

The Search for the Long Island Hitlers

By JESSE GREEN

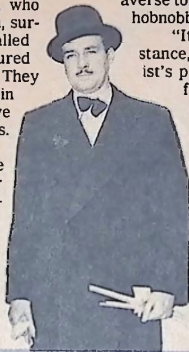
William Patrick Hitler, son of Adolf Hitler's half-brother and the subject of "Little Willy," a play by Mark Kassen.

FOR his professional New York stage debut, which took place in a 1994 Off Broadway curiosity called "Judy at the Stonewall Inn," Mark Kassen wore gold lamé hot pants and danced in a cage. His parents, who schlepped in from Syracuse for the occasion, survived. A few years later, when he was cast in a play called "Things You Shouldn't Say Past Midnight," they endured his appearance, totally nude, in bed with a shiksa. They were tolerant people, after all; they had watched him in an episode of "Cybill." But Mr. Kassen may finally have gone too far, even for his loving and broadminded folks. Monday night he opens as Hitler.

Not Hitler, exactly — or not *that* Hitler. In "Little Willy," which Mr. Kassen researched and wrote over the course of six years, he plays William Patrick Hitler, born in 1911 to the Führer's half-brother, Alois, and an Irish woman named Brigid Dowling. Accurate as far as the evidence goes, and astutely imagined when evidence is lacking, "Little Willy" dramatizes the young man's attempts to trade on his family

name, first as a salesman in prewar Germany, where he played up his closeness to the chancellor, and then on American lecture tours that advertised "his daring exposé of intrigue among the enslavers of Europe." Even then, the play suggests, he was not averse to turning on the old Hitler charm if it meant a chance at hobnobbing with the horsy set or bedding a starlet.

"It's about the advertising of panache without substance," Mr. Kassen said: an account of a young opportunist's pathetic self-marketing but also, by implication, a reflection on his infamous relative's more successful efforts in the same line. Concentrating on the period from 1936 to 1943, "Little Willy" tells the true story of its title character's efforts to extort a better job from Uncle Adolf and then, after leaving Germany in a huff and petitioning President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to serve in the United States military. More speculatively, Mr. Kassen shows him selling Volkswagens and Beech-Nut gum and, most of all, himself, to women who inevitably find him disappointing — hence the play's title, an allusion to the



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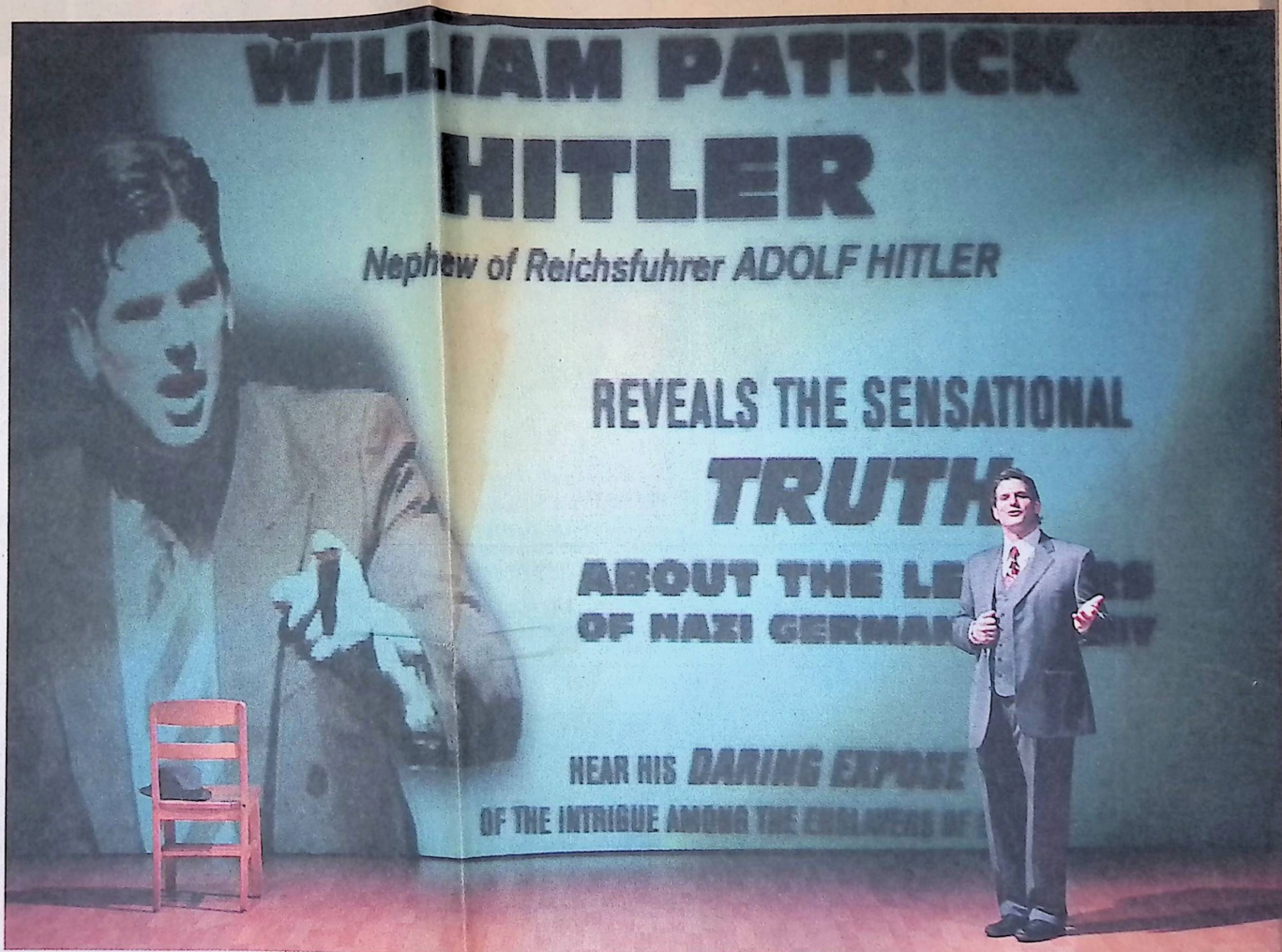
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family habit of overcompensation.

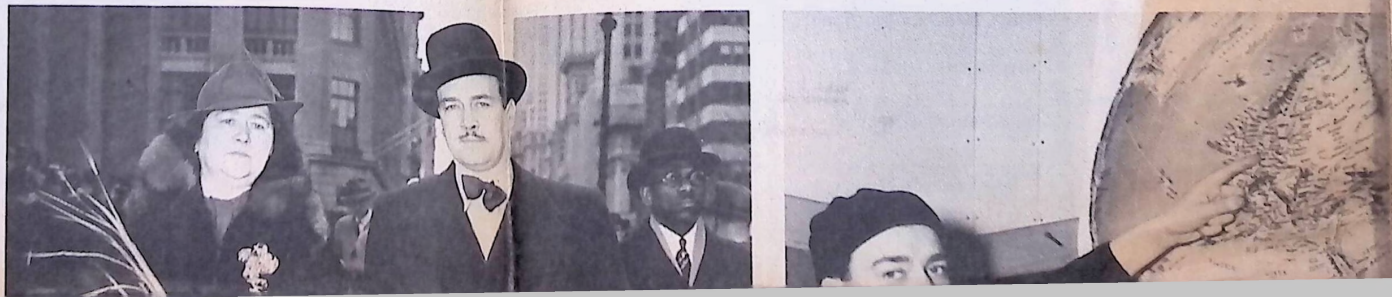
But the story is jolted out of its oddly comfortable historical frame by the news, delivered almost as an afterthought as the play ends, that Mr. Hitler, having become an American citizen in 1944, did a stint in the Navy and then moved to Sunnyside, Queens. Soon afterward, with a new last name, he married and had four sons, three of whom, now middle-aged men, are apparently still living on Long Island.

Wait: the Führer's kin on Long Island? The information is rattling. It's not that anyone could ever have said, "Honey, go play next door with those nice Hitler boys." The family has maintained and, when necessary, protected its anonymity. But just knowing that the last remnants of the most famously evil name in modern history (no other relatives are thought to have survived the war) might be pushing the next cart at the Office Max in Melville makes the membrane between the unsettling past and the familiar present begin to vibrate.

If the vibration is somewhat titillating, that's because the membrane hasn't shattered; discovering real storm troopers on the cul-de-sac might not seem so jolly. It's just the right level of creepiness to know — as Mr. Kassen discovered in his research — that the new last name Mr. Hitler chose for himself, upon his natu-



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



of an English anti-Semite whose writings helped shape early Nazi ideology. Or that, having settled in perhaps the most densely Jewish part of

The play's big surprise comes at the end: the Führer's nephew settled in the New York suburbs.

the country, he gave his eldest son the middle name Adolf.

So his renunciation of his heritage was a tad ambivalent; still, it's an American principle that the sins of the father (or great half-uncle) ought not be visited on the sons. In any case, though Mr. Hitler eventually found work as a freelance phlebotomist, his boys took up the kind of labor that almost seems reparative: law enforcement, counseling Vietnam War veterans, landscaping. In a culture of celebrity-by-association, and even celebrity-by-awfulness, their very attempt at anonymity, understandable though it is, makes them more fascinating. Willful obscurity has become suspicious; if Hitlers are living obscurely among us, shouldn't they be found?

But Mr. Kassen, who with his younger brother now runs an independent film production company, was not interested in that sort of detective work, hunting his subject to the end of the trail, which in this case turned out to be the Long Island Expressway. At first, all he wanted was an interesting, age-appropriate role to play. (He is 34.) Chancing upon a reference to Mr. Hitler in an article, he became fascinated by the acting challenge: the Irish accent, the period style, the Adolfian echoes. (During one of Mr. Hitler's spiels for Colgate toothpaste, Mr. Kassen manages to incorporate a sly version of the Reich salute.) And, as a writer, he found the story of a man with no particular talent or identity of his own, a man willing to embrace (or cast off) anything to acquire even a morsel of importance, "very relevant" to the current moment. "Here, long before Paris Hilton or Kato Kaelin, long before bin Laden's niece tried to cut a record," Mr. Kassen said, "was a window into our own world."

As such, his historical research kept being sidetracked into the present. He viewed newsreels of Adolf Hitler and films of Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn: men whose style Mr. Hitler seemed to imitate. But he also watched clips of contemporary salesmen like Deepak Chopra and Tony Robbins. In color-coded journals and on three-by-five cards (blue for historical facts, fluorescent green for modern parallels) he redacted his reading. He found Brigid Dowling's diary in the New York Public Library. A 1939 "Look" article by Mr. Hitler himself, titled "Why I Hate My Uncle," provided useful details about his character's preoccupations. Among the turn-offs cited are the Führer's "feminine gestures" and the dandruff on his coat.

But Mr. Kassen's high-minded research inevitably brought him in contact with less reputable sources and subjects, to the point of making him and those around him uncomfortable. He noticed that other customers in the coffee shops where he likes to write were looking at him oddly; he learned to keep the covers of the books he was reading — with their prominent iconography — hidden. "And when my girlfriend first



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came to visit me in Los Angeles," he remembered, "I had to explain why 'Mein Kampf' was on my bedside table." Even buying swastika armbands for the show led him down dark alleys; the theatrical costuming Web sites he found required proof that customers were doing legitimate plays like "The Sound of Music." So Mr. Kassen got the armbands "elsewhere" on the Internet. "For all the weird hate sites I got into," he said, "I'm probably going to be in Guantanamo by the end of the play."

But the deeper he delved into the story, the more the fact of the living descendants (William Patrick Hitler died in 1987, at age 76) gnawed at him. He was, at first, reluctant to look for them. "Not that I could imagine that they were going to come out of hiding to sue me for defamation," he said, "but stranger things have happened. Why prod the sleeping giant?" Still, he said, the actor's impulse to assemble a character from as much information as possible and the writer's need to distinguish among the man's many contradictory poses eventually got the better of him. Did Mr. Hitler really renounce his heritage? Did his three sons, as has been variously reported and disputed among Hitlerologists — and as Mr. Kassen states in his play — really make a pact not to marry or have children, so the bloodline would end? "I just needed to know there was a pretty good chance it was all true."

Though by his own admission no scholar — learning disabilities were what led him, he said, to acting in the first place — he worked like an obsessed journalist. "If you find out that somebody does something and has a first name, you can crash databases and get more information," he said. "For instance, I knew he had four kids and then learned that the youngest one, named Howard, died in a car crash on Long Island. So I could find that in newspaper death records. After all, how many people named Howard died in

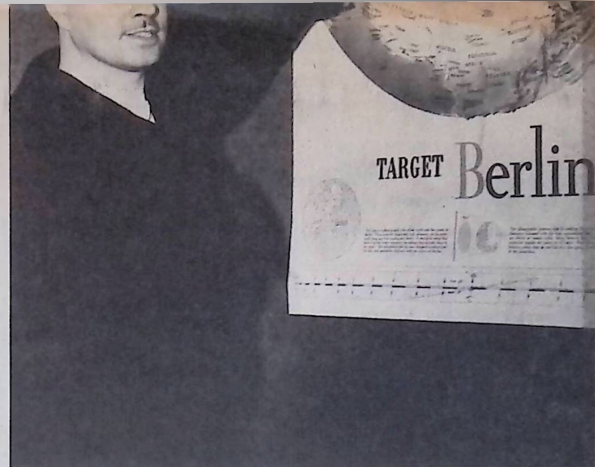
a car crash on Long Island in that particular year? And from that I got their last name. From another source I learned that the oldest son worked for a Veterans Administration hospital on Long Island. Now I had his full name — and how many V.A. hospitals do you think there are on Long Island?"

As it turns out, there's one, and Mr. Kassen called its business affairs office. That's when he was, as he put it, "deterred."

He is circumspect about the details. "Let's just say I was contacted by someone's attorney asking me, in a nonthreatening but really assertive way, to respectfully stay away from the family. I had already found out what I needed to know for the purposes of my play, that the three sons were living where I said they were. And I don't see what great good it does for the world to pursue them. Think of the legal mess. Hitler — I mean Adolf Hitler — had assets that were never claimed. Who would it serve to bring all that out?"

And yet there was one thing Mr. Kassen needed to see for himself: little Willy's grave. So on a spring day in 2003, he headed out to a Long Island cemetery. The monument — to William Patrick and his mother, who is buried with him — was unremarkable: a simple arched stone carved with ivy and a cross. Beneath their adopted surname in large letters, and above their given names, is only the inscription "Rest in Peace." Which Mr. Kassen took as a general imperative; he would not show a reporter the photo he snapped that day.

Because Adolf Hitler has no grave, his nephew's headstone is likely "the only memorial to that bloodline," Mr. Kassen said. "It was more exciting than world. I felt, at best, a little clever for having found it. I guess I had wanted to watch the train wreck, to see where that disastrous train ended up."



U.S. Navy photo from the New York Times Archive

The playwright sought out Hitler's relations, who for obvious reasons preferred not to be found.

Raised in what he called a "culturally observant" Jewish home, Mr. Kassen said he has recently become "a more active nonparticipant." As much as anyone does, he finds the history of the Hitlers disturbing. Yet by investigating and embodying a part of it, he has also made it seem oddly ordinary. Is it the hope that the last century's outsized horror is past — or the fear that it isn't — that allows it to be domesticated? Mr. Kassen said that his father always found sitcoms like "Hogan's Heroes" offensive, as many do "The Producers," for their defanged, lovable Nazis; what would such people think of "Little Willy," which achieves a lot of its humor and power through the contrast between the offstage nightmare of the "real" Hitler and the onstage antics of his ineffectual nephew, hawking a Hoover Deluxe 4000?

"Nowadays we channel surf through tragedy," Mr. Kassen said. "I'm no better. But you draw the line somewhere. I didn't want to walk up to one of the sons with a videocam and 'get' him; that would be the same as what Willy did. Trying to make myself known by exploiting someone else's name."

Nevertheless, that's what's happening, to some extent and however artfully, in "Little Willy" — and, one might as well admit, in this article about it. Theater is at least partly showmanship, as William Patrick Hitler well knew, reshaping his mustache, his politics, his very name to suit the life he sought. (And, by the way, it doesn't take much sleuthing to discover that Mr. Kassen, too, has changed his surname, from Krassenbaum.) Would "Little Willy" have been as noticeable if it were about some lesser evil man's nephew? Or, more to the point, some saint's? "We all trade what we have for what we want," Mr. Kassen said, providing an epitaph for his character if not his age. "And sometimes what we have isn't very nice."

LITTLE WILLY

OHIO THEATER
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Mark Kassen, top, in "Little Willy," in which he portrays William Patrick Hitler, who is shown above in the Navy and with his mother.