The Great Escape

Tom Burns still remembers the time that he and his buddy, Charlie Buchinsky, bought a one-way train ticket out of town. The year was 1946, and both men had just returned from the service to their northern Cambria County hometown of Ehrenfeld, a coal mine "patch" half-way between Johnstown and Ebensburg. Neither man saw a future in the mines, where they'd worked before the war; Charlie longed to be a lifeguard in Florida, while Tom intended to be a prizefighter. They agreed to start in Philadelphia.

For Burns, the train ride turned out to be a round trip. By the following year, he was back in town, though he never went back to the mines (and retired in 1988 as a Cambria County deputy sheriff.) On the other hand, Buchinsky, whose driving ambition for most of his early years in "Scooptown" was to leave for good—so say his
biographers, anyway—made good on his plan. Along the way, he would leave behind his Slavic-sounding surname as well. In 1950s Hollywood, “Charles Bronson” just sounded more, well...more Hollywood.

In real life, Charles Buchinsky epitomized the coal "hunky." He was, according to his biographers, born in 1921, the 11th of 15 children of Walter Buchinsky, a Lithuanian immigrant, and Mary Valinsky, an American-born Slav. At the time of the 1920 federal census, the elder Buchinsky was a coal miner, as was nearly every adult male in the square-mile of shacks that the Pennsylvania Coal and Coke Co. built and dubbed Ehrenfeld. The 1928 Coal Field Directory reported roughly 600 miners worked at its No. 3 and No. 8 mines.

Judging from the census, Ehrenfeld was a typical 1920s patch: lots of Eastern European surnames—Suntofsky, Andreko, Pulaski, even Yablonski—and lots of large households crammed into a small space.

(Bronson is said to remember he and the other kids being “so jammed together we picked up each other’s accent.”) Like those around them, the Buchinsky household was identified in the census by a cryptic company number rather than a street address, underscoring the sense of cell-block confinement. For his father, surely a hopeful immigrant when he arrived in 1906, the mines became a kind of death sentence. Bronson recalls how his father spent the few hours he had at home every night hacking up coal dust—so violently at times that it seemed to shake the house.

By all accounts, Buchinsky was a willful and somewhat feral youth. He would later maintain that his was a delinquency born of economic deprivation. During one of the rare interviews in which he talked about his past, Bronson regaled reporters with tales of knife-throwing, chicken-killing, and petty theft. As a young teenager, he graduated from mischief to delinquency. During a summer work stint on an onion farm in upstate New York, Bronson reportedly burglarized the farmer’s house to recover back wages. He even claims in one of his biographies that he had been arrested for robbing the Ehrenfeld company store: “I used to walk in whenever I needed to and steal something. I never took money, though—just clothes and food. I figured the company owed it to me.”

After his father died, likely from black lung disease, Bronson dutifully joined his brothers in the mines. Intent on finishing high school, he reportedly worked the night shift. The experience toughened Bronson and helped sculpt his physique, but he didn’t find his birthright particularly ennobling: “I can remember being down that mine, hacking away at the g-damn coal and weeping at the sheer hopelessness of everything.”

Ultimately, the Army saved him. Drafted in 1943, he served for three years, returning briefly to Ehrenfeld before moving on to Philly, where he worked odd jobs and attended art school at night on the G.I. Bill (and lifted weights at a gym with Tom Burns). Then it was on to Atlantic City, then New York, and finally, to California, where in 1950 he enrolled at the Pasadena Playhouse to study acting.

Separating the facts of Bronson’s coal past from the fiction is difficult. In 1974, a New York Times reporter, unable to find corroborating evidence of Bronson’s run-ins with the law, attributed most of the stories to an imaginative publicist. A little embellishing surely fortified his tough-guy credentials. (“The only physical contact I had with my mother was when she took me between her knees to pull the lice out of my hair,” he was quoted as saying. Another story, undoubtedly calculated to reinforce his hyper-heterosexuality, has him losing his virginity at age 5.)

But regardless of the details, Bronson is such a product of a particular time and place in Western Pennsylvania history that, try as he might, he can’t shake the shadow. His unmistakable physical presence, an amalgamation of heredity and environment, likely got him into 1950s Hollywood, yet it also kept him apart. During the early years of his career, Bronson—still carrying his birth name Buchinsky—was cast as the token Slavic character. In his first Hollywood film, “You’re in the Navy Now,” (1951) Bronson was cast as the generic “Wasylewski.” Over the next several years, his characters all had a similar ethnic flavor or an outright Pittsburgh connection: Angelo Korvac in “The People Against O’Hara”; the Russian in “Diplomatic Courier”; Igor in “House of Wax”; “Pittsburgh Phil” in “The Bloodhounds of Broadway”; and simply “Pittsburgh” in “Vera Cruz” (1954).
Long after he'd dropped his Slavic surname, Bronson's looks consigned him to parts calling for a vaguely menacing, ethnic outsider. Among Hollywood types, the actor's distinctive physiognomy — square jaw, deeply set vaguely Mongolian eyes, and thick age lines (even by his mid-30s) — earned him the nickname "The Face." In post-modern talk, he was Hollywood's adaptable Other. Floating in and out of film genres — war, gangster, spaghetti Western, prison, crime — he capably played Mexicans, Asians, Slavs, Native Americans, and others outside the Anglo-American gene pool who, like himself, were also uncomfortable with English.

By the 1960s, he was landing roles in some of the biggest male ensemble pictures of the decade — "The Magnificent Seven," "The Dirty Dozen" (as Joseph Wladislaw), "The Battle of the Bulge" (as Major Wolenski), and the "The Great Escape" (Danny Velinski). In that film, he plays a POW designated the camp's best tunnel-digger because of his experience as a coal miner; his character's name is a phonetic copy of his mother's maiden name.

All of these roles won Bronson commercial success — he was considered the world's No. 1 box office draw in 1972 — but little critical praise. His subsequent turn from historical/fantasy action flicks to contemporary urban dramas didn't help matters. In 1974, Bronson released "Death Wish," in which he played a mildly liberal architect who turned enraged vigilante after his family is brutalized by urban thugs (one played by West Homestead native Jeff Goldblum). Critics assailed the movie, calling it everything from "morally reprehensible" to "a streetside fascist pot-boiler." Although he hadn't set out to make a political statement — only money, as he was known to note — Bronson defended the film and its sequels from the phony Hollywood liberalism of his critics. The Death Wish series, he said, "provides satisfaction for people who are victimized by crime and look in vain for authorities to protect them."

The movie Bronson regarded as his most autobiographical, "Hard Times," — a title he insisted on retaining over Columbia Picture's objections — was made just a year after "Death Wish." Though never a professional prizefighter like the character he played in the movie, he knew all about living by his wits in the period film's era (the 1930s). Bronson plays a street tough drifting toward New Orleans. During the filming of the freight train sequence, he reportedly refused the services of a technical consultant hired to advise on the proper technique for boarding a moving train.

By the late 1970s, according to a Bronson biography, the actor began toying with the idea of making a film about his Scooptown days. According to a New York Times report, Bronson's 36-room Bel Air mansion was filled with his own paintings of Scooptown: "the shacks on the hill, the men troping wearily home from work, his mother scrubbing coal dust from his father's back." But Bronson never transferred the images to film. In 1986, perhaps as a concession, he made "Act of Vengeance," in which he plays fabled United Mine Workers reformer Jock Yablonski (with Wilford Brimley, of Quaker Oats fame, inscrutably cast as union boss Tony Boyle). But by 1986, Bronson had burned up whatever capital he had as a Hollywood Player on his "Death Wish" sequels and that, coupled with the soft market for industrial union movies, relegated his one and only mining film to Tinsel Town's slag heap.

Over his career, Charles Bronson logged more than 90 movies and an impressive string of television credits. Now, nearing 80, The Face is softening. Given our celluloid images of Bronson busting up street punks or burrowing past hapless Nazi prison guards, it is bracing to consider just how closely he fits in with his cohort of graying Western Pennsylvanians, right down to his reported hip replacement surgery last year. If you close your eyes, it's not hard to imagine Bronson loafing with his old freight train-hopping, coal-digging buddies at a local bar.

Among the differences, of course, is that Bronson got out. At his last public sighting in Cambria County, at a restaurant in the Ebensburg mini mall in 1997, Bronson carried himself like a Hollywood celebrity but ate like a local: sausage, eggs, and buttered toast ("a good down-home breakfast," said the waitress who served him.) As a final gesture, he turned to the small crowd of gawkers who were keeping a polite distance and scribbled some autographs on napkins and paper menus.
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