

TOMÁŠ HUBÁČEK / 5. 1. 2024

# Life as a jazz ballad. The work of Hans Janowitz, screenwriter of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

“It was the time of ‘voluminous curls.’ It was the time of ‘short skirts’ and ‘body stockings.’ It was the time of runaway sons and kidnapped daughters. It was the time of the first zeppelin flight across the Atlantic, a time of historical strife between East and West. A rift of unimaginable depth opened between the two halves of humanity. It was indeed a time of tumultuous contrasts; it was a time of wild childhood, but it was also a foretaste of the tragic turns that were yet to come.”<sup>[1]</sup> With these words, Hans Janowitz not only began his only completed and published novel, *Jazz (Jazz)*, but also prophetically described the future of Europe – in 1927, when the book was published. At the time of its publication, however, he was no longer writing film scripts in Germany for which he was most famous. He traded decadent cabarets for an office – he has been running a rapeseed oil production plant in Poděbrady for four years. The fate of Hans Janowitz was, in short, as turbulent and full of twists and turns as the era in which he achieved his greatest successes.

## **Youth and wartime disillusionment**

Hans Janowitz was born in Poděbrady in 1890 into a German-Czech Jewish family of Gustav Janowitz, co-owner of a rapeseed oil factory, and his wife Hermina. His parents cultivated artistic inclinations, whether musical or literary, in their four children from an early age, and the language spoken in their household was almost exclusively Czech. In spite of this, Hans was sent to a German grammar school in Prague in 1905; he then transferred to the Prague Business Academy from which he

graduated three years later. In Prague he became acquainted with a circle of German writers, such as Franz Werfel, Willy Haas, and Max Brod. These acquaintances soon led him to the beginning of his own literary activities. From 1911 he contributed poems and essays to the magazine *Herder-Blätter* and Brod's yearbook *Arkadia* (Arcadia). At that time, however, he was already in Germany, where he had originally gone at his father's request to get an apprenticeship in a grain trading company. The years after his one-year military service in Salzburg are difficult to chart accurately in Janowitz's life. He lived in Leipzig, but mostly in Hamburg, where he worked at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus as an occasional actor and assistant director. This was a brief period when the theatre's artistic director was Carl Hagemann whose vision of modern and stylized theatre was a sharp departure from the earlier naturalistic conception and could have been another source of inspiration for Janowitz. In the year before the beginning of the war Janowitz also contributed to *Der Brenner*, a magazine focused on art and culture, both with his own stories and with reviews (he wrote, for example, a laudatory review of the German edition of Fráňa Šrámek's poems).

World War I was a severe test for Janowitz. Although he proved himself as an officer in the service of the Austrian army, his traumatic experiences on the Eastern Front made him a lifelong pacifist. The death of his younger brother Franz, aged twenty-five, a promising poet who had published in all the periodicals in which Hans himself had, was a tragic blow for him. Franz's work was published after the end of the war by his friend and writer Karel Kraus and is still translated and praised among the most important works of the so-called Prague German School.

### **Gloomy film and wild scene**

After the war, Hans Janowitz went to Berlin and at the end of 1918 began working with Carl Mayer on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*). Neither of them had any experience in filmmaking, yet they wrote a screenplay for a groundbreaking film that still fascinates both film audiences and historians today. Janowitz himself made many later statements about the making of the film, but many of his claims are very difficult to prove. For example his story of a murder of a girl he allegedly witnessed in Holstenwall, Hamburg, in 1913, from which he is said to have taken Holstenwall as the name of the town in which the film is set. Whether or not his recollections were true, Janowitz insisted to the end of his life that he wrote *The*

*Cabinet* as an allegory for the whole of Germany, and that director Robert Wiene's decision to set Caligari's story within the framing narrative of the sanatorium undermined the film's sharp political tone.

*The Cabinet* was followed by a surprisingly quick series of other films on which Janowitz participated as a screenwriter. The première of *Eternal River* (*Ewiger Strom*, dir. Johannes Guter, 1920), a story of a young woman who is saved from drowning by a river god and who later takes revenge on all men, came only a month and a half after the release of *Caligari*. In the same year, Janowitz's adaptation of R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, directed by F. W. Murnau, was released under the title *The Head of Janus* (*Der Januskopf*, 1920). Both the audience and the critics particularly appreciated Conrad Veidt's performance as the protagonist of this dark expressionist film. Unfortunately, the film is now considered lost – only a few photographs have survived, along with Janowitz's script focusing more on portraying emotion and atmosphere than on specific shots.

Regrettably, a similar fate also befell the second film resulting from Murnau's collaboration with Janowitz. *Marizza*, called *the Smuggler Madonna* (*Marizza, genannt die Schmugglermadonna*, 1921) was, according to historian Lotte Eisner, filmed in a much more intimate vein than *The Head of Janus* and was more reminiscent of Murnau's *The Burning Soil* (*Der brennende Acker*), released in the same year. However, only a thirteen-minute fragment of this intricate melodrama about a love triangle, based on a theme by Wolfgang Geiger, has survived; it was restored in 2010 and presented at the Pordenone Festival in the same year.

By 1923, Janowitz had written scripts for five more films, none of which received much acclaim. The only exception was the film *Roswolsky's Mistress* (*Die Geliebte Roswolskys*, dir. Felix Basch, 1921) starring Asta Nielsen and Paul Wegener.

Janowitz's work was not limited to the film career, though. He wrote poems and reviews for several magazines (among other things, he contributed articles on German culture to the Prague daily *Tribuna* (Rostrum)) and was considered a respected writer in Germany. In 1921 he became one of the founding members of the literary-political cabaret *Wilde Bühne* (translated as Wild Scenes) of the actress Trude Hesterberg. He wrote poems for the company which published and featured the most important

intellectuals of the time, such as Walter Mehring, Leo Heller, and Kurt Tucholsky; the poems were later published under the title *Asfalt Ballads* (*Asphaltballaden*, 1924). In these ballads he talked about deep humanity, but also spoke critically against the social conditions in Germany.

### **At home and in emigration**

The year of 1923 was a turning point in Janowitz's career. In February his father Gustav died, and Hans had to return to Bohemia to take over his father's oil mill. On top of that, the *Wilde Bühne* cabaret suffered a fire later that year and it did not return to its original revolutionary concept with its new manager.

We do not know much about Janowitz's life in Czechoslovakia. What we know for sure is that he continued to write for newspapers; in the Czechoslovak press he used the Czech variant of his name, Hanuš. He used a number of pseudonyms as well, though, which makes it difficult to compile a complete bibliography today. He also published his second and last collection of poems under the title *Requiem for Brotherhood* (*Requiem der brüderlichen Bruderschaft*, 1928), dedicated to his late brother Franz. In 1927, Janowitz's only novel *Jazz* was published, inspired by his years in the throbbing metropolis of Berlin and its cabaret scene. The intricate parodic plot full of misunderstandings is written in such a way that its rhythm is reminiscent of jazz music. Although it received praise from the literary scene of the time, it quickly fell into obscurity, just like many other works published shortly before the rise of Nazism. It was not until its re-release at the end of the 1990s that the interest in the novel was revived.

Hans Janowitz watched with concern the political changes in neighbouring Germany at the beginning of the 1930s. Aware of the threat of anti-Semitism, he emigrated to New York with his wife Helen on the grounds of his Jewish origin. Most of his relatives did not survive the German terror. His sister Ella and her daughter Erika died in the concentration camps. Depressed by the war conflict, Janowitz became involved with HIAS, an organization providing aid to refugees from Europe.

He also made an unsuccessful attempt to return to filmmaking in America. Only a few of his articles were published in newspapers and magazines, the rest ended up in Janowitz's desk drawer and were not to be found until after his death. This is also

where his ideas for the upcoming sequel to the famous *Doctor Caligari*, subtitled *Caligari redivivus*, ended. It was never made due to legal disputes.

Hans Janowitz did not return to Czechoslovakia after the end of the war. At that time he was already working in a perfume factory, where he remained until his death in 1954. He had acquired American citizenship four years earlier.

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### Notes:

[1] Translated and edited according to the new edition of the book: Hans Janowitz, *Jazz*. Bonn: Weidle 1999.