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Patrimony

PHILIP ROTH

THE PERSON who should be standing here today to receive an award of honor from the New Jersey Historical Society is not the author of *Patrimony* but the subject of *Patrimony*, my father, Herman Roth, whose tenure as a resident New Jerseyan did not end like mine after less than two decades but extended without interruption from his birth in Newark's Central Ward in 1901 to his death in an Elizabeth hospital eighty-eight years later and who, for nearly half his life, sold life insurance here, beginning in the 1930s as an agent in Newark and continuing in the '40s, '50s, and '60s as a manager in Union City, Belleville, and finally just outside of Camden, down in Maple Shade, where he retired from the Metropolitan Life at the age of sixty-three. Working—as a life insurance salesman did back then—as intimately as a family doctor or a social worker with every class and ethnic category in North and South Jersey, talking for nearly forty years to thousands of families here about life-and-death matters in the toughest human terms (“They can’t win,” my father told me, “unless they die”), he came to possess a rich familiarity with the workaday lives of the citizens of this state that far exceeds my own and one for which a realistic novelist native to this region could only envy him. I would not hesitate to place his encyclopedic knowledge of prewar Newark alongside James Joyce’s overbrimming sense of the Dublin that he renders with such lavish precision in his fiction.

It’s the insurance man and not the novelist who came to know, from a vast personal experience, with his own brand of awareness and practical intelligence, the social history of Newark, New Jersey’s largest and, during the decades my father was employed there, its liveliest and most productive city, to know it not just neighborhood by neighborhood, not even just block by block and house by house and flat by flat but door by door, hallway by hallway, stairwell by stairwell, furnace

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room by furnace room, kitchen by kitchen. It's he and not I who knew palpably the ongoing story of its population, if not in every last particular, then—in the years when he was out all day and most evenings collecting premiums on the policies he sold, as little sometimes as a quarter a week from the poor—birth by birth, death by death, illness by illness, catastrophe by catastrophe. It was he and not I who, by virtue of an occupation that took him daily among the people and into their homes however lowly, became something of an amateur urbanologist in the city of Newark, an anthropologist-without-portfolio from one end of the state to the other, and it is for the prodigious substantiality of this achievement, his far-from-ordinary entanglement with the breadth and depth of the everyday existence of a hard-bitten city's seemingly insignificant lives, that I'd like to accept this award in his name.

Between 1870 and 1910, into a prospering manufacturing city of 100,000—a population largely of English-speaking ancestry—a quarter of a million foreign immigrants came to settle in Newark, Italians, Irish, Germans, Slavs, Greeks, and Jews, some forty thousand Jews from Eastern Europe. Among them were my penniless young grandparents, Sender and Bertha Roth. My father, born in 1901, was their firstborn American child, the middle child of seven, six boys and a girl, and very much the man in the middle for most of his life. To negotiate from the middle, between the impositions of the past, as embodied in the customs and values of his Yiddish-speaking parents, and the claims of the future, as articulated in their very bearing by his American children, became not only his task but the endeavor of his entire generation of immigrant offspring born more or less with the new century in a new world, a generation of which only a handful survive.

In a sense every American generation is a middle generation maneuvering between allegiances that are bestowed at birth and the requirements of a drastically transforming society. The struggle to contend from the middle, to be responsible to the bond of one's earliest loyalties and to defend the old way of life from being wiped away—particularly in the domain of morality—while at the same time releasing one's children into a society demanding, promising, even menacing in a wholly new

and uncertain way, is perhaps the quintessential American cultural battle that produces the classic family collisions. I don't think that many generations could have experienced any more pointedly the conflicts inherent to this struggle—and the arsenal of humiliations and reversals ignited by intimidating antagonists—than did the generation born to those newly arrived immigrant parents in the decades before the First World War.

Assimilation is too weak a word, conveying too many negative connotations of deference and submissiveness and muzzling and proposing a story insufficiently gritty to describe this process of negotiation as it was conducted by my father and his like. Their integration with the American actuality was more robust than that and more complicated; it was a two-way convergence, something like the extraction and exchange of energy that is metabolism, a vigorous interchange in which Jews discovered America and America discovered Jews, a valuable cross-fertilization that produced an amalgam of characteristics and traits that constituted nothing less than the fruitful invention of a new American type: the citizen formed by a fusion of allegiances and customs, not entirely flawless in design, not without painful points of friction, but one that yielded, at its best (and clearly so in my father), a constructive mindset radiating vitality and intensity—a dense and lively matrix of feeling and response.

The generation I'm talking about was largely unschooled and undereducated. During these years at the turn of the century when, living in Newark, there were two and a half times as many new immigrants as there were native Newarkers, 70 percent of Newark's schoolchildren—and two-thirds of all Newark schoolchildren were then the offspring of immigrants—didn't make it past the fifth grade. My father was one of the elite who got as far as the eighth grade before leaving school to go to work for the rest of their lives. In contrast to the experience of *their* offspring—my generation—their education took place not predominantly in the classroom but in the workplace. On the job is where their outlook was molded and where they derived their primary knowledge of the American world.

The place of employment—the brewery, the tannery, the docks, the factory floor, the produce market, the building site,

the dry-goods stall, the pushcart stand—was not necessarily the ideal ambience to disabuse one of one's prejudices, to enlarge one's sympathies, or to foster new habits, practices, and modes of deportment to replace those that seemed, jarringly and all at once, to be purposeless or restrictive or, over time, just plain odd. But this nonetheless is where the accretion began, unheard-of new American identities engendered not by schools, teachers, and civics textbooks, not, most certainly, by educational programs in ethnic studies, but shaped spontaneously, extemporaneously—though not without pathos and blundering, anger and bruising, defiance, resistance, tears, and affronts—by the tangible churned-up mutability of a thriving city.

The man or woman in the middle takes blows from both sides. First these children of the immigrant generation were made to feel inferior to the natives, ignorant in all sorts of social matters, graceless, crude, and worse, then they were made to feel obtuse and intellectually inferior to the children for whom they'd undergone their hardships. Yet how else to erase this gap but through the university? By virtue of the elixir known as "a good education," provided with and protected by our diplomas and degrees, we would carry through to completion the manifold processes of Americanization. What began when my rabbinically trained grandfather went to work at the tail end of the nineteenth century in a Newark hat factory concluded when I received a master's degree in English literature at the University of Chicago virtually smack in the middle of the twentieth. In three generations, in about sixty years, in really no time at all, we had done it—we were hardly anything like what we were when we got here. From the historical perspective, we had become, owing to some primal American driving force, unrecognizable new beings reconstructed almost overnight. Thus proceeds, at the most commonplace level, the rapidly unfolding drama of our history, which changes what is into what it is not and elucidates the mystery of how we turn up as ourselves.

I hope these few words explain to you why I'd like to receive this award in behalf of my father, who died just three years ago. During a lifetime as the embattled man in the middle here

in New Jersey, he enacted the consolidating struggle that defined the lives of that all-but-vanished generation whose family tenure in America is just about coming up to one hundred years. He is far more deserving than I. As a chronicler of Newark, I have only stood on his shoulders.