

Foreword

I do not know Andrei Markovits, though we are nearly the same age and must have overlapped at the Center for European Studies at Harvard in the 1970's, but I wish I did know him, for his memoir is a cheerful, idiosyncratic dissent from the entire tradition of writing about exile, especially Jewish exile. Its subtitle—"comfort in rootlessness"—is a challenge to an entire tradition.

Here is a Jew, born in Timișoara, after the Holocaust which claimed so many members of his family, who emigrated first to Vienna, then to the United States and who does not look back in anger, nostalgia or longing for his lost roots. On the contrary, rootlessness, he says, was a "source of joy not a source of anguish."

Consider the weight of the tradition, especially in the Jewish faith, which he is resisting in this delightful memoir. Remember, for example, these great verses from Psalm 137:

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion."

In the Jewish tradition of exile, that begins with this lament in the Psalms, there is no comfort, only hurt and anguish and nostalgia, in recalling a lost home. For the Jewish faithful, it is obligatory to keep your gaze fixed on home. In the words of the Psalm, "if I forget thee O Jerusalem let my right hand forget her cunning" and "let my tongue cleave to the root of my mouth"—let me be rendered speechless—if I do not hold Jerusalem at the center of my life and my loyalties.

Markovits breaks with all of this, throws its weight off his shoulders and embraces a different path away from home, away from roots, away from ancestral claims. While remaining steadfastly and proudly Jewish, he does not accept any idea that he can only be at home in Zion or anywhere else for that matter. On the contrary, he takes delight in being a "rootless cosmopolitan," embracing an antisemitic epithet once used by Stalinists, fascists and nationalists. He has been a "wandering Jew" all his life, and it has allowed him to be free.

Having been uprooted in 1958, months after the death of his mother, leaving Romania forever, first for Vienna and then for New York a decade later, he never sought to belong again. By his own admission, he has cultivated "orthogonality," never fitting in anywhere, all his life. Now in his 70's, happily married and beloved as a professor at the University of Michigan, he tells us cheerfully that he remains "completely marginal and tangential to all three" of the departments he is associated with at the university. Most unusually, this is a memoir that counts only the gains of coming to America. If not for exile, Markovits asks us to remember, would he have discovered how much he loves baseball, the Grateful Dead, and the University of Michigan's stadium on game day?

In this attitude towards loss, Markovits resembles that great artist of exile, Vladimir Nabokov, who always held the view that being forced from Russia by the Russian Revolution was the "syncopal kick" that turned an aristocrat into a writer. Unlike Nabokov, however, he has no interest in nostalgia, no commitment to recreate the lost paradise before exile.

Markovits is not a novelist but the memoir often has the remembered detail, the specificity as to place, time and character that marks good fiction. He remembers the house in Timișoara that his family shared with other families; he can guide you through the rooming

house in Vienna where he and his father stayed on their first arrival in the West. It is all vivid yet unclouded by nostalgia or regret.

Markovits is free of the Jewish past in Central and Eastern Europe, yet proudly affiliates with its best traditions. For there was in Habsburg Europe, a multiculturalism that was never liberal, but made possible a complex accommodation between Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, languages, nations and minorities. This Habsburg multiculturalism was able to survive fascism and communism alike, and the proof of its resilience was in the apartment house Markovits grew up in: home to Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Romanian Orthodox families, Hungarian and Romanian speakers all living together in rivalrous fraternity under a communist regime.

This Habsburg multiculturalism meant that a Jewish family, who had lost family in the Holocaust, still revered German Kultur, adored Beethoven and Mozart and spoke the language of their persecutors, all the while despising the Germans who were responsible for their families' torments. This multiculturalism was anything but liberal or rights-based: Roma were universally despised, and Jewish-Gentile accommodation was tinged with a complex mixture of fear, contempt and attraction. Hitler and Stalin tried to smash this complex pattern of "live and let live" into pieces and now democratic authoritarians in Central and Eastern Europe seem determined to lock Poland and Hungary into ethno-nationalist states in which Habsburg multiculturalism will only be a nostalgic memory. This memoir is the record of a life lived with good cheer and without regret. But there is poignancy in the fate of Habsburg multiculturalism that produced Andrei Markovits. We can be grateful that he both remembers its strengths and ended up embodying its most attractive qualities: a sense of the comic and absurd, an unfailing curiosity towards others and a sharp grasp of reality, driven by an unblinking awareness that it can suddenly turn dangerous.

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