

## HIRSCH SPEAKS!

So easy you think it was for me to be a hero? I was a coward my whole life, this all of you must know. “But Meyer, in your last moments — !” Sure, in my last moments before I was shot I spat in the man’s face. He called me terrible names!

For me nothing came easy, not in those almost fifty years while I breathed air. You think it was easy to haul myself and my stinking hides around those papaya-and-mango republics, all over that lousy place they call the Queen of Continents? Hah! Better you should call it Whore of Continents. I was from Leipzig, a beautiful city, Johann Sebastian Bach played there in the *Thomaskirche*. From there I end up in a place called Sulaco, hanging in some trap of ropes and hooks, face-to-face with a crazed unshaven colonel with the breath which comes only from eating goat’s cheese from the goats they raise there, in Costaguana. I was a cheese connoisseur, when I the time had, also the money, and that smell, I can tell you, is worse than goat shit, you should excuse me. For hours I had in my face this! What was I going to tell him? The truth?

The point is, you have raised me from out my grave, but why? Oh, you want to praise me, to shower me with such lovely words, *Meyer Simcha Hirsch, you are a symbol of resistance, we need you and other Jewish heroes in these dreadful times*. To which I say, for why did you not wake me up in, *pfui*, 1933? Or 1939? Or even 1944? Something I could have done. Maybe I knew a guy, which if you are not from my culture means, *strings maybe exist, maybe I could pull them*. In my life I never had enough strings to pull, and if I did, they usually broke.

Never mind. It’s not like you don’t know my story. He wrote it all down, that Polish *goy*, imagine. But I respected him. He gave me a death with dignity. And so a fiction by a member of

the Polish aristocracy gets pulled out of its stately rest because in the twenty-first century something awful happens to the Jews — again — and there was nobody else you could call? *Was willst du von mir?* What do you want from me? I am, or I was, a little mustached Jew from Germany, trying and failing and trying again to make his fortune in a land that God forgot. A man of misery, not heroism. And I didn't keep kosher, or go to *shul*, except twice a year to say kaddish for my parents, may they rest in peace. I went there in the first place because — look, they have oxen, they have oxen hides. In Hamburg just then they were paying a fortune for hides.

One day I did have at last some good strings in my hand. I had an introduction to Don Carlos Gould, the King of Sulaco, the owner of the silver mine that along with the railway was the only bright spot in that country. Over the mountains I'd come, on a horse, my three *mozos* watching the merchandise. In Leipzig we did not ride on horses. The saddle was high, I am not a tall man, stirrups they couldn't shorten enough. I was screaming with pain. The *mozos* gave me willow bark to chew.

Also coming here I saw dangerous people. Bands of robbers — I was sweating with fear, but they left us alone, don't ask why. They had with them a priest, a fanatical type, with a face like a vulture. He looked, as he stood on the ground talking to some men on mules, as if he could spread those long black skirts of his (in this climate!) and fly off, into the hell he came out of, who knows. He missed the Inquisition, that was his tragedy. I kept my head down as we passed. There was another, too, the insolent rider who swindled cigars from me. Never mind. I came at last to the shop of my Syrian friend, George Anzani. I had some tea, but refused baklava. Sticky hands on the doorknobs of the Casa Gould? No thank you. Meyer S. Hirsch, Esmeralda and Hamburg, disguised himself as a gentleman, bowed to the mirror, and set off for the best house in town, with the most charming hostess, I should add, in the whole Southern Hemisphere. I had

the introduction. All was just so. With a light heart I walked up the one central street of that town to the great house where lights blazed. I'd risked my life to meet that bony Englishman.

He crushed me like a louse under his boot.

It was like talking to a tall glass of ice water. I wanted to wring his sunburned neck. This I admit. Not even to sit down, to talk to me. No, I had to talk to his pockets, in his jacket, that's how much taller he was standing up. I knew in five minutes my business was dead, but what could I do? I did try to work on him. Go work on the statue in the park. That was Charles Gould.

I don't know if it was my face, my voice, my accent — Spanish is my fourth language, or maybe it's fifth — but the man from the start was against me. Was it because, like everyone else, he did not think much of Jews? Most likely — and yet least possible, because he saw nothing outside his mine. He had no room — upstairs, you understand, in his brain — that did not attach to the running, to the profit, to the glory of the mine. What did he need my hides for?

Then I tried again. I got up my nerve. I mentioned the word. Dynamite, I could have gotten for him. What does he say, this man who according to the marketplace is married to his mine? When doesn't a miner need dynamite? Up goes the nose. I'm seeing his mustache from below. Then I question his sanity, yes, I have to. Because he says to me, "Senior Hirsch, I have enough dynamite," and so on, "to send half Sulaco into the air." What does this mean? All night I am something he does not want to see, I am like a speck of soup upon his tie. But I was working on him. Now he tells me in that frozen voice he maybe wants to bomb this place out of existence? Not *wants to*, but could. This is something to brag about? To tell a total stranger, a man who has just tried and failed to sell him something? Charles Gould, like his mine, goes down deep. All the way back that night I kept thinking about it.

Of course I ran, when I heard them shooting bullets. I took off running from Anzani's house, without my shoes. All that time until I died I was in my stocking feet. And I want to say something right now. *Pan Korzeniowski* has me as "blubbering." Not so, my friend. Not so. I suffered, in that *gottverdammmt* climate, from terrible allergic problems. Everything I could eat — except fish. Just from the smell of fish, I would get sick — and I always loved herring at home! Down there, it was like peeling onions. My nose, my mouth - I start to cry. I cannot help it. I was not *blubbering*. I was in that forever-damned lighter which they used *for fishing*. I was an allergic reaction having. You don't know what suffering is until this happens.

The next part he covered just fine, that *Polacki*. Why that Frenchified young man, Decoud, killed himself, I don't know. He at least gave me some water. He was a better sort, a man of culture. You say he couldn't stand to be alone. Excuse me, but he was not born a Jew. To be alive is worth much more than anything that comes into your head. I would have tried to get off that island. I would have screamed and yelled and, who knows, maybe even tried to swim, or build a boat, because to sit there till the silence takes your mind is the act of a spoiled child. The founder of the present state — more coward than me!

As for the *Capitaz*, I ask you: what was so special about that man? He had the English in his pocket. The Italians from the inn, they saw him as some kind of Christ, a Christ who maybe could marry their daughter. Christ with *cojones*. Big talker. Shining his teeth around. Swindling cigars out of me on the road, I was convinced he was a bandit. Later he talked about throwing me off the boat, from that lighter, before the other ship hit us. The man with no self-interest, they used to say, and what did he turn out? A thief. I had no use for him.

You bring me back to life so I can tell you how I died? Where's the heroism there? Believe me, I was possessed by fear, as completely taken over by my terror as that Gulf was by

its clouds. I groveled on the decks of that ship, I shivered and howled and got my languages mixed up. They say Jews are always plotting, are conniving, are smarter than the rest, and so a donkey like Sotillo decides I must be lying. Believe me, clever at that moment I was not. Not even close. I was a gibbering idiot, but I did not want to die. Do you?

They cut me down, the *Capitaz*, and Dr. Monygham. Doctor, hah! Even colder than Charles Gould. When they were questioning me — before the torture — he sat there on the edge of the desk like he was listening to business news, how are the markets, what's up, what's down. I told him, and that jackass, everything that happened, everything. He doesn't move, that Monygham. Of course he knew nothing. Why should he? He had sick people, wounded, dying. What should he know from the silver? It was at the bottom of that foggy Gulf.

And for that I was killed.

The donkey, the jackass, that worse than a dog or a pig, that Sotillo, threw my race at me at the last moment. A "Jewish child of the devil," was I? Something came to me just then. How many others, I started to think, since the days of the exile to Babylon, how many others were tied up and tortured and murdered, for nothing? Because somebody else wanted money, which was not theirs to begin with? Because when in doubt, beat the Jew? I had no help to give the fool. I could see my life was over. *Schluss!* Dizzy, bleeding, my arms strapped up over my head, a rope across a beam holding me up — it was then I started having other thoughts. Maybe now, Meyer Hirsch, I said to myself, maybe now since you have nothing to lose, you say something. Worse than a worm, I had acted. But I would not die a worm.

I curled myself up. Do you know how that hurt? Try pulling your head back against the *strappado*. Try holding your head, high, in that position. But I did it, somehow, and I spat in his face. And now I know why. If I hadn't covered his big purple face with my spittle, with the last

left in my mouth, you, future people, you would not respect me. And you must, or else you would have left me on the page, dead and forgotten.

No matter what they do to you, tell them what you think of them. If you have no more voice to speak, then spit. I have spoken.

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