose the music for my burial according to his good taste and his expert knowledge of the affect this has on the mourners and the congregation... the double quartet and the organist. I don't doubt that Sommer's programme will satisfy my guests completely.

Thomas Mann also noted this sense of doom in Hermann and wrote in his preface to the posthumous volume *Colbert's Journey*, 'it had something to do with his humour, his lack of laughter, his sexual melancholy, the bitter and often uncannily deliberate way in which he expresses his vision of life in his mental and even in his physical physiognomy and appearance – there was a paleness, a fragility, a fatal mark, an austere hopelessness which needed no second sight to interpret this prophetically and which prevents me from seeing his death an accident'.

Despite this gloom, 1929 was productive for Hermann. Another son, Alexander Matthias, nicknamed Sascha, was born on 18 March, a good six years after Tomy, a reflection on the time husband and wife spent apart. Grete's pregnancy had been difficult, as Hermann wrote to Krojanker in the letter complaining of his depression, 'Because of the pregnancy Grete is not well at all. She's vomiting all day long. I think she coped much better when we were expecting Tomy'.

Hermann reports the birth on a postcard to Krojanker on 18 March, but can't resist framing it in a literary context, 'on the 15th of this month my son was born, weighing 7 pounds. I can't

give you the name yet because I myself don't have a title for my latest work. This is always a weakness of mine. Mother Grete is doing well.' On 27 March he writes again: 'It is not customary for Jews to call children after close relative when they are still alive. This means Thomas Michael is out [this was young Tomy's full name]. I decided on Alexander Matthias, nickname: Sascha... Here there is nothing new to report after the birth of the child. Mother is still in bed, not well.'

It is noteworthy that there are few references to Grete and Tomy in the surviving correspondence to his dearest friends, Gustav Krojanker and Ludwig Pinner. Instead the letters chart, for the most part, Hermann's self-absorbed misery in connection with the state of his writing, even when he was productive.

In 1928/9 he published ten short pieces, as well as working on the longer pieces: *Self Portrait*; *The Wine Traveller*; *Do Horses Really Scream*; *Mellon, the Actor*; *The Secret War*; *Tomy Helps to Write*; *Death Advertises*; *The Explanation*; *The Confession* and *Alexander* – all deeply autobiographical. This productivity gave him the final impetus to resign, despite the fact that his second child was only a few months old. Grete had brought a considerable dowry of 250,000 Koruna to the marriage, but Hermann had lent it to his brother Felix, much to her rage. It seemed a feckless decision and was, in part, inspired by his friend Krojanker's decision to resign from the family shoe business. As he wrote to his friend on 23 September 1929:

...just 2 minutes ago I submitted my ... resignation papers to the ministry. That was one of the most decisive moments of my life. Hopefully God won't wreak revenge on my children ... The last few days have been very exciting, with suspense and panic ... It was probably extremely reckless of me, but I couldn't bear it anymore, please don't

blame me!

In the same letter he asked with typical self-doubt, 'Are you working at the moment? I am working on a new play, but fear it will be very bad.'

Just after resigning from the Foreign Ministry, *The Arbour* was in fact commissioned by Ernst Aufricht of the theatre on the Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, who considered it to have just the right balance of 'literature and filth' to promise a box-office hit. Accordingly, Hermann travelled to Berlin to discuss production with the director, and also his new plan to move back to Berlin, the centre of the German literary world.

But it was not to be. A week later, on Monday 21st on October he attended a meeting at the Lodge, and despite complaining of pains in his stomach, visited his mother Jeanette in hospital where she had recently undergone an unsuccessful eye operation. The pains persisted and he consulted doctors, who were told of his medical history. According to his brother Felix, who had accompanied Jeanette to Prague for the operation,

Despite this, no correct diagnosis was made. The poor man spent the night from Tuesday to Wednesday vomiting continuously and in agony. On Wednesday the doctors were still unable to clarify what was wrong with him, although his condition constantly deteriorated. Finally late on Wednesday they decided to admit him to the sanatorium and carry out an exploratory operation on his stomach. They found a perforated appendix which had led to peritonitis. The doctors were to blame as if Hermann had been operated on just two hours earlier, he would probably have survived.

Ironically he was admitted to the same hospital as his mother, Jeanette. Thomas Mann was to write later,

At the time when his illness became acute and they decided to carry out the operation, Ungar's mother was also in the same clinic suffering from eye trouble; they kept his operation a secret from her, but she dreamt about Hermann's death. Her son hung on to life tenaciously for a few days, although the doctors had given up on him.

He came round from the operation and for a couple days seemed in good spirits, not knowing that septicemia had set in, and began to make enthusiastic plans for the première of *The Arbour*. Then on 27 October his heart began to fail and he sank into delirium and had a vision of his impending death, fulfilling all his earlier anxieties and premonitions. Again, Mann described the scene:

A nurse entered the room and he recognised a childhood friend from Boskowitz
[Blanka Totis?]. He was horror-struck, as he saw this as an omen. This face from his
home country meant that the earth was waiting for him. He was going to die. His last
incoherent thoughts centred on the premiere of his drama The Arbour.

Grete had been by his side throughout and wrote this anguished letter to Krojanker on 11 November:

Dear Gustav,

For days I have been meaning to thank you for your heartfelt letter. The only person for whom I was willing to die is lost to me for ever. What other person could ever rouse my interest after a Hermann Ungar. The only thing I have left is my children. The first person I saw dying unfortunately had to be my Schani [Hermann's nickname]. Isn't that cruel. And he could have been alive after all, were it not for 4 idiotic doctors who committed murder through their ignorance, in just under 30 hours. I have to tell you all in person. Writing won't do.

I would be grateful, if you have the time, if you could read through a couple of manuscripts and check them. The theatre business and the most urgent issues will be dealt with by Hoffmann. The play is supposed to start on 1 December. I will travel to Berlin for that. How the poor soul was looking forward to it! He fantasized about it until his last breath.

If only I could wake up from this evil terrible dream.

With heartfelt greetings, your

Grete Ungar

It was October 29th, 1928, and Hermann Ungar was only 36 years old.

* * *

Felix had also been at Hermann's bedside, visiting his mother. He was also heartbroken as this letter to Krojanker demonstrates

Boskowitz 14 XI 29

Dear Gustav!

Many thanks for your [express?] letter, to which I can only reply today because I have only just returned from Prague yesterday. It is probably also difficult for Grete to write and I suspect she hasn't yet replied to your letter.

I am completely broken and destroyed inside because of this immense, sudden tragedy. I have lost more than a brother in the conventional sense, because we were so entwined and as one, that he was in all matters a friend, advisor and selfless support. This blow is doubly difficult to bear because my mother is nearly blind.

But I mustn't moan and must try to pick myself up in order to face the new tasks; part of it is the worry about Hermann's family, but also the worry about my parents, who bear the terrible news with great strength and calmness.

Grete was strong and self-sacrificing and even now she isn't losing her head. She is tirelessly busy with the children. Tomy knows the facts without understanding them. You don't know how much your letter has helped us to bear the burden, because such letters are proof that Hermann did not live in vain. Please keep honouring this friendship, also with his wife and children who might need you in the future. Are you going to stay in Paris long?

Please forgive me for writing in pencil and best wishes from your,

Felix Ungar

We are trying to assess, as far as possible, what remains of Hermann's literary writing and to have it published. If you come to Berlin I will ask Grete to get you involved. Grete will be in Berlin at the beginning of December for the premiere of The Arbour.

Grete was grief-stricken as her next letter to Krojanker reveals

26./XI. 29

Just now I got your telegram. I am so listless and feel paralysed, I don't have the energy to do anything, every day I mean to write to you. The premiere [of The Arbour, in Berlin] is supposed to be on the 10th December, but it isn't certain yet. It is meant to be a kind of wake at the same time. Around that time the Zionists are planning a memorial evening, preferably on a Sunday. Hoffmann says that I must be in the theatre for the premiere. I would really, really like to, but I am filled with dread. But I will certainly go...

For me it's all destroyed and over. Who else could ever take the place of a Hermann Ungar? The boys are very dear, especially the little one, who is a big lad, 21 pounds at 8 months. It is a great relief to me that you all loved him so much and are so very kind to me.

The most heart-felt greetings

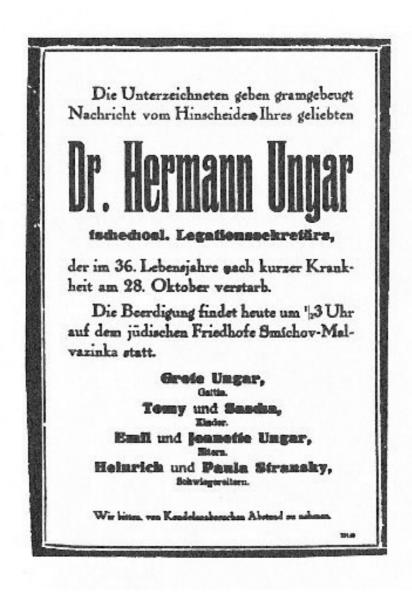
Your Grete Ungar

Even in death Hermann's charismatic personality prevailed, all memory of their marital unhappiness forgotten.

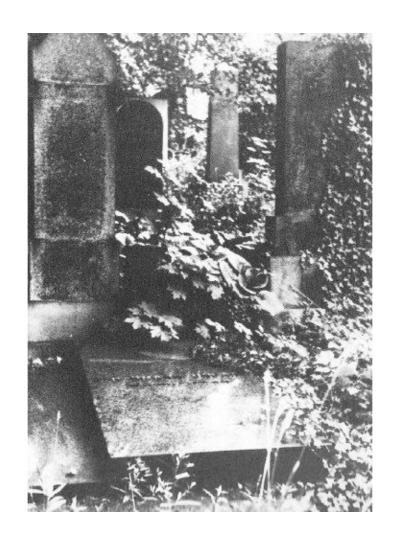


Last photo of Ungar, in 1929, shortly before his death

* * *



Hermann Ungar's death shocked the literary circles in Prague. His funeral, which took place in the Smichov Malvazinky Jewish Cemetery was well attended by his friends, family, members of the Barissia, the Freemasons and the Czech Foreign Ministry. His grave was a simple marble slab, adorned with brass lettering; it is hard to find in the cemetery, now overgrown and chaotic, the grave moved from its original position and the lettering stolen. His resting place, like his reputation, is anonymous.



The grave when the brass lettering was still in place





Visiting the grave in 2019 on Hermann's 90th birthday; the engraving on the end reads 'May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life'

The obituaries from all quarters sang his praises, words he would have loved to hear whilst he was alive. The *Prager Presse* lamented the 'great loss to German-language literature in Czechoslovakia, for modern German literature and, indeed, for world literature' and praised his creation of 'brilliantly composed, psychological novels which threw light on the darkest depths of his characters'. They also published excerpts from *A Man and A Maid* and from the Prologue to *The Arbour*.

His friend Ludwig Winder wrote,

Hermann Ungar only lived for 36 years. Everyone who knew him will read of his passing with painful sadness. The death of a young man is senseless and shocking for all, although war has taught us to accept the brutality of such senselessness. Hermann Ungar was an author worthy of respect and high esteem – we all expected him to

achieve greatness. It is difficult to come to terms with the fact that all these hopes and aspirations have been destroyed...the German theatre-circles in Prague should consider whether they are under an obligation to promote awareness of the existence of this author, who, until his death, was virtually unknown in his own home country.

Max Brod, who was to turn Judas on his friend and colleague, contributed a detailed and fulsome appreciation of Ungar's works to the *Prager Tageblatt*, rendering his later statements of denying all knowledge of his writing all the more incomprehensible. But the most significant tribute of all was that of his old friend Gustav Krojanker, who recalled 'a human being whose every characteristic trait – his laugh, his tortured expression, the way he walked, the furrows on his youthful face – is as well-known to me as that of a beloved brother.' He concluded:

But if this living person is a beloved friend, whose warmth and brotherly presence one still senses, one tries to portray at least a little of all parts of him to those who perhaps never knew him, to guarantee his presence in the future. But to do that successfully, one has to be a writer. So I have to allow this to go out, in memory of him and as my last greeting.

His other great friend Ludwig Pinner, wrote touchingly from Palestine that with Ungar's death 'a light went out which had only just started to glow, but whose first glimmer should have drawn the world's attention...'

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