

BAY AREA

# Jack Hirschman, Marxist poet and North Beach fixture, dies at 87



[Sam Whiting](#)

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**CAPTION:** Jack Hirschman was creator of the San Francisco International Poetry Festival and former San Francisco poet laureate.

Friends of the San Francisco Public Library

Jack Hirschman, a scholar and translator in nine languages who threw over a career as a college professor for the life of a proletarian North Beach poet, died Sunday at his home on Union Street in San Francisco.

With his push-broom mustache, weathered face, wild hair and outlandish hat, Hirschman was what you looked for in a bohemian, and he lived the part in a single room in the old hotel above Caffè Trieste. Even after marriage upgraded him to a cottage behind an apartment house, Hirschman still came to write every day in his room.

Hirschman was 87 and had given a reading at Foreign Cinema on Wednesday before coming down with a cold, his wife, Agneta Falk, a poet and calligrapher, said Sunday. Cause of death is undetermined.

“It is devastating to the local community because Jack was a friend to everybody,” said Beat Museum founder Jerry Cimino on Sunday. “Jack was too young to be considered a Beat but he knew them all, and his reach and influence went far beyond San Francisco and California. He was always approachable, and a word of recommendation from Jack could launch a poet’s career.”

A former San Francisco poet laureate, Hirschman enjoyed a publishing career that lasted more than 50 years and more than 100 volumes, though half of them were translations.

“The most important thing as a poet is that I worked for the Communist movement for 45 years, and the new class of impoverished and homeless people,” he said in a 2018 interview to inform this obituary, while laying on his double bed on the fourth floor of a walk-up, overlooking Columbus Avenue.

Much of his work was put out by small publishers, often as small as Hirschman’s room, outfitted with a copy machine and stapler, and a print run of 150 copies. “One of my presses,” he said, “is this room you are sitting in.”

If he was not in that room, Hirschman was usually around the corner in Caffè Trieste, his face hidden beneath a floppy hat and behind a double espresso. It was here that he wrote his first San Francisco poem, in the early 1970s, not long after he’d been fired from the faculty of UCLA for antiwar activism.

He wrote a poem in Russian, then translated it to English, as follows. “You are not a slave/And I am not a machine/And this ain’t no opium den, comrade.”

On the success of that, he wrote a poem a day in Russian for 12 years, in addition to two poems in English as his daily output. The poems piled up. His best known work, “The Arcanes,” was published in two volumes of 1,000 pages each. At the time of his death he was 450 pages into Volume 3.

“Jack’s a very American voice,” the late Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet and co-owner of City Lights, once said. “He certainly aims to be the voice of the people — of course, he would define ‘the people’ in Marxist terms.”

Though Hirschman was often labeled a Beat poet or a street poet, he preferred to think of himself as a working class labor poet who never stopped working.

“He was not at all ambitious,” said Falk. “but I don’t know anyone who wrote as much as he did.”

Well into his 80s, Hirschman was the curator of the Tuesday poetry readings at the North Beach branch of the San Francisco Public Library.

He’d always get it started by offering up a fresh poem, delivered with the nasal twang of his native New York. He read with a ferocity, as if he were still trying to get the people to rise up against the state. Following the free reading he would lead the procession up to Specs’ 12 Adler Museum Cafe, where he sat at a round table with the ever-dwindling supply of North Beach poets, for pizza and beer.

“Jack would hate to have his poetry classified as agitprop,” said Ferlinghetti. “He raises it above agitprop by the emotion he puts into it.”

Even laying on his bed on a weekday afternoon, Hirschman could muster deep emotion for a reading of “Path,” the poem he said he’d most like to be remembered for.

“Go to your broken heart,” he began. “If you think you don’t have one, get one. To get one, be sincere. Learn sincerity of intent by letting life enter because you’re helpless, really, to do otherwise.”

Hirschman was born Dec. 13, 1933 and grew up in the Bronx, New York. His mother would read to him “The Shadow” by Robert Louis Stevenson and that taught him to love the sound of words. At age 12, he wrote and sang his first poem, “The Bells of Freedom.” He fell hard for Hemingway and sent him a writing sample. Hemingway’s response was later published as “Letter to a Young Writer.”

"I can't help you kid," Hemingway wrote. "You write better than I did when I was 19. But the hell of it is you write like me. That's no sin, but you won't get anywhere with it."

Heeding these words, Hirschman went the route of academia, attending City College of New York where he learned to speak Latin and Greek while being radicalized on the streets of Manhattan.

He claimed to have attended Dylan Thomas' last public reading before he died in New York, in 1953.

Hirschman wrote his thesis on "Finnegan's Wake," by James Joyce, and earned his BA in 1955. He earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University, where he published his first volume of poetry, "A Correspondence of Americans," in 1960.

In 1954, he married a City College classmate, Ruth Epstein, and they had two children, David and Celia.

He moved the family from Indiana to New Hampshire, where he taught at Dartmouth College, then across the country to UCLA, where he was hired as an assistant professor of comparative literature. He was let go for encouraging students to resist the draft during the Vietnam War.

"I became a Communist when I was fired from UCLA," he said. What did it was the translation he wrote for "A Rainbow for the Christian West," by the Haitian Rene Depestre. A reading from that translation is in the Pacifica Radio Archive.

Hirschman had a family to support but he left left academia and never went back, retreating instead to Venice where he did nothing but write poems, translate poems and paint for four years.

Hirschman and Epstein were divorced before he moved to San Francisco, in 1972, arriving at the tail end of the prolific poetry years known as the San Francisco Renaissance. Hirschman lived first in the now-defunct New Riviera Hotel, where he began his long association with Caffe Trieste.

Like jazz musicians, Hirschman was better appreciated abroad. “They worship him in Europe,” said Falk, a Swedish poet and illustrator. “Fame has crept up on him.”

Falk met Hirschman when he gave a reading in London. Hirschman liked to say she moved into his single room where they lived for 10 years but she said that was just talk. They lived in her larger place on Broadway, before moving to the cottage on Union Street.

In 2007, Hirschman was named poet laureate of San Francisco.

During his inaugural address, Hirschman promised to help organize a three-day poetry festival in San Francisco.

“There’s a poet, as we know, behind every espresso cup here in San Francisco,” he said in closing his remarks. “Many write in anonymity, even clandestinely. Yet everywhere the human poetic soul knows how to deconstruct power.”

Hirschman was a founding member of the Union of Left Writers of San Francisco and a member in good standing of the Union of Street Poets. He called himself a working class labor poet and did not like being labeled a Beat. Being labeled a bohemian he would grudgingly allow.

“Of course I’m a bohemian,” he said in his last interview. “Look at this room.”

He was predeceased by his son David, who died of leukemia in 1982. Survivors include his wife Agneta Falk of San Francisco and daughter Celia Hirschman of Oroville.

*Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.  
Email: [swhiting@sfchronicle.com](mailto:swhiting@sfchronicle.com) Instagram: [@sfchronicle\\_art](https://www.instagram.com/sfchronicle_art)*