

ERIC BERNE ARCHIVE

A taste of what lies within

Here is a small taste of what lies within the 404 items of the archives, which are already available online for all for free. These 404 items are only a tiny sample of the entirety of Berne's archive. Below are segments from four letters which were to, or from, Eric Berne, and a few words about how these letters provide us with new information about Berne's personal and professional life.

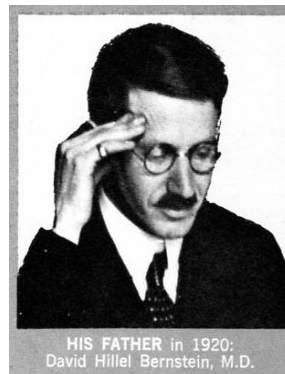
The first letter was written by Berne to his Father fifteen years after his Father's death (Berne, ca. 1935). Berne would have been twenty-five. This was the year Berne was turned down for an internship in the Montreal hospitals, because of the unofficial Jewish quota system, and he was forced to move to American in order to obtain one.



This is a letter of despair. Berne begins by writing:

"Dear Father:

Father, my dear father, who has been dead these fifteen years, who should be in heaven now, if ever any man went there, who gave his life that others might live."



Later in the letter Berne writes:

"There can be no just reward for a life spent only in devotion to those who need a helping hand. And to us, to take money or any other thing from others, even in return for services rendered, is intolerable; perhaps we are the last of a proud, foolish, and irrational line; ..."

And then more worryingly, Berne writes:

"Father, my dear father, ... I say to you this: life has become intolerable. ... One must have food, clothing, shelter, books; that is the least one is able to ask. And these things do not spring from nothingness; they must be received."

And:

“I who find myself unable to receive, even to give to her [Mother], choose the only way out, relieving her thus of worry and the care of myself, one of her two only comforts.”

At this point the letter sounds like it might be a suicide note. Berne finishes this typed letter, by writing in hand:

“God have mercy on my mother’s and sister’s souls.”

This is the first time the TA community has had such easy access to something so personal about Berne as a young man of twenty-five. How despairing he felt. How he felt pulled by his family culture of giving, but not receiving, and yet how he was struggling to have enough money to afford the essentials of life.

The second letter is a fond letter from Berne to his Mother, Sara Gordon Bernstein, dated 15 July 1947 (Berne, 1947).

At this point, Berne had recently settled in Carmel, California, having been discharged from the United States Army the previous year. He was 37 years old.

Berne begins:

15 July 47.

“Dear Mom:

Everything is fine here, except I wish you were here. Everything is in such good taste in this town.”



Eric's mother Sara Gordon Bernstein.

Later in the letter he writes:

“I hope you got the checks. I’ll pay the phone bill next month. Rosabel and I get along fine and I am quite lonely without her, but I am going down to LA Friday for the week end. To-night I’m going to Marie Shorts for poker.”

Rosabel Brown, a child psychologist from Los Angeles, was Berne’s girlfriend at this time.

According to the Jorgensens’ biography (1984, p. 52), Berne sent his Mother US\$60 per month to help her pay her rent. \$60 is not an insubstantial amount even today. Berne remained mindful of how hard his Mother had to work and how she struggled financially to make ends meet after his Father died. Berne seems committed to helping her.

Berne signs of this letter to his Mother with:

“I am kind of sleepy these days so I think I’ll go to bed early. ...

Luv and xx.

Oh, yes, I called you on your birthday but nobody could find a phone listed for Grace and NY didn’t answer so what’s cooking? Maybe I’ll phone you right now, I haven’t heard from you for about two weeks. What is?”

Grace, Berne’s sister, had recently moved house in New York, which is why Berne was having difficulty finding her listed phone number.

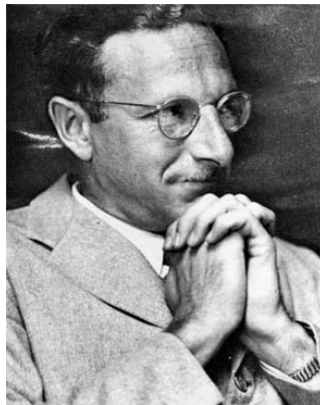
In this letter, Berne is open about his love life, how he is feeling, and how he is spending his time, suggesting he felt close to his Mother. The way he signs off, also suggests an easy warmth and closeness and that he usually had regular contact with his Mother.

This is important information, as some TA writers have suggested that Berne's relationship with his Mother was difficult, that he was ambivalent towards her and angry. For example, Bill Cornell (2010) in his review of Berne's book *A Montreal childhood* (2010), writes:

"I was left with the impression of a quiet disdain for his Mother. We never get the sense of Berne experiencing the kind of respect for and intimacy with his Mother that he felt so deeply in relation to his Father." (p. 307)

This letter from Berne to his Mother suggests there may be another story. In the Jorgensens' biography (op cit), Rosabel Brown when interviewed said that Berne presented his Mother to her as a "heroic figure, a feminist who had struggled successfully against tremendous odds." (p. 106).

The next two letters are from when Berne was in his early forties.



It is fairly commonly known within the TA community that Berne was investigated by the Committee for Un-American Activities (a pre-McCarthy investigation) during the 1950s, he had to hand in his passport, and he lost his job at the Veterans Administration. Thanks to the archives, we now have some exact dates and details.

The letter from Eldon Bailey, Director of Security at the Veterans Administration, dated 25 June 1954 (Bailey, 1954) states:

"In our letter of December 10, 1953, giving the reason for your suspension, there was included as specification No. 5, the following:

"In 1952, you were associated with persons who are or have been members or supporters of Communist organizations in the San Francisco area by your admitted affiliation with the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity, which reportedly has been successfully infiltrated and whose policies are directed by the Communist Party."

Upon the basis of an evaluation of new and additional evidence recently received, it has been determined that the above specification should be withdrawn and it accordingly is withdrawn and stricken from the above referred to statement of charges."

This letter makes it clear that Berne was suspended in December 1953, and that it was June 1954 when he was exonerated from the charges made. It remains unclear if Berne resumed his work at the Veterans Administration – hopefully this piece of the jigsaw of Berne's life will be filled in when we have access to the complete archive.

Perhaps little wonder that from the early 1950s onwards, Berne distances himself from politics in his writing. It was not always so. For example, in the first edition of Berne's first book *The Mind in Action* published in 1947, shortly after World War II, Berne includes a section on "Man as a political animal" (p. 292), where he addresses such questions as "How do evil men gain followers?" (p. 295) and gives Hitler as an example. By the second edition of this book in 1957, now retitled *A layman's guide to psychiatry and psychoanalysis*, this section had been removed.

The final letter is a letter from Emanuel Windholz, the Chairman, of the Education Committee, of the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, dated 25 February 1953 (Windholz, 1953). Berne was 42 at this point. It begins:

“Dear Doctor Berne:

This letter will confirm what we have repeatedly discussed both in the past as well as in my recent meetings with you.”

The second paragraph states:

“Ever since you started your Supervised Clinical work the Education Committee was confronted with the difficult problem of helping you to successfully complete your training. Your supervisors made it clear from the beginning that you had a very special problem in carrying out psychoanalytic treatment. ... you were unable to ... pursue the therapeutic aim according to the standard psychoanalytic technique.”

And in the third paragraph continues:

“Your thesis revealed the same difficulties which they [Education Committee] observed back in 1948. It revealed a great deal of gift in understanding the patient’s unconscious, and the ability to evaluate the technical problem for isolated periods. However, the basic difficulty of carrying out the technique of classical psychoanalysis remains unchanged. For this reason the Committee recommended that you should discontinue your training.”

The fourth paragraph adds:

“... you asked me to convey to the Committee your wish to remain a candidate for another three years in order to give you an opportunity to present to the Committee what you are learning and will still acquire in the near future. I discussed your request with the members of the Education Committee who agreed to keep you on our Roster of Candidates with the qualification that your training has been interrupted. This means that we shall not offer you any more training either in the form of analysis, supervision or seminars.”

There has been speculation in the past regarding who rejected whom. Now we have the evidence that Berne was turned down by the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute and the reason they gave was that he had difficulty with the application of the classical psychoanalytic methodology.

What also seems clear from Berne’s request to remain a candidate for a further three years is that being a psychoanalyst was vitally important to him. Even though three years later in 1956, when Berne had to walk away from psychoanalysis, he continued to use Freudian theories in his writing and continued to use a psychoanalytic couch as part of his individual client work until he died in 1970.



Berne’s archives are important. We, the TA community, now have the opportunity to have the whole of Berne’s vast professional and personal archive digitized and available for everyone in the world to access for free. We only need to raise a further US\$18,000. Please donate via the Eric Berne Archive Project website if you possibly can:

<http://www.ericbernearchives.org>

Be an important part of saving our TA history and legacy.

Document prepared by Ann Heathcote

On behalf of the Eric Berne Archive Project:

Carol Solomon (USA)

Marco Mazzetti (Italy)

Gloria Norieca (Mexico)

Ann Heathcote (UK)

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