George Tabori

HERZL [To audience]: I don’t quite know what gave me the chutzpah to call him “Lobkowitz” instead of “my Lord,” but my nose was freezing and my back hurt. I was sick and tired of our game. For three years now, we have been playing the same game.

LOBKOWITZ: Four years!

HERZL: What made me submit in the first place? Perhaps I felt sorry for this God who, being omnipresent, was invariably present in Vienna, for He loves His Jews so much that He won’t let them out of sight. But in that dawn, in that snow, I’d had it, and unmasked this God as a cook. This God was of course not God. You know who I mean. There is, after all, only one, His name be praised, but Lobkowitz the Loon, a kookie kosher cook, defrocked some years ago by his boss Moskowitz for mixing cream cheese with boiled beef, an insult to Mosaic Law. Why? “I’ll tell you why,” said Lobkowitz to Moskowitz. “Because I’m mad at Moses for wandering for forty years in the wilderness—”

LOBKOWITZ: Thirty-nine!

HERZL: —instead of settling down in Vienna. Be that as it may, Moskowitz retorted, “You are fired.” “May all your teeth fall out except for one, and may that hurt till the end of your days,” said Lobkowitz, and he tore off his cook’s apron and threw it into the borscht!

LOBKOWITZ: Mulligatawny!

HERZL: Then he fell into a coma, came out of it ten days later, a classic case of mistaken identity, which he explained to Dr. S. Freud as follows:

LOBKOWITZ [Upstaging HERZL]: “I think I am God. You think you are S. Freud. Both of us may be wrong.”

HERZL: Sorry, Lobkowitz, to have called you “Lobkowitz” instead of “the Holy One,” His name be praised, but I’m writing a book.

LOBKOWITZ: For me?

HERZL: No!

LOBKOWITZ: About me?

HERZL: Not quite.

LOBKOWITZ: Back to Babylon, and weep!

HERZL: Lobkowitz, wouldn’t you like to know what my book is about?

LOBKOWITZ: No at all!

HERZL: I don’t know myself. I haven’t written it yet. Perhaps that’s what it’s about. In these past three years, I have tried to get past the beginning. Care to hear the beginning I can’t get past?

LOBKOWITZ: By no means.

HERZL: A scorpion bites me to start again each morning. My disgust chokes me each morning. I wish this book were a daily prayer. What holds me back is a pagan giggle, cascading inside my head as I scribble His name, unmentionable in Vienna, fading into blasphemy; it may only be mentioned in vain as a sigh or a curse or a conjuration, “Goddamm it” or “fuck God” or . . .

HITLER: Good God!

[HERZL and LOBKOWITZ take no notice of HITLER, who stands rather impatiently in the doorway]

HERZL: Besides, what’s the point of writing yet another book. There is only one book, and it has already been written, and this one book, that has already been written, says everything about everything, including your tears, yet I must write my own, so as to put the wickedness out of my heart, this shadow falling across my threshold, so I ask you, Lobkowitz, tell me as Lobkowitz, what to do.

LOBKOWITZ [Happily]: You? Ask? Me? As Lobkowitz? I, as Lobkowitz, am to tell you what to do? Well, I tell you as Lobkowitz, if you cannot get past the beginning, you should begin before the beginning. What is the title, what do you call your book?

HERZL: “My Life,” I call it.

LOBKOWITZ [Shaking his head]: “My Life”? You call that a title? You call that a possible title for an important commentary? Shlomo, I am disappointed.

HERZL: How about “My Memoirs”?

LOBKOWITZ [He and HITLER shake their heads]: That’s terrible! “My Memoirs”? Ask yourself, Shlomo, would your mother want to buy a book called “My Memoirs”?

HERZL: No!

LOBKOWITZ: Try again!


[LOBKOWITZ keeps shaking his head] How about “Mein Kampf”? 

LOBKOWITZ: That’s it!

HITLER: You’ve got it!

[HERZL and LOBKOWITZ finally take notice of HITLER]

HERZL: Who asked you?

HITLER: What does it mean?
HERZL: "My Struggle."

HITLER: Is this Frau Merschmeyer's flophouse below her butchery?

LOBKOWITZ: No.

HERZL: Didn't your mother teach you manners?

HITLER: [In one breath]: Yes, indeed, she did. Lately deceased, may she rest in peace, after a hard life ministering to our poor but honest household, a blessed hausfrau, she has never failed to admonish me not to place my elbow on the dinner table, to yield my seat to old ladies on the tram, to tip my hat when meeting my elders in the street, to wash my hands before and after passing water, admonitions that I have dutifully observed in spite of my ingrained reluctance to obey authority, which has finally crystallized itself into an unshakable resolve not to follow in my blessed father's footsteps as a state employee, he too was felled by destiny's axe into a premature grave, but to seek my fortune in the City of the Waltz as an artist, a vocation destined by my considerable graphic talent. [Everybody takes a deep breath] However, I must first signal my utmost amazement, no, no, no, my disgust at your having dragged my sainted mother's memory into a casual conversation, whose motivation frankly escapes me, instead of offering a word of welcome to this unsuspecting country youth, who, having suffered the discomforts of all-night travel in a crowded third-class carriage all the way from Braunau-on-the-Inn to Vienna-on-the-Danube, tramped all morning through the snow-swept avenues in search of Frau Merschmeyer's home for the homeless, and, however overawed by the glorious examples of imperial architecture, is chilled to the core and longing for the well-deserved haven of a warm bed in this dreary dungeon, which is all that I, in my impeccable state, can afford until Dame Destiny will reward my not-yet-recognized genius with fame and fortune.

HERZL: I have asked you a simple question, I expect a simple answer, not the Nibelungen saga.

HITLER: If you fail to appreciate my exhaustive manner of speaking, which my beloved history teacher in Linz, Dr. Leopold Pötsch—

LOBKOWITZ: Pötsch!

HITLER: —has recognized as expressive of a natural rhetorical talent—Why Pötsch?

LOBKOWITZ: Sounds better!

HITLER: What I find appalling, no, no, no, disgusting from a foreigner, is your attempt to reduce my intuitive mastery of verbal felicities to a ridiculous yes-and-no game worthy of the Inquisition.

HERZL: Foreigner? Did I hear you say foreigner? In this place, you are the foreigner, boy. Besides, even if you were one of one billion Chinese, remember that the majority of mankind are, from any point of view, including the Chinese, foreigners. So let us start again, shall we? Didn't your mother teach you manners?

HITLER: I'd be glad to accept your challenge to a bout of racial discussions some other time, when I'm less chilled or constipated, a family weakness aggravated by all-night travel, meanwhile, permit me to be the sole judge of what I consider to be foreign, your accent, for example, your entire demeanor, and especially your nose, not to mention your twisted tongue, which turns into a question what you obviously intend as a statement; for, as I suspect, instead of wishing to ask me if my mother taught me manners, you are actually telling me that, in your estimation, she did not, which puzzles me, for I am not aware of having broken any rules of civilized conduct.

HERZL: You barge in here like a bison into a china store. This is not your house. You're a stranger here, yourself—at best, a guest. I might have been sleeping. I could have been entertaining a friend. It so happens, I was working on a book until God interrupted me.

HITLER: Who?

HERZL: G-O-D.

HITLER: Is dead.

LOBKOWITZ: That's what you think.

HERZL: You bust in like a yokel, offending my privacy. You're not in some Brown-Ouch-on-the-Inn. You are in the city of Schiele, Schnitzler, and Schubert—

LOBKOWITZ [Hums "An Einem Bäcchlein helle"]

HERZL: That's enough!—and Shlomo Herzl. In other words, your mother must have neglected to teach you to knock before entering.

HITLER: Clever, clever! I could tear your un-German arguments to shreds, but I decline, and to demonstrate my inborn generosity, I shall submit. [He picks up his gear, goes outside, closes the door, knocks, opens the door, and enters] Satisfied?

HERZL: No, You knocked and entered. That's wrong. The rule of yore runs like this: You knock, wait for the one inside to say, "Come in," you enter. Try again.

[HITLER, a blush reddening his ruddy cheeks, picks up his gear again, goes outside, closes the door, knocks,]

LOBKOWITZ: Entrez.
the Starnberg area and was jovially nicknamed Ben the Schüttler; but due to a bureaucratic error in City Hall, the ū was replaced by an ū, one of the ūs got misplaced during the Seven Years War, while the ă was lost in the aftermath of a pogrom, which his English-speaking wife, Rebeccà, not surprisingly, resented. When the Shiffers retired in Ambach, smoking trout for a hobby, and the glad news of the emancipation reached them, she dispatched Benjamin to the Department of Germanizing Names so that he might purchase something suitably euphonious. She would have liked Hohenzollern or Beethoven, but they were not in the public domain. Rosenduft or Rosenkranz were too expensive. How much money you got? the clerk asked Ben. Tuppence, he replied. For tuppence, said the clerk, an anti-Semite, I can do only one thing for you, cut the ū, that's all.

**HITLER:** So this is Vienna.

**HERZL:** No, but it's the Talmud.

**HITLER:** Another cousin?

**LOBKOWITZ:** A book.

**HITLER:** In German?

**LOBKOWITZ:** As well.

**HITLER:** Do you like Karl May?

**LOBKOWITZ:** In small doses.

**HERZL:** You see, we do have something in common.

**HITLER:** I doubt it, considering your nose. How did it get to be that way?

**HERZL:** “Common,” A Talmudic word, is contradictory, like God, meaning “mean” as well as “typical.” When “vicious,” it divides, when “ordinary,” it unites. Let me give you an example.

**HITLER:** I was afraid of that.

**HERZL:** Twins fall through a chimney, one comes out dirty, the other clean.

Which one will clean himself?

**HITLER:** The dirty one.

**HERZL:** Wrong. Looking at the clean one, he thinks he is clean, too. Shall we try again? Twins fall through a chimney, one comes out dirty, the other one clean. Which one cleans himself?

**HITLER:** The clean one. Looking at the dirty one, he thinks himself unclean and cleans himself.

**HERZL:** Wrong again. If twins fall through a chimney, how come one comes out clean, the other dirty?

**HITLER:** You speak with a forked tongue, you caught me off balance. But not for long. My father warned me not to believe everything I am told in Vienna.

**HERZL:** I advise you not to believe everything your father told you.
HITLER: My mother thought I ought to be a master builder. True enough, this morning, passing the Burg Theater, I immediately saw that it could be improved, needs more columns. I like columns, don’t you?
HERZL: In small doses. D’you know what Michelangelo asked the pope before starting on the Sistine Chapel?
HITLER: No, what?
HERZL: [In an Italian accent]: What-a color-a you want-a, boss?
HITLER: That was a joke, I take it?
HERZL: Yes, Hitler, that was a joke.
HITLER: I can’t stand jokes. I keep forgetting the punch line. But then, I must admit I prefer profundities, the earnest poise. Life, after all, is a very serious matter.
HERZL: No kidding.

[HERZL, LOBKOWITZ, and HITLER go to bed]

HITLER: Actually, my first love is music. A baritone at fifteen. Sang in the first row of the choir. To be honest, there was only one row in the choir, and my music teacher in Linz, a Frau Przessmyshl, thought my deep tones weren’t deep enough for Tannhäuser. I don’t suppose you know Tannhäuser?

[HITLER launches into “My Fair Evening Star.” HERZL and LOBKOWITZ chime in, trying to harmonize. They sing themselves to sleep.]

Act II

Dawn. Friday. The day bums are already on their way. Hitler is wallowing in his suitcase, throwing things about, a sock lands in the coffeepot, a pair of long Johns is dangling from the ceiling light. He starts shining his shoes.
HERZL returns, with books. Hitler throws a fit.

HERZL: Anything wrong?
HITLER: Everything! The Bard of Bayreuth was right, it’s all the fault of the Jews and the bicyclists.
HERZL: What do you have against the bicyclists?
HITLER: Look at these shoes!

HERZL: What do you have against these shoes?
HITLER: Everything!
HERZL: Everything?
HITLER: Almost everything. [Roars, eyes almost popping out of his head] Tried to shine them but, due to the dimness of this hellhole, smeared by mistake brown paste over them, and they happen to be black, and now they are the color of chickenshit.
HERZL: Hitler, calm yourself.
HITLER: Go to hell!
HERZL: Take a deep breath, cover the brown paste with black, and black being darker than brown, the shoes will shine as good as new.
HITLER: I will take no instructions in shoe shining from a Mosaic bookworm.
HERZL: [Wipes his hands and face on someone else’s bedsheets]: Why oh why did I ever leave Braunau-on-the-Inn?
HERZL: Why, actually?
HITLER: Everywhere, filth, stench, disorder. I should have listened to Dr. Pötsch—
LOBKOWITZ: Pötsch!
HITLER: Why Pötsch? Do you know him?
LOBKOWITZ: A little fat bimbo with a bow tie.
HERZL: Had a beautiful daughter, Roswitha, with a “th.”
LOBKOWITZ: Roswitha!
HITLER: Vienna, Vienna, thou multiracial Sodom, thou unmelting pot of scum. Where are my trousers? [He grabs his trousers, kicks his feet into them, buttons up his fly, a button pops and lands at HERZL’s feet. Hitler looks at it, his eyebrows leaning to the middle of his brow, and throws a tantrum, flinging himself onto someone else’s bed, drumming with his fists on the pillow, gargling abuse.]