

Books by Edgar Hilsenrath

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

and further titles

**The Nazi
and
The Barber**

EDGAR HILSENDRATH

**The Nazi
and
The Barber**

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW WHITE

OWL OF MINERVA

Author's website:
www.hilsenrath.de

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Book One

I

I am Max Schulz, illegitimate though purely Aryan son of Minna Schulz ... who at the time of my birth was a maid in the house of the Jewish fur dealer Abramowitz. There can be no doubt of my pure Aryan origin, since the family tree of my mother, Minna Schulz, while it does not go back to the Battle of Teutoburger Forest, nevertheless has roots which reach back to Frederick the Great. Who my father was I cannot tell you with any certainty, but he must definitely have been one of five men: the butcher, Hubert Nagler; the locksmith, Franz Heinrich Wieland; the builder's mate, Hans Huber; the coachman, Wilhelm Hopfenstange; or the butler, Adolf Hennemann.

I have had the family trees of my five fathers carefully looked into and I can assure you, the Aryan origin of all five can be

certified beyond doubt. So far as the butler Adolf Hennemann is concerned, well, in his case, I can say proudly that one of his forefathers bore the nickname “Hagen the Keybearer,” a cornet of the valiant Knight Siegismund von der Weide, who bestowed upon him a certain key as a sign of his great trust. I refer to the key of the chastity belt worn by his spouse ... a gilded chastity belt renowned at the court of the Mighty Monarch, which later made history.

Itzig Finkelstein lived in the house next door. He was exactly my age or ... to be more precise ... and if I may be allowed to express myself in this way: Itzig Finkelstein first saw the light of the world exactly two minutes and twenty-two seconds after the midwife Greta, nicknamed Fatty Greta, liberated me from the dark womb of my mother with a hearty tug ... that is to say, if life can be called a liberation, which – after all – is fairly questionable.

Two days after Itzig Finkelstein came upon this world, the following announcement was featured in the *Jewish Spectator* in our town ... Wieshalle in Silesia:

I, Chaim Finkelstein, barber, proprietor of the renowned gentleman’s hairdressing salon “Man of the World,” corner of Goethe and Schillerstrasse, Wieshalle, Director of the Jewish Bowling Club, Acting Secretary-General of the “Jewish Community,” member of the German Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, member of the Club for the Furtherment of Interest in Plants, member of the League “Love Thy Neighbor,” member of the Wieshalle Guild of Barbers, author of the booklet *Haircuts Tailored to the Head* ... have the

honor to announce the birth of my son and heir *Itzig Finkelstein*.

The very next day a second announcement appeared in the *Jewish Spectator* with the following text:

We, the Jewish Community of Wieshalle, have pleasure in congratulating Herr Chaim Finkelstein, barber, proprietor of the renowned gentleman's hairdressing salon "Man of the World," corner of Goethe and Schillerstrasse, Director of the Jewish Bowling Club, Acting Secretary-General of the "Jewish Community," member of the German Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, member of the Club for the Furtherment of Interest in Plants, member of the League "Love Thy Neighbor," member of the Wieshalle Guild of Barbers, author of the booklet *Haircuts Tailored to the Head*, upon the birth of his son and heir Itzig Finkelstein.

Can you imagine what Hilda – scraggy Hilda, maid at the Finkelsteins – said to Frau Finkelstein when the announcement of the birth of little Itzig appeared in the *Jewish Spectator*?

"Frau Finkelstein," she said, "that's something I don't understand! Herr Finkelstein is in other ways no show-off. But this announcement of little Itzig's birth ... it's a little too much!"

Scraggy Hilda: over six feet of scraggy body, face as thin as a bird, hair as black as pitch.

Sarah Finkelstein: petite and rotund, pince-nez gripping her nose, her hair plaited round her head, already graying – even though she was not in the least old. Yet she seemed filmed over with the dust of age, of another era, like the venerable family pictures in Finkelstein's old-fashioned living room.

Chaim Finkelstein: still shorter than his wife, but not chubby. A tiny, thin dwarf of a man ... his left shoulder sagging as though two thousand years of exile and two thousand years of suffering were hanging from this single shoulder. From the left shoulder, the shoulder nearest to the heart. Chaim Finkelstein's nose is difficult to describe. I would say ... always dripping a little ... and always a little inflamed by a chronic cold. But not bent. His nose was neither long nor hooked. It was normal. To all intents and purposes normal. And he didn't have flat feet either.

Hair? You want to know if he had any hair? Chaim Finkelstein the barber? Oh no, he didn't have any hair. At least not on his head. But he didn't need it. Because Chaim Finkelstein, that tiny little manikin, had expressive eyes. And whoever looked into those eyes could not possibly be offended by the bald pate. Nor by the inflamed nose that was always dripping just a little bit, or even by his undersized body. His eyes were large, and clear and kind and wise. Eyes that shone with the poetry of the Bible and with compassion for his fellow men.

That was Chaim Finkelstein, the Jewish barber from Wieshalle.

On the 23rd May, 1907, at Finkelstein's house, an event of enormous importance took place: the circumcision of Itzig Finkelstein.

I assume that you are well aware of what circumcision is and that you, if you are a Jew, have not only from time to time contemplated your own mangled member, sizing it up as it were, but that you have also occasionally cogitated upon the symbolic cause of the missing foreskin. Am I not right?

Circumcision is a symbol of the bond between the Lord and

the people of Israel and as such it is also given the name *Brith Mila*. A conscientious reader of encyclopedias, I have been able to ascertain that the circumcision of Jewish little boys is supposed to represent a kind of symbolic castration, a metaphor, intended to symbolize the following: the Ennoblement of Man, the taming of his bestial instincts and passions, a symbolic act, which I, speaking as a mass-murderer, cannot praise highly enough.

On the occasion of Itzig Finkelstein's circumcision, a festive mood reigned in Finkelstein's home. The gentleman's hairdressing salon "Man of the World" was closed. Finkelstein's maid, scraggy Hilda, asked my mother to help out a little since she had much too much to do, and my mother, who was all for cooperation between neighbors, went across to the Finkelstein's and helped scraggy Hilda in the kitchen. There they baked honey cake and apple strudel, flat cakes with sweet raisins and almonds and all sorts of other tasty morsels. The hosts were not skimpy with the hard drinks, and my mother and scraggy Hilda, who had nothing at all against good liquor, drank to the health and wealth of the Jews and the health and wealth of Itzig Finkelstein.

It's true that my mother drank to the health and wealth of the Jews in the kitchen with scraggy Hilda, and to the health and wealth of Itzig Finkelstein, because she liked good liquor and because she was having fun, but she didn't have the slightest idea why it was that there were so many visitors streaming into the house and what sort of strange festival it was that was being celebrated at the Finkelsteins, and when she finally made inquiries of scraggy Hilda, Hilda laughed and then said:

"What's all the fuss about? Little Itzig is eight days old today. And so he's having his willy cut off. That's always what happens with Jews. Always on the eighth day after birth."

“But that’s horrible,” said my mother. “The poor little kid will never be able to have a proper piss again – and later won’t be able to fuck.”

“Oh it’s not so horrible,” said scraggy Hilda. “His dick will grow again.”

And then scraggy Hilda explained to my mother what happened at the ceremony,

“Now just listen, Minna,” said scraggy Hilda, “this is what happens: there’s a fellow called the ‘mohel.’ He has a long knife with two sharp edges. He cuts the little Jewish boy’s willy off then mumbles a few magic words and then the cock he’s cut off starts to grow back again ... till it’s neither too long nor too short ... and is exactly the right length ... but on the other hand especially thick and strong. That’s why Jews are blessed with so many children.”

“Well that’s fantastic,” said my mother. “I’ve never heard anything like that before.”

“It’s all done as a sign of the bond between the people of Israel and the Lord,” said scraggy Hilda. “At any rate that’s what the barber Chaim Finkelstein said not so long ago and the rabbi who was in our house just recently said something similar. He even spoke about a certain prophet – the fellow is called Jeremiah – who is supposed to have said to the Jews: ‘Circumsize yourselves to the Lord and take away the foreskins of your heart.’”

“Just the foreskins?” asked my mother.

“Yes, the foreskins,” said scraggy Hilda.

“Then all they should only cut oft from little Itzig is his foreskin,” said my mother, “and not the whole thing. It’s the same with the heart.”

“Oh well,” said scraggy Hilda, “that’s right of course ... but

you see a dick is no heart ... it grows again ... as I explained to you.” Scraggy Hilda laughed wickedly.

My mother shook her head and said: “That’s fantastic. I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

“How old is your little Max?” asked scraggy Hilda.

“Eight days,” said my mother. “Exactly the same age as little Itzig, or, to be more precise: two minutes and twenty-two seconds older.”

“Then in your place I would have his willy cut off too. You see, Minna, it’ll grow back again, just as it does with the Jews, neither too long nor too short, exactly the right length, but especially thick and strong.”

This is probably the place where you will ask yourself how it is that I know all this so exactly, but with the best will in the world I can’t tell you.

The circumcision of Itzig Finkelstein completed, my mother ran excitedly home, alerted my five fathers, dragged me out of my cot, and placed me on the kitchen table, with the intention of separating me from my member, of slicing it off so to speak. The Abramowitz family was not at home ... and I, a poor, helpless, defenseless little worm, was completely at the mercy of them all. Do you suppose I somehow sensed what was in the air? At any rate I screamed as if the devil had got me and neither my mother nor my five fathers could quiet me. The locksmith held my arms, the builder’s mate my legs, my mother stuck the pacifier in my mouth, the butler and the coachman stood around shamefacedly, while the butcher grinned and brandished a long knife.

“Don’t cut it off,” my mother suddenly said, “it was just a joke.”

“No joke,” said the butcher. “This is something that’s done in bitter earnest.”

“Perhaps it won’t grow again,” said my mother. “After all he’s not a Jew. And besides, the mohel is not there to mumble his magic words.”

“Oh, to hell with the mohel and his magic words,” said the butcher.

“Don’t do it,” said my mother. “Or else we’ll all wind up in jail.”

The butcher was just about to put the blade to my member, when something strange happened: I, Max Schulz, eight days old, suddenly spat out the pacifier, leaped at the butcher’s throat with a yell, took a powerful bite, even though I still had no teeth, let myself drop to the ground, crawled like the wind to the window, pulled myself up on the window sill, and saw, for the first time in my life ... the street ... a street, a completely ordinary street, with a pavement and gutter and flagstones ... I saw brick houses, with sloping, colored roofs, and carriages, and a swirl of two- and four-legged creatures. Gazing up to heaven, I saw ash-gray and black clouds – with spots and splashes – and dark birds circling. But I saw no little angels. Oh no, no little angels. Below us on the street the people were beginning to form a crowd. Somebody shouted: “What the devil is going on up there?” And my mother, who in the meanwhile had stepped over to the window, took me into her arms, and shouted back, “What’s supposed to be going on?”

You’re probably thinking I’m pulling your leg? Or perhaps that’s not what you think, maybe you’re just saying to yourself: Max Schulz has a screw loose! He’s got a mania that somebody wanted

to kill him ... because he was a bastard ... and all done under the disguise of a circumcision, executed, as is the custom among Jews, on the eighth day after birth. What is Max Schulz up to? What's he trying to say to me? Who is he trying to blame? His mother? The Jews? Or God? And all that stuff and nonsense about the baby acting in self-defense, scuttling off, climbing up on the window sill ... it's all nonsense! There's no such thing as that! A nightmare! And nothing more! But I just want to tell you my story, the story of my life in systematic sequence. Is that how I should express myself? However, I am not telling you everything, only the most important things, or those that I, Itzig Finkelstein, at the time still Max Schulz, consider to be the most important.

My five fathers visited my mother every evening. They stood in line in front of her door. Usually the strongest one, the butcher, was the first to go to her, then the locksmith, then the builder's mate, then the coachman, finally the butler. Yes, the butler was always the last, because he was the weakest, a delicate little man with a castrato voice, who was left with no alternative but to stir his cock around in the semen of my other four fathers.

These goings-on did not exactly please the Jewish fur dealer Abramowitz, which I, Itzig Finkelstein, at that time still Max Schulz, can well understand. Not that the fur dealer Abramowitz had anything against me or against the fact of my existence; that is to say: so long as he was convinced that I was the son of his coachman, Wilhelm Hopfenstange or his butler, Adolf Hennemann, since both of those gentlemen belonged as it were to the family ... the real trouble came when the fur dealer became suspicious. One day he said to my mother,

“Now just listen here, Minna. It can't go on like this any longer. I thought it was just my coachman and butler. But five

men in line, that's too much. After all, this is supposed to be a decent house."

"Good things come in threes," said my mother.

"But not fives," said the fur dealer. "Certainly not fives. This is a decent house, and I have to give you notice."

II

One rainy July day – I was just seven weeks old – my poor mother packed her suitcases, took me on her arm, and left the house. My five fathers helped her to move of course. My mother's luggage consisted of three trunks, a rucksack, a grocery bag, and an umbrella. The butcher carried the heaviest trunk, a yellow box made of wood with an iron lock and bolt, the locksmith carried the brown leather suitcase, the builder's mate carried the blue canvas suitcase, the coachman the rucksack, while the weakling butler just took the umbrella and the grocery bag, a bright green shopping bag filled with groceries and a few other utensils such as garters, hair curlers, ribbons, and so on.

You've got to keep in mind that my mother was a pretty big hunk of woman. She looked like a wandering beer barrel, jacked up on stilts which just managed to bear up her gigantic body with dignity. I should not forget to mention her luxurious blond hair, and her steely blue eyes, or her turned-up little nose, which was as gay as her double chin on which she had a bright brown wart. Her lips were sensuous, her teeth strong and white. They never failed to send the butcher into ecstasies, and he was always saying to my mother,

"You know, Minna, when I see your teeth I get scared you're

going to bite off my cock.” Whereupon my mother used to say,

“Oh come on, Hubert, that could only happen to the butler Adolf Hennemann, because his piece is so flabby. I’m not going to break my teeth on a steel prick. Or do you think that’s just what I want to do?”

“No, Minna,” said the butcher. “But teeth are no joke.”

When we left the house I was sleeping peacefully in my mother’s arms. I awoke when we passed Finkelstein’s hairdressing salon; then I began to yell. Right away Chaim Finkelstein rushed out of the salon, even though he was just lathering a client’s face. Scraggy Hilda opened the window on the second floor, saw what was happening, and rushed down into the street. Kissing and hugging was all in vain. Finally my mother said,

“I don’t know what’s up with the boy, Herr Finkelstein. Your barbershop has put some spell on him.”

“What’s this ‘shop’ business?” said Chaim Finkelstein. “I don’t have a ‘shop,’ I’ve got a ‘salon.’”

“Well then the salon’s put a spell on him,” said my mother. “Or else he wouldn’t cry so much.”

“Oh come on, Minna,” said the butcher, “don’t gab so much with the Jew ... and besides this wooden box is too heavy.”

“Yes, we should keep going,” said the butler, and my other four fathers agreed with him.

We didn’t know where we should go. Chaim Finkelstein’s hairdressing salon was situated, as I mentioned already, at the corner of Goethe and Schillerstrasse. The butcher was adamant about staying on Goethestrasse, I suppose because of “The Erl-King Pub”; although I am not sure he knew Goethe’s poem. Perhaps the butcher had heard something about the mad ride through the forest at night or something about the father and the

son or about a temperamental horse and perhaps the madness of Goethe's poem had made an impression upon him. However the butler favored "The Bell," and in his case I have no doubts, for every evening he would recite from Schiller's great poem as he rang for supper. And as for him, he absolutely wanted us to stay on Schillerstrasse. My other three fathers couldn't have cared less. The locksmith thought that the locks in Goethestrasse were no better than those on Schillerstrasse. The builder's mate nodded his head and said,

"Yes, the houses in Schillerstrasse have just as many bugs as those in Goethestrasse."

And Wilhelm Hopfenstange, the coachman, observed that the flagstones on both streets were just as bumpy and full of broken glass and other garbage. Eventually my mother made the ultimate decision. She said: "Let's cross the street first!"

Do you know the German town of Wieshalle? The streets are crooked and narrow, so narrow that from the opposite side of the street you cannot only see everything but also hear everything going on in front of the hairdressing salon "Man of the World."

There Anton Slavitzki was standing ... Anton Slavitzki, the child rapist ... standing there grinning and looking over at our group. By trade Anton Slavitzki was a barber, just like Chaim Finkelstein, only not so good. His barbershop – not a gentleman's hairdressing salon, he was not so classy – was directly opposite the hairdressing salon "Man of the World," and built in such a way that both barbers – Finkelstein and Slavitzki – could gaze at each other through their respective windows – and that they often did: Finkelstein smiling and condescending – Slavitzki spiteful and envious.

Slavitzki? He was a long thin fellow, with bushy eyebrows,

baggy, slightly squinting eyes, oily hair, bony nose, and a cock so long that according to rumors in the town it hung down way beyond his knees, and which people said was the reason why Slavitzki always had it fastened to his thigh with a rubber band.

We crossed the street. As we walked by Slavitzki's barbershop – my five fathers groaning under the weight of the luggage, my mother, looking like a two-ton beer barrel wavering upon two thin stilts, was holding me on her arm. I was no longer yelling, and was about to go to sleep. As we were walking past Slavitzki so innocently, the child rapist took a sudden step forward and pinched my mother in her fat behind. My mother, outraged, stopped.

She said, "What's the big idea, Slavitzki! I'm a decent woman!"

Slavitzki began to stammer. Yes, that was what happened. He stammered – some sort of stupid excuse – and my mother was so pleased she said,

"Well, well it doesn't matter, my behind has done for many a man before now. What is it you like about me anyway?"

And Slavitzki said: "Your behind."

My mother said: "So."

And Slavitzki said: "My good lady. If ever you want to have a fashionable hair-do, I'll do it for you for nothing, even though I'm not really a woman's hairdresser."

And my mother said: "You'll give me the latest hair-do?"

"The latest hair-do," said Slavitzki.

"I'm going to take you up on that," said my mother. "When do you want to do it? And I mean: for free."

"If you like I'll do it right away," said Slavitzki.

"Fine," said my mother. "If we put it off, we'll forget it. So let's do it now."

My mother disappeared with me into Slavitzki's barbershop. My five fathers waited patiently in front of the door but when two hours had gone by the butcher said to my other fathers, "Minna's not coming out. No wonder. He has the longest poker in Goethestrasse."

And the butler said: "You can include Schillerstrasse in that too."

And the locksmith said: "The longest and strongest, that's well known. He's a master fucker."

And the builder's mate said: "Yes, that's right. But he's a Pole after all. That makes him suspicious."

And the coachman Wilhelm Hopfenstange nodded his head and said: "And besides that he's a widower. That's still more suspicious."

My five fathers consulted among themselves for a while. Then they unloaded my mother's luggage in front of the doors to Slavitzki's barbershop, crossed themselves and made off.

"Shabby." I can find no other word to describe the barbershop owned by Anton Slavitzki. Dull mirrors, scratched barber chairs with burst seats, with the stuffing squeezing out, a single washbasin that was yellow and sloppy, cracked walls, damaged floors, bad lighting, everything mean and mousy, dusty, neglected. A curtain at one end of the room hid a kitchenette, right by the emergency exit leading out into the back courtyard, where there was a water closet. The barber Chaim Finkelstein and his best customer, the fur dealer Abramowitz, had a pet name for Slavitzki's clientele, namely the "rag and bone rabble."

Slavitzki's belongings were stuffed away into three chests of drawers arranged in a row by the emergency exit. Slavitzki