

Hugo von Königsgarten

by Renate Publig

It was before his flight from Vienna that Erich Zeisl composed his stage work *Leonce und Lena* in collaboration with Hugo von Königsgarten. Only little was known about this librettist apart from the fact that he, like Zeisl, had to flee from Vienna after the nazi regime's takeover.

But there are surviving blood relations of Hugo von Königsgarten: his nephew, Michael, and his niece, Tessa Garton – the anglicized version of the name Königsgarten – took the first European performance of *Leonce und Lena* as an opportunity to visit Linz. As the family history was conspicuously little spoken about Michael began researching. He wrote down his findings in his book 'In Search of Ernst'. And these findings could hardly be surpassed in terms of complexity: Ernst, who was 'searched' for by Michael Garton, is the brother of Fritz von Königsgarten, the father of Hugo, our librettist. Michael und Tessa's father is Hugo's brother, Henry – or, as turned out, his half-brother – as

shortly before his brother Fritz' death Ernst had an affair with his sister-in-law, Lisi, from which Henry issued. That is, Ernst is not the great-uncle, but the grandfather of Michael and Tessa.

Michael's research also shed some light on the life of Hugo von Königsgarten. Hugo was born in 1904 in Brno; the family moved to Vienna when he was seven years old. His father died in 1907, his mother marrying the Berlin-born Max Bohne, to whose home city the family moved in 1915. In Berlin Hugo began to attend university, graduating around 1930 in Heidelberg as Dr. phil. (PhD). Between 1930 and 1933 – the precise year is not known – he returned to Vienna, but he was to remain only for a couple of years. On 13 March 1938, one day after the Anschluss, Hugo fled to England via Switzerland, two days before his arrest by the Nazis for writing anti-Hitler-sketches for an underground theatre.



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The reason for the long silence about the emigration period gradually came to light. A chest with old documents was found in the attic; it turned out that several family members were killed in the concentration camps: Ernst, Max (Lisi's second husband), and Lisi's mother all died in Theresienstadt, Ludwig (another brother of Ernst) in Auschwitz. The chest also contained manuscript notes by Lisi Bohne-Königsgarten, the mother of Hugo and Henry and the grandmother of Michael and Tessa Garton. One of these notes tells the story of the last hours of a young man in Vienna; and even if the name in the story is given as Benno it is relatively probable that these pages describe the last day in Vienna of none other than Hugo von Königsgarten.

It is set on 14 March 1938 and tells the story of Dr. Benno Becker, a 'non-aryan' author and the incipient love story with his secretary, Luise, the daughter of a Catholic officer. Austrian chancellor Schuschnigg's speech is radio broadcast. Suddenly, the Austria Becker knew and loved is dead. Paralyzing fear and hopelessness pervade, but at the same time Becker is filled with love for Luise. Everything is happening at once; Benno flees, he has lost everything: his home, which had been like light and air to breathe for him – and his Luise. With only one suitcase he boards the train that would bring him to the unknown and to solitude, when at the last moment Luise appears. She had come to join him in his fate and to emigrate via Switzerland to England.

As far as is known there are enough parallels to Hugo's life, including the girl he had fallen in love with. Who the young woman was, and if she really joined him in emigration, unfortunately stays hidden in the mists of time.

Last Days in Vienna

'Enough for today' said Benno. He stood at the window and looked out. It was the afternoon of 14 March 1938. A pale sky framed the familiar picture. Below the old wall along the edge of the dark mountain range (eigentlich Schwarzenbergplatz), trees that as yet had no leaves, but delicate twigs giving a hint of the coming spring; while behind was a pair of slender towers and the beautiful dome with its green patina. On the right hand side the matt coloured front of the Belvedere Caslte. On the street below children played and on a corner a street organ played The Blue Danube.

Benno and heard it all; yes, he saw and heard with heightened clarity. But nevertheless he felt the presence of the girl acutely. As always Luise sat in front of the typewriter. Benno was working on his book, *The Early Classical Age*, and she had been his secretary for six months. All he knew about her was that her name was Luise von Bruckner; that she came from an old Austrian officer's family; that she was an orphan and that she lived with her aunt, the widow of a civil servant.

Heute letzte Page in Wien

"Genug für heute," sagte Benno.
 Er stand am Fenster und sah hinaus.
 Es war am Nachmittage des 14. März 1938.
 Ein klarer Himmel rahmte das ihm bekannte Bild. Unten die alte Mauer längs des Schwarzenbergplatzes, Bäume die erst noch keine Knospen hatten, aber in harter Verzweigung schon den Frühling ahnten, weiter dahinter ein paar schlanke Türme und die ruhige Kuppel mit dem grünen Patina. Zur rechten Seite leuchtete die matt getönte Front des Belvedere's. Auf der Straße unten lärmten Kinder, in irgend einem Hofe spielte ein Streichorchester die *Donauwellen*.

Benno sah und hörte alles ja, er sah und hörte mit ungewohnter Parteilichkeit. Trotzdem aber er fühlte trotzdem mehr denn die Gegenwart der Mädchen. Seine Frau vor der *Edelmanns* wie immer. — Benno arbeitete an seinem Buch, *Das frühklassische Zeitalter*. Er war seit einem halben Jahre sein Sekretär. Alles was er von ihr wusste war, dass sie eine Frau von Bruckner, eine alten österreichischen Offiziersfamilie abstammte und eine Wittwe war. Dass sie bei ihm wohnte, eine Beamtenwitwe, wusste.