

Joseph Roth in Berlin

Ein Lesebuch für Spaziergänger

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Auf meiner Wanderung durch das Jüdische Getto Berlins kaufte ich ein paar jüdisch-nationalen Zeitungen aus dem europäischen Osten. Ihre Berichten über die Kmpfe in Palstina unterschieden sich überhaupt nicht von den Kriegsberichten, an dir wir uns aus eigenen Blttern erinnern knnen. In demselben furchtbaren Borgis-Fett, mit dem verglichen vergossenes Menschenblut eine harmlose Flüssigkeit zu schein scheint, berichteten jene jüdisch-nationalen Zeitungen von den jüdischen "Siegen über die Araber". Und in dem bekannten Kauderwelsch der Kriegskommentatoren stand entsetzlich schwarz auf weiß zu lesen, daß es diesmal, Gott sei Dank, keine Pogromen seien, sondern waschechte "Kmpfe". Hier konnte man wahrnehmen, daß die Meinung , die Juden seien klüger als andere Vlker, falsch ist. Ja, sie sind nicht nur nicht klüger, sie sind sogar zuweilen dümmer. Sie eilen nicht nur nicht die Zeit voraus, sie bleiben hinter ihr zurück. Sie ahmen den eben erlebten Bankrott der europäischen Ideologien nach.....das beweist endgültig, daß es in der Tat keine Sieben Weisen von Zion gibt, die das Schicksal des jüdischen Volken lenken - Dagegen gibt es ein paar hundertausend Trichte von Zion, die das Schicksal ihres Volkes nicht begreifen.

This was written in the fall of 1929. It got Roth into trouble with the Zionsts, yet apart from a few concessions, he never renegaded on his views. You may call it 'self-hatred' as Roth being a successfully assimilated Jew, (maybe the best paid foreign reporter in the German capital) entertained very mixed feelings about the Eastern Jews he encountered, refugees from the pogroms of the East. Yet, as a prophetic pronouncement on the State of Israel it makes a few good points.

The present book is a collection out of the rich ore of Roth journalism, arranged under general themes by headings such as *Im Scheunenviertel*, *Bauplatz Berlin*, *Bürger and Bohemen* and with the concluding masterpiece *Blick zurück im Zorn* (originally written in French) out of Paris. As the subtitle indicates, it is the hope of the editor that those vignettes from the days of the Weimar Republik, should inspire the contemporary reader to view it as a literary Baedeker and check out the various places mentioned by Roth. To whet the readers appetite, the book is generously sprinkled by photographs from the time.

Roth is the quintessial *Flanr*, i.e. the idle stroller, with no particular agenda, only being out in the streets to feel the pulse of the city and the tenor of the times, and to report on those regularly to pander to the likewise idle curiosities of a busy reading public. The pieces are short, and their point are to present a new perspective on something most readers would take for granted. He brings to the task a variety of techniques. In order to show the horror of modern civilization and its alienating technology, he choses to exult

them. As in his *Bekanntniss zum Gleisdreieck*.

So ist das Reich des neuen Leben.... dessen Gang erbarmungslose Regelmäßigkeit ist, in dessen Rdern das Gehirn wirkt, nüchtern, aber nicht kalt, die Vernunft, unerbittlich, aber nicht mehr erstarrt. Denn nur der Stillstand erzeugt Klte, die Bewegung aber, durch Berechnung bis zu den Grenzen der Leistungsfhigkeit gesteigert, schafft immer Wrme.

The very inhumanity of the railroadnode, is, with all its intricacies, after all nothing but the creation of the human mind. It is only the mere matter of the human body which is dwarfed and made redundant, the spirit has in fact created its own flesh, that of the machine. The machine is not guided by mere emotions, it follows the iron-law of logic. Of course there is much irony in this piece, but not of the frivolous kind, Roth is clearly very serious. Progress, Roth argues in another piece on the first skyscraper in Berlin, does not mean abandoning the past, on the contrary, it means connecting to it. *Man ahnte nicht¹, daß jede Entwicklung einen geheimnisvollen Kreis durchluft, in dem Anfang und Ende sich berühren und identisch werden.*

Roth also reflects on the giant department stores which were being built. He remarks that on the top floors restaurants have been established, but that it seems to him that the people who sit there and eat and drink, do not do so because of any real appetite, but only to demonstrate the necessity of such establishments, being as passive as the wares on display on lower floors. And although they no doubt are paying, it is more as if they were being paid.

The concluding essay is the strongest. It is written in September 1939 in an obvious state of great affect. The books of Roth, along with those of many of his literary colleagues, not all of them of Jewish extraction, have recently been burnt by the German authorities. Roth, exiled in Paris, sees a clear continuity between the time of Bismarck and the present time of Nazism, the latter only making manifest what was implicit in the Prussian mindset from the start. Hindenburg, this hero of the First World War, embodying the virtues of the Second Reich, used to boast that he had never read a single book in his life. A Society that hails such men as heroes, Roth points out, should not surprise us when it starts burning books. Yet, the situation is more complicated than that of a civilized society being taken over by boors, as the Nazis, with Goebbels as their most sophisticated representatives, do have pretensions of speaking out for culture. Roth is galled, although he might not be aware of it, by being rejected by Goebbels just for being a Jew, as if the opinion of a Gobbel should after all count for something. Roth embarks upon a spirited defense of the Jewish contribution to German culture? After all is not German culture the same as Jewish culture. Is not the culture celebrated by all Germans, independant upon political persuasion, essentially built and formed by the Jews, the most patriotic of citizens? He gives a long list of distinguished Jewish writers of literature, bestowing praise with an abandon of generosity, which in a less serious context, would be taken for ironic derision².

¹ Referring to those poets that lamented the sullyng of the environment when the steam locomotive was invented

² Roth admits that even fellow writers, whom he ordinarily would despise like Tucholsky, are now seen as allies and kindreds of spirit

In fact even those non-Jewish writers of distinction were discovered and supported by the Jewish intelligencia, and in fact, Roth asks, show me a single aryan writer, musician or actor of worth whose light was suppressed by the Jews, and in need of being liberated by Herr Goebels. In the face of such Semiphilia, one feels sorry not being a Jew oneself. But is semiphilia not another kind, and a most insidious kind to boot, of anti-semitism, also based on the very idea of singling out the Jews as selected. A selection either for exultation or damnation?

Roth remarks, rather perceptively, that in a situation like this being Jewish is a blessing, as being Jewish means never to have to fear moral bankruptcy by being tempted to do the biddings of a barbarous regime, which inevitably will be looking out for any kind of legitimization, and which will thus court the non-Jewish intelligencia.

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