



HANUSSEN'S

By Martin Ebon

He billed himself as **The Mental Wizard of All Ages**, and his insistence of possessing paranormal powers caused his many detractors to expose what they considered to be fraud. Did one of his "prophesies" actually provoke his murderous death?

Erik Jan Hanussen, Germany and Europe's Super-Magician, who claimed clairvoyant and telepathic powers, stood on the stage of a theater in Hamburg, Germany. The year was 1932, the date, somewhere between the 15th and 30th of November. The place, the UFA-Palast, operated by the near-monopoly UFA film corporation, which featured such movies as Hollywood's *Der Jazzkönig* (*The King of Jazz*), starring Paul Whiteman and his band.

Hanussen, dark-eyed and with prominent black eyebrows, radiated self-confidence and studied charm. He was about to demonstrate his skill at muscle reading and asked for a member of the audience to join him on the stage. A very young man, wearing a gray suit, with then-fashionable knickers, walked down the aisle.

But Hanussen did not want a male, no matter how young and impressionable. He sent me back to my seat, wisecracking, "Of course, you can't always tell, these days, who is a man or a woman." He replaced me with a middle-aged lady. Hanussen held her left wrist, monitoring her unconscious emotional fluctuation. She helped him locate the tiny pin that had been hidden in one of the 1,500 seats of the movie emporium. The brazen youngster was I, then only 15 years old.



Dr. Wilfried Kugel, in his painstakingly documented 1998 book, *Hanussen: Die wahre Geschichte des Hermann Steinschneider* (*Hanussen: The True Story of Hermann Steinschneider*), traces the tempestuous career of this multi-talented, self-destructive megalomaniac with remarkable objectivity and detachment. Kugel began his career as a physicist, obtained a PhD in Physics and has researched and published in fields as diverse as biology, literature, history, cinema, psychology of religion, ethnopharmacology, and parapsychology. He spent nearly ten years in preparing this biography, thanks to a grant from the Institute for Borderline Areas of Psychology and Mental Health. He confronted the question of whether Hanussen did, in fact, have parapsychological abilities, such as telepathy or clairvoyance. Dr. Kugel's answer is a reluctant no.

But Hanussen did insist that he had just such paranormal powers, and his detractors concentrated on exposing what they regarded as his frauds and misrepresentations. His enemies were numerous, ruthless, and vocal. Hanussen's most relentless and effective antagonist was his one-time assistant and intimate partner in deceit, Erich Juhn. Ultimately, Juhn's unrelenting campaign against the Super Magician found its climax in the murder of Hanussen by the very Nazi Sturm-Abteilung (Storm Troopers) whom he befriended with gifts, unsecured loans, and the use of his luxurious cars.

Notable among those who benefited from Hanussen's calculated generosity was Wolf Heinrich Count von Helldorf, head of the Berlin Storm Troopers and, as Kluge puts it, "a friend of Hanussen, and later on, his guest." Hanussen's murder occurred early in the Nazi regime, which gained power January 30, 1933. Four months after his self-assured, good-humored appearance at the Hamburg movie palace, Hanussen's partly animal-devoured body was found in an isolated pine forest outside Berlin. Labyrinthine intrigues formed the background to the murder. Helldorf had compromised himself by his liaison with Hanussen — a highly controversial personality and of

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Jewish descent. Helldorf also had a shrewd and ambitious rival within the Nazi movement. This was Karl Ernst, who soon replaced Helldorf and shortly thereafter conveyed and implemented the order to kill Hanussen.

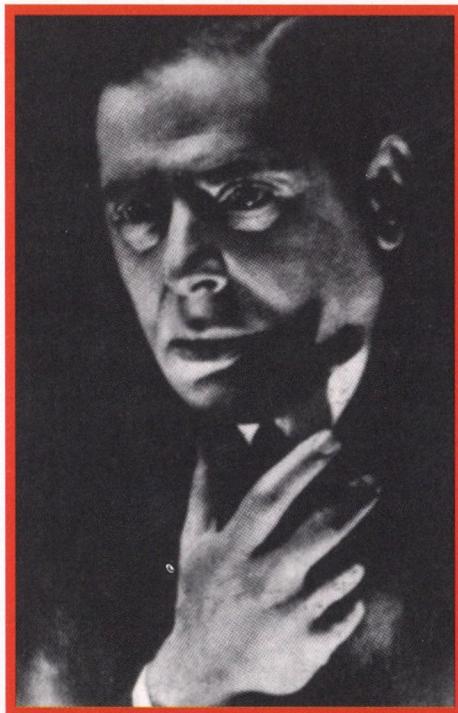
Kugel cites reliable sources which asserted that even Hermann Göring, at that time second only to Adolf Hitler in the Nazi party, had accepted money from Hanussen. The author notes that “during spiritistic séances, especially arranged for Göring,” Hanussen had prophesied “the enormous success, but also the eventual disintegration” of the Nazi regime. Researching material from the former Berlin Document Center (now the German Federal Archives), as well as Judiciary documents, Kugel concludes that the order to murder Hanussen came from Hitler, through Göring, and then to a “Storm Troopers’ Killer Commando.”

Kugel permits himself very limited room for speculation and comment. But it seems fair to ask how Hanussen, and people like Helldorf, could have assumed that they could get away with their daring manipulations. Hanussen’s keen understanding of human nature and psychology might have enabled him to realize that he was, as it were, trying to walk a tightrope — when there wasn’t a tightrope! Could it be that this man, with his astonishing knowledge and memory, this voracious reader had never read Hitler’s blueprint book, *Mein Kampf*... with its pathological chapter on Jews, reflecting unbounded hatred? Not being limited by Dr. Klugd’s detachment, I am inclined to see Erik Jan Hanussen as fitting the totally unscientific category of the “mad genius.” He had reached a point where he may have regarded himself as immune to the forces controlling the rest of humanity.

But then, he had created and re-created himself in a world that resembled a Hall of Mirrors. He wasn’t Erik Jan Hanussen, spawn of an aristocratic Danish family. Nor was he the telepathic and clairvoyant super-magician he presented to the public. Had he come to believe in the illusions he himself created? Clearly, he had not seen into the mind or read the thoughts of Erich Juhn, who, as Kugel cautiously suggested, may have been on Hanussen’s trail long before he became his “man Friday.” Juhn kept an eye on Hanussen’s fierce competitor, Siegmund Breitbart, from 1923 on, and succeeded in becoming Hanussen’s closest collaborator by 1927. Next, Juhn became assistant to yet another Hanussen rival, the stage magician Max Moecke. Juhn finally achieved, “by means of his carefully targeted indiscretions,” as Kugel notes, and with the cooperation of Bruno Frei,

a writer for Communist newspapers, the murder of Hanussen by the Nazis.

Erich Juhn’s extreme hatred of Hanussen prompted him not only to do extensive research into his target’s Jewish origins, but he also violated traditional ethics of professional magicians by publicizing Hanussen’s sophisticated magical secrets. Juhn, who was himself Jewish and active in the Zionist movement, apparently regarded Hanussen’s activities as



Hanussen in 1933, at the zenith of his career, conducting séances at his Palace of the Occult in Berlin.

detrimental to the standing of the Jewish community as a whole. Hanussen, whose newspaper, the *Hanussen-Zeitung*, had forecast Hitler’s success “astrologically,” registered the Nazi triumph with a huge “Victory!” headline. Filled with foreboding, Hanussen became desperate. His secretary Gertrude Schluch, recalled that he said, “If I manage to survive the beginning of this year, I will grow very old.”

Signs of his last-minute desperation were the facts, that, during the closing weeks of his life, Hanussen had himself baptized and, in a final act of self-betrayal, became a member of the NSDAP (National-Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei, or National-Socialist German Workers Party). That he managed, at least technically, to get Nazi party membership, can be attributed to the widespread hysteria, ambivalence, and confusion that marked the initial period of the Nazi regime.

Chaos and power struggle within the Nazi movement led to a series of killings. Hanussen’s executioner-once-removed, the regional Storm Troopers boss Karl Ernst, was killed on June 30, 1934. Count von Helldorf, Hanussen’s friend and debtor who belonged to the group that organized the unsuccessful assassination of Hitler on July 20, was hanged on September 10 that year. Hanussen had helped Helldorf to cover his huge gambling debts.

Hanussen’s dangerous, and ultimately deadly, game ended a trajectory of success, based on determination, virtually egomaniacal ambition, a forceful and even seductive charm, a variety of talents, more or less instinctive knowledge of human hopes and frailties, and self-confidence to the point of self-delusion.

Hanussen was born on June 2, 1889 in the Ottakring district, now part of the city of Vienna. Kugel, ever meticulous, gives the address as Yppenplatz 8, and the names of his parents as Siegfried and Julia Steinschneider.

Variations on the name may have been endearments of one sort or another, as Steinschneider translates into “Stonecutter,” so his ancestors may have been in the jewelry business, perhaps as gem cutters. His first name was Hermann.

Hanussen’s autobiography, for whatever it is worth, recounts his early career as varied and colorful. Never modest in speaking of his erotic liaisons, Hermann recalled that, at age 14, he had fallen for a 40-year-old cabaret singer, which gave him “the idea of becoming a performing artist.” Young Steinschneider’s subsequent career, as recounted in his autobiography, was that of a comedian, itinerant actor, songwriter, and singer. He alleged

that, at a Vienna circus, he even worked as lion tamer. According to his own account, Hermann manipulated himself into a succession of jobs by means of claims, titles, and positions that were either invented or grossly exaggerated. On May 19, 1912, he married his first wife, cabaret singer, Herta Samter.

By the time he was 21, Hermann Steinschneider had become a journalist, but

continued to work as a stand-up comedian and singer. The multi-talented Hermann clearly had a streak for fakery and frivolity, and felt himself part of the Vienna demimonde. At one point, he worked for something called *Hymnen*, which functioned as a “wedding paper.” Hermann called it a “trick paper.” The gimmick was that the news never changed, as it contained general information on weddings, fashions, and homemaking. They inserted a picture of a specific bride and groom, plus some text filled with praise of the young couple and their friends. Of course, the idea was to sell numerous copies of the “special edition” to family and guests.

Other papers lived by not-so-subtle blackmail. One of them, called *Der Blitz* (Lightning), was an out-and-out scandal sheet. Steinschneider was apparently quite adept at that trade. The writers and editors would put together “revelatory” articles about nightclub owners, hoteliers, or restaurateurs — with actual or invented information on prostitution, drug traffic, unhealthy kitchen conditions — and then take the galley proofs to targeted victims. An appropriate payment would keep the revelations from print. One memorable issue appeared May 28, 1913, when the paper published “The Cash Records of a Demimonde Lady,” containing the names of clients of a local prostitute, the amounts of money collected, and frequency of each client’s visits. This issue kept selling for several months.

The day this memorable record appeared, the editors announced the services of a new contributor, called “Faun” — none other than the versatile Hermann Steinschneider. Under the guise of a novel, printed in installments, the paper was able to refine its blackmail technique. Steinschneider produced two novels. One was called *Memoirs of a Snake Dancer*, and purported to be based on “diaries and official documents.” Readers were assured that this was no novel in the general sense, but an account of scandalous conditions in Viennese artistic society and Berlin’s “criminal community.” The second “novel” bore the title *The Adventures of Major Quitsch*, and it dealt with the alleged tours of the Major and his sidekick, Erasmus Pankriatus Rosskopf, of assorted Viennese nightclubs, restaurants, and hotels.

In this case, the publisher did not use blackmail. Instead, establishments paid for the privilege of having their services and ambiance praised by the fictitious Major Quitsch and his companion. This racket was extended to get money out of other places, ranging from department stores to opticians. Of course, the paper was in constant trouble, sued for libel,

closed down from time to time, and often failed to pay its printer. The dubious enterprise apparently enabled Steinschneider to make a good deal of money and engage in a variety of sexual liaisons. His favorite hang-out was the popular and racy Cafe Louvre.

As Hanussen recalled it, he became interested in the occult as early as 1910. He developed an interest in hypnosis. He had himself hypnotized and engaged in public “experiments” in



[Above] Facing press and film crew, Hanussen, seemingly in a trance, envisions a novel he titled *S.O.S.*, which never was realized. [Top] Belgian beauty queen Grace Cameron under hypnotic spell cast by Hanussen.

clairvoyance, the following year. These performances, while either in a hypnotic trance or while fully awake, created what he recalled as a lively public controversy: “I had my followers, who were ready to go through seven fires for me, and my antagonists, who regarded the whole thing as nothing but a clever fraud.” It set the pattern for the rest of the super-magician career.

Hanussen met one of his mentors at the Café Louvre, a self-styled experimental psychologist, Joe Labero, who, in turn, owed much of his skill to a magician by the name of Ernesto Bellini. In 1914, Labero persuaded Steinschneider to attack a rival magician, Eugen de Rubini, on the pages of *Blitz*. Rubini specialized in locating hidden objects; an “open letter” accused him of fraud, under the heading, “Thought-Reader Rubini Unmasked.” Another pattern of feuds had been formed.

At this point, Labero introduced Steinschneider to the technique of Muscle Reading. This was essentially the same method he used when I observed his performance in Hamburg, at the final phase of his career and life. It was also the beginning of his act as a telepath, to which he added a wide array of magic techniques and elaborations of his stage performance, plus lucrative private consultations. (During his Hamburg engagement, he earned 800 German Marks daily, to which he was able to add another 300 and 400 Marks in private consultations.)

Whether as Steinschneider or Hanussen, he insisted that his own performances were based on genuine psychic powers. He denounced other magicians, who made similar claims of fraud, these rivalries, at times, resulted in actual clashes between Hanussen followers and those of his antagonists — some of them may have been staged by paid stooges.

Having lectured and written about “Telepathy Attaching All Occultism,” as well as magic, he began to realize that the public preferred to believe in paranormal claims, rather than being enlightened about tricks.

As he was perfecting his act, he visited Berlin in 1913. He managed to develop his career even during World War I, while serving in the Austro-Hungarian Army. His assignments alternated between active duty and performances for troops or officers and their families. He practiced “prophecy” by intercepting letters from soldiers’ families, holding up their delivery, and relating details from the correspondence to a soldier — until the letters arrived and “confirmed” his pseudo-precognitions. It was during the war years that he adopted, in successive stages, the name Erik Jan Hanussen.

During the war, Hanussen discovered the use and usefulness of utilizing a dowsing rod. To give this discovery an appropriately exotic and mystical air, he claimed that he had come across this allegedly clairvoyant device during a visit to Abyssinia. He claimed that he had observed the use of the rod by a Lebscia boy, who used a forked twig to track down treasures

and other “targets,” including wanted criminals. Wherever he picked up the dowsing rod technique, Hanussen used the method as a magical device, to locate just about everything, from underground water to specific individuals in a public audience. One expert in the field, the Viennese rod-researcher Professor Moritz Benedikt (1835-1920), whom Hanussen credited as his mentor, categorized his performance not so much to telepathy as to a gift of “emetononic thought reading.” Hanussen’s claim, throughout his career, that he employed what today would be categorized as psychic or paranormal gifts, was, and is, a challenge to researchers in the field of parapsychology.

Dr. Kugel’s own research is aimed at sorting

Jauregg, the results tended to be inconclusive. On the other hand, Hanussen could always correctly claim that his “supernormal gifts” had been “examined by scientific experts.” He also obtained certificates from various police departments stating that he had been helpful in identifying criminals and, thus, in solving crimes. Naturally, Hanussen used such credits or endorsements to publicize the alleged genuineness of his activities.

Why did he do this? He knew full well that these claims would always be under scrutiny, whether by rivals, genuine doubters, or scandal-searching investigative journalists, adding yet another “exposure” of this screechingly successful, money-making, self-proclaimed

Afterwards, it was generally assumed that Hanussen had blatantly prophesied the fire, which was clearly due to arson. But who had set the fire? Was it the Communists, as the Nazis maintained, and which gave the Hitler regime the excuse to undertake widespread arrests, and enabled them to issue, the very next day, a sweeping decree that gave them the power to control government, the press, and arrest and persecute any segment of the population at will?

Dr. Kugel’s account of the surrounding events is detailed, and reflects an extraordinary amount of research. (Kugel is now working on a book dealing exclusively with the Reichstage Fire.) Rumors about this event, and of

POSTER REPRODUCTION: 100 YEARS OF MAGIC POSTERS, CHARLES AND REGINA REYNOLDS.



Artist Theo Matejko, noted designer of political posters for the 1928 Deutsche Demokratische Partei election, produced this effective poster for Hanussen in 1919.

the wheat of genuine psychic or parapsychological phenomena from the chaff of pure trickery. Throughout known history, a variety of devices have been used to induce trance or “psycho-physiological dissociation,” real or by pretense. Into this field belongs the practice of hypnosis, which Hanussen employed frequently, either using what he loosely called a medium, usually a woman, or by going into an alleged trance-state himself by means of self hypnosis or intense autosuggestion.

Whenever Hanussen presented his mixed concoction of his alleged paranormal skills to serious researchers, such as the prominent Viennese psychiatrist Professor Wagner-

super-magician. These claims, counterclaims, and controversies prompted enormous publicity wherever Hanussen went. In this, and in many other aspects, Hanussen resembled Harry Houdini, including the endorsements by enthusiastic — or bribed — police authorities. Even Houdini’s death, by a lethal blow, can be attributed to the hubris that eventually provoked Hanussen’s murder.

The murder of Erik Jan Hanussen has true historic importance. What appears to have prompted it, at a specific time, was the fire that destroyed the German Reichstag (Parliament) building in Berlin, on February 27, 1933, shortly before new elections had been scheduled.

Hanussen’s fate in connection with it, are numerous. As such dramatic events go, it has been the source of allegations and legends galore — just as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy prompted numerous allegations of secrets and conspiracies.

As for incontrovertible facts, Hanussen was clearly at the zenith of his career, at that point. He may have had fears and misgivings about his own survival under the Nazi regime, but he also had just furnished a Palace of the Occult at No. 3, Lietzenburger Strasse. And, as Kugel reports precisely, on the third floor, on the left, “this interior decorative tribute of Hanussen’s vanity, self-importance, and occult astrological

facade, included just about every conceivable gimmick, device, and creepy pseudo-occult decoration imaginable." There was a vast room in which he could sit, at the very center, surrounded by his guests/audience, and there was a monitoring set-up that enabled Hanussen to listen in on his visitors throughout the Palace.

The crucial séance took place on the eve of the Reichstag arson, on February 26, 1933. Hanussen's medium for the evening was an actress, Maria Paudler. The guests represented a cross section of Berlin's then-fermenting society: monde and demi-monde, a few princes, actors — and the inevitable Count Helldorf. As the evening went on, Hanussen performed a variety of his well-known clairvoyant and prophetic skills. Dr. Kugel cites his sources for these proceedings with admirable care. Newspaper accounts, the following days, lacked crucial details. Later claims and recollections were inevitably self-serving or extra cautious.

The most acceptable scenario is that Count Helldorf handed Hanussen a slip of paper — possibly asking for the to-be-expected results of the elections scheduled for March 5. Maria Paudler recalls in her memoirs (1978) that she agreed reluctantly to Hanussen's selection of her as a medium. Hanussen either prompted her to forecast the Reichstag arson, or said himself that he saw "flames in a large building," or, more precisely, "I see a large building in flames." Kugel cites other sources as alleging that Helldorf's question was, "Will our great plan to solidify our power succeed?" Hanussen's reported reply included the phrase, "I see the big Wallot Building destroyed by fierce flames." The building housed the Reichstag.

Well, then, was Hanussen killed, shortly afterwards, because the Nazis feared his clairvoyant powers?

Not exactly. Kugel lists the most likely elements that may have contributed to the decision to eliminate the rambunctious super-magician. To start with, Hanussen's Nazi friends may not have known of his Jewish background. But when details of his early life were published in anti-Nazi papers, the SA leaders were certainly discomfited. And then, too, Hanussen had simply become the man who knew too much. Elisabeth Heine, Hanussen's business partner recalled: "The reasons for his murder have a single root. He had become not only too awkward for [the Nazis], but dangerous." Hanussen had not only correctly prophesied the success of the Hitler regime, but also forecast its disintegration after ten years. Heine suggested that, if Hanussen had been permitted to go abroad, such views, together with his knowledge about the Reichstag Fire, could not be tolerated by the Hitler regime. Finally, because of his personal contacts with leading party and government members, Hanussen was familiar with the rivalries, corruption, and

power struggle at the top, and such details must never see the light of day.

Getting rid of Hanussen, once and for all, also solved an embarrassing financial problem for several high-ranking Nazi leaders, from Hermann Göring down, and including the powerful SA chief, Ernst Röhm. (When I moved from Hamburg to Berlin that year, all talk of the Reichstag fire, of Hanussen, and the scandals around him had totally disappeared from the press, as well as from public, and even private discussions. Hanussen had become a non-person, and the Reichstag fire a non-event.)

Hanussen's end was as grotesque as his life had been. He had rented his Palace of the Occult for several years and paid 30,000 German Marks in advance rental. And while he



Twice actual size.

This amulet was given to Martin Ebon by Mrs. Ana Jo O'Brien of Tryon, North Carolina, for identification — at the very time he was reading Dr. Wilfried Kugel's Hanussen biography. As followers of Dr. C.G. Jung might say, "A striking case of synchronicity." Hanussen may have sold or distributed these during his visit to the United States, where he appeared at the Hippodrome in New York City.

privately expressed fear of a Nazi dictatorship, and planned a visit with family members in Italy, while accepting a booking in Vienna, Hanussen's behavior was oddly brazen in Berlin, even as the curtain was coming down on his life. Helldorf's rival and successor, Karl Ernst, assembled a Killer Commando under the command of another high SA leader, Wilhelm Ohst, yet another Nazi chief who had borrowed money from Hanussen.

Ohst arrived at Hanussen's Palace of the Occult at nine o'clock that night. One member of this group, Rudolf Steinle, later recalled the details. They were received cordially by Hanussen's secretary: "Go right upstairs. The boss will see you right away."

When Ohst told Hanussen that he was

under arrest, he protested. "Under arrest? By you, my friend Ohst? That's impossible. Don't kid me... after all I've done to help you out!"

Ohst bluntly asked Hanussen to turn over all the papers connecting him to the Nazi Party. Crucial among these were, of course, the receipts and IOUs he had collected from party higher-ups. He had doubtlessly hoped that these would enable him to blackmail or, more subtly, put enough pressure on the new regime, so he might continue his dazzling and profitable career, unimpeded. They drove Hanussen away, in his own red Bugatti to headquarters of the Field Police on General Pape Street, where, probably in either the basement or court room, they killed Hanussen with three shots. They drove his body to the remote forest preserve outside Berlin, and dumped it. Hanussen was killed on March 24, 1933, one week before a scheduled appearance in Vienna.

Although Kugel finds that Hanussen was first and foremost an entertainer, and that his claims of paranormal gifts remain unsubstantiated, he concludes on a note of caution, stating that his judgment "contains a remnant of doubt." The fascinating, elusive, enigmatic, and ultimately self-destructive Hanussen suffered from the weakness of his strength. He conquered audiences by self-assertion and an air of imperturbable certainty. This ability crossed over, dangerously, into delusions of near-omnipotence, as when Hanussen wrote the following analysis of his power and skill:

"What is magic? Not to upset people in their precious belief in the miraculous, but to encourage it. I provide proof that will power, courage, energy, and impertinence enables us to put 2,000 people inside an auditorium into our pocket. What is an audience? Mental weaklings, miracle-seekers, hysterics, a few truly unhappy souls — but, above all, children, who regret that no teacher, father, superior, or friend impresses them sufficiently so that they can trust him completely. Why, then, do people always trust me, utterly? Because I am stronger than they, more courageous, more energetic, and determined. Because they are children, and I am a man."

Hanussen, like Houdini, displayed the psychological characteristics of the magic profession — but to the point of vainglorious self-delusion. Hanussen had planned a fictional autobiography, *The God of Charlatans and Women (Der Gott der Gaukler und der Frauen)*. This tribute to his delusional divinity could have been Hanussen's epitaph. ♦

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