

HERCZEG, Géza journalist

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Fate and the Fascists

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This is the story of how a man's life was saved. Bela Khun and Tripoli, Hitler and a musical which once starred Al Jolson, Nietzsche and a playwright who collaborates with Jimmy Walker—these form the pattern of this story, these and Strauss waives, these and the rise of Italy's fascism under a big-jawed, grafting leader, pompous and vain.

The man whose life was saved is Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the composer-conductor whose name is familiar to movie-goers who have seen it listed, as musical director, on countless picture-credits. He conducted the Broadway premiere of Max Reinhardt's new version of "Rosalinda." And the man who saved his life is Geza Herczeg, one-time Austro-Hungarian war correspondent, publisher and playwright, author of "Wonder Bar," and recent collaborator of former Mayor Walker.

Herczeg was in Milan, representing the Hungarian government. The Milan publisher to whom he had been paying the usual bribes in return for favorable publicity told him, one day, that this arrangement no longer could continue. "Two of my newspaper colleagues were killed yesterday, on the streets of Budapest, while covering the Bela Khun outbreak," the publisher explained. "Because of this I cannot, even for the money you've been paying me, give Hungary any further good publicity." He gave Herczeg the name of another Milan publisher, a newcomer whose need for money was greater than his grief over the shed blood of newspapermen. Geza studied that name—"Benito Mussolini"—and remembered having met him in Tripoli, in 1912.

They came to terms quickly, in that 2 by 4 office where Mussolini was having his lunch—two stale rolls and a cup of coffee.

In 1926 Geza Herczeg was the owner-publisher of three newspapers in Vienna. He needed refinancing, and decided that the only man who could help him was the man who now had become Il Duce of all Italy. He went to Rome, and immediately was granted an audience, in that vast, empty office which contrasted so deeply with that jammed, tiny one in Milan. Mussolini was having his lunch—still two stale rolls and a cup of coffee.



BENITO
MUSSOLINI

Geza turned the conversation to his own personal problem, that of refinancing his three newspapers. Mussolini gave the money to him. Herczeg returned to his home and was able to continue publication for a little while longer. But his newspapers failed, he turned to playwriting and wrote "Wonder Bar," a hit which found its way to Broadway and Al Jolson.

A few years later Herczeg received a mysterious message from his agent, summoning him to Rome. His plane passage was paid for in advance. There, pursuant to instruction, he went to a theater and was seated in a box. He watched three dull acts of a four-act play about the last days of Napoleon. The author was an unknown Italian . . . At the end of the third act the doors to Geza's box opened and Mussolini entered. "How do you like the play?" asked Il Duce. Herczeg noticed the strange light in Mussolini's eyes—the familiar light which comes only to the eyes of an author.

He said, at first, that he wanted no publicity, that his name was not to be associated with it, and that his royalties would go to the needy actors of each nation where the play was presented. Hungary was first—and the producer who read it there sneered: "I wouldn't do this play even if Mussolini wrote it" . . . "But Mussolini did write it," Geza confided . . . "Then I'll do it only if the foreign office approves," the producer decided. The foreign office approved,

Mussolini was proud—proud of the success, proud of the message of his play: "France's Parliament—any parliament—with 632 men, couldn't accomplish as much as did one leader, Napoleon." A British production was arranged. The American rights were offered to Gilbert Miller, who declined them. And in 1930 the play was produced at the Weimar Theater in Germany. The theater was sold out, that night of the Weimar premiere, in the city where Schiller wrote his plays and Goethe his poems. And the next day, Nietzsche's 80-year-old sister, who, like her brother, admired the philosophy of the superman, invited to her home Mussolini's collaborator in the theater. There, too, she invited the man who was to become Mussolini's collaborator in war, Adolf Hitler. She introduced them to each other.

"Tell Il Duce that I'm delighted with his play," Hitler said to Geza, and then he discussed the Berlin theaters. "I like 'DuBarry,' Schubert, Strauss," said Hitler, "this music written by men who died as beggars. Now others have taken their blood—others, like Korngold. When I shall come to power every great play, every great composition will belong to the state, after the author dies. We will not permit these—these Korngold practices."

A few weeks later Geza Herczeg saw Erich Wolfgang Korngold. "Erich, just remember this," Geza told him. "If you ever hear of a man named Hitler becoming the leader of Germany, leave the country immediately. Remember the name—Hitler." Korngold remembered.

