

HANUSSEN: AUFSTIEG UND FALL DES ILLUSIONISTEN [HANUSSEN: RISE AND FALL OF THE ILLUSIONIST]

By Wilfried Kugel. Tredition. 2025. 364 pp. hardback

After a decade of research, Wilfried Kugel, a physicist with an interest in parapsychology, wrote *Hanussen: Die wahre Geschichte des Hermann Steinschneider* (Hanussen: The True Story of Hermann Steinschneider). It was published in 1998 and was recognised as the most scholarly biography of Hanussen to that date.

Now, Kugel has updated his biography with additional information, expanding the original work from 300 to 364 pages (the number of endnotes increasing from 644 to 653). The greater page count may be partly due to a slightly smaller format, though the font size is correspondingly smaller as well. This new edition is more attractive, having over a hundred higher-resolution photos, including several in colour, among them Hanussen's three best-known posters and a graphic photo of his corpse.

Erik Jan Hanussen (born Hermann Steinschneider in Vienna in 1889) rose to prominence in pre-Third Reich Germany as a controversial *Hellseher*; that is, a clairvoyant. However, most would call him a mentalist, meaning an entertainer who specialises in simulating psychic abilities. Hanussen was controversial because he claimed that his powers were real, and used that pretext to charge clients for advice, which, along with his popular theatrical performances and occult-themed publications, made him extremely wealthy. Although Jewish, he cultivated the Nazi elite and boosted the Nazi cause in his weekly Berlin tabloid. His primary claim to fame is that he supposedly predicted the burning of the Reichstag in Berlin on the eve of its destruction. Less than a month later, he was murdered by Nazi stormtroopers.

Kugel's book is generally organised chronologically, beginning with Hanussen's genealogy (Jewish on both sides going back several generations) and childhood (though Kugel admits the primary source for this section is Hanussen's own unreliable 1930 autobiography), but takes deep dives into special topics.

Hanussen had a varied early career, first as a small-time itinerant actor, tabloid journalist in Vienna, hypnotist, dowser, performer of 'Hellstromism' (finding objects hidden by the audience through muscle reading) and manager of various sideshow acts, most prominently a fake strongwoman, Martha Farra

(a name he used for three different women in this role), in opposition to the popular Jewish strongman Siegmund Breitbart. Eventually, Hanussen settled on being a touring entertainer himself, and Kugel gives a detailed description of his performances, a combination of Hellstromism, hypnotism, graphology, psychometry, cold reading, and audience readings using information secretly obtained and communicated to him by his associates. The public performances also served as an advertisement for his availability to give private readings, a lucrative source of additional income.

His greatest breakthrough as a celebrity came when he was arrested and imprisoned for three weeks in February 1928 in Leitmeritz (now Litoměřice) in Czechoslovakia, on charges of defrauding the public. Kugel covers the trial, which garnered headlines internationally and lasted until 1930, in great detail. Hanussen was ultimately acquitted of the charges after giving a dramatic demonstration of psychometry to the court, but not because the jurists were convinced his psychic abilities were real, though they conceded they might be, but on the grounds that he appeared to be convinced of them himself, and therefore was not deliberately defrauding the gullible. Nevertheless, his acquittal was spun in the press as triumphant proof of his abilities and even covered as such in the *New York Times*.

Having been expelled from Austria in 1923 by the Viennese police for ten years as an undesirable alien (his Viennese birth had been recorded in his father's home town of Prossnitz—now Prostějov—in the Czech Republic, making him a citizen of Czechoslovakia) for his repeated run-ins with the law starting in 1913, Hanussen set up shop in Berlin in 1930.

Hanussen quickly gained a following in Berlin, particularly among the Nazi elite, who were initially not aware of his Jewish heritage. The notorious Count Helldorff, in particular, benefited from Hanussen's largesse, the latter apparently repeatedly lending Helldorff large sums of money to cover his many gambling losses and in return receiving inside information on Nazi party intrigues. Hanussen began boosting Hitler, Helldorff, and others in his occult themed weekly tabloid, *Hanussens Bunte Wochenschau* (Hanussen's Colourful Weekly), starting in January 1932. Although some authors have claimed that Hanussen met with Hitler and coached him in speaking and mesmerising crowds, Kugel argues it is unlikely that the two ever met.

In mid-January 1933, Hanussen signed a two-year lease on a Berlin apartment that he outfitted opulently as a 'Palace of the Occult'. Its invitational grand opening took place on Sunday, 26 February 1933, four weeks after Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany. Accounts differ as to details of the midnight séance that was a highlight of the celebrity-filled event, some reporting that Hanussen himself had a vision of a large building burning, others claiming that a hypnotised subject, the actress Maria Paudler, had the vision before fainting. Regardless, the next day, the German seat of parliament, the Reichstag, fell victim to arson, destroying it. The Nazis used this as a pretext

for declaring emergency powers, suspending civil liberties and due process, and arresting numerous opponents.

In an astonishingly short period of time, Germany became a one-party dictatorship. On 1 March 1933, Hanussen began a scheduled one month run of twice-daily performances at Berlin's famed Scala theatre, with an audience capacity of approximately three thousand. On Thursday 16 March, Hanussen was baptised in a Protestant church. One week later, on Friday 24 March, following his afternoon performance at the Scala, Hanussen was arrested on the pretext that he had lied about his Aryan heritage on his application for NSDAP (Nazi Party) membership. His corpse with three bullet wounds and ravaged by wild animals was discovered in a forest on the morning of 7 April 1933. Kugel reconstructs the details of who ordered his murder and who carried it out. The multiple motivations are enumerated as:

- (1) The fact that he was Jewish, which had been widely reported in the left- and right-wing press in late 1932 and early 1933.
- (2) The fact that he knew too much about Nazi intrigues through his close relations with high-ranking party members.
- (3) The fact that he held numerous favours from high-ranking Nazi officials such as Helldorff, Ernst Roehm, and Karl Ernst (who ordered his murder).

Numerous conspiracy theories surround Hanussen, in particular regarding the Reichstag fire. Austrian–Hungarian filmmaker Geza von Cziffra, who had known Hanussen in Berlin and was also friendly with his private secretary Ismet Dzino, claimed in his book that Hanussen had hypnotised the Dutch anarchist Marinus van der Lubbe, who was convicted of setting the fire, to induce him to the act of arson to gain favour with the Nazi hierarchy (von Cziffra, 1978). While Kugel does not endorse the theory, he also does not rule it out as a possibility. This is, of course, an incendiary possibility, since it would make a Jew, Hanussen, directly responsible for Hitler's assumption of dictatorial powers and all the evil that followed it. Kugel, incidentally, co-authored an 863-page book with Alexander Bahar about the Reichstag fire (Bahar & Kugel, 2001), so can be considered an authority on that subject as well.

Kugel also evaluates Hanussen's claims to psychic abilities, looking at his many published predictions for future events and checking whether they came true. Not surprisingly, some did, but on balance Kugel finds the overall evidence lacking, particularly since Hanussen was known to simulate psychic abilities using trickery throughout his career. In the case of the Reichstag fire, even if he did not have a direct hand in it, his connections to those who did make inside information a more likely explanation for his correct predictions than psychic abilities.

One event that is puzzling is his prediction on 17 May 1932 that the race car driver and aristocrat Czech Prince Georg Christian von Lobkowitz should take special precautions in the upcoming 22 May race on Berlin's racetrack, for

which he had qualified. The warning was not publicised in advance, but Prince von Lobkowitz was killed as a result of an accident in that race.

As an appendix to the book, Kugel includes historical criticisms of Werner Herzog's film *Invincible* (2001, with Tim Roth as Hanussen), Mel Gordon's (2001) *Erik Jan Hanussen*, and Arthur J. Magida's (2011) *The Nazi Séance*. The appendix also includes a five-page bibliography, which covers Hanussen's own writings, interviews with him, films and recordings he made, as well as the extensive secondary literature on him, and films and television programmes about him.

In summary, Kugel's revised and expanded biography of Hanussen tells a fascinating and disturbing story in great detail. Highly recommended.

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