

World's Mightiest Human *continued from page 27*

resorts of the Borscht Belt.)

In 1924, Breitbart parlayed his celebrity status into mass market muscle building. His New York office became a center for sending weekly mail-order bodybuilding lessons and "Breitbart's Muscle Meters" to skinny Jack Dempsey wannabes. The cable address was simply "Superman-New York."

Tragic Homecoming

IN AUGUST 1924, BREITBART, now an American citizen, returned to Europe, possibly to escape being hounded by the U.S. Post Office for deceptive advertising.

While performing in Warsaw, he received a summons from the Radziminer Rebbe, Poland's chief rabbi, who gave Breitbart his approval and a blessing.

The blessing might as well have been a curse. During a performance in July 1925 in the Polish city of Radom, a rusty nail Breitbart was pounding through a wooden board pierced his left knee, resulting in blood poisoning. But his manager insisted he complete upcoming contracted shows.

Soon the ailing strongman had to be rushed to Berlin's Charité Hospital, where his badly infected leg was amputated. On October 12, 1925, after 10 operations, the "Superman of the Ages" died.

Breitbart's funeral, an Orthodox ceremony, was attended by thousands of Yiddish and German-speaking Jews as well as gentiles from the circus and variety stage world. One moving obituary quoted a passage from Zechariah: "Wail, O Cypress, for the Cedar has fallen."

A Legacy Lives On

BREITBART'S LUCRATIVE enterprises and legendary exploits outlived him. Although world newspapers published lengthy obituaries, the Breitbart Institute of Physical Culture continued to issue mail-order lessons with personal messages supposedly signed by its deceased founder (in 1931 the Federal Trade Commission discovered the fraud and ordered the institute to cease and desist all commercial activities). In Warsaw, Breitbart's brothers Gershom and Yosef, both itinerant performers, independently began billing themselves as "Breitbart the

Iron King." (Later, Yosef joined the Resistance movement in Paris and resurfaced as a strongman in a German DP camp. At age 10, Breitbart's son Ossi fashioned his own juvenile bar-bending act in Germany. He is believed to have died in the Shoah.)

Months after Breitbart's death, Ben Kuscher dashed out the incomplete autobiography, *Mayn Lebens Geshikhte* (*My Life Story*), which he had coauthored. It sold well, as did thousands of postcards of Breitbart and scenes from his burial.

In 1928, the pulp writer I. M. Naiman published a fantasy film script, *The Dream of a Newspaper Boy: The Life of Zisha Breitbart*, in the Yiddish journal *Film Velt #1*. In it, Breitbart's days are numbered because of a religious transgression he commits. His father pleads for his assistance in preparing the Passover feast, but the vainglorious strongman waves him away and rocks a laughing teenage girl on his lap instead. Magically, the teen is transformed into an ugly witch who curses the chain-biter: "He will be brought down by a tiny nail!" In the next scene, Breitbart, in the hospital, pleads for his life, to no avail. His body

and amputated leg are buried in the same casket. He goes to heaven, where he meets Samson. In the dénouement, a newspaper boy is awoken from this dream. He has learned Breitbart's secrets and now can tear chains apart, but the witch warns him to always obey his parents; otherwise, the boy will be sent to an early grave like his idol Zisha Breitbart.

In film director Werner Herzog's retelling of the Breitbart saga, *Invincible* (2000), Breitbart dies in 1933, after traveling by foot from Lodz to Berlin, where he works as a strongman in Erik Jan Hanussen's Nazi-infested cabaret. In fact, Breitbart never worked for Hanussen, and the mentalist never ran a cabaret, nightclub, or music hall.

Herzog did accurately portray Breitbart as a sensational popular variety artist and a proud Jew who inspired hero-seeking Jewish children—likely among them Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster.

If so, we should offer a posthumous bow to the "Superman of the Ages," Zisha Breitbart, for inspiring the creation of Superman—a comic book superhero even this consummate master of strongman roles could not have imagined. □

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