



The
WANDERING
*J*EW*S*

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GHETTOS IN THE WEST

VIENNA

I.

The Eastern Jews who come to Vienna settle in the Leopoldstadt, the second of the twenty districts. There, they are close to the Prater and the Nordbahnhof. Peddlers can make a living in the Prater—from selling picture postcards to tourists and from the compassion that happily often accompanies pleasure-seeking. The Nordbahnhof, meanwhile, is where they all arrived. The scents of home still waft through its lofty halls, and it remains the gateway for their possible return.

The Leopoldstadt is a sort of voluntary ghetto. Many bridges connect it to other parts of the city. Every day, the traders, peddlers, brokers, and deal makers—all the unproductive elements of immigrant Jewry—may be seen funneling across these bridges. But these same bridges are also

crossed by the progeny of said unproductive elements, the sons and daughters of the traders, who work in factories, offices, editorial suites, and workshops.

The sons and daughters of Eastern Jews are productive. Their parents may be hawkers and peddlers, but among the younger generation are many of the most gifted lawyers, doctors, bankers, journalists, and actors.

The Leopoldstadt is a poor district. There are tiny apartments that house families of six. There are tiny hostels where fifty or sixty bed down on the floors.

The Prater is where the homeless live rough. The very poorest workers live in the vicinity of the station. The Eastern Jews don't live any better than the Christian inhabitants of this district.

They have lots of children, they are unaccustomed to hygiene and cleanliness. They are detested.

No one will do anything for them. Their cousins and coreligionists, with their feet safely pushed under desks in the First District, have already gone "native." They don't want to be associated with Eastern Jews, much less taken for them. The Christian Socialist and German Nationalist Parties both have anti-Semitism as an important plank of their political programs. The Social Democrats are wary of being thought a "Jewish party." The Jewish nationalists are fairly impotent. In any case they are a middle-class outfit, and the great mass of Eastern Jews are working class.

The Eastern Jews depend on the support of middle-class charitable organizations. People are inclined to rate

Jewish compassion more highly than it deserves. In fact Jewish charity is just as imperfect an institution as any other. First and foremost charity benefits the giver. In a Jewish welfare office the Eastern Jew often finds himself treated no better by his coreligionists or fellow nationals than by Christians. It is terribly hard to be an Eastern Jew; there is no harder lot than that of the Eastern Jew newly arrived in Vienna.

2.

When he sets foot in the Second District, he is greeted by familiar faces. Or do they really greet him? No, he probably just sees them. People who have already been there for ten years have no use for the recent arrival. Someone else has arrived. Someone else wants to earn. Someone else wants to live.

The worst of it is: He can't just be left to perish. He's not a stranger. He is a Jew and a compatriot.

Someone will be found to take him in. Someone else will advance him a small loan or get him credit. Someone else will organize a territory for him, or turn over his own. The new arrival will go into installment selling.

His first and most difficult call is on the police.

The man behind the counter dislikes Jews in general, and Eastern Jews in particular.

He will demand to see papers. Exotic, improbable

papers. Papers the like of which are never required from Christian immigrants. Besides, Christian papers are in order. All Christians have sensible, European names. Jewish names are mad and Jewish. Nor is that all: They have two or three surnames, qualified by *false* or *recte*. You never know what to call them. Their parents were married by a rabbi. The marriage has no legal standing. If the father's name is Weinstock, and the mother's Abramovsky, then the children of their union will be called Weinstock *recte* Abramovsky, or perhaps Abramovsky *false* Weinstock. The boy, for example, is given the Jewish first name of Leib Nachman. Because the name is difficult and might sound provocative to others' ears, the son styles himself Leo. So his name is: Leib Nachman, styled Leo Abramovsky *false* Weinstock.

As far as the police are concerned, names like that are nothing but trouble. The police don't like trouble. Nor is it just the names. The birthdates are inaccurate. The papers have generally been burned. (The registry offices in small towns in Galicia, Lithuania, and Ukraine were continually ablaze.) All the papers have been lost. Nationality is a moot point. Following the War and the Treaty of Versailles, it's become still more complicated. Now, how did our man get across the border? Without a passport? Or with a false one? That means his name isn't his real name—even though he gave so many of them, so many, in fact, that they can't all be right—but it's probably wrong in an objective sense as well. The man listed on the papers,

on the alien registration form, isn't the same as the man who's standing in front of him. So what's to be done? Lock him up? Then the wrong man would be locked up. Have him extradited? That would be extraditing an imposter. Whereas if he's told to come back with proper papers, with sensible names on them, then it wouldn't just be sending the right man packing, but maybe a way of making a wrong'un into a proper one.

So he's sent packing, and again, and again, and again. Till it dawns on the Jew that he has no option but to give false information for the correct impression. To stick to one name that might not be his but would be a plausible and believable name anyway. The police have given the Eastern Jew the idea of concealing a true but tangled set of circumstances behind bogus but tidy ones.

Everyone professes astonishment at the capacity of Jews to give false information. No one professes astonishment at the naive expectations of the police.

3.

The two career alternatives are peddler and installment seller.

A peddler carries a selection of soaps, suspenders, rubber goods, buttons, and pencils around in a basket strapped to his back. With that little portable shop on board, he calls on various cafés and restaurants. It's advisable to think

There are Eastern Jewish swindlers and crooks. Yes, I said it: crooks! But then I have heard there are Western European crooks, too.

8.

The two principal streets of Leopoldstadt are the Taborstrasse and the Praterstrasse. The Praterstrasse is almost elegant. It leads to the Prater and pleasure. It is peopled by Jews and Christians. It is smooth, wide, and bright. There are plenty of cafés on it.

There are a lot of cafés on the Taborstrasse too. They are Jewish cafés. Their owners are largely Jewish, their clientele is Jewish almost to a man. Jews like to go to cafés to read the paper, to play tarock and chess, to do deals.

Jews are gifted chess players. Sometimes they play against Christian opponents. A good Christian chess player is not likely to be an anti-Semite.

There are many standing customers in Jewish cafés. They are a "casual public" in the true sense. They are regulars without taking food or drink there. They will drop into a café eighteen times a morning. They have to, for business.

They make a lot of noise. Their voices are loud and penetrating and uninhibited. Because all the customers are well-mannered and cosmopolitan, no one attracts special attention, though they are all striking enough.

In a true Jewish café you can walk in with your head under your arm and no one will notice.

9.

The war caused a lot of Jewish refugees to come to Vienna. For as long as their homelands were occupied, they were entitled to "support." Not that money was sent to them where they were. They had to stand in line for it on the coldest winter days, and into the night. All of them: old people, invalids, women, and children.

They took to smuggling. They brought flour, meat, and eggs from Hungary. They were locked up in Hungary for buying up foodstocks. They were locked up in Austria for importing unrationed foodstuffs. They made life easier for the Viennese. They were locked up for it.

When the war was over, they were repatriated, sometimes forcibly. A Social Democratic provincial governor had them thrown out. To Christian Socialists, they are Jews. To German nationalists, they are Semitic. To Social Democrats, they are unproductive elements.

What they are is out-of-work proletarians. A peddler is a member of the proletariat.

If he's not allowed to work with his hands, he works with his feet. It's not his fault if he can't find a better job. What's the use of all these truisms? Who believes truisms anyway?

BERLIN

I.

No Eastern Jew goes to Berlin voluntarily. Who in all the world goes to Berlin voluntarily?

Berlin is a point of transit, where, given compelling reasons, one may end up staying longer. Berlin has no ghetto. It has a Jewish district. This is where emigrants come who want to get to America via Hamburg or Amsterdam. This is where they often get stuck. They haven't enough money. Or their papers are not in order.

(Again: papers! Half a Jew's life is consumed by the futile battle with papers.)

The Eastern Jews who come to Berlin are often on a transit visa that allows them to stay in Germany for two to three days. There are quite a few who came on a transit visa, and end up staying in Berlin for two or three years.

Berlin has long-established Eastern Jews, who generally arrived before the War. Their relatives came after them. Refugees from the occupied lands came to Berlin. Jews who had served in the German armies of occupation in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania had to return to Germany with the German army.

There are Eastern Jewish criminals in Berlin as well. Pickpockets, bigamists and con artists, counterfeiters, racketeers. Hardly any burglars. No violent criminals, no murderers.

The struggle for papers, the struggle against papers, is something an Eastern Jew gets free of only if he uses criminal methods to take on society. The Eastern Jewish criminal was generally a criminal in his past life. He gets to Germany on false papers, or with none at all. He doesn't register with the police.

Only the honest Eastern Jew—honest and timorous—registers with the police. It's much more difficult in Prussia than in Austria. The Berlin police like to undertake house-to-house searches. They check papers on the streets as well. They did a lot of that during the Inflation.

The trade in secondhand clothes is not prohibited, but it's not sanctioned either. No one without a hawker's license is allowed to buy my old trousers. Or sell them, for that matter.

But buy them he does. And sells them too. He stands on the Joachimsthaler Strasse, or on the corner of Joachimsthaler and the Kurfürstendamm, pretending to mind

his own business. He has to be able to tell from the look of a passerby, first, whether he has old clothes to sell, and second, if he needs money.

Whatever clothes he manages to buy, he sells the next morning at the old-clothes exchange.

There are distinctions among hawkers too. There are rich and powerful hawkers, to whom the little ones look up shyly and humbly. The more money a hawker has, the more he earns. He doesn't go out on the street himself anymore. He doesn't need to. I'm not even sure whether it is still appropriate to refer to him as a "hawker." In fact he has a secondhand clothes shop and a business license. The license is not in his own name but that of someone settled in Berlin, a solid citizen who doesn't know anything about clothes but takes a cut from the business all the same.

The clothing exchange is where the hawkers and shop owners do business in the mornings. The former bring along yesterday's crop of old dresses and jackets. In spring, light garments and sporty clothes are at a premium. In autumn, it's tailcoats, dinner jackets, and striped trousers. Anyone who comes along with linen suits and summer clothes in the autumn is in the wrong business.

The clothes that the hawker has bought from passersby for pathetic sums are sold to the shopkeeper at a ridiculous markup. The shopkeeper then has them pressed and mended, and generally "freshened up." Then he hangs them outside his shop to flutter in the breeze.

Anyone who is good at selling old clothes will soon graduate to selling new clothes. He will go from a shop to a fashion store. Someday, he will have his own department store.

It is possible for a hawker to make a career in Berlin. He will assimilate faster there than his equivalent would in Vienna. Berlin levels out differences and kills off particularities. Hence the lack of a Jewish ghetto there.

There are just a couple of small Jewish streets around the Warschauer Brücke and in the Scheunenviertel. The most Jewish street in Berlin is the melancholy Hirtenstrasse.

2.

The Hirtenstrasse is the saddest street in the world. It doesn't even have the unreflective joy of real dirt.

The Hirtenstrasse is a Berlin street, softened perhaps by its Eastern Jewish inhabitants, but fundamentally unchanged. It has no streetcar line, no buses, only rarely an automobile; mostly just trucks, carts, the most functional and plebeian of conveyances. There are little hole-in-the-wall bars. You climb a few steps to reach them. Narrow, filthy, worn-out steps. The step equivalent of down-at-heel shoes. Rubbish is piled up in the doorways of houses. Sometimes this rubbish is collectible, even marketable. Rubbish as stock-in-trade. Old newspapers. Torn

stockings. Widowed soles. Shoelaces. Apron strings. The Hirtenstrasse is drab like a slum. It lacks the character of a street in a shtetl. It has a new, cheap, already-used-up, bargain-basement quality. A street out of a department store. A cheap department store. It has one or two dirty window displays. Jewish bakeries, poppyseed cakes, rolls, rye loaves. An oil canister, sweating flypaper.

In addition, it has Jewish Talmud schools and prayer-houses. You see Hebrew writing. It looks out of place on these walls. You see the spines of books behind sullied windows.

You see Jews walking, with their tallith under their arms. Emerging from the prayerhouse, going about their business. You see sick children and old women.

There are repeated attempts to transform this boring Berlinish semisanitized street into a ghetto. But Berlin is always stronger. The residents fight an unavailing fight. They want to spread out? Berlin repeatedly presses them back.

3.

I step inside one of the small bars. There are a few customers waiting for lunch in the back room. They have their hats on. The landlady is standing between the kitchen and the public bar. Her husband stands behind the counter. He has a beard made out of red thread. He seems apprehensive.

And why shouldn't he be apprehensive? Don't the police pay him visits? Haven't they been there several times lately? The landlord shakes hands with me just in case. And just in case, he says: "Oh, such a customer! Has it really been so long since you last did us the honor?" A warm greeting never hurts.

Everyone drinks the classic Jewish beverage—mead. That's the alcohol on which they can get intoxicated. They love the heavy, dark brown mead, sweet, crisp, and strong.

4.

From time to time the "Temple of Solomon" makes an appearance in Berlin. This temple has been put together by one Herr Frohmann from Drohobycz in exact accordance with the description in the Bible, only using balsa and papier-mâché and gold paint instead of the cedarwood and real gold of King Solomon.

Frohmann claims to have spent seven years building this minitemple, and I believe him. To build a model temple in accordance with the description in the Bible must cost as much labor as love.

Every single curtain, courtyard, crenellation, and altar-piece is plainly visible. The temple is on a table in the back-room of a bar. There is a smell of gefilte fish. Very few visitors come and look. The old folks are already familiar

with it, and the young people want to go to Palestine and build roads, not temples.

And Frohmann travels from ghetto to ghetto, from Jew to Jew, showing off his creation. Frohmann is the guardian of tradition and of the only great architectonic work that the Jews have ever produced, and for that reason will never forget. To me Frohmann is an expression of longing, of the longing of an entire people. I saw an old Jew standing in front of the miniature temple. He was no different from his brethren who stand before the one sacred remaining wall of the real ruined temple, weeping and praying.*

5.

I stumbled upon the cabaret by chance, wandering through the dark streets on a bright evening, looking through the windows of small prayerhouses, which by day were no more than shopfronts, but in the morning and evening, houses of worship. The Jews of the East maintain a close proximity between commerce and heaven; all they need for worship is ten adult—older than thirteen—members of their faith, a cantor, and a knowledge of the cardinal points, so that they can identify *Mizrach*, the East, the Holy Land, the source of light.

*The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Hereabouts everything is improvised: The temple is people coming together, trade is stopping in the middle of the street. Basically, it is still the flight out of Egypt, which has been in progress now for thousands of years. The people always have to be on the alert, be packed and ready, have a piece of bread and an onion in one pocket and the *tefillim* in the other. Who can say whether he won't have to resume his wanderings in another hour? Even theater happens suddenly.

The cabaret I saw was set up in the yard of a dirty old inn. It was a rectangular, glassed-in yard, whose walls were windows, giving onto corridors and passages, revealing such domestic details as beds, shirts, and buckets. A stray linden tree stood in the middle of it, representing nature. Through one or two lit-up windows you could see inside the kitchen of a kosher restaurant. Steam rose from cauldrons. A fat woman with bare and flabby forearms wielded a wooden spoon. Directly in front of the windows and half-obscuring them was a platform from which one could go straight into the main hall of the restaurant. This platform was the stage, and in front of it sat the musicians, a troupe of six men, said to be the six sons of the great Mendel from Berdichev, whom the oldest Eastern Jews can still remember and whose violin playing was so beautiful that no one who heard it—in Lithuania, Volhynia, or Galicia—ever forgot it.

The actors who were about to appear went by the name of the Surokin Troupe. Surokin was their director,

producer, and treasurer, a fat, clean-shaven man from Kovno* who had sung as far afield as America; a cantor and tenor; star of synagogue and opera, pampered, proud, and condescending; in equal parts entrepreneur and comrade. The audience sat at small tables, eating bread and sausages and drinking beer. They went to the kitchen to fetch food and drink, enjoyed themselves, howled and laughed. They were made up of small merchants and their families, not Orthodox but "enlightened," as those Jews are called in the East who shave (even if only once a week) and wear European clothes. Those Jews observe the religious customs more out of pious habit than religious need; they think of God only when they need him, and, given their luck, they need him fairly frequently. They range from the cynical to the superstitious, but in certain situations all of them are apt to be maudlin and touching in their emotionalism. Where business is concerned they will deal with one another and with strangers with complete ruthlessness—but one needs only to touch a certain hidden chord within them and they will be selfless, generous, and humane. Yes, they are perfectly capable of shedding tears, especially in an open-air theater like this one.

The troupe consisted of two women and three men—but when it comes to their performance, I hardly know what to say. The entire program was improvised. First to appear was a small, skinny fellow. The nose in his face

*Now Kaunas, in Lithuania.

looked somehow surprised to be where it was; it was an impertinent, somewhat inquisitive, but still touching and laughable nose, more Slavic than Jewish, broad and flat, coming to an incongruously sharp point. The man with this nose was playing the *batlan*, a wise fool and a jester. He sang old songs and made fun of them by giving them unexpected and unsuitable twists. Then the two women sang an old song together, an actor told a funny story of Shalom Aleichem's, and at the end, Herr Surokin, the director, recited Hebrew and Yiddish poems by recent or contemporary Jewish poets; he would recite the Hebrew verses followed by the Yiddish translation, and sometimes he would sing two or three stanzas as though he were alone in his room. And then there was a deathly hush, and the little merchants made big eyes and propped their chins on their fists, and we could hear the rustling of the linden leaves.

You are probably all familiar with Jewish melodies from the East, but I want to try to give you a sense of that music. I think I can best describe it as a mixture of Russia and Jerusalem, of popular song and psalm. It is music that blends the pathos of the synagogue with the naïveté of folk song. The words, when you read them, would seem to demand a light and jaunty melody. But when you hear the song, it's a sad tune, "smiling through tears." Once having heard it, you remember it weeks later; the contradiction was more apparent than real: In fact these words can *only* be sung to this melody. They go:

*Ynter die griene Beimelach
sizzen die Mojschelach, Schlojmelach,
Eugen wie gliebende Keulelach . . .*

[Under the green trees
sit the little Solomons and Moseses,
eyes like glowing coalses . . .]

Note, they're sitting! They don't romp about under the green trees. If they were romping, then the rhythm of the line would be as jaunty as it first appears. But then, little Jewish boys don't go in for romping much.

I heard the old song sung by the city of Jerusalem, so melancholy that the pain of it blows right across Europe far into the East, through Spain, Germany, France, Holland—the whole bitter route taken by the Jews. Jerusalem sings:

*Kim, kim Jisruleki l abeim
in dein teures Land arain . . .*

[Come, come, Jerusalemer, come home
to your beloved homeland . . .]

All the merchants understood it. The little people had stopped drinking beer and eating sausages. In this way they were prepared for the fine, serious, occasionally difficult, and sometimes abstract poetry of the great Hebrew

poet Bialik,* whose songs have been translated into most major languages. They are said to have given a new impetus to the transformation of written Hebrew into a living language. This poet has the wrath of the old prophets and the sweetness of the crowing child.

*Hayyim Bialik (1873–1934).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Roth was born Moses Joseph Roth to Jewish parents on September 2, 1894, in Brody in Galicia, in the extreme east of the then Hapsburg Empire; he died on May 27, 1939, in Paris. He never saw his father—who disappeared before he was born and later died insane—but grew up with his mother and her relatives. After completing school in Brody, he matriculated at the University of Lemberg (variously Lvov or Lviv), before transferring to the University of Vienna in 1914. He served for a year or two with the Austro-Hungarian Army on the Eastern Front—though possibly only as an army journalist or censor. Later he was to write: “My strongest experience was the War and the destruction of my fatherland, the only one I ever had, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary.”

In 1918 he returned to Vienna, where he began writing for left-wing papers, occasionally as “Red Roth,” “*der rote Roth*.” In 1920 he moved to Berlin, and in 1923 he

began his distinguished association with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In the following years, he traveled throughout Europe, filing copy for the *Frankfurter* from the south of France, the USSR, Albania, Germany, Poland, and Italy. He was one of the most distinguished and best-paid journalists of the period—being paid at the dream rate of one Deutschmark per line. Some of his pieces were collected under the title of one of them, *The Panopticum on Sunday* (1928), while some of his reportage from the Soviet Union went into *The Wandering Jews*. His gifts of style and perception could, on occasion, overwhelm his subjects, but he was a journalist of singular compassion. He observed and warned of the rising Nazi scene in Germany (Hitler actually appears by name in Roth's first novel, in 1923), and his 1926 visit to the USSR disabused him of most—but not quite all—of his sympathy for Communism.

When the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, Roth immediately severed all his ties with the country. He lived in Paris—where he had been based for some years—but also in Amsterdam, Ostend, and the south of France, and wrote for émigré publications. His royalist politics were mainly a mask for his pessimism; his last article was called "Goethe's Oak at Buchenwald." His final years were difficult; he moved from hotel to hotel, drinking heavily, worried about money and the future. What precipitated his final collapse was hearing the news that the playwright Ernst Toller had hanged himself in New York. An invitation from the American PEN Club (the

organization that had brought Thomas Mann and many others to the States) was found among Roth's papers. It is tantalizing but ultimately impossible to imagine him taking ship to the New World, and continuing to live and to write: His world was the old one, and he'd used it all up.

Roth's fiction came into being alongside his journalism, and in the same way: at café tables, at odd hours and all hours, peripatetically, chaotically, charmedly. His first novel, *The Spider's Web*, was published in installments in 1923. There followed *Hotel Savoy* and *Rebellion* (both 1924), hard-hitting books about contemporary society and politics; then *Flight Without End*, *Zipper and His Father*, and *Right and Left* (all *Heimkehrerromane*—novels about soldiers returning home after the war). *Job* (1930) was his first book to draw considerably on his Jewish past in the East. *The Radetzky March* (1932) has the biggest scope of all his books and is commonly reckoned his masterpiece. There follow the books he wrote in exile, books with a stronger fabulist streak in them, full of melancholy beauty: *Tarabas*, *The Hundred Days*, *Confession of a Murderer*, *Weights and Measures*, *The Emperor's Tomb*, and *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*.