
Opening Extract from...

Mr Rosenblum's List

Or Friendly Guidance for the Aspiring Englishman

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MR ROSENBLUM'S LIST

or

Friendly Guidance for the Aspiring Englishman

SCEPTRE

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On his ninetieth birthday, I promised my grandfather that I would dedicate my first novel to him. So, this is for Mr P.E. Shields O.B.E., 1910–2000.

And for David, with love.

CHAPTER ONE

It will be cloudy and dull this evening and tonight with periods of rain; the rain being moderate or heavy in many districts. Fog will be extensive on high ground with fog patches along the south coast. Tomorrow, more general and heavy rain will spread from the south-west with temperatures of approximately fifty-seven degrees. That concludes the weather summary; a further news bulletin may be heard at a quarter to . . .

JACK ROSENBLUM SWITCHED off the wireless and nestled back into his leather armchair. A beatific smile spread across his face and he closed his eyes. 'So there is to be more rain,' he remarked to the empty room, stretching out his short legs and giving a yawn. He was unconcerned by the dismal prognosis; it was the act of listening to the bulletin that he savoured. Each evening during the weather forecast he could imagine he was an Englishman. When the forecast was stopped through the war he grieved on behalf of the British, aware what loss this absence would inflict, and when it started again he listened in religiously, happily considering all the Englishmen and women hearing 'light drizzle on high ground' at the same instant as he. Through the daily weather reports he felt himself to be part of a nation; the prediction may be sleet in Scotland and sunshine in the West Midlands but the ritual of the weather forecast united them all. The national preoccupation had been rightfully restored and in his soul Jack rejoiced.

He stared out of the window, watching the rain trickle down the pane. Beyond, the tatty grass of the garden ran up to a dilapidated fence, and on the other side was the heath. No one had mended the fence. It had been falling down since 1940 but there was no new wood with which to mend it. He could have found some on the black market with a little *Schwarzgeld*, but the simple truth was that he, like everyone else in London, had ceased to notice the shabbiness of his surroundings. Over the last ten years the city had slowly decayed, cracks appearing in even the smartest façade, but the people of London, like the spouse of a fading beauty, had grown far too familiar with the city to notice her decline. It was left for those who had returned from exile to observe with dismay the drab degeneration of the once great capital. London was blackened and smoke stained, with great gaping holes strewn with rubble.

Jack was not like the other refugees who, in the most part, were quite happy to build their own tiny towns within the great city. He agreed with his neighbours that the role of the Jew was not to be noticed. If no one noticed you, then you became like a park bench, useful if one thought about it, but you did not stand out. Assimilation was the secret. *Assimilation*. Jack had said the word so often to himself, that he heard it as a hiss and a shibboleth. He was tired of being different; he did not want to be doomed like the Wandering Jew to walk endlessly from place to place, belonging nowhere. Besides, he liked the English and their peculiarities. He liked their stoicism under pressure; on the wall in his factory he kept a copy of a war poster emblazoned with the Crown of King George and underneath the words 'Keep Calm and Carry On'. Their city was crumbling all around them; the peopled dressed in utility clothing, there were only wizened vegetables, dry brown bread and miserable slivers of bacon

from Argentina in the shops, yet the men shaved and dressed for dinner and their wives served them the grey food on their best patterned china. All the British were alike – even as the Empire collapsed and the pound tumbled, they maintained that they were at the centre of the world and anyone coming to England must be here to learn from them. The idea that the traveller from India or America might have some wisdom to impart was ludicrous. The British stood tall in their trilby or bowler hats and discussed the weather.

Jack had lived amongst them for fifteen years. He felt like one of those newfangled anthropologists employed by Mass Observation, but while they were busy surveying the population, listening in on the conversations of coal miners in pubs and on buses, housewives and earls in Lyons Corner Houses, Jack was only interested in one sub-species: the English Middle Class. He wanted to be a gentleman not a gent. He wanted to be Mr J.M. Rosenblum.

Jack aspired to be an Englishman from the very first moment he and his wife Sadie disembarked at Harwich in August 1937. Dazed from the journey and clutching a suitcase in each hand, they had picked their way along the gangplank, trying not to slip in their first English drizzle. Sadie's brand-new shoes made her unsteady, but she was determined to arrive in her host nation smartly dressed and not like a *schnorrer*. Her dark-blond hair was plaited into neat coils around her ears and Jack noticed that she'd carefully masked the heavy circles beneath her eyes with powder. She wore a neat woollen two-piece, the skirt a trifle loose round her middle. Elizabeth, barely a year old and unaware of the significance of the moment, slept on her mother's shoulder, tiny fingers curled in Sadie's plaits. All the refugees, with their piles of luggage, clutches of small sobbing children and pale-faced Yiddish speaking grandparents, were herded into haphazard queues.

Seeing others with parents, cousins and brothers-in-law, Jack experienced a gut-punch of guilt. Acid rose in his throat and he gave a small burp. It tasted of onions. He cursed in German under his breath. Sadie had made chopped liver and onion sandwiches for the train ride into France. He hated raw onions; they always repeated on him. That whole journey, he knew he ought to be mulling over the momentous nature of their trip but he watched with an odd detachment as Germany vanished in a blur – God knew if they'd ever see it again. '*Heimat*' – the idea of home and belonging – was gone. And yet as the train rushed through Holland and France, all Jack could think about was the taste of onions. Sure enough, he arrived in England in his best suit, shoes polished to a gleam, hair neatly trimmed and his breath reeking.

The refugees had waited beside the dock in the falling rain, none daring to complain (they'd learned the hard way to fear the whims of bureaucrats). A man walked along the lines, pausing to talk and pass out pamphlets. Jack watched his progress with fascination. He had the straight back of an Englishman and the self-assurance of a headmaster amongst a gaggle of unruly first-form boys – even the immigration policeman nodded deferentially on asking him a question. Jack admired rather than envied elegance in other men. Jack himself was slight with soft blue irises (hidden behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles) and sandy hair receding rapidly into baldness. He rued his small feet, which turned inwards ever so slightly. When standing still, he always had to remember to turn his feet out, to avoid looking pigeon-toed.

Reaching Jack, the man handed him a dusky blue pamphlet entitled *While you are in England: Helpful Information and Friendly Guidance for every Refugee*. He gave another, identical, to Sadie.

'Welcome to England. I'm from the "German Jewish Aid Committee". Please study this with great care.'

Jack was so taken aback that this man with his twirling moustache was both an Englishman and a Jew that he stuttered – quite unable to talk. The man gave a tired sigh and switched effortlessly into German.

'*Willkommen in England. Ich bin–*'

Jack shook himself out of his stupor. 'Sank you, most kindly. I will learn it hard.'

The man beamed his approval. 'Yes, jolly good.' He pointed to the pages in Jack's hands. 'Rule number two. Always. Speak. English. Even halting English is better than German.'

Jack nodded dumbly, carefully storing this piece of advice.

'And this? He will truly tell me everything that I must be knowing?'

The man smiled tightly, impatient to be moving down the lines. 'Yes. It tells you everything you need to know about the English.'

Jack clasped the flimsy pamphlet in trembling hands. He glanced along the rows of refugees sitting on travel trunks, nibbling apples or glancing at newspapers in half a dozen languages. Did they not realise that they had just been handed a recipe for happiness? This leaflet would tell them – Jews, *Yids* and *Flüchtlinge* – how to be genuine Englishmen. The booklet fell open upon the list and Jack read avidly, his lips mouthing the words, 'Rule one: Spend your time immediately in learning the English language . . .'

Jack spent his first few months in London living according to the rules set out in *Helpful Information*. He took English lessons; he never spoke German on the upper decks of buses and joined no political organisations, refusing to sign a petition for the repositioning of a tram stop, in case later it could be misinterpreted as subversive. He never criticised government legislation and would not allow Sadie to do so either, even when they had to register with the local police as

'enemy aliens'. He obeyed the list with more fervour than the most ardent *Bar Mitzvah* boy did the laws of *Kashrut*, and it was whilst adhering to it, that he had an unexpected piece of good luck.

Sadie had sent him out to buy a rug or a length of carpet to make their flat above Solly's Stockings on Commercial Road a bit more homely and Jack strolled along Brick Lane, idly sucking the salt crystals off a pretzel. He was aware that he ought to be eating an iced bun, but as he recited item number nine, 'An Englishman always "buys British" wherever he can', he consoled himself that in this *shetetl* buns were hard to come by. It was a brisk morning and the steam from the beigel shops hovered in the atmosphere like bread-scented smog. Boys peddled newspapers, trolley-bus conductors yelled for passengers going to 'Finchley-Straße' and stallholders hustled for business, from tables sprawled along the uneven pavement. The air was thick with Yiddish, and Jack could almost imagine himself back in Schöneberg. With a shake of his head to drive away this stray homesick thought, he scoured the stands for carpets. He spied clocks and watches (ticking or with their innards spewing out), barrels of herring, *heimische* cucumbers, lettuces, a broken hat stand and then, at last, a length of mint green carpet. He tossed his half-eaten pretzel into the gutter for the pigeons and pointed to the roll.

'Him. The green carpet. Is he British?'

The stallholder frowned in puzzlement, his usual sales patter forgotten.

Impatient, Jack flipped over the roll to inspect the underside and to his delight saw a Wilton stamp and the Royal Warrant of His Majesty the King.

'Super! I take it all, please-thank-you.'

'Right you are. I got more if you want it, guv? A bloomin' trailer load.'

Jack thought for a minute. On the one hand, he had only ten

pounds to his name. On the other, he could see the potential in selling on the rest of the carpet, if he could get a good price. He glanced back at the Royal Warrant – surely this was a sign?

'Yes, all right. I take everything. I pay two pounds and I must be lending this trailer. '

Sadie was appalled when Jack returned home with twenty rolls of carpet in shades from mint to mustard and magenta. For a week Elizabeth crawled through carpet tunnels, and they all perched on carpet benches in the evening to listen to the wireless – but that trailer load of carpet marked the beginning of Rosenblum's Carpets. At first Jack acted as a middleman, selling on remaindered stock at a premium to other refugees looking to add homely touches to squalid apartments, but soon he realised that there was enough demand for him to open a small factory right there in the East End.

Sadie observed her husband easing into their new life with a mixture of wonder and concern. She knew that the neighbours whispered about him behind his back, calling him a *deliberate assimilator.* As though he was guilty of some silent betrayal.

For her part, Sadie felt off balance in this new place. She disliked leaving the safety of the East End, and rarely strayed beyond the boundary of the Finchley Road. Jack informed her that it was not done to shake hands with strangers on omnibuses or in tramcars (for which she was grateful, having been disconcerted by the hostile stares she received on formally greeting every passenger in the courteous Germanic way). Now reassured that she understood the customs, she agreed to take the bus into the West End with him. There was only one seat downstairs, beside a rotund woman whose doughy face was crowned by an enormous hat decorated with butterflies on wires. Insisting that Sadie took the seat, Jack climbed the stairs to the top deck in search of another. The conductor bustled round dispensing tickets. Sadie stiffened.

Jack always bought the tickets – his English was *wunderbar* and more to the point, he had all the money.

'Where to, madam?' said the conductor, reaching her seat and jangling his box.

Sadie gave a timid smile and pointed at the ceiling. 'The Lord above, he will pay.'

The conductor spluttered in wordless outrage, and Sadie felt the pudgy woman beside her swivel and stare, the butterflies on her hat wobbling as she sniggered.

When at home Jack explained her mistake, Sadie couldn't help feeling that the English language was deliberately designed to confound outsiders. She refused to speak another word to him in that *verdammt* tongue for the rest of the afternoon, and since he would not chat in German, they sulked side by side in silence, until Jack went out. He insisted that they spoke only English (something in that cursed pamphlet for sure) but speaking with her husband in her disjointed newcomer's tongue transformed him into a stranger. He looked the same, but the easy intimacies were lost.

'He'd already changed his name. He was Jakob when she fell in love with him, and Jakob when she married him, but when a clerk wrote down 'Jak' on his British visa, he took it as a sign.'

Sadie perched on the uncomfortable settee sipping a cup of black coffee. There was a murmur as Elizabeth woke from her nap, and then a little cry, 'Mama. Mama!'

Sadie put down her cup, spilling a few drops on the mauve rug in her hurry to fetch her daughter, and gave a little tut of discontent that Jack had taught her baby to call her 'Mama' instead of 'Mutti'. Tonight, when he returned from the factory and could mind Elizabeth, she would go to Freida Herzfeld for some *Kaffee und Kuchen,* kitchen gossip and illicit German chatter. Then she might go to the synagogue – the only place in this city where she felt at home. There the words were the

same: Hebrew in the grand *schul* on *Oranienburger Straße* and Hebrew in the handsome brick building behind Stepney Green. When she closed her eyes and listened to the deep song of the cantor, she imagined herself back in Berlin with her mother beside her in the women's gallery fussing as to whether Emil was behaving himself in the room below. Sadie could almost make out the off-key intonations of Papa as he mumbled his way through the service.

Rosenblum's Carpets quickly outgrew its cramped workshop and expanded into premises off Hessel Street Market, until it was the largest carpet factory in London's East End, supplying some of the best middling hotels in the city. Half the men in the Rosenblums' street were gone, and goodness knew where – Canada? The Isle of Man? Even Australia, if the rumours were true.

The police came for you at dawn. It was a haphazard system, and sometimes if you were out they never came back. Sadie fretted that Jack would be taken, and to humour her, he agreed to this unconscionably early walk to the factory. He never actually believed they would take him, after all, he was an almost-Englishman applying through proper channels to become a genuine citizen (and he could finish *The Times* crossword in under two hours, which Jack was sure must be some sort of record). But when he arrived at the factory that September morning, he realised he'd forgotten his breakfast. Sadie always packed him a paper bag with matzos and a slither of rubbery cheese from his weekly ration, as well as a thermos of foul smelling coffee. His stomach growled.

'*Mistfink*,' cursed Jack, resorting to German in his exasperation.

He pictured the brown bag on the kitchen table and decided to go back for it. He trotted the half-mile back home.

The police were waiting for him on the doorstep. Jack didn't even try to turn around. They'd found him and it wouldn't be British to run like some coward–criminal.

The stench from urinals always brought it back – one whiff of ammonia and mothballs and he was back in 1940 in a makeshift cell in a London police station with five other refugees all facing internment, and all complaining loudly about cold benches and haemorrhoids. Jack had not joined in the discussion; he'd sat with his head in his hands and wondered how it was that he, the most promising Englishman of all his acquaintance, could still be labelled a 'class B enemy alien' (possible security risk) and arrested. With his knowledge of marmalade and Royal Family history going back to Ethelred the Unready, it scarcely seemed possible that he could be anything other than a 'class C' (loyalty to the British cause not in question).

Jack couldn't understand how this had happened. He'd obeyed the rules to the letter and they'd still taken him – clearly the points in *Helpful Information* weren't enough to make a chap blend in. He fished out the pamphlet and began to make his very first addendum:

Regard the following as duties to which you are in honour bound:

1. Spend your time immediately in learning the English language and its correct pronunciation. *Have done so but it is not so easy. Even English lessons do not assist. Cursed German accent IMPOSSIBLE to lose.*
2. Refrain from speaking German in the streets and in public conveyances and in public places such as restaurants. Talk halting English rather than fluent German – and *do not talk in a loud voice. (Unless talking to foreigners when it is the done thing to shout).* Do not read German newspapers in public.

Do not read them AT ALL or you will be considered a 'class A threat' and a spy.

3. DO NOT CRITICISE ANY GOVERNMENT REGULATION, NOR THE WAY THINGS ARE DONE OVER HERE. *Very hard to manage at times <u>like this</u>.* THE FREEDOM AND LIBERTY OF ENGLAND ARE NOW GIVEN TO YOU. NEVER FORGET THIS POINT.

Jack snorted. Loyal as he was, he couldn't help but notice that his was a funny sort of freedom. With a sigh, he realised that this very thought was perilously close to criticism, and turned to the next point.

4. DO NOT JOIN ANY POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS.

It was points five and six that Jack pondered the most. While useful for the newly arrived refugee, Jack now realised that they were in serious need of clarification.

5. DO NOT MAKE YOURSELF CONSPICUOUS BY SPEAKING LOUDLY, OR BY YOUR MANNER OR DRESS. *Don't gesture with your hands when talking. Keep them stuck to your sides or the English will think you strange and over-emotional.* THE ENGLISHMAN GREATLY DISLIKES OSTENTATION OR UNCONVENTIONALITY OF DRESS. *Remember, 'bland is best'.* THE ENGLISHMAN ATTACHES VERY GREAT IMPORTANCE TO MODESTY, UNDERSTATEMENT IN SPEECH RATHER THAN OVERSTATEMENT. HE VALUES GOOD MANNERS. (YOU WILL FIND THAT HE SAYS 'THANK YOU' FOR THE SMALLEST SERVICE – EVEN FOR A PENNY BUS TICKET FOR WHICH HE HAS PAID.) *Always apologise, even when something is plainly not your fault – if a man walks into you on the street, apologise profusely.*

6. Try to observe and follow the manners and customs and habits of this country, in social and business relations. *Yes – but what ARE the manners and customs? This point requires some significant expansion.*
7. Do not expect to be received immediately into English homes, because the Englishman takes some time before he opens his home wide to strangers.
8. Do not spread the poison of 'It's bound to come in your country.' The British greatly object to the planting of this craven thought.

A policeman banging on the bars of the cell interrupted Jack's scribbling. He looked up with a start to see his wife and small daughter standing outside, and flushed with humiliation. He didn't want them to see him caged and stinking. The first week he'd been here, they had met in the visitor's room, but now thanks to Mr Churchill's exhortation to 'collar the lot' every room in the police station was full with refugees waiting for transfer to internment camps.

Sadie reached through the bars and stroked his unshaven cheek.

'*Meine Liebe . . .*'

'In English, darling,' murmured Jack with an anxious glance at the guard.

'The little one misses her papa.'

Elizabeth peeked out from behind her mother, pulling faces at one of the old men sitting at the back of the cell, who was plaiting his long beard into spikes to make her laugh. Jack planted a kiss on the back of Sadie's hand and did his best to seem cheerful.

'It's not so bad. I'll sausage through. Moishe here has been teaching me backgammon tricks. Did you speak to Edgar?'

'*Ja*. I visit him at his office, just like you say. And Lottie, she tell me he visits police every day and he goes to see magistrate and he shout. Then he drink whisky.'

Jack tried to smile, knowing his friend was doing all he could. If anyone could help him, it was Edgar Herzfeld. Edgar was a gentle, sedentary fellow, until something roused him.

'And Freida, she tells me give you this,' Sadie leant forward and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. 'You see? More exciting when kisses are not from your wife,' she said, doing her best to seem light-hearted.

As she left, Sadie slipped a small package wrapped in a handkerchief through the bars. Jack sniffed at it. Apple strudel. Sadie and Mutti, her mother, always baked strudels on Fridays in Berlin. Today must be Friday. He took a bite and his teeth tingled on the sultanas. Sadie's younger brother Emil hated sultanas. He always picked them out and lined them up in neat rows along his plate – it drove Sadie crazy. 'Think of all the currants you've wasted!' she used to say, 'if you lined up all the currants you've not eaten, they'd stretch all the way to the *Zoologischer Garten*.' Jack closed his eyes, and saw a row of sultanas end on end – every one that Emil had ever refused to eat – and wondered how long that line would be at the end of the boy's life. That moment, Jack felt a crushing sadness against his ribs. He swallowed, trying not to cry, but a tear escaped and trickled down onto his strudel, making it taste salty. He worried about Emil and Mutti and the others left behind, but right then, he only had space for his own unhappiness. He was cold, the cell smelled of piss and he was homesick.

At dawn one morning the prison was emptied and he was herded into a second-class compartment of an extra-long passenger train at Waterloo Station. Sandwiched between a pair of elderly Viennese gentlemen, Jack knew he should be

concerned about where they were taking him. Instead, after three weeks sealed into a damp, high-windowed cell, he felt a tingle of excitement in his belly.

The train rattled through the city, an endless warren of brick streets and grey skies. Plumes of smoke still smouldered from last night's *Heinkel* raid. He saw people crawling over the wreckage of crumpled houses and closed his eyes in disgust. The lurching rhythm of the train lulled him to sleep. His head bumping against the glass, he dreamt of strange things, open skies filled with larks, emerald fireflies in the night and chequered flags on the side of a hill.

Then one of the Viennese gentlemen was shaking him awake, offering him a piece of stale bread that he did not want. Jack turned back to the window and realised he had woken in another England. This one was green. Before they left Berlin, he had imagined that this was what Britain was like. He smiled – so England was meadows and sheep, thatched roofs and silver rivers after all.

The train pulled into a station and Jack was shoved onto the platform by the throng. The air smelled of salt and he could hear the sea. The afternoon sun was so bright to his prison-accustomed eyes that it made him blink, and it took him a moment to realise that someone was calling his name.

'Jack! Jack Rosenblum!'

Jack peered into the crowd and saw a figure frantically waving a wad of papers.

'Edgar?'

A slight man with wild grey hair hurried towards him, pushing aside the unwilling bodies and enfolded Jack in a crushing embrace.

'I've done it! You're safe, Jack. I can take you home to Sadie.'

Jack swallowed and stared at Edgar, as his legs began to tremble, like a lush before her morning gin.

'I went to a judge and I tell him, "This man, this Rosenblum of Rosenblum Carpets, is a true ally against the Nazis."' Edgar spread his arms for emphasis, bumping the men streaming by on either side. Refusing to let his recital be interrupted he continued. 'I tell the judge in his funny long-haired wig, "On the day war is declared this man turns his profitable factory over to the British war effort. Do not question Jack Rosenblum's loyalty!"'

Jack nodded dumbly, unable to speak.

'The judge agreed. You are now "class C" alien and can go home.'

Jack's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. 'This place? Where am I?'

Edgar gave a shrug. 'Dorsetshire.'

'Pretty,' said Jack, as a tiny bird with dappled feathers landed on the handle of his leather bag, and stared at him with round black eyes. It flapped its wings and took off in a gust of song.