

Kaffeehaus-Frühling

Ein Wien-Lesebuch

J.Roth

July 19 - Sep 25, 2005

This is a collection of short pieces on post-war Vienna life that Roth wrote for *Der Neue Tag* during 1919 and early 1920. After that the newspaper folded and Roth tried his luck in Berlin.

The pieces are short and many are dated, although much of the charm lies in reading about things that are now obsolete. History is selective and forgets what has few repercussions in the present. Roth, as behooves a *Feuilletonist* directs his gaze on the marginal, the seemingly insignificant. He interviews homeless on the streets, dives under to the catacombs by *der Stefansdom*. He visits asylums for the insane, an old woman to turn one hundred, blackmarketeers, *Badegsten* by the Danube, having to make do with a local Riviera. The pieces are sketchy and often palyful, one beautiful example being that of a visit to the Zoo, when the tables are turned and the animals watch the human variety of spectators. The face of a teacher is likened to that of a vulture, a family to one of Anteaters, and a father pushes his sucking mammals in a perambulator.

The visit to the slaughterhouse occupies several pages. Even at that time, way before the Common Market, cattle were transported long-distance before ending up at their final solution. As they are herded towards their death they tag along without resisting. As they are about to be hit

*Es steht einsam inmitten seiner Todesgefhrten und der ttenden Menschen, nicht mehr von dieser Welt, bereit für die Ewigkeit.*¹

Later on as they are hit in the brain and before the knife is thrust into their throat

*...die Augen noch einmal aufschlge, zum letzten Mal. Es ist einer der wenigen Augenblicke, in denen jedes Tier vollkommen menschlich wird durch die Macht des Todes*²

Interesting is the short visit to Western Hungary on the eve of a referendum. The Communist regime of Bela Kun has just been overturned but Redguards and 'Leninboys' are still around. Some German names of towns have already changed into Hungarian. But even many of the Hungarian farmers would prefer to be citizens under an orderly German government *Deutsch-sterreich* than under the chaos of Hungarian Nationalism. Budapest is very far away and they are ready to perfect their rudimentary German. In the end

¹ It stands alone in the midst of its companions in death and the human killers, no longer of this world, ready for eternity

² .. and once again they open their eyes. It is one of the few moments, in which every animal becomes fully human through the power of death

some of the region is given to Austria, the rest, with new names, is accorded Hungary. The episode, so indifferent to the world at large, show the complexities and confusions of a multi-ethnic community. In the small town of Deutsche-Kreuz, Roth encounters a Jewish ghetto. They have lived here for centuries, invited by the tolerant hospitality of an Hungarian prince. They are well regarded by their neighbours, dealing in trade, with no ambitions beyond their simple life and worship. Once in a very great while they produce a son who goes into the world and becomes known to it.

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