

Some Thoughts About Joseph Roth and Job
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The National Synagogue Book Club
March 19, 2006

Marlene Dietrich once said, “A king, realizing his incompetence, can either delegate or abdicate his duties. A father can do neither. If only sons could see the paradox, they would understand the dilemma.” Captivated by the dilemmas of fathers, sons and – at least symbolic – kings, Dietrich found her way to Joseph Roth in 1930 when he was 36 years old and she was 29. He became her favorite German novelist, and, of his compelling stories, *Job* was her favorite. She went on to artistic glory in Hollywood. He drank himself to death in Paris nine years later.

Fatherless for all of his very short life and kingless for the last third of it, Roth struggled with many crucial issues evolving from this timeless dilemma: identity and its diffusion, stability and loss, fidelity and immorality, integrity and dissembling, faith and suffering, punishment and redemption, idealization and denigration, love and hate.

Let’s look at Dietrich’s parable from Roth’s societal perspective. His personal preoccupations were reflected from a uniquely Austrian experience called “*Bodenlosigkeit*.” Often translated as “rootless,” *Bodenlosigkeit* is a way of conceptualizing much of Central European human experience after the dissolution of the Austrian empire following the First World War, especially the feeling of minority populations in newly emergent national states in the 1920s. Before the War in the former crown land of Volynia in Galizia where Joseph Roth was born, Germans, Austrians, Ruthenians (Ukrainians), Poles, Jews and a smattering of Slovaks were held together not by learning multiculturalism, that is an appreciation of national determination, unique

individuality, diverse languages and different religions, but rather by a common fervor for a unifying experience, embodied in the Emperor as *Ländevater*, “father of the lands.” Each of these cultural groups, while different, were united experientially as citizens of the great Austrian empire and, unless revolutionary nationalists, extolled its leader, Franz Josef, as sovereign.

Roth captures the curious experiences of the citizens of the supranational empire in his novella, *Die Büste des Kaisers (The Bust of the Emperor)*. Roth tells a story through the narration of Count Franz Xaver Morstin, a retired army officer at the end of the First World War and titled head of a Polish noble family that had emigrated from Italy to Austria during the sixteenth Century. His estate was in the village of Lopatyny in the crown land of Galizia, making him at least a geographical relative of Roth, who describes the Count as follows:

He thought of himself neither as Polish aristocrat nor as an aristocrat of Italian origins. No: like so many of his peers in the former Crown Lands of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, he was one of the noblest sort of Austrian, plain and simple. [Hear the echo of Roth’s opening description of Mendel Singer as *ein einfacher Mensch*, a simple, uncomplicated man.] That is [Roth continued, he was] a man above nationality, and therefore of true nobility. Had anyone asked him, for example – but to whom would such a senseless question have occurred? – to which “nationality” or race he belonged, the Count would have felt rather bewildered, even baffled, by his questioner, and probably bored and somewhat indignant. (*The Bust of the Emperor*, pp. 157-158)

This was especially true for the Jews, who, with the exception of the far-away product of Zionism propagated by Theodor Herzl, were not generally participants in outbreaks of crown land nationalism for its own sake. Jewish religious-ethnic pursuits and Austrian imperial allegiances existed without conflict, according to literary critic Sidney Rosenfeld. It was on that basis that long-tenured Franz Josef, who had been on the throne for 46 years before Joseph Roth was born, was playfully referred to as *Yankele Yossele* in the Jewish community.

But, 1918 heralded a new – and for some less welcome – experience. Fictional Count Morstin, really Joseph Roth who frequently dressed the part of and pretended to be a Polish nobleman on the streets of Vienna, had called once-upon-a-time Austria “a great mansion with many doors and chambers, for every condition of men.”

Now, Count Morstin as himself – or Joseph Roth as Morstin’s alter-ego – had become spiritually undermined, made homeless by the sudden emergence of new nations, the old guard having lost its place as the fireworks of self-determination exploded in the former crown lands. To go back to *Bodenlosigkeit*: it is one of those tricky German words, because its meaning goes deeper than the simple English translation, “rootless.” “*Boden*,” in this context, are not the roots, but where the roots are, in the texture of the earth’s surface. So to be *Bodenlos* is to find oneself on disintegrating, flimsy ground, more like having the rug pulled out from under one. When the empire ceased to be, the minority communities in the new states became shaky and without substance, lacking the integrity that Austrian supranationality and the overarching paternity of Franz Josef had provided. Even Sigmund Freud, whose considerations traveled, in his own mind, well beyond the mundane body politic, wrote at the end of the War, “Austria is no more. I do not want to live anywhere else, but I shall have to live with the torso and imagine it is the whole.”

In 1921, Volynia became divided between Poland and the emerging Soviet nation, neither of which, as nation states, captured Roth’s heart or imagination. Roth, a socialist in the pre-war empire, became an ardent monarchist.

As he migrated from Galizia to the national capitals of the new Austria – and then to Germany – the particular ways Jews from the eastern crown lands were perceived, the

dilemma of the *Ostjuden*, began to plague him. *Ostjuden* in the newly created nation states were seen as particularly backward – and those in Galizia were believed to be the most backward of all. Many of Roth’s critics view his frequent false biographical claims and personal affectations, like assuming the identity of a Polish count, to reflect insecurity and shame related to his Galizian heritage. This is true to an extent. But, as I have outlined, the cultural loss of supranationality and monarchy were deep influences as well, and many elements in Roth’s personal story enhanced his sense of pervasive shamefulness and diminution as the outsider.

So, let’s turn to Roth’s story, in which the cultural context provides a crucial backdrop. Moses Joseph Roth was born in the town of Brody on September 2, 1894, the only child of Orthodox parents. Brody was a town of about 18,000 people, two-thirds of whom were Jews. It had been a center of Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskala*) for more than a century.

Roth’s early schooling was probably dissimilar from that offered by Mendel Singer, because it was punctuated by early attempts at assimilation into the Germano-Austrian experience. Yiddish was *lingua familia* (the family understood it) but German became *lingua franca* (the family used it), and the Roth family, like Kafka’s family in Prague, supported ongoing education in the context of German language and pedagogy. Roth attended a German-speaking elementary school, the principal German-language gymnasium in Brody, and, at the age of 19, moved on to the University in Lemberg (now Lvov in the Ukraine).

The reasons for the family’s drive toward melding Orthodoxy with Germanic assimilation are not clear, but there is some interesting evidence. Roth’s father, Nachum,

was an agent for German grain merchants, but it seems that his vocation may have been in service of financial support for his Orthodoxy rather than an attempt to distance himself from it. We probably will never be clear on this point, since Nachum Roth disappeared into insanity during a business trip to Hamburg prior to Joseph Roth's birth. While he spent some time in a sanatorium, his care ultimately fell to an alleged "wonder working" Chasidic rabbi, the same type to which Deborah took young allegedly epileptic Menuchim in *Job*. There is no evidence that Nachum recovered, nor did he ever return to Brody – and thus he became both the focus of Roth's experience of pervasive loss and the first of three of his crucial experiences with severe mental illness.

Raised by his mother in her family's home, largely by his grandfather and a maternal uncle, Roth is thought to have become a Cinderella stepchild, viewing himself as a shameful notch below his cousins. This personal view of second-classness may have spurred some of his fascination with assuming other identities, among them being a secular Austrian.

Believing the University in Lemberg also to be shamefully second-rate, he enrolled in the University in Vienna, which, in 1914, had the largest Jewish population in Europe, about 200,000. But his origins as an *Ostjude* made the transition into "first-class" life very difficult. Roth once remarked, "It is hard enough being an *Ostjude*...But, there is no harder fate than being an *Ostjude* in Vienna." To compensate for his perception, part real and part fantasy, he tutored the children of royalty; became a spatshoed dandy; kissed the hands of women; carried a cane; wore a monocle; and published romantic poetry. He made of himself nearly every protagonist he ever wrote about and became so successful at deceit that he completely confused his early biographers.

His student career came to an end on account of the War, and Roth enlisted in 1916, setting aside his first name, Moses, forever. He spent the remainder of the War with a Polish unit in Galizia and used the experience as additional fodder for later interesting identities: he asserted that he had been an officer in the Imperial army or a prisoner of war in Russia. To give the allegations greater effect, he seasoned his speech with the slang of the Austrian “officer-elite,” affectations he frequented for the rest of his life.

Soon after the War Roth began to write prose, and that marked the onset of his career genius, though he may never have believed in it fully. He wrote for newspapers, regularly as a *feuilleton* writer, or composer of New Yorker style opinion pieces or commentaries; he honed the skill of telling magnificent stories parsimoniously, at great contrast to his often personal grandiosity. Like Hemingway in America, Roth quickly became one of the most sought after journalists (“I am a journalist, not a reporter,” he said. “I am a writer, not a fashioner of lead articles...”), first in Berlin and then, in 1925, among the most highly paid as the Paris correspondent for the prestigious *Frankfurter Zeitung*. His style, tight while also supple, was, however, not entirely original. Roth was, through his growing understanding of French authors, highly influenced by the styles of Stendhal and Flaubert, and some of the lines in his best-known novel, *Der Radetzkymarsch (The Radetzky March)* appearing in 1932, mimic those in *Madame Bovary*.

In 1922, Roth pursued and won the heart of Friederike Reichler, a delicate and deliciously beautiful daughter of Jewish parents from Galizia. She was overly shy and retiring, which appealed to Roth, though he may not have appreciated the intensity of

these traits as harbingers of her later diagnosis of schizophrenia. Married in Vienna, they moved to Berlin for the next several years. Historian and critic Sidney Rosenfeld notes that this period, living with Friederike, called Friedl, in a rented apartment (instead of Roth's penchant for hotels) was the only rational, sane period in Joseph Roth's life. Still, every success and every frustration – indeed, far too many experiences – were punctuated by alcohol. Roth became a “maintenance drinker;” he needed alcohol to maintain the semblance of living. (To fellow Austrian author Stefan Zweig, Roth wrote in 1935, “Alcohol is shortening my life, that is true, but it is also preventing my *immediate* death.”). Frequently drunk and disintegrating, he believed he was driving Friedl crazy, though like any alcoholic he bargained that things would get better through willpower. But, will never sufficed. Only alcohol did.

Semblance of sanity was, however, soon visited by insanity. Friedl became mentally ill and Roth began to drink more heavily, from that time forward unable to escape his powerlessness over the stranglehold of alcohol. He tried isolating himself from Friedl because he was often required to travel. But isolation only became part of the alcoholic melody that played incessantly through life. When Friedl could no longer be left alone, Roth started taking her on journalistic junkets, locking her in their hotel room when he was forced to go out. Then he started leaving her with friends, then putting her in hospitals. He was wracked with resentment and guilt – the major psychological fuel for alcoholics – when, by 1928, she was complaining about ghosts in the central heating system, or that mysterious dew in her room was the cause of her illness. Frequent catatonic episodes finally resulted in her admission to an asylum. His endless wish that Friedl be restored to sanity forever trumped his concern about his

alcoholism, and when nothing good was happening to Friedl or his own mental state, he drank more. He sought the counsel and intervention of rabbis with special powers, this time for Friedl and not for himself, but to no avail. What had failed for his father also failed for Friedl. (When the Nazis annexed Austria in March 1938, Friedl was in the Steinhof Sanatorium in Vienna. Among other Jews and psychiatric patients, she was murdered during eugenics experimentation two years later.)

Roth's novels proliferated, sixteen in sixteen years, six before 1930, ten more until his death in 1939; eight additional major collections were published posthumously. All were well received although, as so often happens in the literary world, with differing degrees of approbation. Nineteen thirty marked the transitional year for Roth's writing, with the publication of *Job (Hiob)*, his seventh novel. Highly acclaimed in German speaking countries, *Job* was translated into English in 1931, whereupon it became the featured novel of the *Book of the Month Club* in November. About *Job* poet and critic Louis Untermeyer wrote that the book "signifies without proclaiming the fact that the chronicling of emotion – downright and self-declared emotion – has lost none of its potency."

When Hitler assumed power in 1933, Roth left Berlin the same day, emigrating to France. He spent most of his time in Paris. His last work was a novella called *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker (The Legend of the Holy Drinker)* appearing in 1939. In the book, the hopelessness of Joseph Roth the alcoholic was transformed into the redemptive experiences of a Parisian vagrant, Andreas Kartak. Kartak's drunkenness was miraculously transformed into paths of virtue, from which he slipped repeatedly. At the end of the story, he thought he was dying serenely in a chapel, believing he had

fulfilled a promise to deliver charity to Saint Thérèse. In reality, he was in a Paris café, mistaking a young girl with the same name for the saint. To this, the story's narrator intoned, "May God grant us all, all of us drinkers, such a good and easy death."

This was not to be the case for Joseph Roth. While Roth was surrounded mostly by drink and may have at times been only dimly involved with people, friends remained invested and loyal, like novelist Stefan Zweig, physician author Ernst Weiss and playwright Ernst Toller, with whom he shared common tormented souls and intersecting family backgrounds and life experiences. (Toller's father, for example, was also a grain merchant.) After his emigration from Berlin, Roth lived with Toller during a sojourn in Belgium, in Ostende. Weiss joined Roth in Paris in 1934.

In 1937, Eleanor Roosevelt became actively concerned about the fate of these authors, including Roth. Along with Dorothy Thompson, Roth's American translator, she attempted to lure Roth to America. But, he resisted, believing, like many German intellectuals, that America was devoid of a personality beyond materialism. Central Europe's 1920s attempt to mimic the social and economic fabric in the United States produced, according to Joan Acocella's assessment of Roth's position in *The New Yorker*, a "wrecked, valueless world, caught between bogus political rhetoric on the one hand and, on the other, a fatuous illusionism, a dream world retailed by billboards and cinema, which, in Roth's shorthand, he called 'America' (January 19, 2004)."

While Roth stayed in Paris, Zweig went to England, then to Brazil, where he died in a suicide with his wife in 1942. Weiss stayed in Paris and killed himself the day Hitler marched into the city in 1940. At the end of May 1939, Roth learned that Ernst Toller had committed suicide in a hotel room in New York. Thereupon, Joseph Roth drank

himself into a final stupor and died on May 27 after four days of agony, succumbing to delirium tremens at the age of forty-four. Already well into the banning and destruction of the legacy of Joseph Roth, the Nazis exterminated Friedl the following year.

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Beginning with *Job*, Roth's works moved from a literal, analytic, sometimes ironic and bitter reflection of the post-war European condition to a lyrical search for both an inner fatherland and spiritual peace. Nothing enduring was to be found. From 1930 onward, commentators would call Roth "a wanderer in flight toward a tragic end," "a Jew in search of a fatherland," and "in flight before the void."

As a prime example of Roth's quest, *Job* is an unassuming story with profound emotional content. Roth decided to write the book during a severe alcoholic period when Friedl's condition had deteriorated toward unmanageability. It seems that Roth was able to find personal relief in a return to Jewish content and considerations, allowing for the possibility, found also by most alcoholics who are successfully recovering, that there was no chemical solution to his fundamental spiritual problem. Turning back to his Judaism and its consistent beliefs across diverse geography, Roth sought a post-war resolution to the lost secular Austrian experience, in this case that a determined, often paternal religion could integrate and unite souls if not bodies.

So Roth conjured up Mendel Singer as the timeless protagonist, a simple man with generations of tradition directing his life. Like his father and grandfather, Mendel Singer was a *melamed*, a Torah teacher of children, though Roth calls him a *Kinderlehrer*, children's teacher. He earned little, wanted little, and, with God on his side, inwardly thrived much. For Mendel and for many similar *Ostjude*, the integrity of

common spirit was threatened by modernity, the stand-in for the eradication of the empire and emergence of post-war nationalism. Just as Professor Haym Soloveitchik notes in *Rupture and Reconstruction*, the article that Rabbi Herzfeld has assigned us, orthodoxy stopped becoming “absorbed” through tradition when secularity began to lure Jews away from the comfort of being traditionally “pious, God-fearing and ordinary,” as Roth described Mendel Singer. Through the social scaffolding of this proscenium, the story of *Job* unfolds.

While Mendel Singer wants to be symbiotic with tradition and generate a life that is molded by tradition and shapes to it, circumstances generate challenges that are too great. Of his four children, all become tackled by the modern era as it comes to Zuchnow, the Russian *shtetl* in which the Singer family was raised. Mendel’s daughter, Miriam, doesn’t maintain the purity of impulse, as Rabbi Herzfeld has elaborated, and is drawn into carnal pleasure, worse yet with outsiders: the soldiers in the nearby garrison, whom Mendel calls “Cossacks.” His two older sons are similarly seduced. Jonas, the younger, gets into the local peasant girls, figuratively and literally; he drinks too much and, when threatened with military conscription, joins the Czar’s army, leaving Jewish tradition behind. His eldest son, Shemariah, escapes the threat of conscription by fleeing to America, whereupon Shemariah becomes “transformed” into Sam, commercial but still caring, although no longer religious.

Mendel’s youngest son, born during the unfolding of the novel, is Menuchim, a different child, said to be epileptic and retarded but has features of simple schizophrenia or Asperger’s Syndrome. With limited motility and language (his word of choice is “mama”), Menuchim is periodically tormented by his older siblings and is the source of

much worry for his mother, Deborah. Governed by God's will, Mendel will not allow Menuchim to be taken by the Russian doctor who comes to Zuchnow to administer smallpox vaccinations – even though the doctor pitches an opportunity for positive treatment. God, Mendel believes, will care for a Jew within His community, not an outsider doctor. Deborah, hoping beyond hope for Menuchim, spirits him away (according to her will, “God helps those who help themselves [p. 41]”) to the Rabbi in Kluczysk, who advises that the family must never abandon Menuchim. Although Menuchim is not easily accessible to Mendel, Mendel tries, as father and *melamed*, to contact and communicate with this child, through quiet hours, through the thought of life being just the two of them without the nagging interference of Deborah and the other children, or through simple music. Roth describes the seminal relationship:

At home, around midday, before the scholars returned, Mendel and Menuchim remained alone. Mendel ate a barley soup...then...lifted the child upon his knee and began to feed it...After Menuchim had swallowed the soup...his father would set him upon the table...and stare with tender curiosity into the broad sallow face with its wrinkled brow, netted eyelids, and flaccid double chin. He tried to guess what might be going on in that broad skull, to gaze in through a window in the brain, and by talking to him...to draw from the stolid boy some sort of sign...But Menuchim never responded. Then Mendel would take a spoon, strike it against a tea glass, and immediately Menuchim would turn his head, and a tiny light would flame in his great, grey liquid eyes. Mendel would ring again, begin to sing a little song and to beat time on the glass with the spoon...(pp. 43-44).

Mendel's continuing determination about God – or his personal *hubris* – continues to make life a tragedy. He will not easily fight the older boys' conscription orders, “Let each suffer his lot! Let the sons serve, they won't go to the bad: against the will of Heaven there is no power (p. 41).”

But against Miriam's carnal impulse, there is necessity for human action. When Shemariah, successfully relocated in America, sends an entrepreneur emissary, Mac, to Zuchnow, his proposal of American emigration to the family will solve two of Mendel's

crucial secular issues: It will take Deborah away from her incessant envy of the profits of local businessmen, and it will remove Miriam from her splendor in the grass. But, there is a problem. Menuchim can't go; he won't make it there, and he won't make it in. He will be denied the mythology of America as the promised golden land. Instead, Mendel Singer arranges for him to stay in Zuchnow with the Billes family, and father will send for son if there is opportunity.

America for Mendel Singer is like an alcoholic nightmare for Joseph Roth: as one hopes things will get better, they just go from bad to worse. In short order Jonas remains lost somewhere in Russia; Shemariah is killed in the First World War after enlisting in the American army; Deborah, like Biblical Sarah, dies upon the announcement of the tragedy that befell her son; Miriam becomes insane (Roth's tribute to Friedl) and is institutionalized. Mendel, as the overly tested Job, becomes bitter, reclusive and denies God, even on Yom Kippur, the holiest of days. He realizes that his life will end and that, because there will be no son to say *Kaddish* on his passing, the integrity and timelessness of Jewish tradition will be denied him. No one will be left to proclaim the glory of God on his behalf.

In despair at the end of the novel, Mendel Singer is urged by his friends to meet a world-renowned musician, the composer of a piece called "Menuchim's Song." The composer goes by the name Alexis Kossak.

The appellation of the last name is no accident, for he who is responsible for Mendel Singer's downfall (the Cossack) comes back in a different guise as his salvation. Kossak is in reality Menuchim, cured of his affliction by a generous Gentile doctor in

Russia, and sustained by his near-inchoate memory of a loving father whose non-verbal, musical relatedness organized his life.

Mendel Singer is probably entitled to this redemptive outcome, fanciful as some may see it. As Job, Mendel Singer was tested; his losses would have been experienced by anyone as unbearable. Yet, even a silent God remains available despite being denied. Mendel Singer has an imaginary conversation with Deborah, now dead, in which he admits that because, in their relationship, the warmth of love was substituted by the chilliness of familiarity, everything around them perished in ruin. When the physical edges out the spiritual, the loss is more than material.

This understanding yields to acceptance; and that probably allows Mendel as Job to become saved and transformed. After all, Mendel Singer's love for Menuchim, idiosyncratically as it may have manifested, remained untainted. Finding Menuchim, Mendel Singer has become like Jacob; Menuchim stands in for Joseph, with whom the father becomes reunited in old age. Both father and son weep at the miracle of the son's salvation and prosperity, indeed within a parallel Gentile community. Now decrepit, Mendel leaves the novel with the knowledge that the father-son relationship has become lovingly and generationally reversed. The son will now care for the father who cared above all for him, with the promise that there will be new doctors for Miriam and a search for Jonas in Russia. Where there was pain and suffering, redemption has marched in with benevolent vengeance. While the problem between fathers and sons was partially solved for Mendel Singer, it remained an enigmatic paradox for Joseph Roth.