

An aerial, black and white photograph of New York City, showing the dense urban landscape of Manhattan and the surrounding harbor. The image captures the iconic skyline with numerous skyscrapers, including the Empire State Building, and the water of the harbor with several ships. The sky is overcast with soft, diffused light.

Jon Bernstein

To a New World

Images and Impressions of
America in 1937

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Introduction

by Judy Mandelbaum

The New World. What imagery this term evokes! Whenever I hear it – which is seldom enough in these jaded times – I imagine pristine beaches, unexplored forests and mountain ranges, technologically innocent peoples living in harmony with their natural environment, and limitless opportunities for doing vast good... and great evil.

But these images belong to a remote past. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the New World increasingly came to resemble the Old and ultimately supplanted it as the center of material innovation and raw power, new images captured the popular imagination: The cowboy, the railroad and steamboat, the ubiquitous automobile, and the electrifying dream world of Hollywood. But to Europeans, entrapped in the turmoil of war, revolution, and economic catastrophe, nothing symbolized the “newness,” “freedom,” and “opportunity” of America – particularly in the darkest days of the 1930s – the way the skyscraper did. Skyscrapers were the most modern of all modern inventions. In the days before the advent of those faceless mirrored boxes that pass for modern architecture nowadays, the New York skyline of the early twentieth century promised a fresh start for a world that had come crashing down off its hinges.

It was in this spirit of unlimited possibilities unshackled from a dead and stifling past that Jon Bernstein crossed the Atlantic in 1937 and staked his new existence on the dream of renewal, American style. Bernstein (not his real name) was born in Budapest, the bustling co-capital of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire, on the eve of the First World War. The son of a Jewish tailor and his Prague-born wife, he had to scramble to find his path in life after completing his advanced secondary school education.

Bernstein always believed in making the most out of the skills and circumstances that were his modest birthright. Despite his low economic status, he was astonishingly well read, even for a man of that highly literate era. Before finishing school he had already tackled not only the entire Hungarian and German canon, but had also read most of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Zola, Shakespeare, Dickens, Longfellow, and Emerson – all in their original languages. In subsequent years he dabbled successively in Marxism, the Kabbalah, Catholicism, Sufism, and Christian Science before discovering a fascination with the American New Thought Movement, which would preoccupy him for the rest of his long life.

Orphaned in early 1937, Bernstein decided to leave the world of his forebears behind him and begin a new life in the New World. This was no sudden and naïve impulse, but rather the result of careful calculation and a burning desire to start out fresh. Packing just a single suitcase and clutching his Hungarian passport and a precious US immigration visa, Bernstein embarked on a harrowing train journey across Nazi-ruled Germany to Berlin and Hamburg, and from there to Cuxhaven, where he boarded the German steamer Hansa for the weeklong voyage to New York.

From the very start, Jon Bernstein regarded his emigration as a transference from one world – or, as he saw it, from one plane of existence – to another. As he traveled to New York, and from there to Washington, DC and Philadelphia, he kept a careful diary, in which he recorded his thoughts and impressions every step of the way, much of it in the form of aphorisms. He also preserved a number of scenes with his Leica camera.

Bernstein's thoughts reveal the influence of his literary inspirations: Goethe, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Emerson, but also such New Thought authors as Wallace Wattles and Napoleon Hill. For him, philosophy was always a pragmatic matter. However, Bernstein's notations also provide us with a fascinating window into the mind of a young person experiencing the fabled New World for the first time. He alternately expressed anticipation, delight, longing, and sometimes foreboding. For Jon Bernstein had no illusions about the United States. While a lifelong lover of America, his perceptive eyes immediately stripped the silk finery from the nation's sores and boils – the profound social inequality, the institutionalized racism, the superficiality of much of American culture, the environmental degradation, and the sheer ugliness of most urban spaces – and he never hesitated to speak his mind, as shown by his later writings and social activism.

In compiling this book, Claus D. Bernet and I have selected and translated those passages from his German-language journal expressing the New Thought ideas that occurred to him during his travels. To the extent that it was possible, we have endeavored to match these statements with the photos he made during those heady weeks of discovery. The photos depict New York, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia as they appeared in 1937, when America, despite its glaring social disparities, seemed to be a land bursting with opportunity for all.

How did Jon Bernstein make out in the New World? While he didn't exactly have an easy time of it, he maintained his focus by rejecting all limitations on his existence and by regarding life as a continuous journey forward. His family tells us that he never cast a single nostalgic look back to the world he left behind him, but instead jumped feet first into his new life. As befitting a proponent of New Thought – the "Secret" of his day – Bernstein believed in "owning" all his personal circumstances without even a hint of blame or