



Hustling Hitler: The Jewish Vaudevillian Who Fooled the Führer

Walter Shapiro

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From acclaimed journalist Walter Shapiro, the true life story of how his great-uncle—a Jewish vaudeville impresario and exuberant con man—managed to cheat Hitler’s agents in the run-up to WWII.

All his life, journalist Walter Shapiro assumed that the outlandish stories about his great-uncle Freeman were exaggerated family lore; some cockamamie Jewish revenge fantasies dreamt up to entertain the kids and venerate their larger-than-life relative. Only when he started researching Freeman Bernstein’s life did he realize that his family was actually holding back—the man had enough stories, vocations, and IOUs to fill a dozen lifetimes. Freeman was many people: a vaudeville manager, boxing promoter, stock swindler, card shark and self-proclaimed “Jade King of China.” But his greatest title, perhaps the only man who can claim such infamy, was as The Man Who Hustled Hitler.

A cross between *The Night They Raided Minsky’s* and *Guys and Dolls*, Freeman Bernstein’s life was itself an old New York sideshow extravaganza, one that Shapiro expertly stages in *Hustling Hitler*. From a ragtag childhood in Troy, New York, Shapiro follows his great-uncle’s ever-crooked trajectory through show business, from his early schemes on the burlesque circuit to marrying his star performer, May Ward, and producing silent films—released only in Philadelphia. Of course, all of Freeman’s cons and schemes were simply a prelude to February 18, 1937, the day he was arrested by the LAPD outside of Mae West’s apartment in Hollywood.

The charge? Grand larceny—for cheating Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government. In the capstone of his slippery career, Freeman had promised to ship thirty-five tons of embargoed Canadian nickel to the Führer; when the cargo arrived, the Germans found only huge, useless quantities of scrap metal and tin. It was a blow to their economy and war preparations—and Hitler did not take the bait-and-switch lightly.

Told with cinematic verve and hilarious perspective, *Hustling Hitler* is Shapiro’s incredible investigation into the man behind the myth. By reconstructing his great-uncle’s remarkable career, Shapiro has transformed Freeman Bernstein from a barely there footnote in history to the larger-than-life, eternal hustler who forever changed it.

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