

Fun Time

by Robin Hirsch (October 2014)

I

We're off, Argentina kicking off and moving the ball out to the right, just inside their half after recycling it across the back four and Zabaleta launches a 40-yard pass down the inside right channel that skips into Cillessen's hands as he races to the edge of his area. Saved!

At the Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village, New York City

perhaps a dozen people

are watching the World Cup semi-final

between Argentina and the Netherlands.

Yesterday in the previous semi-final

Germany demolished Brazil 7-1.

Today the score is 0-0

Zero-zero, nil-nil, nothing-nothing.

On Sunday the winner of today's game

meets Germany in the final.

Lavezzi tries a skittering dribble up the left and makes 20 yards until he runs straight into De Vriij who whips the ball off him and knocks him over.

In the thirties

much of my family—

those who were lucky—

escaped from Germany.

They were German Jews:

Germans,

who for more than a century

had contributed much to Germany—

science, art, banking, bakelite, philosophy;

Jews,

who in the thirties

were identified as devils,

persecuted and pursued by Hitler.

Perez and Higuain have the ball on the right of the Holland box, interchanging quickly and looking for Zabaleta on the overlap but Vlaar steps up to the 18-yard line and toes it away.

My aunt,

my mother's older sister, Herta,

with her two children,

makes it to Argentina.

Saved!

My uncle,

my father's younger brother, Georg,

with his wife and his mother, my grandmother,

makes it to Holland,

where of course the Nazis follow.

Saved! Not safe.

Holland work up the left with Blind, Van Persie and Sneijder who eventually switches the play out to Kuyt on the right and Holland begin again patiently with every member of defence and midfield having a touch.

And in March of 1938 the Anschluss—

Germany annexes Austria.

And in October Germany occupies the Sudetenland.

And in November Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass,

when synagogues and Jewish businesses all over Germany

are torched and gutted.

In Berlin, Goebbels commandeers a suite at the Hotel Kempinski,

owned by friends of my family,

to watch the Fasanenstrasse synagogue,

where my mother's family has worshiped since it was built,

burn to the ground.

My father's bakelite firm on Koepenickestrasse

is destroyed.

Well, we started out with 32 countries, then we whittled them down to 16, then 8, and now we're down to the final four. The loser today plays Brazil on Saturday for third place. And the winner of course plays Germany on Sunday for world domination.

And in March of '39 Germany invades Czechoslovakia.

And in September Germany invades Poland.

And Denmark and Norway fall,

And Holland and Belgium and Luxemburg fall,

And then, inconceivably, France.

After 90 seconds of unthreatening Dutch possession, Argentina win the ball back and make several probes up the right, making their way through Mascherano's pass to the edge of the box.

Today, seventy-six years later,
at the Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village,
at the Fun Time Café in Khan Younis, Gaza,
at bars and cafés around the world,
in people's homes, at stadiums and movie houses,
Argentina,
the adopted homeland of my long dead aunt,
is playing the Netherlands,
the adopted homeland of my long dead uncle,
for the chance to defeat in the final
the long lost homeland of my long dead parents.

II

The Dutch counter up their right but Garay makes a fine intervention, reading their intentions very well and starting another push up the left

My parents, separately, in middle age,
escape to England,
my father at the end of '38,
my mother at the beginning of '39.

In February of '39

at a small anonymous ceremony

at the Kensington Registry Office

they marry.

They move into a small flat, No. 154,

in a large block of flats,

Grove End Gardens,

in St. John's Wood,

an eminently respectable London neighborhood—

Saved! Safe!

Argentina free-kick 22 yards out, after Vlaar brought down Perez when Argentina were three on three after breaking fast.

In September of '39

Britain declares war on Germany,

my parents' former homeland,

still the only homeland of their imagination.

Tribunals are set up.

My father is interned as an enemy alien

in one of ten camps on the Isle of Man.

Where?

German Jews, who have fled for their lives,

are rounded up and thrown into the equivalent of concentration camps.

"Collar the lot!" says Churchill.

Thousands are shipped to distant parts of the Empire—

Canada, South Africa, Australia.

Where?

Hundreds drown when the Arandora Star is torpedoed in the mid-Atlantic.

My mother, frantic, calls the Home Office, scans the lists.

Nothing. Nil. Zero.

Messi takes it and spins it low around the wall towards Cillessen's right post. His quick feet get him over there and he grabs it to his stomach as he falls to his knees. Saved!

My father is lucky.

After several months he is released.

He is reunited with my mother.

They become naturalized citizens—

British, not English;

second-class citizens, naturally,

but no longer aliens.

For many German Jews,

bereft of family,

time is running out.

My mother is forty.

My father is forty-four.

Like many German Jews,

they decide to have children in the midst of war,

me and then my sister.

We are born English.

Excellent overlapping run from Zabaleta and a cross chipped in to the near post where Higuain has made his run, but De Vriij is there too and hooks it behind for a corner.

For the remaining five years of the war—

five years—

my father,

together with other older men in the building,

does anti-aircraft duty on the roof of our block of flats,

mostly at night in a tin hat,

looking and listening for the planes and rockets

of his erstwhile countrymen.

Up on that roof,

shielding his half cigarette against the dark, draped London night,

does he ever permit himself to wonder, I wonder,

whether any of the men who launch the rockets,

who fly the planes,

who drop the bombs,

are old enough to have fought in that earlier war

in which he fought—

the First World War,

the Great War,

the War to end all Wars—

and whether by some ghostly chance

one of them might have stood shoulder to shoulder with him
in those desperate, muddy, blood-soaked trenches at Verdun?
For his services to Germany in that war,
almost a century ago,
he was awarded,
this German Jew,
the Iron Cross Second Class,
the same medal as a young Austrian defector,
named Adolf Hitler.

Argentina counter but Kuyt matches Lavezzi stride for stride and stops his first
dart into the box at the price of a corner.

We are bombed nightly during the Blitz—
57 straight nights of sirens,
57 straight nights of rockets, planes, and bombs.
I am born after the worst is over.
Still,
sirens, rockets, planes, bombs—
70 years later,
they shadow me still.
I still jump at sudden noises,
I still shudder when a plane flies overhead,
I'm still undone at the smell of smoke.
Still, not still.

Excellent corner from Lavezzi gets over the heads of the near-post sentries and into the six-yard box where Garay stoops to head and wears Vlaar's boot in his face.

One night the top three floors of our block of flats
are destroyed.

But the alert has been given
so everyone is in the basement
and there are no casualties.

Saved!

Mascherano is on the ground receiving treatment, having headed the back of
Wijnaldum's head.

The building next door is totally demolished in another attack.

After the war

that bombed site

becomes our favorite playground.

It is far more enticing than the spacious garden

which is available to all the residents of Grove End Gardens

with its sandpit and little flowerbeds.

Here there is rubble and undergrowth and mystery and a place to hide.

Safe!

The ref blows after Rojo's deep cross from the left is agonisingly inches too high
for Higuain to fight Cillessen for it.

Peep. Peep. Peep. Half time it is.

So today we are here at the Cornelia Street Cafe,

at the end of the first half—45 minutes.

There is still no score.

After a break there will be a second half

and then if there is still no score

the game goes into extra time.

The second half is about to begin.

A billion people are watching all over the world.

III

Half time change. Interesting sub—Daryl Jan Maat is coming on for Holland,
replacing Martins Indi.

At the Fun Time Café

in Khan Younis, Gaza

perhaps a dozen people

are watching the World Cup semi-final

between Argentina and the Netherlands.

Yesterday in the previous semi-final

Germany demolished Brazil 7-1.

Today the score is 0-0

Zero-zero, nil-nil, nothing-nothing.

On Sunday the winner of today's game

meets Germany in the final.

If the game is still drawn after extra time—

two fifteen-minute halves—

it will come down to penalty kicks,

the best of five.

And then, if it is still drawn,

to sudden death

My father and my uncle are early Zionists,

quite a revolutionary thing to be in Germany

in the teens and early twenties.

They have bought a parcel of land on Panorama Road in Haifa.

Do they know what's coming?

My uncle even lives there briefly in the twenties,

under the British Mandate of Palestine.

In Berlin they are members of a famous Jewish sports club—

Ivria—

They are rowers.

These Zionists—

what is their allegiance?

These Zionists, these Jews—

They row;

They win races on the Spree;

They serve in the Wehrmacht;

They are usurpers, infiltrators, traitors, scum.

Juden! Juden! Juden raus!

And in Germany the ravaging inflation;

and a lunatic strutting in Bavaria;

and in '23 the beer hall putsch in Munich,

and the lunatic arrested and jailed;

and in jail the lunatic writes a best seller about his struggle.

And in '33, ten years later—how is it possible?—

the lunatic becomes Chancellor.

And in '35 the first promulgation of the Nuremberg laws:

Jews are now officially second-class citizens—

Aryans are *Reichsbürger*, citizens of the Reich;

Jews are *Staatsangehörige*, subjects of the State

harder and harder for a Jew to live;

harder and harder for a Jew to leave.

And in '36 a brief respite for the Olympics in Berlin:

No Jews,

only a few symbolic half-Jews,

are allowed to compete;

the black son of an American sharecropper wins four gold medals.

And then back to business:

the relentless buildup to Kristallnacht.

My uncle prepares to pack up, to flee, to seek refuge.

But where?

Palestine?

But how?

Now with a wife and an elderly mother, my grandmother,

the journey and the pioneer life in Palestine:

too arduous.

He chooses Holland.

Mascherano looks OK since his stunning head collision, chipping a decent long pass that bounces just out of Messi's stride as Cillessen races out to sweep up.

On the 10th of May, 1940, Germany invades Holland.

On the 14th, 57 Heinkels drop 1308 bombs on Rotterdam.

The Dutch capitulate.

The Nazis take over.

In Amsterdam my uncle, my aunt and my grandmother

go into hiding.

Like the Frank family, also German Jews,

they are betrayed, arrested and shipped to a series of concentration camps—

Westerbork, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz.

In Auschwitz Georg Hirsch, my uncle,

and Otto Frank, Anne's father,

share a bunk.

My uncle and aunt,
unbeknownst to each other,
survive,
one of only five Dutch couples to survive the camps
intact as a couple.

My grandmother, my father's mother,
is not so lucky.
She, too, like my mother's mother,
vanishes in the smoke of Hitler's ovens.
Otto loses everyone.

Robben sprints up the middle when the ball is dinked past Demichelis.
Six million vanish in that smoke:
dead, gone, nothing,
Nothing, nothing, zero, zero, nil, nil.
Sudden death.

He opens his body and takes it to the left but Biglia has been diligently stalking
his run and whips it away.
Survivors, shards from the explosion,
are scattered across the earth.
Waitlists, visas, quotas,
unfamiliar tongues:
a new diaspora.
Strange new homelands:

Britain, Australia, Canada, the United States. Where?

South Africa, India, China, Malaya, Japan. Where?

Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru. Where?

Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Argentina. Where?

Venezuela, Jamaica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic. Where?

The British Mandate of Palestine.

Oh . . .

IV

Biglia goes flying into a 50-50 with Janmaat. Biglia comes off worse, taking the full impact of Janmaat's body on his forearm, which takes a minute to strap and bandage.

When I am six,

my best friend at school,

an English Jew,

calls me a Nazi.

"Hirsch's parents are Nazis.

They speak German, I've heard them.

They're Nazis,

Hirsch is a Nazi."

I am flattened.

Long cross from Kuyt towards the penalty spot is headed clear and Vlaar has to step out of the line to dispossess Messi.

And down in our basement in a German trunk,

amid the bakelite samples and his letters home from the Western front,
my father keeps his Iron Cross and a Luger with two bullets.

Language, identity, history, homeland, lost.

The old diaspora. Lost.

Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland. Lost.

Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Rumania, Russia. Lost.

Italy, Greece, Holland, Belgium, France. Lost.

Most of Europe. Lost.

Lost, but impossible to shed.

It's getting a little too scrappy now, players conceding fouls and some
miscontrol.

In 1948,

out of the ashes,

under the watchful eye of the UN,

an ancient homeland is reborn:

a new State,

forged from the British Mandate of Palestine—

the State of Israel:

a beacon for the Jews who survived, who escaped, who scattered,

who started over in alien lands;

a new language repurposed from the ancient Hebrew,

Ivrit,

a destination for the Babel of lost tongues;

a provocation, an incitement to war

for surrounding Arab nations.

Argentina have a free-kick wide on the right, about 20 yards from goal, and Messi aims for the back post, completely overhits it, and it bends harmlessly out for a goal-kick.

Palestinians are driven from this new land.

Wars follow.

Israel grows, prospers, expands,

invades Lebanon,

occupies Sinai, the West Bank, Gaza.

At last Mascherano sticks it in the mixer with a sixty-yard bazooka pass but Vlaar clears easily.

Today in Gaza, at the Fun Time Café

The score is frozen at 0-0.

Zero-zero, nil-nil, nothing-nothing

What it will become no-one knows,

no-one will know.

Double Argentina substitution, Palacio for Perez, Aguero for Higuain.

Three young Israelis have been kidnapped and murdered.

One young Palestinian has been kidnapped and murdered in revenge

Hamas has been tunneling into Israel;

Israel has been retaliating.

Hamas has been firing rockets into Israel;

Israel has been bombarding Gaza.

Rockets, planes, bombs.

Before the score can be settled

Another score is settled:

Sirens blare.

Too late.

An Israeli bomb demolishes the Fun Time Café.

A mistake from Zabaleta nearly opens it up for Van Persie to sneak in on the left but the right-back jumps the gun and is blown for offside.

Peep, peep, peep. Extra time it is.

V

We're off again. Slowly, till Blind chips a ball 50 yards and Van Persie backs into Zabaleta.

It is not given to many people to choose their citizenship.

It is mostly an accident of birth.

German

English

Israeli

Palestinian.

After the war,

my parents could have made Aliyah—

immigrated to Israel,

a second migration,

a third nationality, identity, language, home.

But . . .

Middle age. Children. A foothold in England.

Too late.

How do you commit to a country?

Who actually gets to make that choice?

My uncle was born German,

lived in Palestine,

became Dutch.

My aunt was born German,

acquired visas for Uruguay,

became Argentinean.

Her daughter, my cousin Ellinor, moved to Beer Sheva,

married, and became Israeli.

Cousins of my father,

born German,

acquired visas for Peru,

but ended up in Shanghai.

My parents were born German

but became British.

I, their son, was born English

but still identify as the son of German Jews.

German-Jewish.

A most ambiguous heritage.

Sneijder wriggles away from his marker, crouching almost to veer off until Biglia fouls him.

In 1965, after much deliberation,

I accept an invitation to teach at a German university.

To face the bogeyman.

To stick my finger in the wound.

I am 22.

On my first morning,

my landlady pounds on my door

with a mop and bucket.

"Englander," she screams in German,

"You murdered my husband.

"You English, you started the war.

"Thousands of bombs, thousands of bombs!

"Wie kommt es dass Sie so gut Deutsch sprechen,

"Englander?

"How come you speak such good German?

"Herr Hirsch—

"how come you have a German name?

"Sind Sie vielleicht ein Jude?

"Jude! Jude!" she spits the word in my face.

I rush past her, down the stairs,

her mop and bucket clattering behind me.

"Jude! Jude! ScheissJude!"

I run and run.

Sobbing, underneath a bridge, I come to rest.

He rolls the free-kick to Robben who sends it back out to the left where Kuyt
overhits his cross.

In 1967, thanks to luck and Senator Fulbright,

I abandon an incipient career as an actor in the North of England,

and come to America,

a temporary visitor in a land of immigrants.

I study, I teach, I overstay my visa,

I move to New York, an academic wetback,

an illegal alien.

I teach, I write, I direct, I act, I do construction.

I finagle a green card.

A second-class citizen, certainly;

but no longer illegal.

Ten years later, with two other artists,

I open a one-room café with a toaster-oven

on a one-block street in Greenwich Village,

Cornelia Street.

The Cornelia Street Café.

From the beginning we are an artists' café.

We grow, we prosper, we expand.

We take over the place next door.

We build a kitchen.

After 37 years

we have three rooms upstairs,

two bars, two kitchens,

and more refrigerators than I can count.

And downstairs a performance space

in which we do 700 shows a year,

including music from all over the world—

Africa, Brazil, Cuba, India, Argentina, Japan, France, Spain, the Middle East—

and poetry in a dozen languages,

among them Greek, Italian, French, German, Russian, Rumanian, Spanish,

Yiddish, Vietnamese, Hebrew, Arabic.

Robben, now with the captain's armband, bundles into the box, nutmegs Demichelis, takes one touch too many and wins a corner, shooting from almost horizontal to the goal.

It took me forty-five years to choose to become an American citizen:

Vietnam, Nixon, Reagan, Iran-Contra, Bush Junior, Afghanistan, Iraq;

assassinations, lynchings, border patrols, civil and uncivil wars;

immigrants kicking would-be immigrants

one step below them

off the ladder.

It was not until Americans elected a black President

that I felt moved to join my wife and children

and pledge allegiance.

Shot from Robben cutting on to his left foot from the right touchline, shrugging off the pursuing Biglia and whips it low and bobbling but Romero gathers it.

It is—how could it be otherwise?—

an ambiguous allegiance.

Not to Washington, to Wall Street, to the Second Amendment,

not to political or religious fundamentalism—

there's enough of that in my history, in our history, in the Middle East,

God, Allah, Jahweh help us all.

A spark from Messi who turns a gorgeous pass with his left foot from the right up the middle and is trodden on when he completes it, Aguero not managing to control it either.

No, I pledge allegiance to the diaspora of New York City,

to Greenwich Village,

to a small café on a one-block street

which celebrates the great American freedoms:

freedom of expression, of experimentation, of improvisation, of diversity.

A plenitude of the soul and spirit.

My own small victory.

My own new, chosen homeland.

Peep. Peep. Peep.

Extra time, half time. The players take on fluids

VI

We're off again, Kuyt knocking over Zabaleta when they both went for a ball that was thigh high. I think the City full-back took a shoulder in the jaw.

In Gaza, at the Fun Time Cafe

nine people are killed, including three of the owner's four sons.

People killed by my people.

Sudden death.

If my parents had made Aliyah,

would my sons be in the army now,

bombarding Gaza?

Rockets, planes, bombs?

If I owned the Fun Time Café,

would my remaining son

become a suicide bomber?

Jihad, shariah, beheadings?

Long, long delay while Zabaleta receives treatment. Up he finally gets with a tissue clamped between his teeth to stem the blood.

I have two sons.

They do not work at the Cornelia Street Café.

They are watching the World Cup with friends

in other bars, cafés, at people's houses.

They are at liberty to come and go, to travel freely.

Wherever they are now the score is still the same:

Zero-zero, nil-nil, nothing-nothing.

A hint of life at the death when Huntelaar's cross finds Kuyt at the centre of goal
by the spot and his shot is deflected wide.

Peeeeeeep. That's it. Penalties it is.

The game goes into penalty kicks.

There will be a victory of sorts, certainly a defeat.

And then on Sunday a final victory.

Holland to go first. Vlaar to take.

Saved!

Holland 0-0 Argentina.

Low and central, slightly to the keeper's left.

I hope for my sons that in their souls they will one day

claim a victory of sorts,

that in their souls they will be able

to choose their own small homeland.

Not a political or a religious homeland,

but a homeland of the soul and spirit.

Messi to take.

Scored!

Holland 0-1 Argentina.

Shaped it down the left with a left-foot curling shot.

Robben to take.

Scored!

Holland 1-1 Argentina.

Rolled it to the right.

They both/We all

deserve our own small victory.

They both/We all

deserve our own small homeland.

They both/We all

deserve our own protected Fun Time,

free from sudden death.

They both/We all

deserve our own Cornelia Street,

our own small, intimate, safe, personal café.

Scored!

Saved!

Scored!

Scored!

Scored!

Argentina to meet Germany in the final.

Note: The descriptions of the game are taken largely from the Daily Telegraph live podcast.

Robin Hirsch has acted, directed, taught and published on both sides of the Atlantic. He is the author of [FEG: Stupid Poems for Intelligent Children](#). In 1977, he co-founded The Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village, which the City of New York has proclaimed “a cultural as well as a culinary landmark.”

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