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My Way as a German and a Jew

Jakob Wassermann

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“I was rather like Moses coming from Mount Sinai, except that I had forgotten what I had seen there and what God had spoken to me about.”

Jakob Wassermann (1873-1934) was one of the foremost writers of his day. In this new translation of his emotive autobiography “My Way as a German and a Jew”, Wassermann tells us of the agony of being caught between two powerful traditions, the German and the Jewish. With great perspicacity and fierceness, he probes the question of belonging, a concept which also passes through the mental filter of many children today who come from a multi-ethnic background. With wry cynicism and a keen eye, the author makes his way through a life subjected to the pull and push of both traditions. To his intense frustration, those around him, friend or foe, constantly denied Wassermann's ability to be anything other than a Jew. He certainly recognised the Jewish elements in himself and identified with this description: “Jews had an ear that listened, an eye that examined. They were able to discover a secret, understand wonder . . .”

Wassermann’s autobiography is an uncompromising attempt to understand why the German core of his character was negated and what that meant for him and his work. He takes us through the brutal Jewish experience of the pre-war years of the 20th century; in desperation caused by poverty, he once threatened his step-mother with a knife.

His opinions on power, greed, and the dilution of societal development are as valid today as they were when he wrote this book in 1921; a fact that is both worrying and sobering. This is proven by the fact that Wassermann’s words are still being reprinted and quoted today; in the bestselling “The Hare with Amber Eyes” by Edmund de Waal, for example.

In “My Way as a German and a Jew”, Wassermann has given us universal, timeless writing. A book of today from a voice of the past.

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