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Journey to Poland

Alfred Doblin

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#12230235 in Books 1991-12-31 Original language: German PDF # 1 9.21 x 6.14 x .0l, .0 #File Name: 1850433631300 pages | File size: 15.Mb

Alfred Doblin : Journey to Poland before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Journey to Poland:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. As the Caftan began to fray...By ReviewerI'm not crazy about travelogues (the last one I read and enjoyed was Knut Hamsun's "In Wonderland"). That disclosed, I've enjoyed enough Do?blin in the past to at least give this book a go on the strength of my previous reading of his works. "Berlin Alexanderplatz" is a tour-de-force, and some of Do?blin's other works (like "A People Betrayed") are at least important historical artifacts of a very chaotic time and place, regardless of their literary merit."Journey to Poland" is a weird mix of philosophy, eschatology, soap-boxing, and poetic musings from Do?blin, who describes his west-to-east journey from Germany into Poland in the book's pages (the borders between the two lands have always been contested, and strong tensions have always existed between the two peoples). The author's descriptions of religious icons, historical sights, and architecture really start to take on a quality of sameness that recalls Steven Spielberg's dig at Kubrick's masterwork "Barry Lyndon," that it's all a bit like spending all day at the Prado without lunch. Some of the esoteric info about the non-assimilated Jews Do?blin encounters is fascinating, as are the debates surrounding the then-nascent movement of Zionism. The problem is that for every time Do?blin allows his subjects to speak, he interjects ten times as much of himself into the travelogue. These things can be turgid enough as is (they're basically picaresques without the action or the rake/libertine element); add to that the fact that Do?blin is too solipsistic to even play "camera" and faithfully record what he sees around him (to borrow the term from John van Druten by way of

Christopher Isherwood) and we get a picture that becomes increasingly myopic at just the juncture when it feels like Do?blin would have been better served rather by widening his vistas. Ironically, the parts of the book that worked best for me seem to be when Do?blin abandons his human quarry and his mission to establish a link with his less assimilated Jewish brethren, and he instead focuses on natural splendor or wintry barrenness, on mountains and trees and landscapes. He's not Whitman or Emerson (or a German romantic equivalent) but he has a nature poet's transcendentalist gift for losing himself (and his ego) in descriptive renderings that leave the reader breathless, and it only makes me wish there was more of such descriptions in this book. That said, the usual caveat that this is one man's opinion needs to be interjected here. Others may enjoy it quite a bit more and shouldn't let my review serve as much other than a guidepost for the book's contents. I wouldn't recommend "Journey" except for those with a strong interest in Judaica and a keen interest in the moment just before an entire metaphysical framework was steamrolled by the progression of Panzer tanks that followed the same general course as Do?blin, although they came as conquerors and not travelers.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An amazing document of a disappeared world
By Witold
An amazing document of a disappeared world! - There are not many books that talk about the Jewish Poland, the German Poland, the Ukrainian Poland, the Austrian Poland, the Lithuanian Poland and the Polish Poland when they all existed together at one time after the First World War. Readers usually get to read about a one kind of Poland, the one they personally identify with. This book attempts to give a whole picture of a newly reborn country, a country dealing with countless problems, the extreme poverty just one of them. Naturally, as Doblin had no access to internet, there are many factual errors; the misspellings of Polish names are countless and often border on the ridiculous. The writer tries not to be too judgmental and looks at everything with a sympathetic eye, or at least he is trying to understand everything from a different perspective. The overwhelming sadness of this book is something only the reader is aware of (and not the author) as just not even 20 years later this entire cultural landscape was forever erased by the barbarity of the Nazis.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Visiting German Jew Affirms the Strong Otherness of Poland's pre-WWII Jews. Polish "Civic Nationalism" An Impractical Idea
By Jan Peczkis
Author Alfred Döblin (Doblin, Doeblin) was a German Jew who had grown up in Stettin. (p. xiv). He travelled across the newly-resurrected Poland in 1924, and spent much time with Poland's Jews. Döblin's book, originally published in German in 1925 (p. ix) under the title REISE IN POLEN, is hereby translated into English and published in 1991. All in all, Döblin shows an astonishingly-good grasp of Polish history. For instance, he writes, (quote) The aphorism of 1861 is magnificent: "Under a mild regime, the Poles rise up because they can; under a strict regime, because they have to." (unquote). (p. 25). The author also has sophisticated insights into Polish-Jewish relations. I focus on a few issues of lasting interest: JEW AS THE "OTHER": A NATION-WITHIN-NATION IN SELF-IMPOSED APARTHEID
Alfred Döblin was immediately struck by the essential difference between Poland's Jews and the Jews of Weimar Germany. He writes, (quote) Three hundred fifty thousand Jews live in Warsaw, half as many as in all Germany. A small number of them are strewn across the city, the bulk reside together in the northwestern sector. They are a nation. People who only know Western Europe fail to realize this. The Jews have their own costumes, their own language, religion, manners and mores, their ancient national feeling and national consciousness. (unquote). (p. 50). IN SOME LOCATIONS, JEWS REFUSE ANY MODUS VIVENDI WITH THE NEW POLISH STATE
While in Lublin, Doeblin concluded that, (quote) During the Russian period, these two nations were on good terms. Then the Russians used the Jews against the Poles; that was the start of Polish anti-Semitism. In this city, social intercourse between the two nations is virtually nonexistent. The Orthodox Jews are powerful. They received the majority vote in the municipal elections. But the town council actually fell apart; it got into a conflict with the government because over half the councilmen spoke only Yiddish. The government demanded that at least the chairman speak Polish. But when he tried, all hell broke loose; and that was the last session. (unquote). (p. 132). JEWISH AUTHOR DÖBLIN CONCURS WITH ENDEKS: POLAND'S MINORITIES ARE MOSTLY UNASSIMILABLE
Nowadays, Poles put up with a lot of flak about the pre-WWII "exclusiveness" of Polish nationalism, particularly that of Roman Dmowski and the Endeks. Poles get moralized about the "fact" that the so-called ethnonationalism of the Endeks should have given way to an "enlightened" and "inclusive" so-called civic nationalism. Döblin knew better. He realized that large-scale assimilation of minorities, besides being incompatible with Poland's Roman Catholic culture, was not even practical in the first place. Reflecting especially on the situation in Eastern Galicia, Döblin quipped, (quote) Assimilate the Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, Jews, Germans---Poland can't do it. It's bitten off more than it can chew. America manages to assimilate, it's an open basin. The masses easily pour in, American civilization is large and enviable. Here, the rural population is uneducated to the point of illiteracy; the urban education is narrow with sharp national accents, and a powerful and rigid Catholicism. (unquote). (p. 150). EVEN POLONIZED JEWS CAN RETAIN A HOSTILITY TOWARDS POLISH PATRIOTIC TRADITIONS
Many (if not most) of Poland's Jews went to special Jewish schools, and this only accentuated their "otherness" relative to Poles and Poland. However, even the acculturated or assimilated Polish Jews, whose children went to public schools and were instructed in Polish alongside ethnic Polish children, commonly remained alien to essential Polish-ness. The following observations by Döblin, in Lodz, are revealing, (quote) The young woman who speaks to me teaches Polish and Jewish children together in a Polish school. "The little Poles are better in writing, in composition and handcrafts; but the little Jews are better in

language and comprehension.” However, the questions raised by the little Jews are dreadful; at times you’re absolutely horrified. Recently, they were talking about Jesus, when a Jewish child asked very calmly: “Did he really exist?” And the Polish children gaped and gawked. She once told them about a heroic patriotic Pole who allowed his hand to be burned off in a war with the Turks; she demonstrated that he had shown courage. A Jewish child sat there, reflecting, and then remarked: “Yes. But the Turks also showed courage.” (unquote). (p. 244). [If this boy survived the eventual German-made Holocaust, would he have made the wisecrack that, not only were the Jewish fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943) heroes, but so also were the SS units that fought them?]THE SELF-ATHEIZATION OF POLAND'S JEWS. JEWISH COMMUNISTS CANNOT BE PROFILED OR DISMISSED AS JEWISH-MARGINALAlready by the early 1920's, Poland's Jews had taken significant steps towards irreligion and atheism. Döblin writes, (quote) During the war [WWI], the religious and ethical feelings of the Eastern European Jews were weakened, the love of material things gained control. But eventually, Jewish life stabilized. (unquote). (p. 252).Nowadays, a common apologetic trope, on Jews and Communism, is the one about Jewish Communists variously being "not really Jews", "only of Jewish background", "Jews by ethnicity", "non-Jewish Jews", etc. Once again, Alfred Döblin upends this, (quote) I converse with a Zionist leader, a lively, bearded, thoroughly energetic man. He says: “...Judaism no longer has a living religious and spiritual life, a religious and spiritual movement as in the days when Hasidism was growing. Jews are becoming increasingly secular...The caftan and the capote don’t tell you much. There are Communists who wear caftans.” (unquote). (p. 58).

Fascinated by the nature of the Jewish identity, Doeblin, the author of "Berlin Alexanderplatz", a non-practising Jew in Berlin in the 1920s, decided to visit Poland to try to discover his Jewish roots. This book is a record of that journey. He describes Polish-Jewish language and tradition, the striking costumes and colourful markets, and the terrible poverty that surrounded everything. The book is both a personal investigation into ancestry and a portrait of a unique society on the eve of its destruction.

Language NotesText: English (translation) Original Language: German