

Books by Edgar Hilsenrath

NIGHT
THE NAZI AND THE BARBER
THE STORY OF THE LAST THOUGHT

and further titles

Fuck America

EDGAR HILSEN RATH

Fuck America
Bronsky's Confession

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OWL OF MINERVA

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Prologue or “Fuck America”

Express Letter

To the American Consul General
Clausewitzstraße 3b
Berlin

November 10, 1938

Dear Mr. Consul General!

Our synagogues have been burning since yesterday. The Nazis demolished my store, emptied out my desk, chased my children out of school, set my apartment on fire, raped my wife, crushed my testicles, confiscated my assets, and froze my bank account. We have to emigrate. We have no other choice. It will only get worse. There is little time. Can you, esteemed Mr. Consul General, provide immigrant visas to the United States for me and my family in the

next three days?

Sincerely,
Nathan Bronsky

PS: I have lived in Germany for 40 years, in Halle an der Saale, but I come from Galicia, a province that is now part of Poland.

To the Polish Jew Nathan Bronsky
currently residing in Germany at
Königstraße 10
Halle an der Saale

July 10, 1939

Dear Mr. Bronsky!

Your express letter has been sitting on my desk for eight months. I didn't get around to reading it until today. Enclosed please find some application forms for you to fill out and return to me. Unfortunately, I have to tell you that the chances of a quick immigration to America for you and your family are slim. You see, esteemed Mr. Bronsky, all of a sudden hundreds of thousands of Jews want to come to America. But we can only let in a limited number of them because America is a paradise whose immigration policy has been

determined by a cleverly designed quota system since the 1920s. This quota system, esteemed Mr. Bronsky, severely constrains the waves of alien and foreign elements from across the oceans in the interest of a dominant, purely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant electorate. The waiting lists for persecuted Jews are therefore long. Very long. Hundreds of thousands of names with quota registration numbers are already marked on the waiting lists. If you fill out the application forms without delay and return them to me, then, at best – given the circumstances – it might be the Bronsky family's turn in about 13 years. I thus estimate, dear Mr. Bronsky, that I will be able to issue immigration visas to you and your family in 1952, provided that you are able, by then, to obtain the necessary affidavits, as well as other pertinent records, vouchers, papers, and documents.

Sincerely,
The American Consul General

To the American Consul General
Clausewitzstraße 3b
Berlin

July 12, 1939

Dear Mr. Consul General!

Time is running out. War is just around the corner. I see terrifying things ahead for us. Please have mercy! I have daily conversations with my stomach ulcer. It tells me strange things: It tells me about gas chambers and firing squads. It tells me about black smoke. The Nazis will murder all the Jews. Us, too. Please have mercy, dear Consul General, and send us the immigration visas as quickly as possible!

Sincerely,
Nathan Bronsky

To the Polish Jew Nathan Bronsky
currently residing in Germany at
Königstraße 10
Halle an der Saale

August 24, 1939

Dear Mr. Bronsky!

Some time ago a Jewish refugee ship tried to land here. It was the well-publicized case of the SS St. Louis. Despite the thousands of telegrams with which our president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was bombarded, we had no other choice but to chase the refugees, who were not in possession of valid immigrant visas, back out to sea. This goes to show that not even our president, Franklin D. Roosevelt,

who – as you may know – is facing considerable political difficulties at home, can afford to simply ignore the anti-Semitic voices of distinct yet numerous groups within the American middle class. Neither can he resist the pressure from the isolationist and anti-Semitic wings in parliament – the so-called “congress” – in order to bring about a change in the immigration quotas to benefit Jewish refugees. So you see, dear Mr. Bronsky, there is no point in burdening me, the American Consul General, with further letters. By the way – between you and me – there isn’t a country on this earth that gives two hoots about whether or not they kill you all. The Jewish problem is too much of a bother and no one really wants to deal with it. As far as we are concerned, and by that I mean the country that I represent as Consul General, I can only tell you this: We’ve had enough of you Jewish bastards in America. You’re overcrowding our universities, taking over our leadership positions, and getting more and more impudent. Send back the application forms and wait for your turn in 13 years’ time. In case your prophecy about the gas chambers and firing squads turns out to be true, I advise you to write your will now, clearly stating your family’s intent to immigrate, so that in 1952, when your immigration visas are ready, the executor of your estate can send your ashes to America as per your request.

Sincerely,
The American Consul General

Diary Entry

New York, March 1953

I dug out my father's desperate letters. As well as the responses from the American Consul General. I read the letters aloud to myself, changing the wording a bit while reading, like I normally do, or to look for the truth written between the lines.

I imagine the Consul General with a bony face and thin, graying, carefully parted hair. When he reads the Jews' letters, his cold blue eyes are set aflame by passion. I wonder if he's jacking off when he tosses the Jews' letters into the trash.

I see a humongous trash can containing the letters of those who have been condemned to death. I see a stream of tears running from the trash can. I hear the voice of the secretary from the room next door: "Mr. Consul General. There's a flood in your office!"

I would like to talk to someone about the Consul General. A suitable location would be the emigrants' cafe at the corner of Broadway and 86th Street. The emigrants there know about it. Everyone there also knows me. Everyone knows: That's Jakob Bronsky, the son of Nathan Bronsky.

How would it be, I ask myself, if the emigrants in the cafeteria didn't know who I was?

This is how I imagine it:

I buy the New York Times on May 22, 1953, to see what's happening in the Korean War. The Times has just been delivered. It's almost two in the morning. I glance over the headlines and notice that they have gotten quieter; I wander down Broadway toward 86th Street. The whores at the street corners know me by sight. "Hey, you old motherfucker. Wanna have a quickie?"

"No, thanks."

"Five bucks. Only five bucks."

"No, thanks."

"How about four bucks? I'll suck you off!"

"No, thanks."

"I'll make it real cheap for you today, boy. Real cheap. 'Cause I got good news. My guy is coming back from Korea. There's talk of peace."

"No, thanks."

The emigrants' cafeteria at the corner of Broadway and 86th Street is open all night. I know the air conditioning is turned off after midnight: The door and windows are then yanked open. But today, strangely, the windows are closed. The main door is open, but just a crack. As I enter, stale air hits me. I see the emigrants. Actually, I'm late, I think. It's already two in the morning. And secretly I'm surprised that the emigrants are still here because they usually go home around midnight.

This is how I imagine it:

No one knows me. Everyone's forgotten that I am Jakob Bronsky,

the son of Nathan Bronsky. In the back, at the last table, sits Grünspan, an emigrant who used to be in the textile industry, but here in America he works in sales at Woolworth's, only temporarily, more like a sub, out of work at the moment. Grünspan writes airmail letters and has separated himself from the others. I sit down at his table.

Grünspan pushes the airmail letters aside, as well as the chocolate cake and the watered-down coffee. "My name is Jakob Birnbaum," I say to fool him. "Been in America for a year."

"You're from Germany?"

"Yes. From Germany."

Grünspan nods. He says: "Me, too. From Germany."

This is how I imagine it:

He really has no clue who I am.

I ask: "Have you ever heard of the Bronsky family? From Halle an der Saale?"

"Never heard of them," says Grünspan.

"I happened to know them," I say. "They were from my town."

"Yes," says Grünspan.

"A perfectly normal family," I say. "The old man was a merchant, lived for his business – a furniture store. The wife busied herself in the kitchen. There was also a son: Jakob."

"Also normal?"

"At that time, yes," I say. "Average student. Bad gymnast. Wrote poetry."

"He wasn't normal if he wrote poetry," says Grünspan.

“Perhaps,” I say.

“I don’t know what became of the Bronskys,” I say. “They wanted to go to America after *Kristallnacht* but America’s gates were locked.”

“Hundreds of thousands wanted to go to America when war was around the corner,” says Grünspan, “and America’s gates were locked.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Yes,” says Grünspan.

“It’s the fault of the Consul General,” I say.

“Of the Consul General?”

“Of the Consul General!”

“It’s the fault of the American government whom the Consul General represented,” says Grünspan. “Or, to put it another way: It’s the fault of the American people who elected their government.”

“It’s the fault of the Consul General,” I say.

“Of the Consul General?”

“Of the Consul General!

Guess what became of the Bronskys?”

“I assume they were surprised by the war?”

“You’re right about that.”

“I assume they were deported by the Nazis.”

“That’s possible.”

“I assume they were gassed in Auschwitz.”

“That’s possible.”

“Or in Treblinka.”

“That’s possible.”

“Or somewhere else.”

“That’s possible.”

“But it’s also possible that they were shot by the Nazis,” says Grünspan. “Or they starved in a ghetto or in a concentration camp.”

“Everything is possible,” I say. “It is also possible that they survived the war.”

“Possible, yes,” says Grünspan. “But unlikely.”

“Why would it be unlikely,” I say carefully. “After all, others survived the war. You, for example. Or me.”

“We are exceptions,” says Grünspan.

“Exceptions?”

“Exceptions.”

“Let’s assume the Bronskys survived the war,” I say.

“Okay, let’s assume they did,” says Grünspan.

“And just how do you think that worked?”

“I don’t know,” says Grünspan. “I have no imagination.”

“I have imagination,” I say. “At least, I think I do.”

Grünspan laughs. “Okay,” he says. “You are a man with an imagination. How did the Bronsky family survive the war?”

“In a trash can,” I say.

“In a trash can?”

“In a trash can.”

It could also have been three trash cans,” I say.

“You’re right, three trash cans are better.”

“Three trash cans.”

“Three trash cans.”

I say: “A medium-sized German city. A small, old apartment building. A backyard with three trash cans.”

“What kind of people lived in that building?”

“Respectable Germans lived there.”

“Opponents of the Nazis?”

“People who were part of the passive resistance,” I say. “They knew that the Bronsky family were to be killed and they had resolved to save their lives.”

“The lives of three Jews?”

“Three Jews.

Imagine,” I say. “How the Jews crouch in the trash cans. They have pulled flour sacks, cardboard boxes, even hat boxes, over their heads. Every morning the sleepy respectable Germans come out of their apartments, empty their trash, chuckle sympathetically but don’t say a word. The trash collectors also keep their mouths shut: ex-Communists, also members of the passive resistance.”

“A touching story.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did the SS stop by?”

“Just once. At night. A single SS man. Dropped off his girl at home. Did it with her in the backyard in front of the trash cans, then pissed on one of the cans in which the old man was hidden, but didn’t notice the Jews.”

“The girl didn’t betray them?”

“No. She didn’t betray them.

It only got dicey a few times,” I say, “at night when the rats came. Nathan Bronsky wanted to jump out of the trash can.”

“Did he do it?”

“No. He didn’t do it.”

“But the story isn’t credible,” says Grünspan. “Think of something else.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s assume ...”

“Let’s assume what?”

“That the Bronskys were hiding not in trash cans but in a cellar.”

“In a cellar?”

“In a cellar!”

“With the respectable Germans?”

“With the respectable Germans!

They hid out in the cellar for years,” I say. “The respectable Germans shared their bread with them, even the janitor, who was a member of the party.”

“A Nazi?”

“Not a Nazi.”

“Someone who only pretended to be one?”

“Yes, sir.

The old man got depressed,” I say. “The cellar broke him. His wife, too.”

“And Jakob?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Jakob became mute. Didn’t say a word for years.”

“But he wrote poetry?”

“No,” I say. “Jakob didn’t write any more poetry.”

And then one day the war was over,” I say. “The Bronskys stumbled out of the cellar. It was spring.”

“Your story’s starting to get interesting,” says Grünspan. “Keep talking.”

“When the Bronskys saw the sun again for the first time in years, the old man wanted to cry but couldn’t. His wife also wanted to cry. And Jakob, too. But it didn’t work.

‘Give me your mirror,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

‘I don’t have one,’ said his wife.

‘No, you do,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘It must still be in your old purse.’

‘I’ll look,’ said his wife.

‘Hurry,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘Find the mirror. It’s important.’

Nathan Bronsky looked into the mirror for a long time,” I say. “Then he gave the mirror to his wife and to Jakob.

‘Our eyes have changed,’ said his wife.

‘That’s right,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

‘There’s no sparkle,’ said his wife.

‘You’re right,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘Our eyes don’t sparkle anymore.’

‘I think we lost our souls in the cellar,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

‘I think so, too,’ said his wife.

‘We can look for them,’ said the old Bronsky.

‘In the cellar?’ his wife asked.

‘In the cellar,’ said the old Bronsky.

They returned to the cellar to look for their souls, but they couldn’t find them. They called the janitor. And he came with a flashlight. But he couldn’t find the Bronskys’ souls either.”

“Keep talking,” says Grünspan.

I nod and say: “You see, Mr. Grünspan. That’s what happened.”

“But the story must go on.”

“Of course, it goes on.

I imagine,” I say, “that the Bronskys then went to the Jewish cemetery. There they met a rabbi; he was very old, much older than the old Bronsky, who really wasn’t all that old.

‘Rabbi,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘We lost our souls. We looked for them in the cellar, but we couldn’t find them.’

‘Have you searched in your eyes?’

‘Yes, we have.’

‘That’s bad,’ said the rabbi.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

The rabbi pondered for a while. Then he said: ‘No one can lose his soul.’

‘But we have,’ said Nathan Bronsky.