

Books by Edgar Hilsenrath

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

and further titles

Fuck America

EDGAR HILSENDRATH

Fuck America

Bronsky's Confession

TRANSLATED BY PETER STENBERG

OWL OF MINERVA

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Prologue or “Fuck America”

Special Delivery
Consul General of America
Clausewitzstraße 3b
Berlin

November 10, 1938

Dear Mr. Consul General!

Since yesterday our synagogues are burning. The Nazis have demolished my business, destroyed my documents, driven my children from school, burned down my apartment, raped my wife, smashed my balls, stolen my possessions and taken over my bank account. We must emigrate. We have no other choice. It

will get worse. Time is short. My dear Consul General, would you please issue exit visas for America to my wife and me in the next three days?

Very truly yours,
Nathan Bronsky

P.S. I have lived in Germany for forty years, in Halle an der Saale, but I come from Galicia, a province that now belongs to Poland.

To: The Polish Jew Nathan Bronsky
Resident of Germany
Königstraße 10
Halle an der Saale

July 10, 1939

Dear Mr. Bronsky!

Your special delivery letter has been on my desk for eight months. Today I had a chance to read it. Enclosed you will find some forms to fill out and return to my address. Unfortunately, I must inform you that your chances of a quick emigration for you and your family are poor. You see, my dear Mr. Bronsky, hundreds of thousands of Jews suddenly want to go to America.

But we can only take a small number of them since America is a paradise whose immigration policies have stayed the same since the 1920's. They are based on a well thought out quota system, my dear Mr. Bronsky, which carefully controls the number of successful applications from foreign and exotic elements from overseas, with the goal of maintaining a citizenry dominated by pure white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The waiting list of persecuted Jews is therefore long. Very long. Hundreds of thousands of names have already been registered, along with their quota number ranking, on the waiting lists. If you fill out these forms and send them back to me quickly, then the Bronsky family – and this is optimistic – might have their turn come up in about thirteen years. Therefore, I estimate – on the understanding that over the years you will be able to find the necessary guarantors, along with the essential forms, proofs, papers and documents – that I will be able to issue the relevant immigration papers to you and your family, Mr. Bronsky, in 1952.

Yours truly,
The American Consul General

The Consul General of America
Clausewitzstraße 3b
Berlin

July 12, 1939

Dear Mr. Consul General!

Time is running out. The war is about to begin. I see horrible things approaching. Have mercy! Every day I talk with my ulcer. It tells me strange things. It tells me of gas chambers and execution squads. It tells me of black smoke. The Nazis are going to exterminate all the Jews. Including me and my family. Have mercy, dear Consul General, and send us the immigration papers as fast as you can.

Yours truly,
Nathan Bronsky

To: The Polish Jew Nathan Bronsky
Resident of Germany
Königstraße 10
Halle an der Saale

August 24, 1939

Dear Mr. Bronsky!

Some time ago a Jewish refugee ship tried to land on our shores. I'm talking about the famous case of the St. Louis. Despite the thousands of telegrams that bombarded our president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, we were left with no alternative but to send all those refugees, who did not have valid immigration papers, back out to sea. These facts prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that not even President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who, as you probably know, has serious domestic problems to deal with at the moment, can afford to ignore the anti-Semitic feelings of certain large groups of the American middle-class, or to defy the isolationist and anti-Semitic blocks of Congress – our parliament – in order to increase the immigration quotas for Jewish refugees. So you see, my dear Mr. Bronsky, it really is pointless to bother me, the American Consul General, with any more letters. By the way, just between you and me, there isn't a government on earth that really gives a shit whether they wipe you out or not. The Jewish problem is just too much of a pain in the neck for all of them, and nobody really wants to get involved with it. As far as we are concerned, that is to say, the government that I as Consul General represent, I can only tell you this: We have enough of you Jew bastards in America. They are flooding our universities, pushing themselves into key positions, and getting more and more uppity. So send back the forms to me and be prepared to wait thirteen years. If your prophecies about gas chambers and execution squads are correct, then I advise you to make out your will immediately, making absolutely clear the desire of the Bronsky family to emigrate, so that in 1952 – the year you should be receiving your valid immigration visas – your executor can carry out your wishes

and have your ashes sent to America.

Yours truly,
The American Consul General

Diary Entry

New York, March 1953

I dug out my father's desperate letters. The responses from the Consul General, too. I read the letters out loud to myself, changed the text a bit, as I like to do, or because I like to find the truth lurking between the lines.

I picture the Consul General with a bony face and thin, gray, carefully-parted hair. When he reads the letters from the Jews, his cold blue eyes begin to glow. I ask myself if he doesn't jerk off when he throws the Jew letters into the wastepaper basket.

I see a gigantic wastepaper basket with the letters of the condemned. I see a flood of tears burst through the wastepaper basket. I hear the voice of the secretary from the next room: "Sir, there is a flood in your office!"

I would like to talk to somebody about the Consul General. The emigrants' cafeteria on the corner of Broadway and 86th would be the right place. The emigrants there know what I'm talking about. Everybody knows me there. Everybody 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 the way I imagine it:

On the 22nd of May 1953, I pick up the New York Times to see how the war in Korea is going. The Times has just appeared. It's around two in the morning. I glance at the headlines, see that they've calmed down a bit, stroll down Broadway toward 86th. The whores on the corners recognize me vaguely. "Hey, motherfucker. How about a quickie?"

"No, thanks."

"Five bucks. Just five bucks."

"No, thanks"

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

"No, thanks."

"For you, there's a special on today, boy. Real cheap. 'Cause I got some good news. My man's coming back from Korea. They're talking about peace."

"No, thanks."

The emigrants' cafeteria at Broadway and 86th is open all night. I know that they turn the air-conditioning off after midnight; then they open the doors and windows. But strangely enough the windows are closed today, and the front door is just propped open. Stale air hits me when I go in. I look at the emigrants.

Actually, you're late, I think. It's already two in the morning. And actually I'm surprised that the emigrants are still there because usually they go home about midnight.

This is the way I imagine it:

Nobody knows me. They've all forgotten that I'm Jakob Bronsky, son of Nathan Bronsky. Way in the back at the last table sits Grünspan, an emigrant who used to be in textiles. In America he's working as a salesman at Woolworth's, sometimes just as a substitute, and at the moment he is unemployed. Grünspan is writing airmail letters at a table away from the others. I sit down at his table.

Grünspan pushes the airmail letters aside, along with the chocolate pastry and the watered-down coffee. "My name is Jakob Birnbaum," I say, just to lead him astray. "Been in America for a year."

"You come from Germany?"

"Yeah. From Germany."

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

I picture it like this:

He really has no idea who I am.

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

"Never heard of them," says Grünspan.

"I happen to have known them," I say. "They came from the same city as me."

"Yeah," says Grünspan.

"Just your normal family," I say. "The old man had a business

that meant everything to him – a furniture store – and his wife stayed in the kitchen. And there was a son: Jakob.”

“Also normal?”

“Back then, yes,” I say. “Average student. Lousy at sports. Wrote poems.”

“If he wrote poems, he wasn’t normal,” says Grünspan.

“Maybe,” I say.

“I don’t know what happened to the Bronskys,” I say. “After Kristallnacht they wanted to go to America, but the gates of America were locked.”

“Hundreds of thousands wanted to go to America when the war was about to start,” says Grünspan, “and the gates of America were locked.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Yeah,” says Grünspan.

“It’s the American Consul General who is guilty,” I say.

“The Consul General?”

“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 happened to the Bronskys?”

“I assume they got caught up in the war.”

“You’re right about that.”

“I assume they were deported by the Nazis.”

“That could be.”

“I assume they were gassed in Auschwitz.”

“That could be.”

“Or in Treblinka.”

“That could be.”

“Or somewhere else.”

“That could be.”

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

“Everything’s possible,” I say. “It’s even possible they survived the war.”

“Also possible,” says Grünspan, “but unlikely.”

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

“We’re exceptions,” says Grünspan.

“Exceptions?”

“Exceptions.”

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

“Okay, let’s suppose,” says Grünspan.

“How do you imagine that?”

“I don’t know,” says Grünspan. “I don’t have any imagination.”

“I have imagination,” I say. “At least, I like to imagine I do.”

Grünspan laughs. “Okay,” he says. “You’re a man with imagination. How did the Bronskys survive the war?”

“In a garbage can,” I say.

“In a garbage can?”

“In a garbage can.

Maybe it was three garbage cans,” I say.

“Three garbage cans would be better. You’re right about that.”

“Three garbage cans.”

“Three garbage cans.”

I say: “A middle-sized German city. A small old apartment building. A courtyard with three garbage cans.”

“What kind of people lived in the building?”

“The decent Germans lived there.”

“The Anti-Nazis?”

“The people of passive resistance,” I say. “They knew that the Bronskys were going to be exterminated and they got it into their heads to try to save the Bronskys.”

“The lives of three Jews?”

“Three Jews.

Just imagine,” I say. “The Jews squatting in their garbage cans. They’ve stacked flour bags, cardboard and hat boxes over their heads. Every morning the decent Germans come sleepily from their apartments, dump out their garbage, giggle compassionately, but don’t say a word. The garbage men also keep their traps shut, former Communists, also members of the passive resistance.”

“A moving story.”

“Absolutely.”

“Did the SS show up?”

“Only once. At night. A lone SS man. Brought his girlfriend home. Screwed her in the courtyard in front of the garbage cans,

then he pissed on one of the garbage cans where the old man was sitting, but didn't notice the Jews."

"And the girl didn't say anything."

"Nope, not a word."

Once in a while it got a bit dicey," I say, "at night when the rats showed up. Then Nathan Bronsky just wanted to jump out of that garbage can."

"Did he do it?"

"No, he didn't do it."

"This story is unbelievable," says Grünspan. "Think of something different."

"Okay," I say. "Let's suppose ..."

"Suppose what?"

"That the Bronskys weren't hiding in the garbage cans, but in the cellar."

"In the cellar?"

"In the cellar!"

"Where the decent Germans lived?"

"Where the decent Germans lived!"

They hid in the cellar for years," I say. "The decent Germans shared their bread with them, even the caretaker, who was a member of the Party."

"A Nazi?"

"Not a Nazi."

"Somebody who made believe he was one?"

"Absolutely."

The old man got depressed,” I say. “The cellar wrecked him. And his wife as well.”

“And Jakob?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “He stopped talking. For years, he didn’t say a word.”

“But he still wrote poetry?”

“No,” I say, “he didn’t write any more poems.

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

“I’m beginning to get interested in your story,” says Grünspan. “Keep talking!”

“When the Bronskys saw the sun for the first time in years, Old Man Bronsky wanted to weep, but he couldn’t. His wife also wanted to weep. And Jakob as well. But they couldn’t.

‘Give me your mirror,’ said Jakob Bronsky.

‘I don’t have one,’ said his wife.

‘Sure, you have one,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘It must be in your old handbag.’

‘I’ll take a look,’ said his wife.

‘Hurry up,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘Look for the mirror. It’s important.’

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

‘Our eyes have changed,’ said his wife.

‘That’s right,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

‘They no longer sparkle,’ said his wife.

‘You’re right,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘Our eyes no longer sparkle.’

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

‘I think so, too,’ said his wife.

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

‘In the cellar?’ asked his wife.

‘In the cellar,’ said the old man.

They went back into the cellar to look for their souls, but they couldn’t find them. They called the caretaker. And he came with a flashlight. But he too could not find the souls of the Bronskys.”

“Keep talking,” said Grünspan.

I nod and say: “You see, Mr. Grünspan. That’s the way it was.”

“But the story must go on.”

“Of course it goes on.

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

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

‘Did you look in your eyes?’

‘Yes, we looked in our eyes.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said the rabbi.

‘Yes, it’s terrible,’ said Nathan Bronsky.

The rabbi thought for a while. Then he said, ‘Nobody can lose his soul.’