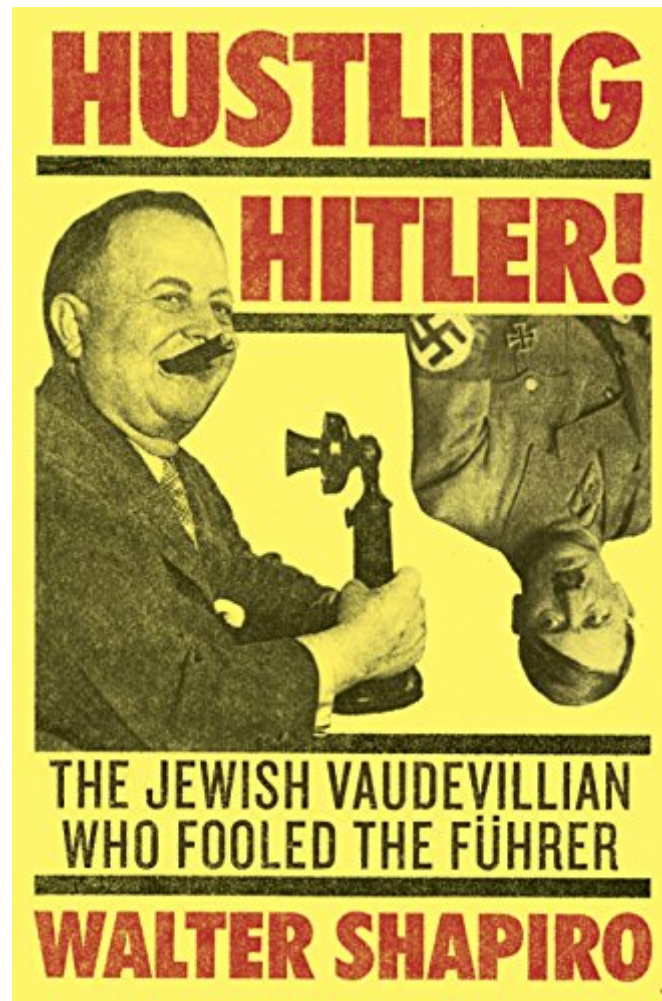


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Hustling Hitler: The Jewish Vaudevillian Who Fooled The FÃ¼hrer



Synopsis

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. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

It's hard to understand how anyone could give this book 4, much less 5, stars. While the title suggests that the book is going to be about Freeman Bernstein cheating Hitler out of a shipment of Canadian nickel in 1937, most of the book is about Bernstein's life. It really should have been titled something like "Vaudeville Con Man" with a subtitle like "A Biography of the Man who Hustled Hitler." Of course it wouldn't sell as well that way. It's very disappointing -- to say the least -- that with the exception of a few pages in the first chapter he doesn't get to the "hustle" story until page 336. Making this more ridiculous is Shapiro's criticism of Bernstein because Bernstein's own booklet about the caper doesn't get to the event until page 32. Wish Shapiro had gotten to the main story by page 32, but he didn't. Frankly the book is poorly written. I found myself skimming because I was so bored. For starters, there is an excessive use of metaphors, lousy metaphors; stuff like: "his physique more resembling a table than Gable" (page 2) "getting no closer to frostbite than baked Alaska" (page 11) "hit Il Duce with all the force of a plateful of Chef Boyardee's canned ravioli" (page 338) And there's more: "He worried about having enough shekels to avoid being sent back to New York in shackles." (page 369). "everyone wanted to nick some Canadian nickel" (page 338). "For all his glib talk about opening up a refined jade shop in Beverly Hills, Freeman's finances were too jaded for such a burst of respectability." (page 381). I doubt a high school sophomore would get away with kind of stuff. How a distinguished columnist got this past the editor is beyond me.

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