

# **HITLER IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

*A non-kosher story*

**Jacobo Schifter Sikora**

## INTRODUCTION

“The Sikoras are dying out!” I shouted as I awoke. “The Sikoras are dying out!”

The long dream had started in the Jewish cemetery. The graves of my maternal relatives seemed to be going up everywhere, two or three under construction while the cement was still fresh on the others, like a poorly planned but teeming slum of the dead. While the Schifters, my father's family, were reproducing like yeast, my mother's side was experiencing a population implosion. Before long, there would be more of us within the cemetery's brick walls than out.

Hector asked me to calm down. “Stop bringing the house down with your shouting,” he said. “There are still some relatives of your mother left. It's true that some of them are a little mentally defective, but there are others who can keep the species alive.”

“You mean I had a nightmare?” I asked.

“Another one,” he said, referring to the dreams I had been having all week. “I guess you won't be able to go to sleep right away. So,” he added without much enthusiasm, “why don't you tell me your dream? It might help you to settle down.”

San José's Jewish cemetery is located in a southwestern district of Costa Rica's capital, behind the much larger Catholic cemetery. The property was bought on April 19, 1931; my grandfather, David Sikora, was one of the promoters of the project. In one of the early dreams in the series, I saw him signing a check and handing it over to the seller in the name of the few Jews then living in the country. “I intend to have my wife join me here,” he told the seller, “and I want a plot for her. If I have to strangle her one day, I don't want her buried in the streets like a dog.”

On October 9, 1932, the first burial took place. My grandfather was thrilled. “Didn't I tell you that it was good to think ahead?” he said to the other members of the *Chevra Kiddushe*, the religious board that managed the cemetery and made sure that the dead were buried according to prescribed rituals. “We already have our first tenant.”

“The man's lucky,” said Don José, a fellow Jew. “He bought this plot dirt cheap.”

“Yes, sir,” said my grandfather. “Just imagine what it's going to cost to live here in fifty years.”

In another dream, I had seen myself in the present, entering the cemetery alone. Over the decades, the population of the graveyard had indeed grown. Hundreds were there, including

my mother, who had died on October 2, 1985. I had visited the cemetery to look at the tombstones and verify the birthplaces of my ancestors for a novel I intended to write.

“But you don't write fiction,” Hector had pointed out when I told him that particular dream.

“In the dream I did.”

When I entered the cemetery, the first thing I saw was a marble and cement monument, financed by a group called *Yad Vashem*, which stands for “Commemoration of the Holocaust” in Hebrew. The monument described itself immodestly as the first of its kind in the Americas and its slogan was “Remembering is our duty! Never again, our cry!” Two columns tried but failed to uplift the spirit; one was decorated with the Star of David, the other with a nondescript rhomboidal shape, its symbolism perhaps best left unexplored.

“Does such a thing really exist?” asked Hector.

“It most certainly does and it's so ugly that it belongs in a nightmare.”

Next to the monument, a small washbasin allowed visitors to wash their hands before leaving the cemetery, since visiting the place of the dead, like menstruation, required ritual cleansing. A sort of vase, full of small stones to be placed on the grave markers, had been donated, if I remembered correctly, by Masha Scharf, née Teitelbaum. The graves themselves were arranged more or less chronologically. The oldest ones, to the right, were easy to recognize because of the frequent fallen-tree motif in their carvings, a symbol of prematurely interrupted lives and the unpretentious use of cement instead of marble. The names of the dead on some of the oldest tombstones were no longer legible, their occupants bereft of even this modest form of immortality. In the older part of the cemetery, some families had made reservations, so to speak, buying several plots near one another so that their relatives, even those who would not die for many decades still, could all find eternal rest together. That had not been the case with my grandparents. My grandmother used to warn us: “I'll come back to haunt you and pull you by your toes when you're sleeping if you ever bury me next to that man.”

During the 1970s, a competitive spirit began to guide the design and particularly the grandiosity, of each tomb: a sort of arms race, except for the fact that everyone was dead to begin with, instead of being a potential victim. The tombs, no longer content to remain close to the ground, started growing higher, vaguely reminding one of New York City's early 20<sup>th</sup> century skyscrapers, the oldest of which, the tallest of their day, were soon dwarfed by newer and ever taller buildings. Cemetery visitors started losing their way, unfamiliar with the changing landscape. Plants no longer exposed to the sun except for a few hours each day started withering. “Moishele,” someone might ask a friend, “can't you make that Star of David a little smaller so I can plant some roses? Can't you see that your mother's tomb is so high that no light ever shines on my grandmother's?” Others would complain that some of their departed, separated even after the death of both because of the unavailability of plots

next to each other, could no longer talk to each other. “Yudko, your father's grave has a *menorah*<sup>1</sup> so high that my father, who is behind it, can't communicate with my mother.” Yudko would reply with a question, in the time-honored Jewish tradition: “If they never talked to each other when they were alive, why do you want them to start talking now?” The debate became so acrimonious that a woman known for her wisdom offered a Solomonic solution: ban any tomb higher than five feet. Since the new rule would not enter into force until the following year, to accommodate those who had already commissioned a given design at great expense, some wags suggested that several of the oldest members of the community hastened to die before the deadline so they would not have to live – if that is the right word – in cramped quarters.

“Did that put an end to the problem?” Hector had asked, stifling a yawn.

“No,” I said. The new rule, like the proletarian revolution in Russia that so interested my poor grandmother, did not bring about social equality. If encroachment into the heavens was no longer allowed, expansion would now be horizontal, with thicker slabs and fancier finishes. The plainer ones were all cement. Others combined cement and floor tiles. Many used a combination of cement and marble. But the largest and most luxurious ones were completely covered in marble or, what was even more fashionable, blue granite. Even among the fancy ones there was social distinction depending on the provenance of the stones used. The best ones came from Italy. The middle class had to settle for a Brazilian material of inferior quality, while the poor put up with, God help them, Guatemalan marble. Some of the tombs were so luxurious that they attracted petty thieves, eager to run away with anything valuable they could prize off. But that was not the worst kind of aggression. Sometimes the neighbors would throw stones over the brick walls when a funeral was underway, to remind the Jews that even in death they would find no peace.

For those who could not afford fancy building materials, the epitaphs on the tombstones provided some compensation. “Thou was the princess of our home,” read one in Spanish and Hebrew. The inscription next door raised the stakes: “To the queen of our happiness.” A variation on that theme was more precise: “To the tsarina of our joys.” Men, for some reason, were never princes, kings or tsars; they were “righteous,” “loving,” “just,” or “wise.” One inscription, ambiguous because it was unclear whether it should be read as a description of the departed or a post-mortem admonition, read: “The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increaseth understanding. (Proverbs 16:21).”

In that dream, I remembered what my mother had once said to me during a visit to the cemetery. “Even the most *ganefim*<sup>2</sup> have epitaphs that proclaim their rectitude,” she noted. “But mother,” I said, scoring one for gender equity, “there are also a lot of *kurvehs*<sup>3</sup> who are described as saints.” My mother, Elena, ignored my comment and laughed at Don Abraham's tomb. His wife had demanded that the inscription describe him as the wisest man on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Candelabrum

<sup>2</sup> Thieves

<sup>3</sup> Easy women

“And all the damned fool knew was how to write checks,” she said. I retaliated by pointing to Dona Mishke's tomb. To call her short would have almost been an understatement and yet there she was, described as “the dove that flies the highest.” Elena responded by pointing out Mr Guasesteyn's tomb. The inscription spoke of him as “a generous soul,” whereas everyone knew that his métier was exploiting financially troubled fellow Jews, buying him or her out when their businesses were on shaky ground. One of his specialties was taking over businesses whose owners were at death's door and not paying the heirs.

In my nightmare, the poor, the ever-present poor, had their own ways of getting even. One cannot take flowers to a Jewish cemetery, but nobody ever said anything against planting a few bushes. On Dona Sarah's tomb, the daisies were as profuse as if they were being taken in a truck to market. Rachel's had so many rosebushes that they were considered a public hazard. “Miriam,” said a visitor, “I've just impaled my arm on your thorns. You can't walk in peace around here with that jungle you've planted.” Competition in the gardening division even led some to theft. “They say Samuel is so tightfisted that he steals his neighbor's daisies to plant them on his father's grave,” some would say. The rivalry soon extended to tree planting. Don Rogelio planted some pines. Herman, his neighbor, not one to be outdone, planted some beautiful fichus trees. What he did not know was that this species grows enormous roots and pretty soon his departed wife and several other occupants were inadvertently disinterred. And of course the birds perching on the many branches did not exactly help to keep the fine marble slabs clean. The wise woman who lay next to my grandfather suggested that a regulation be passed to ban the planting of more trees.

“Did that put an end to the problems?” my friend asked.

“No, competition sprang up in another quarter,” I said.

The more numerous families had a clear advantage in their reproductive force. When someone died, family members arrived in droves, regardless of how close they had been to the departed. Nobody could compete with the Rubipleins: like mushrooms, they seemed to reproduce by spontaneous generation. Their funerals were as crowded as those of great statesmen or popular entertainers, the cemetery overflowing with mourners.

“When you see such a packed funeral,” Dona Ruth would say, “it's to die for.”

The mortals who had less aggressive genes would compensate by employing social or economic pressures. If someone had amassed a reasonable fortune, hundreds of debtors could be called upon to attend the funeral or settle their debts. “Who was Dona Menche?” I heard someone ask. “Why, the grandmother of Golcha, your grandmother's cousin. If you didn't know her, why did you come?”

“I owe money to her son.”

For one without such means of persuasion, a final strategy remained: to attend everyone's funeral, in the hope that the relatives of the departed would reciprocate when the time finally came for one's own reversion to dust and ashes. Dona Perla, a friend of my grandmother, looked forward to a well-attended funeral, since she had not missed one in four decades. So terrified was she of alienating potential mourners at her own funeral that if someone died while she was on vacation, she would rush back into town, even from abroad. At the risk of acquiring a reputation as a bird of bad omen, she would call the relatives of the sick to plan her agenda. "Do you think I can go to Puntarenas?" she would ask solicitously about her plans to visit a seaside resort. "Of course," her friend would reply, "Lupita still has a week to live."

The most haunting fear was not merely the lack of a decent turnout, but far worse, a lack of quorum. The Jewish faith required a *minyan*, a minimum of ten men, for the funeral to take place. Women did not count, of course. Some families had to suffer the anguish, in the very middle of a funeral, of trying to find a man, any man, when things ground to a halt. "How many dicks have we got?" an enraged feminist asked in my dream, upset that in spite of thirty women being present, the proceedings could not begin because only seven men had turned up. "We need six *baitzim*<sup>4</sup>," said her sister. The poor woman had to rush to a payphone to call three nephews who had just turned thirteen and therefore qualified. "If you don't show up right now at the cemetery," she shouted into the phone, "you won't be left with a single ball among the three of you to make a *minyan*!"

Although I had been looking down upon such silly games of one-upmanship, in tonight's dream I got caught up in one. It is the Jewish custom, when visiting the dead, to leave a pebble atop the gravestone. Nobody knows how the ritual started. Some claim that it began during Biblical times, when the pebbles could be used to help build the crypt. At some point they stopped having any practical use, except as a memento. In my dream, however, the ritual served as an excuse for another arms race, since some gravestones did not have a single pebble, while other ones had so many that it could only be explained as the result of a suspiciously large number of visits.

The gravedigger – not a Jew but a *Tico*, a Costa Rican with a beer belly and strong sun-burned arms – told me that the gravestones that had no pebbles belonged to people who had no living relatives or whose families had forgotten them. "Others were not from Costa Rica but died here during a trip, far away from their loved ones," he said and then added slyly, "Some relatives simply cannot bring themselves to visit the cemetery, or they think they're too busy. I personally visit my poor little mother's grave every other Sunday, weather permitting, but then I'm a Catholic, you know.... I don't think I've seen you around here very often, have I?" I chose to ignore this comment. What the digger had said accounted for the gravestones that had no pebbles, but what about the ones with a surfeit? "Is it true what they say," I asked him, "about you getting paid to put pebbles on some of the tombs so the

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<sup>4</sup> Testicles (literally, eggs)

relatives don't have to visit the cemetery every month?" The man scratched his beer belly, grinned and said, "One tries to be of service. It is one's Christian duty."

"What sort of a sick brain could think that a humble worker would try to profit from people's pain?" asked Hector. "I really think you should talk this over with your therapist."

In the dream, I decided to even out the competition so that my mother would not be in the lowest percentile, pebble-wise. But I got lost and could not find her grave, although I walked up down among the gravestones. I wondered if my mother, annoyed at my infrequent visits, had decided to move house, leaving no return address. In desperation, I reluctantly enrolled the gravedigger in my search in spite of his persistent grin, which seemed to suggest that some people visit their loved ones so seldom that they forget even the whereabouts of their graves. I finally apologized to Elena in my mind. "If I have not visited you more often, it's because it still hurts to know that you are dead," I said under my breath.

As is the way in dreams, I found the grave immediately. "You mustn't forget to write about how your mother punished you by hiding herself from you," the gravedigger said, laughing and scratching his belly as he walked away.

The gravestone had only two pebbles. I deposited twenty more, pilfered from nearby markers. It was cheating, I suppose, but at least it would uphold the tarnished honor of the Sikoras. While I did so, I paid attention to the two original ones and noticed that one of them – not the one I had left during my last visit – was blue, with a red triangle in the middle. Somebody had taken the trouble to paint it. I looked for the gravedigger and asked him if knew who had left the colored pebble. The man asked me to please take it away. "Otherwise, others will start competing with brighter colors and before you know it this place will look like a fast-food restaurant's playground," he said. "That pebble was brought by a gentleman who always comes on the first Monday of every month at two o'clock. He always brings a different one, not like some people I could mention who pick them up off the street."

I ignored his obvious retaliation for my earlier comments about his reputed sources of extra income and I asked him what the man looked like. "Oh, I don't know," said the gravedigger. "Tall, distinguished-looking, maybe 75 years old, white hair. Does that ring a bell?"

I had to admit that the description did not fit any of her living relatives. "Well, he's no ghost," the gravedigger said. "That pebble's pretty solid."

I ventured a guess. "Elena – that's my mother – founded an organization to fight cancer. Maybe they helped him and he's still grateful."

"Listen, young man," said the gravedigger. "I don't know who that gentleman is, but I've been working in this cemetery for more than thirty years and if there's something I can tell you, it's who he is not. He's not a grateful acquaintance and he sure as hell is not just a 'friend

of the family', if you know what I mean.” He grinned again, a habit I could have done without.

Nothing, I vowed to myself, would keep me from being there on the date of the next visit by the gentleman of the colored pebbles. Looking at my watch, as is often the way in dreams, I realized that the day was Monday, that it was Monday the third and that it would be two o'clock in a few minutes. I went away a few paces, so that I could watch the arrival of this mysterious visitor without revealing that he was being observed.

“That's a pretty long dream,” said Hector, apparently despairing of going back to sleep anytime soon. “It makes *Gone with the Wind* look like a short film.”

“There's more,” I warned him.

A man who fit the gravedigger's description to a T arrived at two o'clock sharp, as if the dead should not be kept waiting. I watched him take out a colored pebble from his pocket, kiss it and deposit it on my mother's grave. While I was torn between respect for his privacy and the urgent desire to find out who he was, my curiosity won out. “Excuse me, sir,” I said, approaching him. “I am a son of Elena and I was told about your visits. I am very impressed by your devotion and I just want to thank you for your lovely gesture.”

“You startled me,” he said, his Spanish tinted by a northern-European accent, his eyes pleasantly blue. I noticed that he was also looking deeply into mine, as if we were two oculists.

“My name is Carlos,” he said. “I was a friend of your mother and I like to visit her. Would you care for some coffee?” I mumbled something incoherent about not wanting to take up too much of his time, but he insisted and soon led me to a waiting Mercedes Benz driven by a chauffeur.

That he was rich was plain to see. A Mercedes Benz in Costa Rica is worth a fortune and Rohrmoser, a Western suburb of San José where he lived, is not a place where real estate comes cheap. His white two-story house, emphatically modern with its straight lines and large dark mirrors, could be described only as ostentatious in a tastefully understated way. Finally hearing his well-known surname, I realized that he was German and had made his fortune with a string of clothing stores and private medical clinics.

“Please come in, Jacobo; this is your home,” said Yadira, his wife, giving me a thorough inspection. The living room was large enough to feel spacious in spite of the black leather couches, the glass-and-mahogany coffee tables and the dark cabinets filled with exquisite vases and a collection of colored crystal wineglasses from Czechoslovakia and Krakow that revealed his exquisite taste. The walls were decorated with modernist paintings, some by famous painters from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century like Georges Braque, Paul Klee, Stuart Davis and Marsen Hartley.



“They're good pictures,” I said, “but I don't care for modernism.”

Without any prompting from him, I launched into a tirade against modernity.

“It left us with the worst universal ideas ever,” I said, “like nationalism, psychiatry, modern jails, sexual education, Nazism and Stalinism, the modern State, the concentration camps. Modern art, with its exploration of perception and its limits, strikes me as useless.”

Don Carlos disagreed. He believed in the potential of reason and scientific development. He admitted that people had sometimes wandered off the right path, but there was no option but to “go forward.” He did agree, however, that Nazism had been the worst tragedy in history.

I apologized for criticizing the paintings. “I'm a disenchanting postmodernist,” I said, “unable to believe in anything.” I had lost faith in my scientific discipline, history and above all in the possibility of publishing my research without engaging in self-censorship or provoking the rage of my contemporaries. But I confessed that I wanted to write a novel. My goal was to preserve the experiences of a generation of Jewish survivors, brave men and women whose breed was in danger of extinction. The new generations were a pale imitation.

“My mother was very independent, a feminist, a fighter,” I said, “while the new generation of Jewish girls only aspire to be chosen as cheerleaders in high school and later be elected Miss Dadeland in Miami. Ever since Elena died, they speak of her as a devoted wife and an upstanding member of the community, when in truth they could never bear her ideals of social justice and women's liberation. I want to write her story before the patriarchal dinosaurs at the Israelite Center manage to silence all dissent and make us believe that Hebrew women, those who could not vote until 1997 or lead in prayer to this day, were submissive from the start. My mother never accepted the submissiveness to the *baitzim* and I don't want them to score a victory now that she is gone.”

“That's a pretty passionate speech,” said Hector. “I had no idea you felt so strong about writing a novel.”

“I didn't either,” I said. “I don't, really. That was in the dream.”

“Yeah, right.”

I told Don Carlos that, much as I wanted to write the book, I had no idea how to go about doing it. “I feel paralyzed. I'd like to write a true story, but I don't have enough information. Besides, I've never written fiction.”

“Why bother describing what never happened, when reality is so magical, sometimes so hellish,” he said.

But I had to admit that I was not sure about my ability to describe even real events. A good novelist could set the scene so that others could visualize it clearly, bring characters to life with a few well-chosen strokes of the pen. Me? I could not even remember what color my shorts were. How could I describe a landscape, a city, or a person, if I was so unobservant that I sometimes wore shoes that didn't match? "One day," I told him, "when I was living in Chicago, I walked three blocks on freshly paved sidewalks. The only reason I noticed that I was leaving a trail of deep footprints in the wet cement was that the workers started cussing me out."

My host wanted to know what my objective was in trying to write the novel. "Do you want to make a contribution to the Jewish faith, to Israel, to the Hebrew people?" he asked. I had to admit that I was not clear on my purpose, that all I knew (perhaps echoing what the gravedigger had said back at the cemetery) was what it was *not* meant to be. My book was certainly not aimed at promoting the complaisance of the religious, the rabbis, the orthodox, the Zionists, those who would eat only kosher food.

"How can we the Jews still believe in God after Auschwitz?" I said, repeating my favorite rhetorical question.

I could not stand those who would not, for example, eat meat and cheese in the same meal, as if God, who was not brave enough to stop the gas chambers, would have the *chutzpah* to punish them for it. "I'd love to stand before God and have him tell me that I wasn't kosher and can't get into heaven," I said. "I'd look at him straight in the eye and tell him: 'You did not keep your promise to protect the Chosen People. Who gave you the right to judge me?' But I won't be meeting God. He burned in the ovens, went up in smoke."

"But there's the State of Israel," Don Carlos said.

"The Zionists," I said, "negotiated with the Nazis and played their own little selection game." I knew they had worked out a deal with Hitler to funnel Jewish confiscated wealth from Germany to Palestinian banks, precisely at a time when American Jews were for the boycott of Hitler's economy. When the Nazis still allowed Jews to leave for Palestine, the Zionists chose the ones they considered most 'fit.' I can imagine them saying, 'Let's fill this small quota of visas with ignorant Jews who know only how to plant potatoes. In Palestine, what do we want intellectuals for? Let's leave them in Germany.' When the news came out that Hitler intended to kill all the Jews, it didn't even get front-page coverage in Hebrew newspapers in Palestine. They thought a football match was more important. Now Israel has proclaimed itself heir to the Holocaust and the protector of all Jews. They just use it to promote nationalism. No, I don't want to write my story for any of them."

"Then who is the novel for?" asked Don Carlos. "For women, for witches and for queers," I said.

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