

Gaëlle Vassogne: Max Brod in Prag. Identität und Vermittlung. (Conditio Judaica, Bd. 75.) Max Niemeyer Verlag. Tübingen 2009. VI, 366 S. ISBN 978-3-484-65175-3. (€ 79,95.)

Prague-born Max Brod (1884-1968) wrote many novels and political and philosophical essays, as well as numerous reviews and feuilletons for newspapers, but today he is chiefly remembered for his work as a literary and cultural intermediary, editor, translator, and propagandist. Most famously, Brod undertook to publish his friend Franz Kafka's manuscripts after the latter's death. Even if little of Brod's fiction is read today compared to the work of his friends Kafka and Franz Werfel, and his essays on politics, culture, Jewish identity, and Zionism are largely ignored, he was a highly successful writer in his time. That fact and his role as an intermediary and propagandist make him worthy of attention for anyone interested in early twentieth-century Central European literary and cultural life and in the Central European debates on Jewish identity and the relationship of Jewish intellectuals to their non-Jewish counterparts.

This study offers an intellectual and cultural-political exegesis of Brod's major works of fiction and his principal writings on philosophical, political and cultural questions, followed by a shorter discussion of his work as a critic, translator, and literary and cultural intermediary. The bibliography includes a highly useful chronological listing of Brod's published writings, including his many longer newspaper articles. The author offers a thoughtful description and analysis of the major publications with particular attention to Brod's concerns about Jewish identity and European Jews' relations with European Christians. For this, Vassogne's work will be useful to readers looking for an introduction to Brod. One cannot call this book an intellectual biography, however, because the author deals very selectively with Brod's life circumstances and the context of each of the major writings.

V. takes up the Prague context for Brod's life and work most explicitly in the introduction and first chapter and then again in the final two chapters, which treat his work as a public intellectual under the first Czechoslovak Republic leading up to his departure in 1939. The author generally follows a current consensus view among historians who have written in English and German during the last two decades about the development in Prague between the 1880s and 1930s of nationalist politics, culture, and literary life among Czech and German Christians and the Jewish population. National loyalties became increasingly problematic for Jews in the city after the mid-1880s as they faced the choice between Czech, German, and Jewish loyalties. The defining of group cultural and political allegiances became a major concern for Brod as well as most of the largely Jewish group of German-speaking writers to which he belonged. In fact, the very concept of a distinct "Prague Circle" of writers and Brod's central role in it was Brod's own creation; and he campaigned tirelessly on behalf of that group's reputation. V. has some occasional difficulties with spatial realities in Prague and the geography of interwar Czechoslovakia: in 1900 Prague's German-speaking population was most numerous in the New Town, Josefov, the Old Town, and Vinohrady, with far fewer in Malá strana and Hradčany (p. 3). The city of Prešov (Hung. Eperjes) is in eastern Slovakia, not in Subcarpathian Ruthenia/Ukraine (p. 145).

V. is sensitive to the culturally and politically liminal position of Brod and the German-speaking Jewish writers of Prague. Brod's search for social and ethical meaning, connectedness, and identity took him on a long odyssey. As a writer of fiction he passed through a fascination with Schopenhauer to a phase of aestheticism and "indifferentism" summed up in his successful novel "Schloss Nornepygge" (1908). But there was also a strong realist element in Brod's literary aesthetic, and he, along with many other writers of his generation, soon developed a fascination with the erotic, which took Brod and many of the others into the early phases of expressionism. V.'s account of these developments is clear and sound, illustrated with references to various writings of Brod. Other scholars have also traced this path of development in the literary careers of Brod and his contemporaries. It is a significant shortcoming of this current book that the author cites the earlier works but

does not engage directly with the other literary and intellectual history scholarship on Brod. Scott Spector's book¹, for example, appears in the bibliography; but it is puzzling that V. does not take it up either in the text or notes.

The author offers sensitive and often sympathetic analyses of Brod's literary works but deals more critically with his forays into philosophy, cultural and social theory, the meaning of Judaism, theories of national identity, and Zionism. Brod conceived of Jews as a distinct nation or *Volk* with its own essential culture and identity, for whose predicament in contemporary society Zionism could be the only ultimate political solution. In multiethnic Central Europe, however, Brod saw Jews, particularly Jewish artists and intellectuals, as perfectly positioned to function as intermediaries between the contending larger national groupings. Because of his political activism during the early years of the First Czechoslovak Republic, he could take some of the credit for the government's formal recognition of a Jewish nationality.

Brod's efforts to define the concept and character of a distinct Jewish nation were least successful, in V.'s view, when he responded to National Socialist writings on the relationship between race and national differences. Brod wanted to accept the biological reality of race and racial differences as part of human existence while denying that any pure race or racially pure nation actually existed in the modern world. One cannot dispute V.'s judgment that Brod's effort, as a Jewish nationalist, to try to reason with the Nazi racial theorists was fundamentally misguided.

This book's slender treatment of Brod's biography and the practical context for much of his literary and work is often a drawback. Where Brod explicitly debated other contemporary thinkers in his writings, V. offers some immediate context. Otherwise the author generally provides few details about Brod's contemporary life circumstances in parts one and two of the book. Perforce the author must offer more on the practical context for Brod's work in part three, which addresses his activities as a cultural intermediary, translator, critic, and propagandist. Here, though, biographical details are still limited. The story of Brod's work as a critic and advocate for other writers and artists does not present an altogether positive portrait of his character. V. does not treat at length Brod's work in publishing Kafka's writings but does examine his creation of German-language editions of several Janáček operas and his campaigning for their staging outside of Bohemia and Moravia. V. makes unmistakably clear how much Brod invested of his own ego in his efforts on behalf of other writers and composers and that his work as a critic, intermediary, and promoter involved not a little *Selbstdarstellung*. Brod's determination to present himself in the most flattering terms means, as V. rightly points out, that his later recollections are not always to be taken at face value. As conditions in Prague steadily worsened in late 1938 and early 1939, for example, Brod desperately tried to find escape and sought first a new home and career in the United States before he decided to go to Palestine, although his later recollections speak of his primary determination to go to Palestine. V. relates that even after Brod arrived in Tel Aviv, he still tried to find a position in an American college or university. In the last chapters of V.'s book, Brod's egocentrism, sensitivity, and capacity for self-deception come increasingly to the fore.

This book offers more analysis of the individual writings of Max Brod during his years in Prague than other recent scholarly accounts and peels back a few more layers of his often difficult personality. This study does this with considerable clarity, care, and accuracy. It makes only limited efforts at any new interpretation of Brod's works and life in Prague, however; and it does not present a full-scale intellectual biography for his five and one-half decades in that city.

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¹ SCOTT SPECTOR: *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2000.