

The Literary Club

ROOTS & UPROOTS, or  
*Why am I Here?*

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I didn't know Mrs. Zwillman, but I knew she was someone who could pull strings.

My mother didn't know her well, but she had the chutzpah to call her when she needed a string pulled. Like the time a cop caught me and some other 9 and 10 year olds playing football in the street. The regular cops never bothered us, but he was new, and he stopped the game and took the ball, which was mine. When I told my mother, she called Mrs. Zwillman. An hour later, he was back at our door with my football.

That's how things happened in the Weequahic section, the neighborhood of Newark where I grew up, and that Philip Roth has given permanent status to in modern American fiction as the neighborhood where the main character in most of his novels, always male, always Jewish, comes of age.

In fact as well as fiction, during the first half of the 20th century, Newark's 3rd Ward, better known as the Weequahic section, was an 81 block area almost entirely populated by Jewish immigrants and their first and second generation descendants, and more or less surrounded on three sides by similar neighborhoods of Irish, Italians and Germans, and by Weequahic Park, Newark's equivalent of Central Park, on the fourth.

The four neighborhoods were a microcosm of the huge wave of European immigrants who landed here between 1845 and 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Anti-Immigration Act stopped the flow.

The Irish came first, fleeing the blights of 1845 and '46 which destroyed most of Ireland's potato crop. Potatoes were the sole staple in the diet of millions of Irish peasants, and by 1850, an estimated one million, mostly uneducated and penniless peasant farmers, died of starvation or typhus, which ran rampant in the weakened population. Millions of others fled leaving Ireland with about 25% of its pre-blight population. By 1855, more than 2.5 million

arrived, and settled mostly in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, where large Irish communities, like South Boston, became, and still are, significant voting blocs.

Most of the German immigrants came from three groups: liberals unsuccessful in their sometimes violent efforts to unify the autocratic city-states; workers in cottage industries displaced by the Industrial Revolution; and tenant farmers dispossessed when large centuries-old family-owned land holdings on which they farmed were broken up because of the elimination of the ancient rule of primogeniture; i.e., the eldest son no longer inherited everything.

Between 1848 and 1860, over a million arrived. Some continued on to join earlier German settlers in mid-western agricultural states. Most settled in larger cities, such as New York, Baltimore, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Milwaukee, where many opened the same kinds of businesses they ran in Germany.

Some four million Italians arrived between 1880 and 1914, about 80 percent peasant farmers from Sicily and southern Italy, which prior to the unification of the Italian states in 1871, was the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Two Sicilies was the largest, wealthiest and most populous state, but soon after unification, the new government appropriated its treasury, and moved most of what little industry there was in the south to the new industrial north. This left millions of unskilled and uneducated peasants with no jobs and no help from the government, except the strong suggestion that they leave the country.

Like the Irish, the Italians remained in the northeast, creating “Little Italy” sections and strong political constituencies in places like Lower Manhattan, the Fordham section of the Bronx and Boston’s North End.

And then there were the Jews.

Unlike the others, whose mass departures from their homelands were pretty much historical firsts, the Jews had wandered for 6,000 years without a homeland, and their back story probably requires a crash course in Mediaeval European history, at least for some of us.

In 710 A.D., the Moors, generic for all Muslims of that era, invaded the Iberian Peninsula and captured Hispania from the Christian Visigoths. Hispania became Al-Andalus, an

independent Moorish state, and for the next 700 years, Spain and Portugal were part of the Islamic Middle East, economically and culturally severed from the rest of Europe.

Contrary to tales of Muslim inhumanity to those non-Muslims who refused to accept Islam, the non-Muslims of Al-Andalus could keep their religions by paying a “harac”, a head-tax. The harac became a significant source of revenue, and eventually, the Moors designed a way to increase collections by actually discouraging conversions. “Behave and pay your taxes”, they said, “and you can keep your religions, your languages, your customs, *and* your government.” The only intrusions would be a governor, the Caliph, a tax collector, and, of course, a large resident Muslim army,

It was a stroke of genius. Non-Muslims paid the harac, practiced their religions quietly and lived more or less normal lives among the Moors; and the increased cash flow gave the Moors even more with which to pay their armies and build the palaces, mosques, and other marvels of mid-eastern architecture, many of which still stand today.

Even more significant, as Islam moved westward, its scholars discovered Aristotle, Archimedes, Ptolemy, Euclid and the other great scholars of antiquity, and translated their works into Arabic, Latin and Hebrew. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Al-Andalus had become the center of a Golden Age of intellectual inquiry and enlightenment, and in that surprisingly tolerant environment, Jews and other non-Muslims participated with their Muslim counterparts in commerce and the professions - literature, art, music, medicine, science, engineering, astronomy and all other areas of creative thought, experiment and exploration.

If this seemed too good to last, it was.

By the 11th century, Al-Andalus began to disintegrate, its coffers and energy constantly being taxed by internal disputes and warfare with various Christian armies in the north. Spanish armies gradually regained control of most of the peninsula, and Al-Andalus finally collapsed in 1452, when Cordoba, the last significant Moorish state, fell.

In 1492, Spanish King Ferdinand, fed up with his brutal, but largely unsuccessful efforts to convert the Jews to Catholicism, kicked them out.

As an aside, the most obstinate of the non-converting Jews were called "marranos", Spanish for "swine", a name that persists in various forms even today, as in "Meranus."

A year after Spain captured Cordoba, another burgeoning Muslim Empire, the Turkish Ottomans, captured Constantinople, the last outpost of the Byzantines, and moved on from there to conquer most of southeastern Europe, becoming the dominant power in the Mediterranean world and arguably the greatest Islamic empire in history.

At the same time, a new era of commerce and trade was emerging. Sailing vessels were replacing camels as the fastest way to transport goods to and from distant destinations. In the same year that Spain expelled the Jews, it sent Columbus off to find new trade routes to the Far East.

To participate in the new commercial world, the Ottomans needed merchants, bankers, traders with good international contacts and others with commercial experience. Muslims, by nature agrarian and nomadic people, were unfamiliar with these matters, and considered them details to be attended to by their non-Muslim subjects. Having so recently conquered most of their Christian subjects after centuries of brutal warfare, the Ottomans were not ready to trust them, regardless of their skills. That left the Jews, who had handled commerce for the Moors for centuries. In 1492, with Spain expelling hundreds of thousands of Jews, Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II found the mother lode of skills he needed. He not only invited them to his empire, he sent ships to get them. An estimated 150,000 Jews sailed from Spain to the Ottoman Empire in 1492 alone.

They had to pay the harac and were subject to a few minor restrictions, but unlike other minorities, there were no restrictions on where they could live or the professions they could practice, and several rose to high positions in Bayezid's government.

The symbiotic relationship between Muslim and Jew continued for about 300 years, but once again, it was too good to last.

By the 1800's, the Ottoman Empire was in decline. The areas in which Jews lived under the Ottomans became Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Rumania, Poland, etc., all under Russian control. Most of the Jews lived in shtetls, impoverished rural villages, with few property rights, and subject to persecution, the degree of which varied at the whim of the ruler in power. In 1881, Czar Alexander II was assassinated. His son and successor, Alexander III, blamed the Jews, unleashing pogroms, violent and destructive attacks on the shtetls, and other drastic

impositions, and ultimately, the expulsion in 1878 in a shtetl near Kishinev. When I was a child, she told me how one night, when she shof the Jews from Eastern Europe.

My maternal grandmother was born in 1878 in a shtetl near Kishinev in western Russia. many years ago she told me that one night, when she was 9 years old, she was awakened by a bell ringing in the street. Her mother entered the room and woke her three younger sisters. "Come children," she said, "it's time to go." Each girl took a "zechel", a small bag with clothing and a few other small belongings that had been under their bed for months, and they and their parents walked from their little shtetl to Hamburg, 400 hundred miles away. Many years later I saw much the same bittersweet scene portrayed in "Fiddler on the Roof."

The Jews wandered all over the world. Over a million, came here. Half settled in the New York City area. About half of them almost doubled the population of the already over-populated Lower East Side, many living with relatives in small, crowded walk-up flats. Among them was my then recently widowed paternal grandmother, who arrived in 1888 with two sons and a soon-to-be born third – my father.

Which is a long answer to the simple question “Why are we here?,” and brings me back to Mrs. Zwillman and the second part of my budget.

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