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# An American Decade

Written by Richard Aronowitz

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# AN AMERICAN DECADE

RICHARD ARONOWITZ

SAMPLE
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‘A fine novel about an emigré German singer at large in the America of the 1930s, in which Richard Aronowitz displays his characteristic ability to mingle the slow unravelling of ordinary lives with the ebb and flow of world events. I greatly admired it.’

**D. J. Taylor** on *An American Decade*

‘Where Aronowitz really succeeds is in dazzling the reader with startling imagery …’

**Independent on Sunday** on *Five Amber Beads*

*For my son, Henry*

*Who rides so late through the night so wild?*
*It is a father with his child.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
*Der Erlkönig* 1782

# PART I:
# ARRIVAL

# Chapter One

*Wuppertal-Elberfeld, western Germany, October 1929*

His new wife lay dying in her childhood bed. She was thirty years old and they had been married for only six months. Her family had brought Ida home from the hospital so that she could spend her final hours with them. Christoph sat by her side clutching her hand tightly, refusing to turn his gaze away from her still face which glistened with the lightest sheen of sweat. She was unconscious and had not spoken or opened her eyes in more than twenty-four hours. Her breathing was shallow and the rise and fall of her chest was barely perceptible now. The doctor, out in the hall with Ida's ashen-faced mother Perla, had told them that it would not be long. Her father, already an old man, was in the back of his tailoring shop, too inconsolable to speak.

Christoph was blaming himself; he was cursing himself bitterly, sitting there in silence, her hand clenched in his, for not having made her visit the doctor sooner. She had been complaining of pain in her abdomen for some days before she finally went to see her doctor across town. If only he had listened to her more carefully: if only he had told her in no uncertain terms to go to the surgery straight away, had taken her there himself, things might have been different. He was losing her and he could not bear it. He was pale with guilt and fear.

Ida Bernstein had been a beautiful bride. They had married in Wuppertal's main synagogue in March, although Christoph was not Jewish. He had had some religious instruction from the rabbi on Sunday afternoons and by the time of the wedding he was familiar enough with the ritual to know what he should say and do at each part of the ceremony. In truth, her brothers and sisters were almost completely assimilated and they thought of themselves as more German than Jewish, only going to synagogue with their parents on high and holy days at most. Ida had known little about the wedding ceremony herself.

Not one prone to unalloyed joy, Christoph had nevertheless been very happy that long spring day. His parents had been there, of course, and stood out in their expensive clothes. His younger sister, her husband and their little boy had also been in the congregation, shifting uncomfortably in their hard seats because of the unfamiliarity of the setting, the service and the mournful singing of the cantor. His parents had grown fond of Ida and were pleased with Christoph's choice of bride, despite the young couple's differences of religion and background. His parents both came from rather grand old families in the town.

Christoph had known the Bernsteins since childhood and knew Ida best of all. There were five Bernstein children – Ida was the oldest and closest in age to him. Abraham was the next eldest; then there were another two daughters, Miriam and Hedwig. The youngest boy, Isy, was just under twenty. The Bernsteins all had dark-brown hair and expressive eyebrows, and grew into young adults blessed with strong features and good looks. They were a close-knit and loving family and had

warmly welcomed Christoph.

It did not seem to interest them in the slightest that he had been raised in the Lutheran church. Although their parents had been religious Jews back in Poland, when they had come to Germany in 1910 all of that had fallen away. Isy had even been sent to the Protestant school closest to their house, although he did not have to attend the religion lessons there, and this younger generation of the Bernsteins were Germans beyond anything else. They had left school as soon as they could to work as apprentice tailors and seamstresses to help support the family.

The wedding party was held at the old-fashioned Hofgarten hotel in the upper part of the town, paid for by the groom's parents. There was no honeymoon as Christoph had a series of singing commitments in the south-west of the country straight after the wedding. When Christoph returned from his short singing tour, he and Ida settled peacefully into their new life together in his small apartment on Lothringerstrasse and they were happy for those brief summer months. As they had known each other for almost all of their lives, they understood each other's likes and dislikes. One knew almost instinctively what pleased or displeased the other.

They were still young and their lives shimmered with dreams and possibilities for their future. They had so much to experience together, so much to look forward to. They had only recently begun trying for a family when Ida became ill and Christoph was left a widower at just thirty.

# Chapter Two

*October 1930*

The great hulk of the ship juddered and vibrated with a low rumble like thunder as it came into port. Christoph had been on board the *Albert Ballin* for ten days as it sailed down from Hamburg to Cherbourg, then onwards to Southampton and New York, and he had spoken to no one. Sometimes, his fellow passengers had heard him singing in his cabin: *Lieder* by Schubert, perhaps, or other songs from the classical repertoire that they did not recognise. To those with an appreciation of music, he had a wonderful tenor voice, even through upholstered wooden walls. To the few others who noticed this ghost of a man, he had a closed-off, faraway look, with his hair slicked straight back from his forehead, as if he were framed in a promotional photograph of a film star they did not recognise.

The ship was docking in an outer quay. Its immense iron hull seemed to Christoph to be about to break apart as it slowed, groaning and echoing with guttural booms and creaks, its formidable weight working against itself. He could make out only dim shapes on the quayside through the maritime fog. He clutched his papers in his hand and could not begin to know what to expect. He was only thirty and had left everyone he loved behind in the Ruhr.

He knew no one in Manhattan except his childhood

friend, the composer Matthias Walter who had grown up in a villa on the same road in Wuppertal and had moved to New York five years earlier. He had not been able to establish, due to the carelessness of a cable operator on board ship, whether Matthias would be at the pier to meet him. He was not sure that he would recognise Matthias in the crowd after all this time. Christoph had attended English language classes at night-school in Wuppertal for almost nine months before he left – the first time that he had tried to master the language since finishing with it in disgust at fourteen at the gymnasium – but he was on unsteady ground away from his mother tongue and fatherland. He was not at all sure that the Americans spoke an English that he would readily recognise.

Amongst his papers, slightly dampened by the sea-salt spray of the passage, was the address that he would call home, written in Christoph's neat copperplate hand in blue ink: *233 East 89th Street, New York, New York*, a single room above Matthias's apartment. The address sounded almost mathematical, like some sort of equation; a world away from his family home on the Weinbergstrasse, where the name of the road told you where it went and what it was. Matthias had used the room for storage, he had written to Christoph, but would clear it out and furnish it with a bed in time for his arrival. Christoph knew that East Eighty-Ninth Street was on the Upper East Side, but had no idea what life was like there. He had come to New York to make something of his life, and to sing.

The mist had lifted by the time the ship came in to the pier. The ship's crew announced in German, and then in heavily accented English, that the passengers must disembark in an

orderly fashion, one deck at a time. They started at the top, with the upper classes. It was almost one and a half hours before Christoph was stepping off the wide gangplank onto the quayside to join the long line of passengers waiting for their papers to be inspected by the Immigration Service officials. He took his final step off the ship that had been his home for almost two weeks and touched American soil for the very first time. He would have to find his shore legs again. At the end of the snaking line, the huddled would-be immigrants were either given permission to land or were denied entry and immediately sent back on board to wait for the boat's return crossing. An official, whose elastic accent surprised him, checked his visa and papers before stamping two identical forms with an unintelligible mutter and a theatrical flourish of his hand. Christoph had been granted entry to the United States without really knowing what was going on and clutched his copy of the form tightly in his hand.

It was damp and cold and the wet air crept through his winter clothing. He could see the Statue of Liberty a long way off across the water, floating in the mist that still lingered out to sea as mysteriously as an apparition in a dream.

Where was Matthias? There were still so many people standing around, alone or in groups on the pier, even though it had been almost two hours since the ship had come in. Christoph worried that it would be impossible to spot him. A light drizzle was falling now and he lifted the collar of his woollen overcoat to cover the back of his neck and brought the brim of his hat down lower on his forehead. There was a sudden hand on his shoulder. Christoph almost jumped out of his skin.

'Are you lost?' a man's voice said, then laughed a full-throated laugh. Christoph span round and there was Matthias, looking undoubtedly a little older and, he could not think of another word, somehow more *American*.

'*Du bist gekommen*!' Christoph said.

'*Aber klar*,' Matthias replied matter-of-factly. 'But now we must speak English, *mein Lieber*. You must practise your new language.'

'Yes,' Christoph replied. That was his first English word in this new land. 'Yes, I must practise,' he said.

'It's a long walk to the six-line train and cabs are too damn expensive. We'd better start and get you to East Eighty-Ninth. You must be tired.'

It was just after noon and the sun was still hiding behind cloud. Christoph's trunk was to follow by shipping agent, and all he had was one large leather valise that they took it in turns to carry through the streets of lower Manhattan towards the subway.

The buildings were all low-rise here. Christoph had thought that they would be skyscrapers.

'Where are the high buildings?' he asked.

'They're farther up the island; Midtown mostly. Here they're more like the houses and streets back home, but everything is straighter, more *rechtlinig*: built on a grid pattern.'

They walked east and then north, leaving the waterfront and the bustle of the docks behind them, all the while Christoph's eyes taking in the newness of his environment.

The valise was getting heavy by the time they reached the subway station near City Hall that served the number six line. Christoph had rarely disappeared underground before to take a train. He noticed the echoes and the musty air;

how every person waiting on the platform stood as if alone in the world. The train's wheels screeched as it came into the platform and electric sparks lit up the dark underside of the train for the briefest of moments.

Christoph could not believe he was actually in New York City, underground. None of it had sunk in yet. Seeing Matthias again was like seeing a ghost from a past life: they had not seen each other in at least half a decade, and even in Germany in their early twenties they had not been that close. Christoph had left Wuppertal to study at the conservatoire in Berlin and Matthias had gone to Munich to study composition at the academy there. They had only met up now and then for a drink or for a walk when they both found themselves back at their parents' homes at the same time.

The train seemed to stop and start northwards for an eternity. Christoph clamped the worn valise tightly between his knees, with Matthias seated to his left and a stranger to his right. Everyone was still wearing their hats or caps, even underground. The exact meaning of the word 'Depression' plastered on the front pages of newspapers that many passengers were reading at first eluded Christoph, although he soon guessed that it concerned the economy, the land and not its inhabitants' mental states as such. He knew before he left Wuppertal that he was an emigrant from one collapsed economy to another. He had set foot on American soil one year to the month since the Wall Street crash. One year to the month since Ida had died. Ida, his dearest dark-eyed Ida, whose memory he had betrayed, seeking comfort and solace with her younger sister Miriam when Ida had not been long in the ground. Miriam, with her fine seamstress's fingers and her beautiful nut-brown hair.

Miriam, with her gentle soul and her caressing touch. Ida, her dark eyes melting into nothingness, cold in the ground beneath the cypresses.

The shattering rattle and echo of the train's wheels formed a pulsing crescendo of noise in his head, yet thoughts of Ida would not be drowned out by any amount of sound. Why had he not realised that she was so seriously ill? He had turned to Miriam in his heartbreak for human warmth, for succour, for some flesh to drown his sorrow in, for his very survival. But all of that, he tried telling himself, was already so far away and so long ago.

Matthias was sitting beside him in silence, distractedly drumming out some arrangement with his fingertips on the seat between his legs.

'Is Depression the same as our *Weltwirtschaftskrise*?' Christoph asked him, forcing himself out of his dark thoughts.

'Yes,' Matthias answered. 'It's like our *deprimierend*. The Americans say 'depressing', and it's only going to get worse. I hope at least the Nazi Party will turn things round back home, if they can ever get into power. They were making a lot of noise and saying the right kinds of things when I was a student in Munich. They still seem to me to be the one party that could sort out the terrible mess in Germany.'

'But I really don't like what they stand for,' Christoph replied. 'They're far too, um, *aggressive* for me. I think it's because I don't come from a good worker family.'

'And I do?' Matthias asked, laughing. 'My father, the eminent professor, would take quite some issue with that idea. Anyway, let's not talk politics quite so soon.'

'I hope that people still want to hear singing here, despite the Depression,' Christoph said, concentrating as

hard as he could on the language.

'How's the voice? As good as it always was?'

'I think the air of the sea made it more, ah, more *kräftig*.'

'More *powerful*,' Matthias guided him. 'It will need its full power to be heard over here.'

Christoph could not make out what the driver was saying over the loudspeaker system every time the train slowed into another of the curious subterranean worlds that were the subway stations, hot and half-lit, peopled by dark shapes like the anterooms to hell.

'He's just announcing the station names,' Matthias explained.

'How far are we going?'

'A couple more stops. Where we live, in Yorkville, is not far from Eighty-Sixth Street station.'

'I'm looking forward to arriving finally.'

'I was terribly sorry to hear about Ida. That must have been a really hard blow for you and the Bernsteins,' Matthias said over the din.

'It was an unbearable time: I just had to get away from there, Matthias, after losing her. I couldn't keep on living there with all those memories.'

'Anyone would understand,' Matthias replied. 'Did they give Ida her people's kind of burial?'

'Yes, she was buried in the Jewish cemetery up on the Weinberg and then there was the sitting of Shiva, when one remembers and prays for the deceased. How's Valentina?' Christoph asked tentatively, trying to change the subject. Matthias had written to him some months earlier that his wife's health was not good, and his tone had been serious and concerned.

'She's much better, thank God. It was what they call

over here "women's troubles"; she lost a baby early in her pregnancy,' was all that Matthias would say on the matter. 'You'll see Valentina yourself later.'

'I'm very sorry about the baby,' Christoph said. He felt that his accent was as thick as the fog that had enveloped the shore, and was amazed at how fluent Matthias seemed to be in his adopted tongue.

'I'm sure my loss was in no way as hard as yours, although Valentina took it very badly,' Matthias replied. 'To lose your wife so soon like that must have been unbearable. I didn't know what to say when I wrote back to you. I'm sorry if I didn't put it right.'

'It's been very hard for everyone, her family most of all. I just had to get away from Germany. I had to get away.'

'I feel bad that I've never written to the Bernsteins with my condolences.'

'You're a long way away from all of that over here, Matthias. I'm sure they knew they were in your thoughts. By the way, how do you say *stolpern* in English?' Christoph asked; he was keen to shift the conversation away from painful memories of home to the here-and-now.

'It's like "stumble" or "stutter" or something like that. Why do you ask?'

'Because I feel that my English is stumbling or stuttering,' Christoph said with a slightly forced laugh, trying to lighten the mood. 'Did you attend evening classes when you came here?'

'Can't you tell?' Matthias said with a warm smile. 'I have even begun writing some *libretti* in English. Let's show the Americans what we Germans can do!'

Christoph had only left his homeland twice before: once on

a tour of the beautiful churches of Holland with his communion class at the age of fourteen; the second time in 1916, when he turned seventeen and was sent to the Western Front. The subway train screeched and sparks exploded in the darkness of the tunnel. He preferred not to think of the Front. The deep shrapnel scar high up in his right thigh, itself shaped like a shell-burst or the clenched fist of a child, throbbed every time his thoughts strayed into those deep recesses of his mind where he had buried these painful memories. His voice refused to sing when these thoughts surfaced, threatening to envelop and paralyse him with the fear he had struggled to cast aside.

He was now the farthest he had ever been from home and he felt a little afraid.