

Jews in the Former Habsburg Empire: Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel, and the
Concept of Nationalism in Interwar Europe (1918-1938)

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So Count Franz Xaver Morstin had returned. But where had he returned to?...instead of greeting Lopatyny as home once more, Count Morstin threw himself into difficult and unhelpful speculation on the question of what was home. Since this village, he thought, now belongs to Poland and not Austria, can it still be said to be my home? What is home anyway?

Joseph Roth, *The Bust of the Emperor* (1935), 235.

In the past no one ever dreamt of making such a great fuss about belonging to the native soil, but now things are completely different.

Franz Werfel, *Cella* (1989), 7.

The Habsburg Empire (Austria-Hungary) provided stability for the Jews living within its borders. It was their fatherland, their place to belong. After the collapse of the empire in 1918, nation-states were established in its place. The Habsburg laws which prohibited anti-Semitism disappeared with the empire. These laws existed because the Habsburgs viewed Jews as useful because they adopted German language and culture, the dominant one in the empire.

The interwar period (1918 – 1938) in Central Europe represented the death of the multinational empire and the rise of exclusive nation-states. As a result of the rise of nation-states, Jews in the former Habsburg Empire faced an identity crisis and nostalgia for the bygone empire. They could no longer be Austrian citizens in a multinational empire where everyone had a different nationality. After World War I each nationality received its own state except the Jews. They were doomed to wandering once again. This paper seeks to articulate the phenomenon of Jewish identity crisis and nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire in the interwar period, as it is revealed in the works of two Jewish authors, Joseph Roth (1894-1939) and Franz Werfel (1890-1945), in the context of an examination of the historiography of nationalism and Jewish assimilation.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE

One must understand the long and complex history of the Habsburg lands in order to understand the consequences of its collapse. A brief summary of the Habsburg Empire's origins is in order for the reader who may not be familiar with the history. The Habsburgs attained their multinational empire and extensive lands through war and marriage. The name Habsburg comes from a German word meaning "the Castle of the Hawks."¹ The knights of this castle allied themselves with important southern German families like the Babenburgs. The eastern march (Osterreich or Austria) of Charlemagne's empire was granted to the Babenburgs in the tenth-century.² These were hereditary lands. Gradually the house of Habsburg dominated the elected office of Holy Roman Emperor. Rudolf of Habsburg is considered the first Habsburg emperor. He was elected to the throne of Holy Roman Emperor in 1273. The Habsburg dynasty held the crown of the Holy Roman Empire for over five centuries. There were also ties to France, Spain, as well as Hungary, Croatia, and Bohemia. Robert A. Kann argues in *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526 – 1918* that it was the eastern lands that really laid the foundation for the modern empire with which we are familiar. With the extinction of the Spanish Habsburg line in 1700, the Habsburgs' relationship with the Spanish empire was reduced to diplomatic and military alliances.³

¹ John W. Mason, *The Dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire 1867 – 1918* (Harlow, England: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997), 1.

² For this paper, the empire will be referred to as the Habsburg Empire. Please note that after 1867 it was called the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prior to that date it was the Austrian Empire. One may also see it referred to as the Dual Monarchy or simply the Habsburg Monarchy. Nevertheless, the Habsburg Empire is still an accurate description.

³ Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526 – 1918* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1974), 11.

The unexpected death of Louis II of Hungary in 1526 (at the battle of Mohacs against the advancing Ottoman Turks) opened the door for the succession of Ferdinand I of Habsburg to three crowns: Hungary, Croatia, and Bohemia (Czech lands). This succession was the beginning of what we know in modern history as the Habsburg Empire. The succession was possible because of a marriage arrangement. Hungary was largely anti-foreign and anti-Habsburg but with the fast approach of the Turks towards Vienna the formidable power of the Habsburgs was the only political force of its time and place which could have resisted the Turkish advance.⁴ The Habsburgs were successful in warding off the Turks in 1529 and in securing their succession to three powerful crowns in Europe, mentioned above. When the Habsburgs acquired their new crowns (Bohemia, Hungary, and Croatia), their empire was no longer mainly German in character as it had been previously. It had now become multinational. This multinational character remained until the empire's dissolution in 1918.

Despite the multinational character of their empire, the Habsburgs themselves retained their German identity. The modern centralized administration was German in character. Empress Maria Theresa (r. 1740 – 1780) had centralized the state. Previously the Habsburg lands were feudal in nature which was inefficient for the conduct of wars. In 1784 Emperor Joseph II (r. 1780 – 1790) issued the language decree which required all official business and documents in the Empire to be in German; even in the Hungarian lands. Joseph believed that this decree would serve the best interests of all his subjects.⁵ He also believed that German culture was superior to any other.⁶ Germans were in fact

⁴ Ibid., 10 – 11.

⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁶ Ibid., 186.

the leading group in the empire,⁷ as well as the largest. They were seen as cultural, political, and administrative leaders.

There were eleven nationalities living within the Habsburg realm: Germans, Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians (Ukrainian), Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, Rumanians, Magyars, Slovenes, and Italians. Not one of them comprised a majority in the empire. There were only majorities in local areas. As tables 1 and 2 show in Appendix A on page 31, the various populations were mixed together in a huge conglomeration of religions, languages, and national histories. In 1910 the population was 63.8% Roman Catholic, but Eastern Orthodox Christianity (10.5%), Greek Catholics (11.2%), and Jews (10.5%) were also well represented. In 1910 Germans comprised 23.9% of the population. Magyars (Hungarians) were in second place with 20.2%, followed by Czechs (12.6%), Poles (10.0%), and Ruthenians (7.9%). Despite the fact that they all lived under one emperor they had their own national history and identity. However, it should be emphasized that the national movements in the empire didn't develop until the late eighteenth-century, and then intensified in 1848. These nationalist movements were not desired by the Habsburgs.

Jews lived throughout the empire. However, there were high concentrations in Galicia, Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. Around 1900 Galicia's population was 11.1% Jewish. Bohemia and Moravia (Czech lands) were about 3.3% Jewish, and in Prague Jews comprised 9.4%. Vienna's Jewish population was 8.7% of the total and in Budapest it was 23.6%.⁸ The highest concentrations were east of Austria-Hungary in the Polish

⁷ Mason, 10.

⁸ Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1993), 108 – 109.

lands occupied by Prussia and Russia. In other words, there were more Jews in the east of the empire overall than in the west.

THE JEWS IN THE HABSBURG EMPIRE

The history of the Jews in the Habsburg lands dates back to the late medieval period. This was long before the establishment of the Habsburg Empire. The Catholic nature of the Holy Roman Empire as well as the Habsburg Empire resulted in their expulsion from certain areas as well as legal restrictions on dress, profession, and movement. Many of these legal restrictions were removed in the 1780's and the rest were removed in the mid nineteenth-century. As a result of their emancipation, the Jews in the Habsburg lands adopted the dominant German culture and language, and developed a strong loyalty to the emperor who had liberated them. The following section seeks to illuminate for the reader the history of Habsburg Jews.

The Greeks, Armenians, Germans, and Jews were the “immigrant developers” of modern cities in East Central Europe. They were invited by city-dwellers to settle in Central European cities in the later medieval period. Poland became the center of the largest Jewish population in Central Europe. The Kingdom of Poland welcomed the Jews who were fleeing anti-Semitism in the Holy Roman Empire in the twelfth-century. They were later encouraged to move to the lands further east which Poland had annexed in the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries: Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus. All of Poland was eventually partitioned between the Habsburg Empire, Prussia, and the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth-century. These areas became known as the Pale of Settlement. The Jews in Poland were Ashkenazic Jews. They were distinguished from other Jews by

certain forms of dress, custom, and ritual, but mainly by their spoken language, Yiddish.

Yiddish was a mix of old German, Slavic, and Hebrew.

Between 1750 and 1850 Jews from the Pale migrated to Vienna, Budapest, northeastern Hungary, and Romania. Another mass migration occurred between 1880 and 1914 to the large cities of the empire. These Jews were mainly from the province of Galicia, which was the part of Poland annexed by the Habsburgs in the late eighteenth-century. They migrated for economic and sometimes political reasons. There was also a mass migration of Jews from East Europe and Russia to the United States during this time. Galicia, along with Moldavia, became the birthplace of Hassidism, Zionism, and Yiddish literature and scholarship. This is where Joseph Roth was born. In addition, Roth was among those Jews who migrated to Vienna in 1914.

In 1669-1671, the Habsburg Emperor Leopold I expelled the Jews from Vienna. Most moved to the Czech lands.⁹ A century later, the Habsburgs began to treat their Jews a little better. In 1781 and 1782, Emperor Joseph II issued a series of decrees which removed many of the legal restrictions on the Jews in the Habsburg Empire. Because of “rabid anti-Semitism” among his subjects, Joseph II didn’t give full emancipation, but he was undoubtedly influenced by the humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment. Jews were not allowed to live outside the ghettos. His official intentions for these decrees were to make the Jews more useful to the centralized state. Some of the provisions in the decrees of 1781 and 1782 were: the removal of clothing ordinances, e.g. no longer required to wear yellow armbands; required Jews to learn German; allowed Jews to attend imperial universities; allowed Jews to engage in agriculture, as well as painting, sculpture, and

⁹ William O. McCagg, Jr., *A History of Habsburg Jews 1670 – 1918* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1.

other liberal arts. Joseph II established schools for Jews with German as the language of instruction. Under the terms of their emancipation Jews in the Habsburg lands pursued German assimilation.

An excellent article which examines the phenomenon of Jewish assimilation into the German culture is “Jews in German Society: Prague 1860 – 1914” written by Gary B. Cohen. His article is a case study of Jews in Prague in the last fifty years of the existence of the Habsburg Empire. According to Cohen, Prague offers an instructive locale for analyzing the movement of Jews into German culture and society in the late nineteenth-century.¹⁰ He argues that the Jews of the Austrian western provinces had much in common with the Jews in Germany, they lived in higher concentrations than in Western Europe, and they sought entry into Gentile society to a much greater degree than did the Polish and Russian Jews.¹¹ Furthermore, Cohen adds that Prague offers ample evidence for studying the integrative processes (assimilation), since Jewish settlement in the city dates back at least to the early tenth-century.¹²

In 1859-60 the last restrictions on Jewish movement and residence were removed and in-migration, meaning moving within a province of the empire rather than from one to another, took place within Bohemia. Fertility rates among the Jews increased. The great majority of Prague Jews adopted the culture and values of the dominant German middle class in Prague, despite the fact that Germans were the minority group within Bohemia. The German language and German culture provided more opportunity than Czech culture for upward social mobility. Cohen goes on to say that the Jews could

¹⁰ Gary B. Cohen, “Jews in German Society: Prague, 1860 – 1914,” Central European History 10, no. 3 (March 1997): 30.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

identify more easily with German rather than Czech culture. Jews were historically excluded from the Czech guilds and so could not identify with small craftsmen. In contrast, Bohemian Jews most often were self-employed professionals who identified with German Liberal Party. They were most often middle class. This party remained in power in Vienna until 1879, and remained even longer in Prague. The German Jews openly supported the goals for which the liberal middle class Germans stood: the primacy of the German middle class in a centralized Austria, civil and economic libertarianism, and the removal of clerical influence from politics and public education.¹³ The German Jews in Prague simply expected to be respected as a distinct religious group and would not tolerate anti-Semitic attitudes. Conversion rates out of Judaism remained low in Prague compared to Vienna where anti-Semitism and Catholic piety remained high.

Although Prague Jews assimilated to the German culture in all aspects of public life, their private lives remained separate. Despite the fact that Jews were no longer restricted to the ghettos they still preferred to live with other Jews in Jewish neighborhoods. In addition, marriages between Jews and non-Jews remained low. It ought to be pointed out that some Jews in Prague did align with the Czechs. This was usually a matter of class and not religion (Czechs were Catholic, Germans were Protestant). Poorer Jews aligned with poorer Czechs, because Germans were seen as prestigious elite.

The Jews in Prague found respect and acceptance among the German Liberal associations and clubs. They were a significant part of the business world which the German middle class dominated. The Jews had every reason to align with the Germans and support the monarchy. Indeed, Marsha L. Rozenblit asserts that the German-speaking

¹³ Ibid., 46.

Jews of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period experienced the crisis of the collapse of Habsburg Austria most acutely.¹⁴ She goes on to say that it was a natural response for Jews everywhere to mourn the passing of the Habsburg Monarchy.¹⁵ This shows that the Jews in the former Habsburg lands obviously felt that they had lost something: their fatherland; a place to belong. With the Habsburg Empire gone, would they still be accepted in the new society of independent nation-states? How would they cope with the increased anti-Semitism without the legal protection of the Habsburg Empire?

With their final emancipation in 1860, Jews in the Habsburg Empire felt free to associate with the Christian nationalities in civil society and commit themselves to the empire. Their value of education and hard work and their relative wealth made them eager contributors to the culture of Central Europe. William O. McCagg, Jr. explains in his book *A History of Habsburg Jews 1670-1918* that his study is not just a history of the Habsburg Jews, but a mirror of the Habsburg middle class.¹⁶ Jews were a consistent bourgeois element, according to McCagg. Indeed, the most prolific authors of the interwar era in Europe were Jewish. Jews have been consistently important contributors to the arts. The role of the Jews in culture is best expressed by the Czech author, Milan Kundera when he writes, “Jews in the 20th century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe. They were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in ed. Gale Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 221.

After the collapse of the empire this intellectual cement in fact felt as if the mortar between the bricks of its home had melted away. McCagg addresses the Jewish reaction to the disintegration of the empire. There was widespread panic among the upper class Jews following the collapse of the empire according to McCagg. The Habsburg state had provided increased stability for Jews, and now that state was gone. In 1920, upper class Jews joined the Magyars in Hungary in the “restorationist” regime in exchange for protection.¹⁸ McCagg also mentions mass conversions out of Judaism among the upper class following the collapse. In contrast, the middle class Jews developed a heightened Jewish consciousness. Jewish national councils sprang up. Their leaders were mainly doctors, which were unmistakably from the middle class.¹⁹ McCagg does mention a few authors in connection with a “Habsburg nationalist identity crisis”²⁰ during the interwar period. Roth is among the ones he mentions, but he does not go into any detailed analysis.

Cohen’s study of the Jews in Prague addresses why Jews chose to adopt German culture, even in areas like Bohemia where Germans were the minority. Cohen also mentions some Jewish writers like Franz Kafka and Max Brod who portray the middle class German Jews as a minority within a minority in their writings; rejected by both middle class Czechs and middle class Germans. Cohen believes Kafka’s and Brod’s interpretation to be incorrect.²¹ His reason is that Jews were in fact accepted by middle class German Liberals as his research shows.

¹⁸ McCagg, 221.

¹⁹ Ibid., 219.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 31.

THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

The Habsburg Monarchy's failure to find a permanent solution to the nationality question contributed to the collapse of the empire. This problem had been a persistent one since 1526, and had become more acute after the revolutions of 1848 and after the Ausgleich in 1867.²² At the time of the revolutions of 1848 Frantisek Palacky, a Czech nationalist, argued for equal rights of all nations in the empire as well as for the empire's continuance. His main argument for the preservation of the empire was that it was necessary to provide defense for all the smaller nations against the Russian Empire to the east.²³ His reasons for supporting the monarchy are entirely practical. Palacky admits to serving the interests of his nation. Indeed, the Czech national movement was one of the most prevalent and active in the years leading up to World War I. Palacky viewed the Habsburg Empire as security against a Russian threat, and similarly the Jews viewed the empire as security against the nationalist groups within the empire. No other nationality within the empire understood the nationality and minority problems which the empire faced more acutely than the Jews. The writings of Joseph Roth and Franz Werfel, both Habsburg Jews until the collapse of the empire in 1918, exemplify the identity crisis and Jewish nostalgia for the former empire that the Jews had seen as their homeland.

Historians have been theorizing for decades "what is a nation?" There are several definitions offered and also much debate over these definitions. What must a group have

²² Ausgleich or Compromise of 1867: This change in the relationship between Austria and Hungary started as a lawful, peaceful revolution in 1848 which made Hungary a constitutional hereditary monarchy linked to Austria only through the Habsburg Emperor, Franz Joseph I. This put the Magyar ruling class of Hungary on equal footing with the German Habsburg dynasty. Previously, the Habsburgs had seen Hungary as a mere province of their empire, but now they were indeed equal partners. Hungary's national minorities (such as Slovenes and Ruthenians) were unhappy with this arrangement. They feared that their rights would not be protected and wanted the same autonomy as Hungary. They revolted and took up arms against the Hungarians on the side of the Austrian forces.

²³ Alfred J. Bannan and Achilles Edelenyi, *Documentary History of Eastern Europe* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), 147.

in order to be considered a nation? Ernest Gellner offers a possible definition for a nation. In order to be considered a nation a group must have will and culture.²⁴ In other words, there must be common consent among the people to be a part of this group and they must share a common culture. It sounds logical, but Gellner argues that this definition simply does not hold up. He points out that people have always been in groups of one kind or another throughout history, whether they are family groups, tribal groups, guilds, etc. As far as culture is concerned, Gellner argues that cultural lines are sometimes sharp and sometimes fuzzy. Furthermore, if nations really have existed for centuries upon centuries (as many nationalists claim) then Gellner argues that the agrarian world of our ancestors simply could not have been so neat.²⁵ This type of differentiation didn't converge with political boundaries. Indeed, Gellner turns the original question on its head by asserting that it is nationalism which engenders nations and not the other way around.²⁶ Nations, he claims, can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism²⁷, which has been within the last 200 years.

Gellner attributes this phenomenon to the pervasive high cultures of formalized education and literary language. This came with the process of modernization.

The argument of Gellner which states that there have not always been nations is echoed by E.J Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm observes that language has often been a rallying point for groups claiming nationhood. But he claims that this has not always been so. Only within the last decades of the 19th century did it become so. It was in fact a new invention, a new criterion for nationalism.

²⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1983), 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

How did Habsburg Jews respond to nationalist movements springing up all around them in the empire? Jews, for the most part, supported the Habsburgs and the Habsburg state. Perhaps their lack of indigenous territory prevented them from developing a national consciousness. All the other nationalist movements within the empire also had territorial claims. The Jews had none. They were committed to the larger idea of the Habsburg Empire. However, territory is not a necessary criterion for nationhood. Indeed, Benedict Anderson writes that a nation is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.²⁸ Anderson uses the word limited to mean that if a nation does claim territory then that territory has finite boundaries. Territory is not a requirement for nationhood, however. And so “limited” can also mean some other type of boundary. An individual who perceives himself to be a part of a nation also perceives that there are some individuals who do not belong to the same nation as himself. This is another form of “limit”, which can be defined by language, religion, culture, etc.

ROTH and WERFEL: THEIR PERSPECTIVE

The concept of nationalism was definitely on the minds of Joseph Roth and Franz Werfel. There are common themes in the work of both authors. One of these is nationalism and their apparent puzzlement over the whole thing. Other prominent themes that they have in common are sentiment for the lost Habsburg Empire and its beloved Emperor Franz Joseph, and anti-Semitism in Europe. Both Roth and Werfel are celebrated authors and their works are very significant.

Joseph Roth was a Jew born in Brody, Galicia in 1894 in what is now Poland. He was educated at Lvov in Poland. He moved to Vienna in 1914 (part of the mass migration

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

of Galician Jews at that time) and served in the Austro-Hungarian army. Roth was a loyal subject to the Habsburg Empire and a journalist by trade. Since he wrote in German he took to writing for German language newspapers after the war. He published novellas in series in newspapers which were later compiled into complete works. He became a communist for a time, disillusioned by war and the plight of the Habsburg Jews: the loss of a fatherland. However, one of his translators claims that this was merely a mask for his true (yet out of date) royalist beliefs. In 1933 he moved to Paris in anticipation of a Nazi takeover of Austria. The limits of this study do not permit an extensive analysis of the full body of Roth's works, although they are rich with insight into the confusing world of post-World War I Central Europe. However, for the purposes of this paper I have chosen three samples of his work which address some of the common themes experienced by Habsburg Jewry after World War I. They are *The Bust of the Emperor*, *The Wandering Jews*, and *The Emperor's Tomb*.

The Bust of the Emperor addresses themes like nationalism, the question of what is home, and his love for the old emperor. Written in 1935, it is the story of a rather influential Count Franz Xaver Morstin from Galicia, who loves the Emperor Franz Joseph. He is delighted when he is able to host His Majesty at his own estate in Poland while the army is doing maneuvers in the Count's hometown. He owns a bronze bust of the Emperor which he displays outside his stately home. The Count faithfully responds to the call to arms during World War I. When he returns home he is bewildered to know that not only is his beloved emperor dead, but his beloved Austria is also dead. When he takes a trip to Switzerland he is enraged to learn that people have such disrespect for the empire he loved and can't help still loving. He returns home once again and buries his

prized bust of the emperor which was a fixture outside his home in what is now Poland.

This story is a reflection of Roth's own experience and feelings after the collapse of the empire. Roth himself loved the emperor, went to war for the emperor, and, like the Count, had to come to terms with the fact that Franz Joseph and the empire were dead.

Roth pours himself, his feelings, his ideas, and his arguments, into each one of his characters. His prose is engaging. He always takes the time to describe the way his characters look and feel. Through his characters Roth seems to be embittered by the collapse of the empire, but also saddened. *The Emperor's Tomb*, which he wrote in 1938, is narrated by a Slovene named Trotta who is reflecting on the past. Trotta's hometown, Sipolje, no longer exists. It was destroyed by war. The novel is mostly a flashback to a time just prior to the First World War. Roth foreshadows the coming war and the doom of the empire when he writes, "Death folded his hands above the goblets from which we drank. We did not see him, did not see his hands."²⁹ He uses this and similar phrases frequently in this novel. This of course means the coming death of Emperor Franz Joseph as well as the death of the Habsburg Empire. Roth constantly talks about the coming death. He is obsessed with death in this book. It seems he uses a metaphor for death every chance he gets. Trotta's voice is Roth's voice in this novel. It is too genuine to be a fictional character. Roth poured his feelings into his characters. Another character, Count Chojnicki, praises Galician Jews and their talent. Chojnicki remarks that, "My Galician Jews are capable of everything."³⁰ He therefore helps a young Galician Jew from the town of Zlotogrod get into the Konservatorium for studying the violin. I do suspect that

²⁹ Joseph Roth, *The Emperor's Tomb*, trans. John Hoare (Woodstock, N.Y: The Overlook Press, 1984), 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

Roth is displaying some pride in his birthplace. Roth is from Galicia and seems to be quite proud of this fact.

Roth observed the collapse of the empire, daily life, and politics and wrote about all of it. He touches on several different themes in *The Emperor's Tomb*, which were no doubt prominent in the minds of the Habsburg Jews at the time. Some of these themes were active anti-Semitism; the war and its results; and his love for the defunct Habsburg Empire. Roth's feelings about the results of the First World War are evident when he writes, "...long after the Great War which is now, in my opinion, rightly called the World War, not only because the whole world was involved in it but also because, as a result of it, we each lost a world, our own world."³¹ Roth's love and faith in the empire is revealed in such phrases as, "...I speak of the misunderstood and also misused power of the old Monarchy which worked in such a way that I was just as much at home in Zlotogrod as I was in Sipolje or Vienna."³² Count Franz Xaver Morstin echoes this sentiment by saying, "Since this village, he thought, now belongs to Poland and not Austria, can it still be said to be my home?"³³ In these passages Roth is expressing the fact that the empire had provided stability and continuity throughout a very diverse territory.

Roth is bitter. Apparently in his mind it was someone's fault that the empire fell. He blames, or rather one of his characters does, the Germans for bringing down the Habsburg Empire. Specifically, he feels that it was the Social Democrats from Germany who were responsible. Roth even makes mention of communism in this story. The young Galician Jew dies for communism: a rebel who took up arms and was shot in the

³¹ Ibid., 38.

³² Ibid., 38 – 39.

³³ *The Collected Stories of Joseph Roth*, 235.

Revolution in Austria.³⁴ In the last pages of the book Trotta remarks, “I still belonged to a palpably vanished world, a world in which it seemed plain that a people exists to be ruled and that, therefore, if it wishes to continue being a people, it cannot rule itself.”³⁵ From this statement it is undeniable that Roth was indeed a royalist, a supporter of the Habsburg Monarchy. He could not escape this identity; and this was almost tragic. Roth knew that conservatism had no place in a world of nation-states. Trotta expresses feelings of being obsolete and “extra-territorial”. How fitting this description is. Austria was considered a supranational empire. Jews were considered a nation without a territory. In the world of nation-states which succeeded the Habsburg Empire, Jews had no state. What was even worse was that the nature of states had changed. It was no longer desirable for states to be multinational. You had to claim a nationality. The Habsburgs only required that a subject claim Austrian citizenship. Your nationality was your own business. From reading these chapters the reader can tell that Roth valued the common culture, stability, order, and governing body which the empire represented.

In his book *The Wandering Jews*, Roth deals with the concept of nationalism and the Habsburg Jews quite extensively. His view is clear when he comments that “...nationality is a Western concept.”³⁶ Roth considers states to the west of the former Habsburg lands the west. Mainly he refers to France and Britain. He wrote this piece in sections throughout the 1920’s. It was first published in 1927, while Roth was still living in Vienna. He later moved to Paris where he died in 1939. Roth is an excellent commentator on the nationality question as seen by the Jews. Although he never comes

³⁴ For more information about the political scene of interwar Austria see: C.A Macartney and A.W Palmer, *Independent Eastern Europe: A History* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1962), 198 – 207.

³⁵ Roth, *The Emperor’s Tomb*, 153.

³⁶ Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York and London: W.W Norton and Co., 2001), 15.

out and says that he himself is a Jew, he is not shy about telling the truth he sees about the lives of his fellow Jews in Europe and Soviet Russia. An Eastern Jew from Galicia, Roth seems to have bitterness towards the West. In *The Wandering Jews* he writes, “The Eastern Jew looks to the West with a longing that it really doesn’t merit.”³⁷ He explains that the West is too refined, however modern and advanced. He complains that the Eastern Jew fails to see the beauty in his own homeland and the decent coarseness of the Slav people.³⁸ He prefers this decency over the “house trained animality of the Western European.”³⁹ Roth observes that while there are laws in the West prohibiting anti-Semitism, a Jew is still a Jew. A Jew is treated differently; never equally.

Roth also explained how Orthodox Eastern Jews cannot be nationalists. Jewish nationalists (Zionists) are the Jews who have largely given up their Jewishness in favor of a European idea called nationalism. Of Orthodox Eastern Jews Roth writes, “He (the Orthodox Jew) detests the Zionist, who uses ridiculous European methods to try to set up a Judaism that doesn’t deserve the name, because it won’t abide the coming of the Messiah....”⁴⁰ Jews are supposed to wait on God for their deliverance; the Messiah who will finally free them of their oppression. By striving for their own state, they are not trusting God to provide.

Roth recognized the increasing anti-Semitism throughout Europe. The Habsburg Empire’s laws against anti-Semitism left with its collapse. Roth recognized that it would only get worse for Jews in Germany. He speaks of nationality as a Western European

³⁷Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, 5.

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30 – 31.

invention.⁴¹ He writes, “The will of several million people is already enough to form a “nation”, even if it has not existed before.”⁴² Roth was bitter about the fact that Jews conformed to this. He feels like the Jews just jumped on the band wagon with all the other nationalities of the former Habsburg Empire with their new nation-states. Roth then comments, “National self-determination was the battle cry all over Europe, and Jews took it up as well.”⁴³ He therefore concludes that, “Zionism is really the only way out: if one must be patriotic, then at least let it be for a country of one’s own.”⁴⁴ Jews never had to pledge loyalty to a nation before, just a state.

Another important theme that Roth addresses in this book is that the Jews are wanderers by nature; hence the title of his book. They have been wandering for thousands of years; always ready to flee at a moment’s notice. He really addresses the subject of wandering in his chapter about Jewish emigrants to America: “It’s not America that frightens him, it’s the ocean.”⁴⁵ The Jews have a history of fleeing from this or that enemy. The Jews of interwar Europe were no different. Why is he afraid of the ocean? Roth explains, “Where can he run to, if something happens?...he has been fleeing for thousands of years... Might there not be a pogrom on a ship? Then what?”⁴⁶ Roth was trying to make the point that Jews have never really had a true homeland like the many other nationalities in Europe. They seem to be fated to a life of constant movement with no true home. The Habsburg fatherland provided a pause in this perpetual wandering.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴² Ibid., 9.

⁴³ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 98.

With the advent of new nation-states all the inhabitants of the former Habsburg Empire became identified by their nationality. Roth speaks of the endless “papers” that a Jewish immigrant had to acquire in order to be a legal resident of whatever European country in the event that he chose to move. This was new to Habsburg Jews because they didn’t think of themselves as having Polish, German, or Czech “nationality”. That was only the culture which they chose to adopt. Previously their citizenship had been Austrian under Habsburg rule. Their ethnic/religious identity was Jewish.⁴⁷ But in the interwar period former Habsburg subjects had to claim a nationality. It was the age of nation-states.

After analyzing these three works by Roth, one can make three general conclusions. The first is that Roth was very much aware of the anti-Semitism which was present throughout the former Habsburg lands after World War I. Anti-Semitism had actually always existed in the empire. The difference was that after the collapse of the empire the new nation-states could make their own laws regarding the Jews. Previously, the Habsburg laws had prohibited anti-Semitism. This gave Jews security. After the security of the Habsburg laws vanished anti-Semitism became more socially acceptable. He also understood the danger that the Nazi party posed to the Jews, especially after Germany (which he still called Prussia) annexed Austria in 1938. Indeed, he left his beloved Vienna and moved to Paris in 1933 in anticipation of a Nazi takeover of Austria in the future. Secondly, we can also appreciate Roth’s loyalty to Austria and its emperor, even after they had vanished from the earth. He was sorry that it happened, and wished that it hadn’t happened. As a result of the collapse of the empire, Roth faced a

⁴⁷ Idea from Rozenblit, 129.

bewildering identity crisis, which is reflected in his story “The Bust of the Emperor.” He himself pondered the question, “What is home anyway?”⁴⁸

Thirdly, we recognize Roth’s overall mood in his stories. His writings always seem to have a certain gloom about them. He never seems to indulge in jokes or anything lighthearted. Roth is also cynical. He expresses these feelings through his characters. Even twenty years after the collapse, when he wrote *The Emperor’s Tomb*, he was still depressed over the whole thing. This depression is revealed in the pitiful character, Trotta.

Trotta, like Roth, knew that the empire was lost and the emperor was dead. He knew that his world would never be the same again, and yet he longed for it to be so. He longed in vain. The new world of nation-states was confusing, bewildering, and irrational in his eyes. And so our protagonist Trotta returns to the tomb of his emperor. There is his security, his home, his identity, his clarity of purpose, his foundation, his rock. But like a rock, it is lifeless and will never be alive.

Like Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel was another Jewish author who expressed sentiment for the lost empire and his beloved emperor. Nationalism was also a theme that he addressed. Werfel also explored what it meant to him to be Jewish. Franz Werfel was born in Prague in 1890. His father was a wealthy glove manufacturer. Werfel taught at the University of Leipzig until he was called to the Russian front during World War I. His first success was as a lyric poet and received praise from the famous Prague poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Werfel moved to France in 1938 where he wrote his popular novel *Embezzled Heaven*. He was forced to leave France in 1940 when the country fell to the Nazis. He and his wife, Alma, moved to Hollywood. Werfel’s only son had died years

⁴⁸ *The Collected Stories of Joseph Roth*, 235.

before, a premature birth. Alma had a daughter from a previous marriage, Manon, who died in 1935. Werfel adored the girl as if she were his own. Manon occupied his thoughts long after her death. A character in one of Werfel's unfinished novels, *Cella*, is based on Manon. Werfel died in 1945.

According to the foreword by Otto Friedrich, *Cella* has two main themes: Werfel's love for a daughter which was not his own, and his effort to escape the fate of being a Jew.⁴⁹ While I believe these to be strong themes, the concept of nationalism and a strong loyalty to Austria are also important themes in this book. *Cella* is unfinished; it ends in the middle of a chapter. Friedrich explains that Werfel's reason for this was that it was "overtaken by events."⁵⁰ Events like Anschluss, and the active persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. What he was writing about was no longer fiction; it was real. Werfel sets the novel in 1938. In other words, he was writing about events as they were happening. The main character, who is Jewish, experiences persecution and deportation from his beloved Austria. Ironically when the Nazis came to power in 1933, Werfel signed a declaration of loyalty to the new regime. He also applied to the Nazi-run Writers Association. He described himself as a "member of the German minority in Czechoslovakia."⁵¹ Friedrich attributes Werfel's self-description to a "deferential acquiescence that had brought Jews out of the ghettos."⁵² Friedrich believes that Jews were trying to deny their origins at this point in European history and they were totally dedicated to assimilation. This is only partially true. It is true that Habsburg Jews, for the most part, chose to assimilate to German culture, but according to Cohen they still

⁴⁹ Otto Friedrich, in Franz Werfel, *Cella*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1989), vi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵² *Ibid.*, ix.

insisted on being respected as a distinct religious group in Prague. However, in Vienna anti-Semitism was more prevalent and the conversion rate among Jews was higher.

In Werfel's novel, *Cella*, the main character, Hans Bodenheim, who is a Jew, is dedicated to preserving Austria as a state independent from Germany. Bodenheim is a member of the Iron Ring, a veterans' association for members of the old Austro-Hungarian army. Bodenheim's colleagues put him in charge of circulating a petition which is to be given to the Austrian chancellor. Werfel never indicates what the petition is for, but it is implied that it was intended to ask that Austria resist the Anschluss with military force. Bodenheim spent weeks gathering signatures and felt that he was "making a desperate attempt to save our country."⁵³ While Werfel never specifically spells out the word Jew, he doesn't hide the fact that Bodenheim is a Jew. Indeed, throughout his life, Werfel was dedicated to the idea that the common humanity of all people mattered most, and not the differences between Jews and Christians.

Werfel very early on in his novel, *Cella*, comments on the peculiarity of nationalism: "In the past, no one ever dreamt of making such a great fuss about belonging to the native soil. But now things are completely different."⁵⁴ Werfel also appears to refer to his army days in the service of the emperor when Bodenheim states, "The happiest time of my life: the war." Bodenheim recalls when he was decorated by the Kaiser (emperor) in person. He was so proud. Werfel makes a reference to the fact that in some cases Jews were actually already in the Habsburg lands before some of the native peoples came in the medieval period. Bodenheim and his wife have an exchange about growing anti-Semitism and their need to leave Austria. His wife believes that they should leave

⁵³ Franz Werfel, *Cella*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1989), 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

before it becomes impossible, and he stubbornly wants to remain in his beloved Austria. Werfel in fact did flee Austria for France in real life. There are also expressions of love for the old empire and the and the Habsburgs in this novel. One character remarks, “I am a Habsburg to the core! True unto Death!”⁵⁵

Werfel began writing *Cella* in 1938; five months after Hitler’s Anschluss had incorporated Austria into the German Reich. Werfel definitely sensed the growing resentment and hatred toward the Habsburg Jews at this time, especially coming from the Germans. Bodenheim remarks, “Ever since German despotism passed those cruel laws, I have become more of an Austrian patriot than ever.”⁵⁶ Obviously he had gotten over his loyalty to the new Nazi regime by the time he wrote this novel. Werfel expresses trust in the Austrian people, even though the Austrians are ethnically German and desired annexation to Germany up until about 1938. His trust is revealed: “The Austrians”, says Bodenheim, “are not obsessed barbarians, they’re good people.”⁵⁷

According to Werfel, it is not nationalism but a new ideology which really seems to be permeating the borders of Austria and threatening her integrity. The new ideology was that of a superior race which was destined to take over the world. This is evident in an exchange between Bodenheim and his Jewish friend Herr von Weil. The two men are sitting on a bench in the park when they observe a group of young people walking past them. Werfel writes, “Their faces showed secretive contempt. They all wore shorts and white stockings. Everyone knew that those white stockings signified a certain political belief.”⁵⁸ Then Bodenheim remarks, “You must admit that this bunch does not have the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 22 – 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 29.

slightest pretense to any sort of nationalism. Their fathers were Croats, Czechs, Hungarians, Turks, and goodness knows what else.” Weil pipes in, “Who is talking about nationalism...once these people have conquered the entire world, they will be more international than any Communist world revolutionary has ever dreamt.”⁵⁹ Weil then proceeds to elaborate on his view of the current state of events. Weil says that the white stockings have “the collective drive” and “hostility toward individual personality.” Weil continues by saying, “Always the same type: slender, handsome, muscular, with blank eyes, a small skull, an activist chin, and glittering cinema teeth. Swimming, jumping, running, boxing, motorized from A to Z! All alike.” It can be deduced that the “white stockings” are fascists; Nazi sympathizers; Aryans. Weil explains that it is the turn of the white-stocking species to conquer the earth and remold it.⁶⁰ One can interpret this description as German nationalism mixed with the ideology of world domination by the Aryan race. Weil argues that *we* (the Jews) cannot be remolded; only killed or driven away. Bodenheim retorts, “But things have not yet reached that pass, thank goodness. Our Austria is still here. And she lives and wants to live defending herself...I will not have anyone tell me that this is not our fatherland and that *we* cannot defend its freedom without compromising that freedom. We should therefore think of the fight rather than a destruction which must not come.”⁶¹

The last chapters are particularly haunting. Werfel describes Bodenheim along with other Jews being herded into trains to concentration camps.⁶² At this point, Werfel is not afraid to use the word Jew. The terrible reality that the Germans were killing Jews

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 32.

⁶² Ibid., 207.

came crashing down on Bodenheim, and probably on Werfel himself. It was the clash between Germans and Jews; between nationalism and a stateless nation which was standing in the way of German expansion. Werfel was terribly bewildered as a Jew. Bodenheim thinks to himself, "Israel is not a nation, Israel is an order of the blood, which one enters by birth, involuntarily."⁶³ This is the conclusion that Werfel comes to at the end of his novel, *Cella*. In the end, Bodenheim doesn't really seem bitter about the collapse of the Empire, but rather the fact that he is a Jew and can't escape it. In the last pages Bodenheim says "You were not burdened with an invisible sack of coal right at birth...My self-confidence was strangled at the very beginning. It could not be cured even by the Kaiser and by having my name in the military roll of honor."⁶⁴ It seems here that Bodenheim, as well as Werfel, was coming to the realization that the age of empires was over. The emperor could no longer offer protection from the forces of nationalism and that was dangerous for Jews in the former Habsburg lands.

After analyzing his words we can come to three basic conclusions about Werfel. One is that he believed that nationalism was quite odd and different from the empire he was used to. Yet it was a powerful thing in the hands of the Nazis. Secondly, it is clear that he still harbored sentiments for the empire, and the independent state of Austria. Lastly we can see that his Jewish identity seems to have been less important to him, and indeed it seems that he was trying to escape it. It was a burden to him. Being Jewish was that "invisible sack of coal"; an involuntary order of the blood.

Roth always mentions a Jew in his stories. They are integral parts, or at least mentioned in the story. Roth is not afraid to use the word, Jew. Werfel felt compelled to

⁶³ Ibid., 214.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 242.

use euphemisms and avoided using the word Jew. However, neither of them come out and says that they themselves are Jewish. Roth also seems a little less shy about writing about Habsburg Jews. He's not ashamed of Eastern Jews, no matter what the world believes about them.

Roth and Werfel's personal experiences in the late 1930's were different. Werfel was in Vienna right up until 1938 when the Anschluss took place. Roth had fled to France years before in 1933 when Hitler first came to power. Werfel was loyal to the new regime for a time. Indeed, he was most likely embracing his chosen German heritage by declaring loyalty to the new regime. His Jewish heritage was less important to him, and yet it became a burden to him. It was the feature that everyone noticed. His books were burned by the Nazis because their author was Jewish. However, both authors experienced World War I and they both fought for the empire. Both Werfel and Roth express sentiment for their army days through the characters in their fictional works. The Habsburg Empire was important to both of them. It was their fatherland. However, Roth seems to be more sentimental about the past empire, while Werfel seems more willing to defend the Austrian state from Germany.

Werfel doesn't mention Prague, but Roth mentions Galicia frequently. Roth seems to have a great deal of pride in the Jews from Galicia. Werfel is indifferent to Prague. In Vienna the German Liberal Party was defeated in 1879, anti-Semitism grew and the Vienna Jews were left to find a new identity. Assimilation had failed. This does not seem to be the case in Prague. Werfel and Roth both lived in Vienna for a good part of their lives and then in exile. They probably both experienced this anti-Semitism that had become so prevalent in Vienna post 1880. They both had Vienna in common. It was

their home at some point in their lives. After the war Roth became a communist, or at least used it as a mask as Hofmann asserts. Werfel was loyal to the Austrian state after the empire fell. He fled to France and then to America only to save his own life.

CONCLUSION

The literary sources from Roth and Werfel which we have discussed mention World War I, the war's aftermath, sentiments for the old empire, nationalism, etc. One may argue that this was simply because the collapse and the war were recent events, still vivid in the minds of everyone in Europe. While this probably is a factor, I would also say that the common themes we see in two different authors' works reflect something deeper. It pierced their souls. Roth and Werfel's writing definitely confirm Rozenblit's statement that it was a natural response for Jews everywhere to mourn the passing of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁶⁵ Roth confirms this with a quote from *The Emperor's Tomb*: "...long after the Great War which is now, in my opinion, rightly called the World War, not only because the whole world was involved in it but also because, as a result of it, we each lost a world, our own world."⁶⁶

Why did Habsburg Jews even care about the Habsburg Empire and its collapse? One reason was that they had adopted German language and culture. According to Cohen and his case study of Prague the great majority of Prague Jews adopted the culture and values of the dominant German middle class in Prague, despite the fact that Germans were the minority group within Bohemia. The German language and German culture provided more opportunity than Czech culture for upward social mobility. Cohen goes on to say that the Jews could identify more easily with German rather than Czech culture.

⁶⁵ Rozenblit, 138.

⁶⁶ Roth, *The Emperor's Tomb*, 38.

Bohemian Jews most often were self-employed professionals who identified with German Liberal Party. This identified them as middle class. Both Roth and Werfel wrote in German which reflects Cohen's conclusion that Jews assimilated to German culture in all aspects of public life. Furthermore, Werfel himself was a Prague Jew like the ones examined in Cohen's case study.

The simple fact that Roth and Werfel were writers indicates that they were a part of the intellectual middle class, as discussed by Cohen. McCagg explains that his study is not just a history of the Habsburg Jews, but a mirror of the Habsburg middle class.⁶⁷ Jews were a consistent bourgeois element, according to McCagg. Indeed, the most prolific authors of the interwar era in Europe were Jewish. Roth and Werfel were just two of them.

Milan Kundera's assertion that "Jews in the 20th century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe. They were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity"⁶⁸, is proven by Roth and Werfel's contributions to literature. What's more convincing is that Kundera was referring to Jews of interwar Central Europe when he wrote his article. What all this means is that the Jews had a stake in this society of the Habsburg Empire. It mattered to them. They *believed* in it. They felt that they were a part of it. That's why they faced identity crisis, nostalgia, and a sense of loss after the collapse of the empire.

After analyzing the works of Roth and Werfel in this context we can come to three conclusions. The first is that after 1918 nation-states took over East Central and Central Europe. This represented the death of multinational empire and the triumph of

⁶⁷ McCagg, 4.

⁶⁸ Kundera, 221.

exclusive nation-states. The second is that Jews saw the Habsburg Empire as their fatherland; a place to belong. Therefore, they faced identity crisis following the empire's collapse. Finally, Jews had no nation-state in Europe to identify with, and were therefore forced to wander once again in the interwar period.

Roth and Werfel were struggling with a new Europe filled with nation-states – a concept peculiar to Habsburg Jews. Out of all the authors mentioned in the historiography of nationalism above, Roth and Werfel seem to best support Anderson's claim that a nation is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.⁶⁹ Roth asserts in *The Wandering Jews* that, "The will of several million people is already enough to form a "nation", even if it has not existed before."⁷⁰ Werfel confirms that nationalism is both an invented and modern concept when he writes, "In the past, no one ever dreamt of making such a great fuss about belonging to the native soil. *But now* things are completely different."⁷¹

These Jewish authors took to writing after the collapse to express their feelings or perhaps just to make it all make sense for them. This is not to say that they didn't write before 1918, but their best works were written thereafter. They couldn't let go of the imperial past and yet they knew they had to. They still believed in the image of the old emperor, their war medals, and Austria. The reality of the world was no longer multinational empires, but exclusive nation-states. Their Habsburg fatherland and Habsburg identity were trampled under the foot of nationalism, and they were forced to live with the question, what is home anyway?

⁶⁹ Anderson, 6.

⁷⁰ Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, 9.

⁷¹ Werfel, 7.

Appendix A

Table 1: Nationalities in the Habsburg Empire, 1910:

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Germans | 23.9% |
| Magyars | 20.2% |
| Czechs | 12.6% |
| Slovaks | 3.8% (estimate) |
| Croats | 5.3% |
| Serbs | 3.8% |
| Mohammedan Serbo-Croats in Bosnia-Hercegovina | 1.2% (estimate) |
| Poles | 10.0% |
| Ruthenians | 7.9% |
| Roumanians | 6.4% |
| Slovenes | 2.6% |
| Italians | 2.0% ⁷² |

Table 2: Population of the Habsburg Empire by religion, 1921:

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Roman Catholic | 63.8% |
| Greek Catholic (Uniate) | 11.2% |
| Eastern Orthodox | 10.5% |
| Lutheran and Calvinist | 3.7% |
| Other Protestant | 0.1% |
| Other Christian | 0.2% |
| Mosaic (Jews) | 10.5% ⁷³ |

⁷² Kann, 607 – 608.

⁷³ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1974), 36.

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