

Translated excerpt

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Das irrwitzige Leben des Hasso Grabner

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Journey through a Tragicomic Century.
The Absurd Life of Hasso Grabner

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The impressive old pile in which the battalion radio operator Hasso Grabner not only works but also lives dates back to the 16th century and not long ago belonged to a count by the name of Kōnstantínos Theotókēs. Theotókēs himself had studied in Germany at the end of the 19th century and had come into contact with socialist ideas there, ideas he had internalized to such an extent by the time he completed his studies that he not only propagated them on his return to Corfu, but also attempted to put them into practice for himself, which led to him rejecting the inheritance of his highly influential aristocratic family and – rather than becoming an archbishop, prime minister or at least a member of parliament like his brothers, nephews, uncles and various ancestors – founding a socialist trade union federation on Corfu and writing a series of novels, all of them focused on the class struggle.

It is as though the two biographies were reflected in that castle, in the year 1943. Theotókēs, deceased for twenty years, came from Corfu, went to Germany and came across socialism there, only to return and attempt to spread its teachings, writing under its auspices.

Twenty years later, Hasso Grabner, who came from Germany and went to Corfu, was also to be part of a socialist movement and write novels no less concerned with the class struggle. At this point, however, he knows nothing of all that. At this point he's still stuck in Corfu. In a tower. And Germany, indeed even the war, seem infinitely far away.

And yet it is still there. And Hasso Grabner, the communist in Wehrmacht uniform, is a part of it. But what can he do?

Two thousand kilometres away from Corfu, the illegal leadership committee of the Communist Party of Germany, imprisoned in the Brandenburg house of correction, knows the answer to that question. At least with regard to the communists among the members of the 999th Penal Division. The committee recommends that they use every opportunity to defect – 'to the Soviet troops, or to the partisans in Greece.'

People behind bars sometimes have difficulties imagining mobility. But when they do envisage it, it's all very easy. All you have to do is run off and you'll be with the Soviet troops or the partisans in a jiffy. Except, sadly, there are no partisans in Corfu. Even the German secret service reports: 'Organized bandit activity non-existent from either communist or EDES side.'

'But the Soviet troops! Defect to the Soviet troops!' the KPD leaders proclaim from their two-thousand-kilometre distance. Only there are not only no partisans, but also no Soviet troops on Corfu. Indeed, the Russians couldn't give a flying fuck about Greece as a whole. One thing's for sure: Stalin's emissaries send millions of warm words to the communist resistance fighters during the war, but not a single cold bullet.

And Stalin himself? He meets up with Churchill and watches him sketch out his idea for the future division of the Balkans spontaneously 'on a half-sheet of paper'. On the subject of Greece, Churchill's suggestion is as follows: Britain: 90 %. Russia: 10 %.

'I pushed this across to Stalin. There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us.'

Two thousand kilometres west of Moscow, in Brandenburg, the imprisoned KPD leadership knows nothing of this deal and continues to demand persistently that its men defect to the Soviet troops or the partisans in Greece. Hasso Grabner, meanwhile, sits in his tower, notes down the incoming Wehrmacht radio dispatches and uses them to build his own kaleidoscope of the island.

Eight years later, by which time most of the images have faded and a new resumé forces his memories into the Procrustean bed of the next ideology, one of them is still very much present. Back-translated into words, it reads: 'In 1943 I was sent to the island of Corfu. There was no active resistance movement there, no partisans.'

And even if they had been there: when you defect on an island, you're still stuck on an island.

All around Corfu, meanwhile, the war continues; only on the island, so it seems, is nothing happening. Although the Allied troops are only a twenty-minute flight away, controlling the entire airspace above the Adria and dropping the occasional bomb on Corfu, most of the time the island is in a strange state of calm, and it almost appears as though Corfu is a prisoner-of-war camp 'in which the Germans manage and take care of themselves.'

In the spring of '44, however, conditions begin to shift. The pre-stabilized harmony of the uncontested coexistence with the Allied troops stationed in Italy starts to slip, almost soundlessly. And the Albanian partisans too raise their heads from their hiding places and peer across at Corfu. Well, I never, things really are happening on the island...

In May '44, a British plane lands in the south of Corfu. This part of the island being largely unoccupied by the Germans, a reconnaissance troop is immediately dispatched. By the time they arrive, however, they can only report that the plane has burnt out and the crew has vanished.

On the rocky island of Fano to the northwest of Corfu, considered the key to the Adria due to its exposed position, unknown parties mount an attack on a Wehrmacht base in July '44. The German staff, headquartered twenty-five kilometres away in Karousades, experiences the assault at almost first hand. The uncapped radio connection broadcasts live footage of hand-grenade explosions and screams. Partisans are suspected, but the attackers are never caught.

A few days later, a British submarine is reported to have landed on the west coast of Corfu, in the bay of Sidari. The observers cannot say whether anyone disembarked, as the guards are poorly distributed. Nevertheless: 'The impression is increasingly prevalent that Corfu is forming a base for the Allies to infiltrate the south-eastern area with agents, to support the mainland partisans.'

Shortly after that, flashing lights and signals are sighted on the sea off Corfu and on the opposite Albanian mainland. German counterintelligence attempts to identify the signals but is soon forced to admit that the messages' senders and receivers are not only unknown, but also remain invisible.

One thing has been visible from the outset, however: the Jews on the island.

It is April 1944, and the Corfiot Jews feel safe despite the German occupation. Their community is one of the oldest in Greece, their significance for the island's economic survival is undisputed and their protection is ensured by a Red Cross ship moored in the harbour. At some point this month, the radio operator Hasso Grabner receives from his superior in Karousades Tower a confidential, doubly coded command document. The writ orders the company command posts on the island to report all Jewish residents in their catchment areas.

Over the subsequent 48 hours, every one of the two thousand Jews living in Corfu are placed on lists and forced to present themselves regularly to the German authorities from then on. The attendant humiliations are tacitly accepted, and nor is any other protest raised. On the contrary: the president of Corfu's Jewish religious community calls on its members to follow the Germans' instructions. They have nothing to fear, he tells them.

Hasso Grabner, meanwhile, attempts to use all channels available to him in Karousades Tower. He knows what this census signifies, and he succeeds in warning one Jewish man who lives in the village. He manages no more than that. The middleman who recently helped to enable the night landing of a British submarine seems absolutely helpless on the Jewish question.

On 25 April, the head of the relevant German department declares there are 'no fundamental concerns' with regard to the deportation of Corfu's Jews and that sufficient shipping capacity is available.

On 12 May, the German police department in Athens informs Army Group E, stationed on Corfu, that the removal of the Jews is directly impending and is to be performed 'at accelerated speed'. The legal basis, they add, is an order by SS-Reichsführer Himmler.

On 14 May, SS-Obersturmführer Anton Burger, newly arrived on the island and in charge of Jewish issues, orders the island commandant Emil Jäger to arrest all Jews on Corfu without delay. The island commandant, however, intervenes.

Jäger, the owner of a riding hall in civilian life, is actually a loyal servant to the Führer, so loyal that he kept a seat free for him at all party events under his own organization for years, and at some point – since the Führer still never showed his face – undertook to speak to him directly, albeit not in person but in written form, which he entitled *A Fateful Contribution from the NSDAP's Time of Struggle in Austria* and sent to Hitler's confidant Martin Bormann, with a request to present his opus to the Führer.

Now, however, as island commandant of Corfu, Jäger does not want to have 'his' Jews simply arrested, let alone deported; after all, he explains, the Red Cross ship is still in the harbour and would 'ensure propaganda of atrocities'. Aside from that, he adds, the local population sides with the Jews, meaning 'the inevitable brutality can only have a repellent effect'. The consequence: 'loss of ethical prestige' and 'moral damage to the troops' – not the only price to be paid, however, as the Jews, according to Jäger, possess 'considerable amounts of gold, jewels, fabrics' and other items that would 'corrupt our soldiers and the German authority in the form of bribes' and 'only aid the enemy to a great extent'. He suggests that the army commanders therefore 'postpone for the foreseeable future'.

In Karousades Tower, Hasso Grabner can't quite believe his ears. Not only does it look like the Jews won't be deported after all; no, if he is to believe the island commander's words, they have also been warned. The helplessness he felt only days ago vanishes into thin air.

It is dangerous for Grabner to display his joy at the developments openly but he does want to express it. Over the next few days he writes a series of poems, a kind of Corfiot trilogy of fulfilment, leading – in the form of a giant lyrical nature symbol – from night to dawn to the brightness of day. The opening lines of the last verse, written on 28 May 1944, are: 'Joyous sky of Corfu, your sounds / echo from the gentle mounts.'

Five days later, it's the sonorous tone of Allied bomber planes echoing from the island's mountains, as the British and Americans undertake another air raid on Corfu. The bombs they drop are real, the buildings they land on are reduced to rubble and the people they hit are as dead as only bombs can kill. And yet the attack is purely for decorative purposes, intended only to distract attention from the Allied landings in Normandy.

On Corfu, meanwhile, the German army command is creating cold hard facts. On the evening of 8 June 1944, the island's Jews are instructed to gather in the city the next day, while Hasso Grabner and with him all the penal battalion soldiers receive orders to keep out of what is to happen tomorrow.

On 9 June, the Corfiot Jews become the victims of the largest raid in the island's history. Only few of them try to escape to the mountains, with many Jews even placing themselves directly in the Germans' hands. It is not easy to say why. Perhaps they are in a similar situation to the communists in Wehrmacht uniform, perhaps they simply don't believe they might find an island of safety on an island. More likely, however, the Jews of Corfu trust in their history and their importance to the economy – and trust even more in the high-ranking members of their religious community, who cannot imagine their own extermination. It is not the first time that the credulous become corpses. A year previously, the president of Thessaloniki's Jewish community warned the Jews threatened with deportation against fleeing, as it would displease the Germans and the new settlement area in Poland appeared promising. Most of the more than 40,000 Jews of Thessaloniki believed him. Only few of them fled their homes. Those who remained were arrested and deported to Auschwitz and Treblinka, where three quarters of them were gassed. Did they know that the president of the community had once written his PhD in Vienna, on descriptions of hell in Jewish literature?

In Corfu, meanwhile, almost 1700 Jews have gathered outside the city's old fortress at six o'clock in the morning of 9 June 1944. Those who don't turn up voluntarily are beaten out of their homes; patients in hospitals and asylums are promptly 'released'.

The people milling outside the fortress aren't the only ones up and about that morning. On balconies, behind windows encased in thick walls, on top of roofs and houses, everywhere groups of people whisper and watch as the Corfiot Jews below them form a great group, *an island on the island*, penned in by Wehrmacht, Gestapo and Greek police officers, who wear no uniforms. Athens Jews, the Rikanati brothers, also help the Germans.

And so it proceeds. The Corfiot Jews are sorted, searched and then robbed of their belongings. Even their house keys are taken from them. And the Red Cross ship has also departed.

Other ships have come in its place, and while the Jews wait in Corfu's old fortress for their fate to unfold and every thought of escape ends in the barrel of a German machine gun, Wehrmacht-chartered boats are prepared for their load in the city's harbour, and two days later, on 11 June 1944, the deportation begins.

Since there is neither food nor water on the crossing, the number of living passengers is reduced by several dozen on the way via Lefkada to Patras. That is essentially in the Germans' interest, however. The question of disposal was clarified nine months previously by the example of the Italian army officers; the problem of washed-up corpses is discussed and a promise is given that it will not happen again. The dead are therefore weighed down before they are thrown in the sea, and the fact that they do not get washed up on the beaches is taken as proof that the Wehrmacht has learned from its mistakes.

Once the shipping is done, the Corfiot Jews are interned in the Haidari concentration camp near Athens before being taken to bevor Auschwitz in cattle cars. The rail journey takes nine days. Many of them die of starvation or thirst. When the Jews arrive in Auschwitz on the evening of 29 June, most of them are immediately murdered and burned in crematorium number two.

And in Corfu? The beaches are clean as a whistle, and the Greek mayor holds a party in mid-July. 'Our good friends the Germans have cleansed the island of the Jewish vermin. Now we must no longer share the harvests of our fields with them.'

Two weeks later, the war in Corfu has finally degenerated to the grotesque; from now on, a British fighter plane circles the island every morning. It is not attacked but nor does it attack anything or anyone itself, and it almost appears as though the Italians and Jews had been its preferred targets. The German soldiers, at any rate, soon grow accustomed to this exquisitely English form of encirclement, watching the plane fly its relentless circles of the island, at some point calling it 'the duty officer from the other side'.

And yet the thing with the 'other side' is not quite as simple and peaceful as it seems; to be precise, there are *two* other sides on Corfu. And while one of them comes from outside, belongs to the Royal Air Force and offers aerial tours around Corfu every morning, the other is stationed on the island itself: loyal members of the KPD despite their Wehrmacht uniforms, who spend every free hour building a model of their own base out of matchsticks.

What may sound like a pointless creative exercise, in truth has a political motivation. For months, the soldiers' newspaper *Wacht im Südosten* has been tub-thumping for the special exhibition 'Combat Area Southeast' to be mounted 'in the near future in Vienna', even offering a prize for the best model of a Wehrmacht base.

There can be no better cover story. The communists in Hasso Grabner's penal battalion take up *firstly* the challenge, *secondly* the opportunity to meet up regularly on an

absolutely unsuspecting pretext, and consequently *thirdly* they take the matter appropriately seriously, so it is no wonder that they end up – *tadaaa!* – winning the thing.

The man who awards the prize to the soldiers allegedly acting out of personal motivation and enjoyment of fascist propaganda, is Wilhelm Hammer, a counterintelligence officer in Army Group E. He has no idea that the prize-winners are communists with the actual task of making plans for a coup on Corfu, rather than matchstick models.

There really are plans to take the island back from the Wehrmacht – and Hasso Grabner is in the midst of them, the node of a web of information which runs from his radio station in Karousades Tower via the company command posts to the remotest of grenade launcher positions.

But German counterintelligence on Corfu is not inactive, and soon requests secret military police, standard military police and additional counterintelligence troops ‘for the surveillance of unreliable elements of the local battalion of men unworthy for service’.

Meanwhile, a few kilometres from Karousades, the penal soldier Hans Binder has made contact to Greek resistance fighters. Binder, whose story is lost in an obscure gloom of rumours and half-truths and whose political views veer somewhere between communist, cryptic and criminal, soon lets his direct contact Hasso Grabner in on his plans.

Grabner, however, is sceptical. With his contact to the staff commanders and his position providing him with wide-ranging information, he warns against hasty actions. Under the conditions of an island, with a view of Corfu as only harbouring few hidden partisans while the Wehrmacht is well established, he considers direct actions against the German occupiers far too dangerous.

Hans Binder does not want to hear about risks and dangers; Hans Binder wants to do something. So he tries to win over other penal soldiers for his plans, not excluding the ‘criminals’ in the 999th Division – who end up betraying him.

On the evening of 8 September 1944, German counterintelligence men raid the house Binder uses as an illicit meeting place and arrest the Greek partisans they find inside. Binder, on duty that evening and not present, is dragged out of a rifle pit shortly later, taken to a nearby police prison and ‘questioned’ by the secret military police. During the simultaneous search of his belongings, they find a small notebook containing the names of those he has informed of his plans. Hasso Grabner’s name is at the very top of the list.

That same night, Hasso Grabner receives a visit at Karousades Tower from three Wehrmacht soldiers, who command him to come with them. He does not know what he is accused of. Nor does he know where he’s going, and not until the end of a three-hour march taking him to the western part of the island, to the picturesque village of Paleokastriza, does Hasso Grabner know what awaits him. Tied to an olive tree in the rising morning light, he finds Hans Binder.

Grabner immediately sees that the military police have prepared Binder for execution. His hands are tied behind his back and his eyes are covered. All that is merely decorative, though; Hans Binder cannot see a thing any more. His face has been beaten to a pulp, his left eye socket now completely empty.

Hasso Grabner is soon likewise shackled and tied to a post only metres away from Hans Binder, but the men purposely leave his eyes uncovered. He is to watch his comrade dying.

Shortly, Hasso Grabner hears the familiar command and sees the firing squad's bullets hit the shackled body. Yet they don't kill Hans Binder. Instead, the commanding officer steps forward, stands directly in front of Binder hanging from the tree, and looks at Grabner as if to challenge him. When he sees that Grabner is watching, he takes his gun and shoots Hans Binder in the face, not once taking his eyes off Grabner. The tied-up body slumps to the ground.

That is the last thing Hasso Grabner sees. Then his eyes too are covered and the command rings out. 'Aim. Fire!'

Not a shot is to be heard, only howls of laughter. After a while, Grabner is untied. 'It'll be serious next time, you communist swine,' the officer tells him, clearly looking forward to it. Then the three soldiers take Hasso Grabner back to Karousades.

Essentially, the Wehrmacht in Corfu in 1944 is in the same position as the judge nine years previously in Dresden. They think they've taught Hasso Grabner a lesson, but he's long since learned his own. When he finds out the next day through the radio troop commander stationed with him in the tower that, as a result of Binder's treason, the entire penal battalion on the island is to be disarmed and every tenth soldier is to be shot, he immediately passes the news on to the 'political' penal soldiers serving with him, and with good luck and diplomatic skills, they manage to thwart the plan. Hasso Grabner breathes a sigh of relief when he hears over the radio that the order to disarm has been reversed and the planned executions have also been called off. A few days later, however, his chest constricts again.

It is late September, and Hasso Grabner finds out via a series of top-secret channels that the local administrator of Karousades, Konstantinos Kladas, has spoken in favour of making him, the communist in Wehrmacht uniform, an honorary citizen. His reasoning is that Grabner, whom everyone in the village calls simply 'the doctor', has rendered outstanding services to the village by relieving the Wehrmacht antimalarial stocks of 10,000 Atebrin tablets and giving them to the local people – something everyone knows but no one says out loud. He has also 'reallocated' German guards on several occasions via radio, thereby enabling the landing of a boatful of resistance fighters from Albania, and done everything he could to come into contact with the Greeks and their resistance fighters.

But Hasso Grabner doesn't want to be an honorary citizen of Karousades. Hasso Grabner wants to go home.

A few days later, he gets a chance to do so. On 1 October 1944, the Germans pull out of Corfu. Shortly before that, the entire 999th Battalion has been swiftly declared worthy of

military service after all, and every private has been made a private first class. The only exception from this mass-promotion is Hasso Grabner. The army commanders are not reckoning on him surviving, anyway. His unit is the last in the west wing of Army Group E. And the rear guard on a retreat is always the first to feel the enemy's attack. The losses, the commanders estimate, will be extremely high.