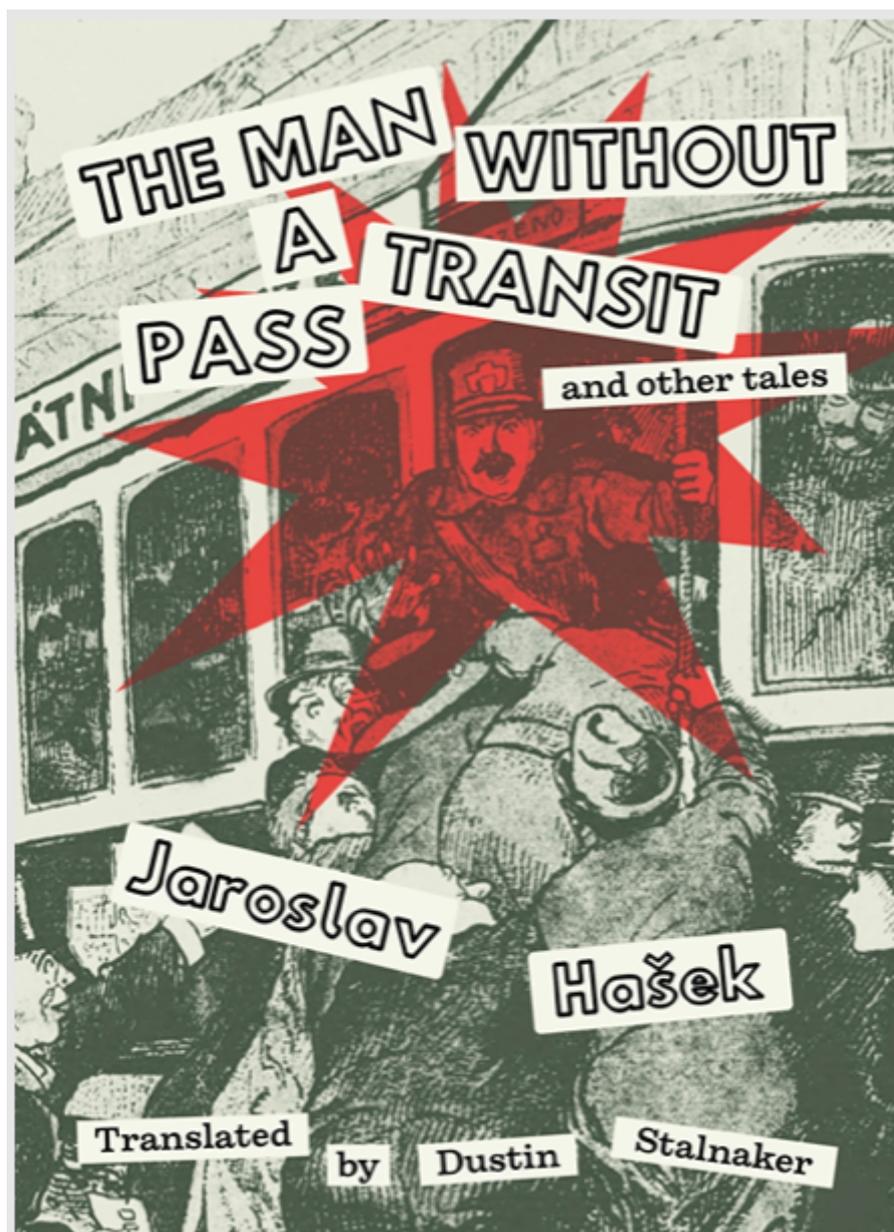


# New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: Jaroslav Hasek's "The Man Without a Transit Pass and Other Tales"



There are few things I like better than sitting down with a copy of classic Central or Eastern European literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, especially its short fiction. The best authors from this area all have this in common with

Stephen King: the longer works can be powerful, but there is something particularly pointed about their short work. Constrain them to a few thousand words and one is rewarded with beautiful, absurd, and entertaining stories suitable for any setting: morning or evening, summer or winter.

I read Jaroslav Hasek's *The Man Without a Transit Pass and Other Tales*, published by Paradise Edition and translated into English by Dustin Stalnaker (@Jaro\_Hasek on Twitter) over the course of two days. Consisting of 15 short stories of between a thousand and several thousand words, no single story is so sophisticated or overwhelming that it will require a PhD to read; furthermore, those references in the story that do benefit from context to which your average English speaking 21<sup>st</sup> century reader does not have access are suitably footnoted.

The stories are filled with a wry and subversive humor characteristic of those places touched by the Austro-Hungarian empire – the absurdity of a space defined by hidebound bureaucracy and hereditary aristocracy, combined with the knowledge that its many flaws notwithstanding, at least the system was to a certain extent a known entity. Like the works of Babel or Kafka, one has the impression of looking into a world that could not exist after the Holocaust; the little indignities and tragedies of life not quite yet condemned to the absolute horror of totalitarianism.

Hasek's Czech, Hungarian, and Galician regions bustle with charming frauds, shameless charlatans, fools, and ne'er do wells trying to hustle their way through life one scam at a time; these are its heroes. Aligned against them are those government functionaries, holy men, and police (always the police) who are embodying or upholding a fundamentally hypocritical and iniquitous system that is dedicated to oppressing its citizenry. In "The Footrace" a con man seeking a bed and a meal accidentally swindles his way into a

betrothal with a young woman while pretending to be a British (or American) millionaire; this is similar to what happens in “The Beckov Monastery” where a con man lies about his purpose to monks and enjoys their repast on the backs of local farmers, and also “A Legitimate Business” and “A Guest in the House is a God in the House.” “The Reform Efforts of Baron Kleinhampl” follows an imbecile who inherits a manor and sets about bedeviling its residents with harebrained improvements.

My favorite story – a difficult feat in a book filled with delights – was “A Legitimate Business,” the heart of which is a familiar concept to fans of Seinfeld. A group of hucksters used to showing people things like flea circuses, while hunting for a new trick, come upon a novel idea – a show about nothing.

“Hang on a minute with the ‘show them something,’ I interrupted, drawing with my walking stick in the sand. “Why this ‘something’? Let’s go one step further. Do you get me? Show the audience *nothing!*”

The show consists of a person entering a dark room where they’re promptly seized and thrown out of the room into daylight; it proves a hit with locals who want to see others subjected to the “fun,” and ends (as do many stories in the collection) with police breaking things up.

Perhaps this story resonates in part because so many of today’s controversies feel so odd or irrelevant. A professional American football team, The Washington Commanders, were briefly known as The Washington Football Team (and before that, a name that was too rude to write here). A dislikable and argumentative short man, Ben Shapiro, reviewed a movie by way of a video titled “Ben Shapiro Destroys Barbie for 43 Minutes.” Meanwhile, a war rages in Ukraine – part of which, Galicia, appears in Hasek’s stories. It’s been a while since so much of so little consequence has occupied our attention – or so little of things of great consequence have

not.

The society and time related by Hasek is filled with lighthearted and for the most part seemingly inconsequential mix-ups, which means people can feel comfortable taking pleasure in the follies that unfold over the pages. I encourage anyone who enjoys this sort of literature (as I do) to pick up a copy and read it. And thanks to Matthew Spencer (@unpaginated on Twitter) of Paradise Edition for putting this into print – you can acquire your own copy [here](#).