

Das Spinnennetz

J.Roth

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Roth is a critical observer of the Weimar Republic, just as he the previous decades had been a critical observer of the decline of the Austrian Empire. He had made a name for himself as a journalist, but this book, written in the early twenties, is his first, and strangely prophetic. That a single author writes a prophetic book is truly remarkable, on the other hand if you chose from a great variety of authors, there is statistically bound to be some of them with, in retrospect, prophetic ability. To what category does Roth belong? Is he picked up after the fact, his guesses being the lucky ones, or was he a man from the very beginning, who came to his conclusions by reasoning and sharp observation? The latter interpretation is the more exciting one, and hence the one we would tend to adopt.

The protagonist of the short novel is a certain Theodore Lohse. He is an ambitious young man but with a second rate mind not really up to par. During the War he has briefly tasted the prestige and power of the officer, although he never rose that high among their ranks. His present position as a tutor by a rich Jewish jeweler and beautiful young wife, he finds not up to par with his self-image. He envies his employer his wife and his riches and the power that goes with it, just as he earlier as a school-boy had resented the mental superiority of some of his Jewish class-mates. When the opportunity arises to join a secret organization he jumps at it.

This are the first years after the war. The war that Germany should have won, and maybe in fact almost did. National sentiments run high, conservative opinions are rampant, there are all kinds of groups that glorify violence, ostensible for the sake of the Nation. 'Blut und Boden'. Highly seductive sentiments, especially at a time when they had not been thoroughly disgraced. Does Lohse believe in all of this nonsense? Not really, but nevertheless the excitement and the opportunity to get ahead, pulls him deeper and deeper into this spiders web. In fact he is willing to betray comrades and even to kill in order to further his career. Not only willing, but so he does. He makes himself more and more indispensable in the secret organization. He writes virulent articles for the Nationalistic Press, and becomes engaged in the Reichwehr, he gets to command, he builds up a base of power. The city of Munich is mentioned several times. He is a friend of a Prince, or at least out of social vanity allows himself to be sexually exploited by him. He is even noticed by Ludendorff, the big war hero. But above all, he becomes dependent upon a certain Benjamin Lenz, a Jew out of Lodz, who has lost all illusions, and works as a triple agent, deceiving everyone, including Theodore Lohse of course. But that does not mean that there is no bond between them. He is the street smart one, without whom Lohse would be out of his depth. Lenz supplies him with money, information, contacts. In the end even with a wife, a young woman of aristocratic stock, who coldly sees Lohse as an upcoming man, somebody to reach an important position in the state services, in those turbulent times. Yes, those turbulent times, when the workers go hungry and desperate

and strike and rebel, and when it is necessary to react with speed and bloodied harshness. Yes indeed, although it is revealed that Lohse is a physical coward, that he is haunted by the thought of being followed by the brother of the woman the friend he betrayed were to marry, he becomes head of security forces. The novel ends in the middle. We will not know what becomes of Lohse in the end, only that he is likely to survive and prosper in spite of everything.

Roth was prophetic. He noted the phenomenon of the newly established NSDAP which openly could purport views, which normally would only have been expressed through secret underground organizations. This gave some indication of the ruptures of the normal tissues of society, and he lets his protagonist be attracted by the idea of joining such an open organization.

Remarkable to a later reader is the fact that among those Nationalistic and openly anti-semitic rabble makers he also includes Jews. Especially the character Lenz may be rather problematic to modern readers. There are many ways of surviving, and the Jews as a community did not stand apart, although pictured as so doing, after all there had been a rather long period of assimilation in German lands. But such apparent anomalies makes the novel into an interesting eye-witness account, thus helpful in dispelling anachronistic notions.

Roth is a journalist. It shows in his treatment. The prose seems to be written in haste, the rhythm is one of stuccato. There is an element of impatience not to say urgency. Roth extols in the significant detail, or in lyrical passages, that seemingly explode, out of the brain of the writer onto the pages. He is ruthless in his satire, and the protagonist, in spite of being at the center of attention, is never allowed to engage the readers sympathy. It is not ideology that drives the action, it is the love of violence for its own sake, the narcissistic exhilaration of power, the sentimental attachment to weapon. Ideologies may serve as cloaks or coat-hangers, but as with the high-sounding speeches at the end of a dinner party, no one really takes them seriously. Parallels with today, be it with organized terrorists groups or singular lunatics, are striking and instructive.

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