

Reisen in die Ukraine und nach Russland

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This is a recent collection of 'Reisebriefen' which Roth wrote in the mid-twenties during a trip to the Ukraine and Russia for publication in a number of German newspapers, primarily Frankfurter Zeitung. Thus we are talking about the first years of the Soviet union. The years following the initial Civil War and the death of Lenin, but still during NEP (New Economic Policy, Новая Економическая Политика). No one in Germany really knows about Ukraine except that its inhabitants live somewhere between the Carpathian mountains and Caucasus. Nevertheless anything Ukrainian is for the moment high fashion in Berlin, a country remote and unknown enough to serve as a projection of phantasies, a veritable country of operettas. Its 'Volkkunst' is however very original and stands out Roth concludes his short 'Mitteilung', meant as an introduction to his journeys. The letters are not presented chronologically but thematically, which is the cause of some minor confusion.

How could one have forgotten about the Ukrainians, they do after all constitute some 30 million people. Not all of them contained in the present geographical entity said to be the Ukraine. Many of them live in eastern Poland, that country that rose out of its ashes after the conclusion of the First World War and the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. Now they constitute one of many ethnic minorities in the new republic of Poland, and far from one of the happiest and most contented. The Polish part of the Ukraine, once known as Ostgalizien, is the first encounter. How to describe a city? A city has so many faces and moods, how to do justice to the all? One can give the data of a city, that means describing its streets, its houses, facades and churches. This is what one tends to do when taking photographs, I would say, but it does not really show the soul of the city, or what Roth would call in a mock-scientific way its 'Atmosphäre'. To do so one is better engaged in trying to convey its smells. Smells being more basic involves our more unthinking and animal nature it seems to me. He makes some passing remark on some minor cities and then turns his full attention to Lemberg, or Lvov in Polish idiom (now of course Lviv, but that Roth would never experience). It is a cosmopolitan city, and that very much appeals to Roth. Before the war one heard Polish, and German and Ruthenian. What does one hear now? Polish, German and Ruthenian. Much has changed, but much stays the same nevertheless. *Junge und kleine Nationen sind empfindlich*, Roth remarks *Große sind es manchmal auch* he adds in a typical rothian remark. *Nationale und sprachliche Einheitlichkeit kann eine Stärke sein. Vielfältigkeit ist es immer..* Multiculturalism, the catchword of today, was close to the heart of Roth. Lemberg is colorful, but not calling attention to its colorfulness as a city like Budapest, more Balkan than the Balkan. '*Die Buntheit is die Buntheit der Jugend*' Roth explains and sketches the city in a few lines. Young peasant women with baskets pass in peasant wagons along 'die Hauptstraße'. It smells of hay, a man with a barrel organ plays an old popular melody. Straw covers the dirt of the road. Yet the ladies who frequent the Konditoreien wear the latest out of Paris. *In die Seitenstraßen staubt man Teppiche*. Such a typical dead-pan ending of Roth. The

city makes things more democratic, simpler even more human. It must have to do with its cosmopolitan inclinations, Roth comments, and talks about the tendency to obtain *eine selbstverständlichen Sachlichkeit*. He talks about the religiosity, the beggars in front of the churches, the Jewish merchants in front of the Synagoges. Would God visit Lemberg, he would saunter by foot along the main street. It is a city by borders. The most easternly outpost of the defunct Austrian empire. Beyond Lemberg begins Russia.

Lemberg is filled with invalids. One of them committed suicide, shot himself in the head. Was buried one of those gray dismal days, when the sky seems to hang close to our heads, but God nevertheless seems so far away. Then there were invalids everywhere, no one staid at home, could they limp, they limped; could they crawl, they crawled, and could they not move at all, they were put on the bed of a truck. It was quite an impressive manifestation. Behind the blind walked the one-armed, and behind them those who had no arms left. But then came the trucks with the horrors, invalids with their faces showing nothing but cavities, bundles of flesh in uniforms, the arms tied together behind their backs. And at the very back, those who still kept their faces, their arms, their legs, but had lost their wits and sense and understood nothing. People stood and watched and neglected to unfold their umbrellas when it started to rain.

In Leningrad. One cold Sunday morning. The air was of glass, and cracked like glass. The streets were snow. Sunlit on one side, shaded on the other. The snow banks were high. The breath streamed loudly out of mouths and nostrils and formed clouds, which were constantly renewed. Bigger though were the clouds from the horses which pulled the sledges. High up under the clear blue sky the frost sang. Thin and whimperingly, but not out of pain, rather out of cold lust for the cold pain. In spite of the sun being so bright, one could nevertheless look into it, because its white brilliance was a respite from the white brilliancy of the snow. *Der Schee war stark wie die Sonne, and die Sonne sanft wie Schnee*. It was -28° and everybody walked very quickly and as a result everything that did not move appeared as if it was put down for time and eternity. This made the palaces doubly impressive. And so he saw the city for the first time. It was the city of Peter the Great, and like the captains deck on a ship, placed in the bow in order to steer the giant ship, so does his city correspond to that huge ship which is Russia. Peter the Great, who had such a sense of eternity that he placed his corpse in a Sacrophag, and when it after the revolution was opened, people shied away from his undecayed body as they have once been terrified him when alive.

Next day the frost was gone transformed into a fog rising out of the canals. The sky was no longer blue but gray, and the snow *knirschte nicht mehr*, but more was on the way, the sun hidden behind clouds. The city rests on swamps, and the impressive palaces and buildings seem more to have sunk than have to be built. An *eigensinniger* Czar had wanted to show his power over the swamps. But the city is not real, it is a dream dreamt by the swamps. One day, Dostoievsky claimed, one will simply wake up and the city will no longer be there. This city cannot be destroyed, only dissolved into the mists that hover over the swamps.

St.Petersburg is not Russian, it is European. It provided Russia with a window to the west. It was a city richer than Paris, at least in the opinions of the patriots, whom Roth denigrates as reactionaries. It was close to abroad. Foreign ships in the harbor, diplomats,

merchants. There was spoken in French and German, but one cursed in Russian. It had no Russian name. Petersburg, the name was almost holy. What a let-down when it was named Petrograd during the war by Nicholas II, a forerunner of the revolution. When a city is called Petrograd, it is only a matter of time when it will be called Leningrad. And so it has just been named. Those reactionaries still roam around the city as ghosts preserved by the mist from the swamps. They will never leave their city.

Yes, I recall in 1968 visiting Moscow and then Leningrad, how much more European Leningrad appeared to me, such a nice contrast to the Asiatic Moscow, a city plunged onto the steppes.

What is the real everyday life of the Soviet union? The first encounter with the new country is at the border. The border of Niegoreloje where Roth along with all the other passengers must disembark in the middle of the night. They wait in a huge wooden room, readjusting their watches. There are more luggage than people. Outside the Russian locomotive is getting ready. *Der russische Lokomotive pfeift nicht, sondern heult wie eine Schiffssirene, breit, heiter und ozeanisch.* When one looks out through the window into the moist darkness, and hears the locomotive, one feels as if one is at the shore. And then he describes what is to be found in all of those pieces of luggage among the motley crowd. It is a thorough inspection, he notes, but it is not a usual border between countries, but one between worlds. To enter the Soviet union, is really to enter another world.

In Moscow, Gunnar Tolnaes, the dumb tenor of the north, proceeds victoriously through the constant din of cannons, through Blood and Revolutions, unharmed as any real ghost. What is up? They are showing the movie (silent of course, that explains the dumbness of the tenor) 'Maharadscha' in the middle of Moscow. The reception is enthusiastic, all the Kinos are over-filled. He then describes the fashion prevalent in the city with that touch of irony and appreciation of the absurd, which you expect from Roth. The Bourgeois is still very much in attendance. At this time *Roth ist noch rot* and he is genuinely curious as any reporter worth his salt is. He speaks with one of the old intellectuals. His virility (*Lebenskraft*) is gone. His honest but petty revolutionary idealism along with his heartfelt but narrow liberalism have been smothered and suffocated by the great fire of the Revolution, just as a candle is extinguished in a house on fire. He gets on in a small way, doing service for the Soviet state, and cherish a few mementoes from the pre-revolutionary times, some ugly souvenirs from Karlsbad, some family albums, books with leather bindings. He occasionally plays the piano with his wife, but his existence is no longer of any significance. His children consider him superfluous, they are truly adjusting to the new world.

He gives a lengthy report on what has been done. Homer is no longer taught at school, it has been, along with religion, thrown out of the curriculum. No longer should a hexameter be recited in the whole of Russia. The new creative citizen is a worker. But Roth is skeptical. Education should be practical, and this is fine for tomorrow, Roth admits, but what about the day after tomorrow? The naivety in matters meta-physical is striking, Roth remarks, and can only be compared to that still prevalent in the States. But then he admits that it cannot very well be otherwise. The masses must first pass through the superficial veneer of knowledge, before they can probe deeper. After all until recently they were blind.

Later on he travels on the Volga, in a steamer divided into four classes. In the top one you find the new elite, the Nep-people on their way to their summer vacations in the Caucasus or on the Crimea. They dine in a special diner, in the shade of potted palm trees, with the portrait of a famous revolutionary nailed above a doorway. The fourth class, however, is to be found deep down in the ship. Those passengers are surrounded by cheap baskets and big sacks. All kinds of nations can be found here. Gipsies and Jews, German and Poles, people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and of course all the Russians. Here you find Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, as well as Muslims and Pagans. Young and old, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, they are all mixed up with musicians, rural workers, artisans, and shoe-polishers only half-grown up. And not to forget, the Bezprizorni (Безпризорный). Street children in modern parlance, who get by on air and misfortune. In the day the scene is filled with commotion and noise, but at night there reigns stillness as in a church. Holy is poverty in sleep. The lamps shake in concordance with the engines.

Yet there is mixture between classes. Down in the fourth you may find well-to-do peasants, according to Roth. They dwell here not only for economic reasons, they do not yet feel at home in the higher classes. 'Look' an American points out, 'what has the revolution accomplished? The poor still crowds in the bottom and the rich play six and sixty'. 'But' Roth counters 'the poorest among the poor are now conscious of the fact that they may rise to the top, while the rich Nep-man fears that he might tumble down to the bottom. Above and below are no longer symbolic but factual designations. Maybe they will once again become symbolic'. 'They will' says the American.

The sky above the Volga lies low and painted with immobile clouds. Villages and towns and people are spread out far from each other. All of them surrounded by solitude. The river is like the land; wide and infinitely long and very slow. You feel in your mouth the bitter taste of infinity. You are like a small child who has woken up early a summer morning, when everybody else is asleep. They pass by villages with houses built out of clay and wood with thatched roofs with the motherly dome of a church in the middle. Kazan is the capital of the Tatars. The domes of each churches glow green and golden in the late sun of the afternoon. A road leads from the harbor to the city proper. It is like a river, as it has recently been raining. The road signs are splattered with mud and cannot be read. In fact they are doubly unreadable because the script is the Tatarian. Their literacy was significantly raised by the Revolution, and here Communism is identified with Civilization. It brought them electricity, newspapers, radio, books, typewriters, Kino and theatre. Yet the towns along the Volga are the saddest he has seen so far. They were burnt down during the Civil War. And white glowing hunger charged through the ruins on flame. People starved in the thousands. They ate cats, dogs, ravens and rats. And also starved children. The starving children bit their own fingers to suck up their own blood. They dug for earth worms and white lime which tasted like cheese. Two hours later they died in agony. That those cities still survive! Soon there will be a generation that never knew of the misery of the past.

All along the Volga the merchants are complaining, the workers optimistic if somewhat fatigued, the waiters respectful but unreliable, while the youth is revolutionary. People pay attention to his clothing, when he discards his tie and dons boots, life becomes incredibly

cheap. Fruits on sale cost only a few kopeks. a trip with a cab, half a ruble, the waiters expect no tips. But how it all changes when he puts on a tie.

He marvels at the hospitality he enjoys, remarking that in Russia you can actually see more of the land than in many other lands. And here one can speak openly with soldiers and officers of the Red Army in every tavern about war, pacifism and literature, which can be dangerous in many other countries. The secret police must be so skilled that I do not notice them, he whispers in an aside.

He notes the Burlaki (Бурлаки) and their songs. Those haulers of barges must be the strongest people on Earth. Their songs are known widely around, they do not stem from their larynxes but from unknown anatomical crevices of the heart, and usually you do not get entire songs, only phrases and fragments.

He and the American are about to disembark. The American shows on all the riches underfoot which are just wasted here. If only Volga was to be found in the civilized world, there would be the steam of plants, motorboats and cranes, and when people got sick they could recuperate on the sandy beaches.

Finally Roth reaches his destination - Astrachan. Here many people are engaged with fish and caviar and the stink of that activity spreads all over the city. People who get here do not stay for long. Among the specialties of this city is the Astrachan fur and hat. Roth is told that rich people lived here before the revolution. He cannot believe it, but he is shown ruins of their houses, where he can still discern the vulgarity of the rich, their lack of taste, their peacockery. In fact this is the last that is sustained in a building, in fact *der letzte Ziegelstein protzt*. Yet, why did they live here, even if they got rich on caviar, where the fish stink so bad. The city is invaded by flies, and Roth regrets that there not more spiders. But the people do not seem to notice them, how they cover their mets, their breads, their fruits, they make no attempt to shy them away, not even when they enter through their nostrils, frolick in their beards, and climb on their brows. In the pastry shops the war against flies has been given up a long time ago, they do no longer bother even to close the glass cases, where the flies nourish themselves well on sugar and chocolate. Why no fly paper, that wonderful American invention. One day those small animals will devour the entire city, fish and caviar included.

He travels on to Baku and the Caucasus, and gives his reports. Then he goes down to particulars, how does it look like on a Russia street? The ladies wear read cloth on their heads tied together in the back. It makes the street scene like bright and colorful. From the facades there are red flags hanging. Modern buses some of them from England, lighter and more practical than those seen in Berlin or Paris, The streetcars are happy, and the cars sound like young dogs, all of them flying over the cobbled streets, *auf dem furchtbarsten Pflaster der Welt*. And over the roofs glitter the fairy tale domes of the Russian churches, golden onions, the fruits of a strange and exotic Christianity. In contrast the Russian streets are gray, the masses which people them, as well, and he goes on to report on how the proverbial men in the street are dressed. He also dips into sociology expounding on the new sexual mores. Love is reduced to a hygienic coupling of two consenting individuals, who have been fully informed through school courses, instructional films and brochures. In most cases there is no courting, let alone seduction not to speak of passion. Thus in Russia sin is as boring as virtue is by us. Marriage, and hence divorce is shorn of drama,

and there is no difference between mothers within or outside wedlock. A pregnant woman who works cannot be fired, on the contrary when she is to deliver she gets doubly paid vacation. It all sounds very liberal, way ahead of the times. And what about prostitution? It is forbidden under law. In Moscow there may be two hundred, in the much smaller city of Odessa, twice as many. Some taxi-cabs are used as brothels on wheels, and hence there is now a law, that at night the internal light has to be on. Russia is not immoral, Roth emphasizes, only hygienic.

Letters follow on the church and religion. He notes that in Russia there is no persecution of the church, only its power and influence is combatted. Finally there are letters on Russian villages and the state of newspapers and journalism.

The extracts above may give a taste of the impressionistic approach of Roth. It has advantages and disadvantages. It works very well in small doses, in fact the letters would improve would they be split up in shorter pieces, maybe even further condensed, as in the mosaics of Anders Björnsson, who obviously have been very much influenced, or at least inspired by Roth. When it is piled upon itself, the fare becomes too rich, and one may miss a more structural approach providing more factual information, of the kind that Roth briefly contemplates only to reject, as seen above. The problem is that it becomes hard to recall in retrospect as a basic structure is lacking. Returning to it a second time, one discovers anew pearls of expression, one marvels that one was able to let them slip in memory. 'Reisebriefe' published in newspapers are meant to be ephemeral, but his letters deserve multiple readings, and one suspects that only on repeated contact, the full power becomes manifest.

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