

The Immigrant Forger: Hero or Villain?

By *Kenneth D. Ackerman*

I don't have a photo of Joseph Rubinsky. I know he was short and skinny. U.S. law enforcement files peg him at 5 feet 3 inches tall, 112 pounds, with brown hair and brown eyes.

But here's something better: a sample of his work. What you see in the accompanying illustration is a 1926 American entrance visa, a rare gem at a time when millions of refugees from war-scarred Eastern Europe were trying to reach the United States but were blocked by newly imposed immigration quotas. It sold for a fortune on the black market, a beautiful, profitable, elegant fraud. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of illegals, mostly Polish and Russian Jews, fooled Ellis Island inspectors with Rubinsky forgeries between 1922 and 1926 to reach the Land of Liberty.

Breaking immigration laws made Rubinsky a criminal. Police jailed him at least four times during the 1920s in Poland, Germany and France. Each time, Rubinsky bought or connived his way out and went back in business.

Hero or Villain?

Was Joseph Rubinsky a hero, savior of Jewish refugees from persecution and the upcoming Holocaust? Or was he a villain, a parasite who soaked desperate people of their last pennies? We too easily forget the painful compromises that litter our past. Thousands, probably tens of thousands, of our grandparents and family members entered this country illegally, by forgery, smuggling or secret border crossings, not unlike human trafficking on the American southern border today. Rubinsky reminds us of this truth. He prompts us not to be smug.

I first encountered Joseph Rubinsky researching my own family, digging through old diplomatic files at the U.S. National Archives, exploring how my grandparents came from Poland in the 1920s. Here, I discovered a 1926 cable reporting the arrests in Berlin of six people carrying fake travel documents. The listed included Hinda Bronfeld — my future mother, then 14 years old — and two siblings, my future uncle and aunt. Except it wasn't them.

Nobody in my family had heard this story, and all of that generation — parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents who made the immigrant journey in the 1920s — had died years earlier. Months of research confirmed our family had been victims of identity theft. Only dumb luck had avoided my family being detained and marooned in pre-Holocaust Poland. For me, the story became personal.

American Consular Service
at Warsaw, Poland

QUOTA
Immigration Visa

No. 125

Polish Polish
(1904) (1904)

Date: Aug. 11th 1924

* Non-preference
Preference

Passport No. 23430, issued by
Starostwo 1442/23

Wilno Poland on the 12th
day of Aug. A. D. 1923, valid
until the 27 day of Aug.
A. D. 1924

SEEN:
The Doctor, Elstein Ohlowne, who
is of Polish nationality, having
been presented and examined, is classified as a Quota immi-
grant and is granted this Immigration Visa, pursuant
to the Immigration Act of 1924.

The validity of this Immigration Visa expires on
the 11th day of DEC.
A. D. 1924

American Consular Service
WARSAW
POLAND
For 1924
Fee No. 44

Vico Consul of the
United States of America.

NOTE: This Immigration Visa will not entitle the
person to whom issued to enter the United States if,
upon arrival in the United States, he is found to be in-
admissible under the United States under the Immigration
Law, (1904-1924) (a), Section 2, Immigration Act
of 1924.

* Check appropriate classification.

Photo credit: Courtesy National Archives, College Park, Md.

Rubinsky's handiwork: a visa from a counterfeit passport, complete with fabricated official stamps and forged signatures, carried by the author's grandfather in 1924. Immigration officials detected defects in the type and other irregularities.

Who Was Rubinsky?

Born in Kiev in 1892, Joseph Rubinsky came to America as a teenager and settled in New York City. He talked fast, had an eye for business and an ear for languages: English, Russian, Polish, Yiddish, French, German and others. And he was a fighter: authorities reported a vicious scar on his left jaw.

He'd built what seemed a nice life for himself in New York, with a wife Ida, daughters Henrietta and Dora, and a Bronx apartment.

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But, in December 1921, he left for Europe. He called it a business trip, claiming to import furs and to represent a shipping firm, the Russian American Relief Package Forwarding Company.

Within a year, Polish police in Warsaw arrested him and seized a large stash of blank visa applications signed by a purported New York notary, plus blank U.S. nationalization forms. Investigators confirmed that both of Rubinsky's American businesses were shams. He spent the next 10 months in a Polish prison before being released on bail. Weeks later, he was back in business.

His Customers

Rubinsky provided a service much in demand. Between 1881 and 1914, more than 2 million Eastern European Jews left their homes to escape persecution. A few went to Palestine, but the bulk came to America, congregating mostly in New York and other cities to form large, vibrant communities.

But the outbreak of World War I, the naval blockades and U-boat attacks largely blocked trans-Atlantic crossings until the armistice in late 1918. For Jews left behind, things got worse. The war's Eastern Front had battered most of the Jewish Pale of Settlement. After the armistice, a new wave of violence swept the region. The 1917 Russian Revolution sparked a three-year civil war pitting Bolsheviks (including many high-profile Jews) against reactionary White Russians, replete with massacres of Jewish communities. Nationalist movements in Ukraine and Poland also spawned anti-Jewish pogroms, while in Germany pre-fascist rabble-rousers blamed a Jewish "stab in the back" for the country's defeat in the Great War. Death tolls of Jewish civilians murdered in these years topped 50,000.

Desperate to escape, Jewish immigrants to America returned to pre-war levels in 1919 and 1920, but America, too, had changed. The welcome mat was gone. Congress was preparing to slam the door.

Americans had long resented immigrants



Photo credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Drawings Division, Washington, D.C.
Published in a Yiddish newspaper in 1920, this cartoon depicts anti-immigration Congressman Albert Johnson slamming a gigantic door on Eastern European Jews attempting to enter the United States.



Photo credit: Courtesy of the National Archives, College Park, Md.

Employees of the American Consulate in Warsaw in 1926. Some of them may have provided the means for forgers to obtain blank forms and completed applications.

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Photo credit: Kenneth Ackerman Collection

Bronfeld family members were photographed in Zawichost, Poland shortly before they immigrated in 1926. The author's future mother, who was arrested with a fake passport, stands at the extreme left.

and despised foreign-born socialists and radicals. Peace in 1918 brought economic shocks that heightened this nativist streak: spiking unemployment and living costs, labor strikes, a Red Scare, race riots. Recent immigrants, primarily Jews and Italians, were singled out as dirty, suspicious and disloyal, stealing jobs from native-born Americans. Rhetoric grew ugly. Rep. Albert Johnson (R-Wash.), chairman of the House Immigration Committee, called them "the scourings of the sewers of Europe."

Congress' new Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 effectively closed the era of open entry into America. Annual immigration fell from pre-war levels of over a million people to about 150,000. The new laws also imposed quotas based on each nationality's foreign-born residents in 1890, with limited exceptions for families. This formula caused visas for Eastern European Jews to plummet 90 percent.

Back in Europe, a booming business



Photo credit: Kenneth Ackerman Collection

An official visa, issued to the author's grandmother in 1926.

arose among entrepreneurs — forgers and smugglers — willing to supply travel documents to those seeking escape. They could charge the moon for a quality fake ... which brings us back to Joseph Rubinsky.

Rubinsky's Gang

By the mid-1920s, Rubinsky and his gang — police claim he had at least seven partners — operated out of two cramped apartments, one in Warsaw, one in Danzig (modern-day Gdansk). Similar rings operated in Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg and other ports. They hired webs of accomplices, crooked railroad conductors, steamship agents, hotel keepers and local police willing to take bribes. To produce convincing forgeries, they stole or purchased blank American visa forms from U.S. consulates, bribing staff officials when needed. The best forgeries sold for \$500 or more (about

\$15,000 in today's dollars), plus surcharges for passage across Europe or smuggling over national frontiers.

Rubinsky's name appeared again in diplomatic cables in late 1924, when 26 counterfeit American entry visas were seized from a group of Polish Jews crossing from Germany into Belgium. A similar group had been captured in Paris, and another 53 counterfeit visas discovered in Marseilles. The documents all bore stamps and signatures from the U.S. consulate in Warsaw, all fake. French police quickly traced the frauds to Rubinsky and an accomplice operating in Germany. American diplomats immediately compiled a list of indicators — mostly tiny typesetting discrepancies — to distinguish the forgeries from genuine visas, and shared them with steamship officials, police and consulates across Europe. This resulted in more counterfeits being discovered.

Rubinsky was arrested in Breslau, Germany, and spent much of 1925 in a Warsaw jail. Then authorities released him again.

Rubinsky went back to work. By now, U.S. consulates had instituted new tracking systems to detect counterfeits. To avoid detection, Rubinsky needed to include in each new forgery the name, age, date and quota number from an actual legitimate visa. Where did he get this information? There was only one place — from the American consulates. Whether by bribe, theft or trickery, he soon had dozens, perhaps hundreds.

My Family

This is where my family comes in. My grandfather came to America by himself in 1920 to escape the Polish-Bolshevik War, then spent five years saving money to buy passage for his wife and children. He also became a naturalized American citizen, qualifying the family for non-quota visas, which they obtained from the American Consulate in Warsaw in April 1926.

At almost the exact moment my family

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left Warsaw for the long trip across Europe to Antwerp and a ship to America, a second group started the trip as well, this one carrying forged visas and passports with the names of my family members, purchased from Rubinsky at top dollar. In Berlin, German police happened to stop this second group for questioning, checked their papers, discovered the fraud, and arrested them on the spot. Hence the flurry of diplomatic cables listing the arrested people as my future mother, aunt and uncle.

Had the second group managed to reach Antwerp first and board the ship, then my family would have been the ones detained and accused of carrying fake documents. Untangling the mess could have taken years as America's doors were closing, leaving

them stuck behind to face a dark future.

A few days after the Berlin arrests, police arrested Rubinsky in Danzig along with six accomplices. His apartment yielded a treasure trove of forgery paraphernalia: seals, consular stamps, blank forms and the rest. By then, just 35 years old, Rubinsky had had enough. He bought himself out of jail one last time, disappeared, slipped back into the United States via Cuba under a false name, then vanished into Canada. Not even J. Edgar Hoover's G-men could find him.

What made Joseph Rubinsky, this small, unremarkable man, leave his comfortable home and family in New York, cross the ocean and become an underworld smuggler? What drove him to face repeated arrest and prison, deal with swindlers, extort the

last pennies from destitute refugees? Was it just greed? Or vanity? Did he see himself a hero, a profiteer, a gambler?

There is no exact count of how many Eastern European Jews entered the United States illegally during the 1920s, but the number was certainly large. By 1927, U.S. immigration officials estimated, more than 100,000 illegals were entering America each year, and over a million were already living inside the country. That year, U.S. border patrol officers also reported arresting more than 18,000 trying to cross the border from Canada, Mexico or Cuba.

Whatever their motives, Rubinsky and his fellow forgers/smugglers had a massive impact on thousands of lives. As American Jews, they are part of our story. ☑

TO MAKE
GREAT WINE

YOU NEED TO
KNOW YOUR ROOTS

HERZOG
LINEAGE

HERZOG
LINEAGE

<https://vimeo.com/309999603/>