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# Mendel Singer Goes to Hollywood. On the Lost 1936 Film Adaptation of Joseph Roth's Novel *Hiob*

Francesco Burzacca

*Sins of Man* is the title of a 1936 Hollywood film, which has thus far represented something of a gap in research for scholars of the Austrian Jewish writer Joseph Roth. Film catalogs and online databases simply acknowledge that the film is based on Roth's 1930 international bestseller *Hiob. Roman eines einfachen Mannes*<sup>1</sup>: it was the first adaptation ever made of one of his novels according to most sources, and the only one predating the author's death in 1939. Despite being mentioned in several reference works and secondary literature on Roth, however, the film virtually disappeared shortly after its release, and it has never enjoyed scholarly attention. In fact, various scholars have considered it a lost work<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, *Sins of Man* still exists: there is at least one surviving 35mm nitrate print preserved in the Film & Television Archive at the University of California of Los Angeles, although this is not in circulation. As in the case of rare or endangered cinematic documents, the copy is available for research purposes only<sup>3</sup>. To some extent, this relatively

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<sup>1</sup> *Hiob* was published on October 10, 1930 by Gustav Kiepenheuer, Berlin. It also appeared as a serialized novel (in September-October 1930) in the «Frankfurter Zeitung», The American edition, *Job. The Story of a Simple Man*, translated by Dorothy Thompson, was published by the Viking Press, New York, in 1931.

<sup>2</sup> In her substantial study on the reception of Joseph Roth, Margarete Willerich-Tocha indicates that *Sins of Man* can no longer be seen, and limits her research to two film reviews (Margarete Willerich-Tocha, *Rezeption als Gedächtnis. Studien zur Wirkung Joseph Roths*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. u.a. 1984, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1983, p. 275-276). There is also no research regarding *Sins of Man* in the collection of essays on Roth, many of them dedicated to film adaptations, that appeared on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the author's death (*Joseph Roth. Interpretation. Kritik. Rezeption – Akten des internationalen, interdisziplinären Symposions 1989 / Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart*, hrsg. v. Michael Kessler – Fritz Hackert, Staufenburg-Verlag, Tübingen 1994). In a more recent publication on Roth's years of exile the film is indicated as presumably lost (*So wurde ihnen die Flucht zur Heimat. Soma Morgenstern und Joseph Roth. Eine Freundschaft*, hrsg. v. Sylvia Asmus, Weidle Verlag, Bonn 2012, p. 82-83, text note 272).

<sup>3</sup> The film is a five reel (about 10,000 ft., 77 minute), black and white 35 mm nitrate



protected, non-commercial status explains the unusual lack of critical writing on the movie: the only accounts and reviews of it currently to be found date back to the time of its release, in 1936, or shortly after. For this reason, some eighty years later, *Sins of Man* makes for a fairly atypical case study. Despite today's pervasive support of online search tools, Internet databases or even fandom blogs, the film remains an essentially unknown work. In this respect, research perspectives are not merely restricted, as is often the case with more popular works, to discussing new interpretations. Indeed, *Sins of Man* still misses some screening-based critical analysis, and it further requires archival investigation to clarify its origins, uncover production details, and possibly rectify reception errors or fossilized accepted truths.

Of these, a small but significant detail should be corrected at the outset: *Sins of Man* is, indeed, the first film adaptation ever made from a novel by Joseph Roth. There is no previous 1932 American film based on *Hiob*, as erroneously stated in the critical edition of Stefan Zweig's letters, a claim that reappeared in the published correspondence between Zweig and Roth<sup>4</sup>. This is most likely a mistake based on a misreading of similar movie titles<sup>5</sup>. *Sins of Man* is therefore the long-forgotten, and only fore-runner, of a large series of adaptations based on Roth's works, most of which were produced for German state television channels in the 1960s and 70s. These were the years of the so-called Roth-Renaissance, an academic and commercial revival of interest in the Austrian novelist that helped make him one of the most adapted authors in German literature<sup>6</sup>.

This essay aims to shed light on the vicissitudes behind the production of *Sins of Man* and on Roth's involvement in particular. Additionally, it will

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print. A second copy in the UCLA Archives is indicated as incomplete and deteriorated. An additional non-circulation DVD copy, was specifically created by UCLA Archives staff for the research screening preliminary to the writing of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich. Briefwechsel 1927-1938*, hrsg. v. Madeleine Rietra – Reiner Joachim Siegel, Diogenes, Zürich 2014, p. 509.

<sup>5</sup> A note in the critical edition of Stefan Zweig's letters states that the first film adaptation of *Hiob* was the 1932 film *Sin's Pay Day*, directed by George B. Seitz (1888-1944), produced by Action Pictures Inc. (s. Stefan Zweig, *Briefe 1932-1942*, hrsg. v. Knut Beck – Jeffrey B. Berlin, Fischer, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, p. 555). *Sin's Pay Day*, however, is a gangster story based on an original script by Betty Burbridge and Gene Morgan. The American Film Institute Catalog lists *Sin's Pay Day* alphabetically right after *Sins of Man* (*The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States. Feature Films 1931-1940*, ed. by Kenneth W. Munden – Patricia Hanson – Alan Gevinson, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1993, vol. 3, p. 1956), a fact that might have contributed to this mistaken observation.

<sup>6</sup> The definition «Roth-Renaissance», along with a partial listing of the film adaptations from Roth's works, is in Margarete Willerich-Tocha, *Rezeption als Gedächtnis*, cit., p. 276-278.



focus on the short-lived reception of the film and on possible reasons for its successive oblivion. Finally, thanks to the unprecedented opportunity of a research screening at the UCLA archives, it will offer a projection account of *Sins of Man* that should clarify some recurrent misunderstandings about the film, while opening up new critical perspectives.

#### FROM BERLIN TO HOLLYWOOD

The hope that *Hiob* would mark his Hollywood breakthrough, in addition to the more predictable expectation of healthy sales, was a clear goal for Roth as he was working on the novel between the early months of 1929 and 1930<sup>7</sup>. This may appear remarkable in light of the rather apocalyptic condemnation of the cinematic art that Roth expressed in later writings – particularly in his 1934 polemic essay *Der Antichrist* – as well as in his private correspondence: «Ich *bitte* Sie, um keinen Preis der Welt auch nur ein Zehntel Zusage an Hollywood zu geben [...] Sie wissen, daß der Film der wahre Antichrist ist. Wer sich mit ihm einläßt, ist verloren»<sup>8</sup>.

However, Roth's ambiguous attitude towards film is just one of the many contradictions – most notably seen in relation to his political and religious beliefs – that, especially during his post-1933 exile years, indicate a broader and often paradoxical tendency towards cultural pessimism. In his fierce rejection of an increasingly technically dominated modernity, Roth saw cinema as the quintessential expression of a materialistic and dehumanized western civilization. Yet, while dramatically referring to the motion picture industry in Hollywood as «Hölle-Wut» (*Der Antichrist*, Roth 3, 614)<sup>9</sup>, and «Hades des modernen Menschen» (*Der Antichrist*, Roth 3, 571), he was attracted by the high profits involved in film writing, and was constantly in search of opportunities to sell the copyright of his own novels for film adaptations<sup>10</sup>. Shortly before his death, and plagued

<sup>7</sup> For indications regarding the dating of the writing of *Hiob*, see Roth's letters to Félix Bertaux (Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-1939*, hrsg. v. Hermann Kesten, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 1970, p. 146-147, 150) and to Stefan Zweig (Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 30-31).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> «Ich kam nach Hollywood, nach Hölle-Wut, nach dem Orte, wo die Hölle wütet, das heißt, wo die Menschen die Doppelgänger ihrer eigenen Schatten sind». Unless otherwise specified, quotes from Joseph Roth refer to the complete edition of his works: Joseph Roth, *Werke. Ausgabe in sechs Bänden*, hrsg. v. Fritz Hackert – Klaus Westermann, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 1989-1991. Throughout this article, quotes from Roth's *Werke* will be directly followed by the indication of the volume together with the page number.

<sup>10</sup> «Es steht aber nirgends geschrieben, daß ein armer Jude nicht versuchen darf, Geld zu verdienen. [...] Ich dachte, Sie könnten mir etwelche Filmbeziehungen verschaf-



by impending financial troubles, he also worked on various ‘treatments’ (preliminary versions of film scripts), and considered the possibility of a move to the United States, joining the great wave of Jewish intellectual migration from Europe to Hollywood<sup>11</sup>.

Such a double standard towards cinema was less in evidence by the time *Hiob* was published. In the late 1920s Roth was a rising star of journalism and an avant-garde political novelist, writing regularly for various German newspapers, and mostly known for his travel reports across Europe. Throughout the decade, he had also been writing passionately about films – typically reviews and *feuilletons* characterized by an ironic regard for the newly established star system and the phenomenon of screen idols – where his amateurish knowledge of film technique tended to be overshadowed by witty descriptions of the production milieu<sup>12</sup>. Certainly, Roth showed no ethical bias against the rising *Kulturindustrie* as far as using his own literary works for film adaptations was concerned. On the contrary, he was very determined to exploit the economic potential of *Hiob* in order to improve his increasingly unstable financial situation: «Im Oktober wird es sich zeigen, wie Hiob geht. Wenn er wenigstens 15.000 hätte!» he wrote to Stefan Zweig in June 1930<sup>13</sup>. And again a few months later: «Ich kann den Erfolg von Hiob nicht abwarten. Er kann sich erst im Januar einstellen und bis dahin sind drei Monate»<sup>14</sup>. He openly shared his hope for financial recovery thanks to an American adaptation of the book with his parents-in-law, with whom he frequently

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fen, oder raten», Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 305. Especially during the emigration years, Roth often had heated discussions with Stefan Zweig on the possibility of capitalizing on his novels, most notably *Der Radezky marsch*, through film adaptations; see also Zweig’s answer, *ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>11</sup> Between 1938 and the early months of 1939 Roth wrote two treatments (*Kinder des Bösen* und *Der letzte Karneval von Wien*) in cooperation with the expatriate Viennese scriptwriter and director Leo Mittler (1893-1958), and he worked alone on a third, unfinished draft for a film script. In the same period, while afflicted by quickly worsening health conditions (he died on May 27, 1939), he unsuccessfully tried to intensify his contacts with literary agents and friends who could facilitate his plans to emigrate to the US. On this point, see Joseph Roth, *Drei Sensationen und zwei Katastrophen. Feuilletons zur Welt des Kinos*, hrsg. v. Helmut Peschina – Rainer-Joachim Siegel, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2014, p. 342-351. See also Klaus Westermann, *Joseph Roth, Journalist. Eine Karriere 1915-1939*, Bouvier, Bonn 1987, p. 104-107.

<sup>12</sup> On Joseph Roth’s early journalism on cinema, see Klaus Westermann, *Joseph Roth, Journalist*, cit., p. 177-190; Leonardo Quaresima, *Der Schatten, die Stimme: Joseph Roth als Filmkritiker*, in *Joseph Roth. Interpretation. Kritik. Rezeption*, cit., p. 245-259; Joseph Roth, *Drei Sensationen und zwei Katastrophen*, cit.; Joseph Roth, *L’avventuriera di Montecarlo: scritti sul cinema (1919-1935)*, a cura di Leonardo Quaresima, Adelphi, Milano 2015. See also Mirella Carbone, *Joseph Roth e il cinema*, Artemide, Roma 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.





corresponded mainly regarding the growing mental problems of his wife, Friedl: «Von den Übersetzungen Hiobs kann man erst in Frühjahr etwas haben, bis das Buch in den diversen Ländern erschienen ist. Aber an Geld kommt nur Amerika u. England in Betracht, weil überall sonst die Währung schlecht ist. Nur eine Verfilmung in Amerika kann mich retten, und uns Alle»<sup>15</sup>.

One of Roth's most famous novels, traditionally seen as a watershed work between the early experimental fiction and the more classically narrative style of his later years, *Hiob* was characterized from the beginning by the author's efforts to obtain useful contacts for a future cinematic version. Already in September 1930, Roth was working through Stefan Zweig to reach out to the most prominent German star of the time, the 1929 Best Actor Oscar recipient Emil Jannings, and to propose him in the leading role of the *melamed* Mendel Singer, the poor Jewish teacher of the Russian village of Zuchnow<sup>16</sup>. Certainly, Roth must have been much taken with the idea of involving the famous actor of *Der letzte Mann*, the international blockbuster directed by F.W. Murnau that he enthusiastically praised in one of his best-known film reviews<sup>17</sup>.

A conscious strategy of self-promotion can also be seen behind the author's collaboration with Dorothy Thompson, the influential correspondent of the «New York Post» in Berlin, who helped Roth with the descriptions of the urban environment of New York in the second part of the novel. Thompson would then also translate *Hiob* into English (as *Job*) and assist its early appearance on the American literary scene<sup>18</sup>.

Berlin's Kiepenheuer Verlag published *Hiob* on October 10, 1930, and the book soon became an unprecedented success for its author<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, Roth was struggling to keep a reasonable balance between his significant incomes – he was one of the best-paid journalists of the time – and the lavish cost of his nomadic lifestyle. The 1931 American edition of the novel made Roth's name known overseas for the first time,

<sup>15</sup> Undated letter of 1930 to Roth's mother-in-law, Jenny Reichler, in Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-1939*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>16</sup> On Stefan Zweig's mediation between Roth and Jannings, see Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit. p. 41, and related notes, p. 403. See also Stefan Zweig – Friderike Zweig, *Wenn einen Augenblick die Wolken weichen. Briefwechsel 1912-1942*, hrsg. v. Jeffrey B. Berlin – Gert Kerschbaumer, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 2006, p. 232.

<sup>17</sup> Roth wrote a review of *Der letzte Mann* (known in English as *The Last Laugh*) for the «Frankfurter Zeitung» in January 1925. See Joseph Roth, *Drei Sensationen und zwei Katastrophen*, cit., p. 137-141, and related notes p. 325-326.

<sup>18</sup> For Dorothy Thompson's role in the writing of *Hiob*, see David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 1974, p. 389.

<sup>19</sup> *Hiob* quickly had noteworthy sales of 30,000 copies in the German market alone (*ibid.*).



and *Job* was even selected by the prestigious 'Book-of-the-Month Club' that November<sup>20</sup>. This brought some improvement to the troubled finances of the author, now also affected by his wife's uninterrupted series of painful hospitalizations: «[...] im November kommt endlich Geld aus Amerika. 1000 Dollar vorerst, aber ich bin schon damit glücklich, und ich hoffe, daß es auch mit Friedl besser wird»<sup>21</sup>. American royalties represented only a temporary relief, however: «Es geht mir schlecht, trotz Amerika», Roth wrote as early as September 1931<sup>22</sup>.

Despite his initial hopes for a German adaptation, Roth soon had to realize that it was an undoubtedly a hard time to promote a Jewish story in the *Filmbranche*: «[...] der herrschende Antisemitismus verhindert die Verfilmung eines jüdischen Stoffes. Vor einem Jahr hätte ich mit [*Hiob*] 100000 Mark verdient. Aber ich habe Glück so wenig, wie jeder alte Jud»<sup>23</sup>. Not surprisingly, copyright for the film eventually became part of the agreement between Roth and Viking Press, the prestigious American publishing company that bought the book. Indeed, *Hiob* was ready to hit the all-important road to Hollywood: a promising prospect, but now totally beyond the control of the writer as regards the future adaptation process.

#### THE MAKING OF *SINS OF MAN*

Roth's lack of awareness of the filmic destiny of *Hiob* is remarkable, and it certainly contributed to the subsequent confusion of Roth scholars regarding the movie: there are no explicit references to *Sins of Man* in Roth's writings, nor any evidence that he ever had a chance to watch the movie, which enjoyed a limited distribution in some European countries, including France<sup>24</sup>. By examining Roth's unpublished correspondence (held at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York), it emerges that in

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390. On the American success of *Job* and the Book-of-the-Month selection, see also Louis Untermeyer's review *Uz in America*, in «The Saturday Review of Literature», 7 November 1931, p. 261.

<sup>21</sup> Undated letter of 1930 to Jenny Reichler, in Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-1939*, cit., p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Undated letter of 1931 to Jenny Reichler, quoted in David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, cit., p. 390.

<sup>24</sup> *Sins of Man* was released in England in December 1936 (see «Picturegoer», December 1936, p. 23-25, 28-30). According to the Internet Movie Database, *Sins of Man* was also distributed in France, Portugal, Spain, Denmark and Hungary. A publicity poster kept at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles also indicates a Polish edition of the film.



the summer of 1933, about two years after the American publication of *Hiob*, Benjamin Huebsch, director and co-owner of the Viking Press, informed Roth about recent agreements on the making of the movie: «By this time you will have heard from Landshoff that the film sale of *Job* is a fait accompli»<sup>25</sup>. Towards the end of 1934 Roth was in touch with Fritz Kohner (later known in Hollywood as Frederick Kohner), an emigrant Austrian author and a friend of Stefan Zweig, who was working in London on the screenplay of *Hiob* alongside the Russian playwright Ossip Dymow. Existing excerpts from letters to Kohner reiterate Roth's negative feelings towards cinema – *Der Antichrist* had been published just a few months earlier<sup>26</sup> – and reveal a pressing need to justify himself for making compromises with the film industry: «Es ist nicht Geldgier etwa, sondern Not, der ich gehorche»<sup>27</sup>. No news on the adaptation seems to have reached Roth over the following few months. In September 1935, he indirectly learned that a major Hollywood studio – the 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation, which eventually produced the movie – was interested in taking over the film rights, and so he decided to write to Huebsch for an explanation. His letter, never previously published, confirms Roth's general ignorance of the ongoing film project, but also testifies to his characteristic unease in keeping track of copyright dealings and contractual obligations, which often led to serious misunderstandings with his publishers and literary agents<sup>28</sup>:

<sup>25</sup> Letter of July 8, 1933, held at the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Bornstein Collection, Series V: Joseph Roth 1917-1939, Subseries 4: Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 11. Fritz Landshoff (1901-1988), former co-director of the Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag that published *Hiob*, co-founded the Amsterdam-based Querido Verlag in 1933, which would publish some of Roth's later works.

<sup>26</sup> Roth himself sent a copy of the *Antichrist* to Kohner in October 1934, making his thoughts on cinema clear: «Sie werden, wenn Sie Zeit finden, es [the *Antichrist*] zu lesen, daraus ersehen, daß ich nicht nur fremd dem Film gegenüberstehe, sondern auch feindlich». Unpublished letter, quoted in Gerhard G. Mack, *Frederick Kohner*, in *Deutsche Exilliteratur seit 1933*, Band 1: *Kalifornien*, Teil 1, hrsg. v. John M. Spalek – Joseph Strelka, Francke Verlag, Bern 1976, p. 762-770, text note 13.

<sup>27</sup> Unpublished letter of Joseph Roth to Frederick Kohner of January 12, 1935 (*ibid.*, p. 765). A few days later Roth would specify: «Sie scheinen aber kaum eine richtige Vorstellung von meiner Lage zu haben – und wie sollten Sie auch! Mein Name hat zu viel Klang, als daß man sich vorstellen könnte, daß sein Träger wie ein Bettler von Almosen und Darlehen lebt. Ich schäme mich nicht, es Ihnen zu sagen. In dieser Situation nimmt man alles, was man unterwegs findet» (unpublished letter of January 17, 1935, *ibid.*).

<sup>28</sup> In the aforementioned letter of July 8, 1933, after informing Roth about the film sale of *Hiob*, Ben Huebsch also complains about the inconsistency of his contractual requests regarding *Radetzky marsch*: «[...] You ask me to make an offer for the American rights, whereas the existing contract with its options accords us all English language rights [...] I accept gratefully your protestations of friendship, but I am disappointed that they should be accompanied by remarks that seem to imply a desire to repudiate a



Sehr verehrter, lieber Herr Huebsch,  
ich übersende Ihnen anbei ein Schreiben des Rechtsanwalts Dr. Paul Koretz in Wien, der einen Auftrag der Twentieth Century Fox-Film hat, die Filmrechte am *Hiob* zu erwerben.

[...] *haben Sie irgendwelche Nachrichten wegen der Verfilmung des Hiob? Wann wird der Film gedreht? Auf wie lange Zeit sind die Rechte vergeben worden?*

Ich wäre Ihnen sehr dankbar, wenn Sie mir dies mitteilen oder eine Kopie des Vertrages einsenden würden.

Dergleichen wäre ich Ihnen sehr dankbar, wenn Sie mir Abschriften unserer Verträge über die bei Ihnen erschienenen Werke einsenden könnten, da ich in meiner Vertragsmappe keinerlei Verträge vorfinde.

[...] Ich möchte vor allem wissen, ob nach diesen Verträgen die Vergütung der Filmrechte durch Sie zu erfolgen hat, oder ob ich über diese Rechte selbst verfüge<sup>29</sup>.

Naïveté about commercial procedures, or more likely some trick to bypass them, must have been behind an unsuccessful irregular attempt to resell the film rights to *Hiob* in 1935<sup>30</sup>. In any case, as inexperienced as he might have been in business matters, Roth always showed determination in claiming the financial returns of the film sale, which to his great disappointment happened to be paid in the summer of 1933, shortly after the advent of the Nazi government in Germany. Roth repeatedly tried to avoid the larger portion (\$ 2,000) being sent by Ben Huebsch to his publishing company Gustav Kiepenheuer in Berlin, where the new political situation would prevent him from receiving his expected share of the profits. His eventual failure to stop the money transfer to Germany, with its unfavorable financial implications, became an endless source of resentment, especially towards the publishers Walter Landauer and Fritz Landshoff, who were both responsible for Roth's copyright incomes:

Von 2000 dollars, die Huebsch bekommen hat – für ein Verfilmungsrecht des *Hiob* – erhält Herr Landshoff 1600 Gulden – ich nur 3500 französische Francs. Sie ahnen nicht, wie ich selbst gegen mich wüte; noch weniger, wie die Anderen, meinen Wahnsinn und meine Ohnmacht ausnützend, gegen mich wüten. Das Märchen von Aladin und den Räubern mit schlechtem Ausgang<sup>31</sup>.

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perfectly clear understanding», letter held at the Leo Baeck Institute, Joseph Bornstein Collection, see above note 25. Misunderstandings regarding English copyright for later works would also trouble Roth in 1934, see Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 455-456.

<sup>29</sup> Letter of September 23, 1935, held at the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Roth Collection, Series III: Correspondence 1906-1939, Box 4, Folder 2. Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> The episode is reported in Géza von Cziffra, *Der heilige Trinker. Erinnerungen an Joseph Roth*, Ullstein, Frankfurt a.M.-Berlin 1989, p. 71, 82-84.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 171.



Such outspoken remarks on lost profits are among the rare pieces of information regarding the adaptation of *Hiob* that emerge from Roth's letters or from archival documentation. A few American journalistic sources, however, can help to reconstruct the making of *Sins of Man*, such as an illuminating release which appeared in the daily newspaper «The Hollywood Reporter» on September 18, 1935 – just a few days before Roth's aforementioned letter to Huebsch – confirming the transference of film rights to 20th Century-Fox. The note also sheds some light on the people involved in the film project and on the events that had delayed its filming:

*Zanuck Buys 'Job' From Greg. Ratoff*

The Joseph Roth novel *Job*, the screen rights of which have been treasured by Gregory Ratoff for the last three years, has been bought by Darryl Zanuck for 20th Century-Fox for a reported sum of \$10,000. Ratoff gets a separate deal in an advisory capacity during the preparation of the yarn.

Ratoff had planned to produce the picture on his own in England during the late winter, but Zanuck's offer killed that<sup>32</sup>.

Gregory Ratoff, the first buyer and 'treasurer' of the film rights, was a Russian-born actor of Jewish origins who by 1935 had established a solid career in Hollywood. By taking over the adaptation rights, Darryl Zanuck, the powerful head of 20th Century-Fox, revitalized a project that had been frozen for years and changed the original production plans while still allowing Ratoff to work behind the scenes (the 'separate deal'). Further information can be found in another «Hollywood Reporter» release of March 9, 1936, in the column *Pictures Now Shooting*. Here the film is presented under its working title *Turmoil*, without any direct reference to Roth's novel, giving an initial listing of film crew and cast<sup>33</sup>. Ratoff is indicated as co-director of the film – a debut behind the camera for him – but Zanuck paired him in this role with the more experienced Otto Brower, mostly known at the time as director of Westerns. Samuel Engel, a writer and producer who had worked in Hollywood since the early 1930s, is accredited for the screenplay, while no mention is made of Frederick Kohner and Ossip Dymow. The star in the main role is the Danish-American actor Jean Hersholt, who was the

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See also p. 431-432 for a brief reconstruction of the complex vicissitudes of the money transfer.

<sup>32</sup> «The Hollywood Reporter», 18 September 1935, p. 1. According to a second brief release the film rights were apparently sold only in February 1936, «The Hollywood Reporter», 6 February 1936, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> «The Hollywood Reporter», 9 March 1936, p. 31.



newly acclaimed lead in the successful Hollywood drama *The Country Doctor* (1936), and who would later play Shirley Temple's grandfather in the 1937 hit musical *Heidi*. Another important member of the cast was the future star Don Ameche, until then «a semi-obscure Chicago radio actor» of Italian origin<sup>34</sup>, who made his screen debut in *Sins of Man* with quite an unusual double role (he played both sons of the main character at different stages in their lives). A further press release in the «Motion Picture Daily» briefly mentions the subsequent title change and completion of the shooting:

*'Turmoil' is retitled*

Hollywood, April 5 – Twentieth Century-Fox has set *Sins of Man* as the release title for the picture which has heretofore been known as *Turmoil*. Production on the picture finished March 28<sup>35</sup>.

#### REACTIONS IN THE ÉMIGRÉ LITERARY CIRCLE

None of the above developments were known to Roth, who by this time was unsuccessfully trying to promote the adaptation of other novels, particularly *Radetzkymarsch*, and he reluctantly accepted Zweig's suggestions to reinvent himself as a scriptwriter:

schmieren Sie außerdem ohne Rücksicht auf Stil und Kunst ein paar Filmsujets hin, damit man irgend eine Grundlage hat für mögliche Verhandlungen. Berthold Viertel kämpft hier seit zwei Jahren für Ihren Radetzkymarsch und hofft ihn doch über kurz oder lang einmal durchsetzen<sup>36</sup>.

Certainly the adaptation of *Hiob*, which remained his bestselling book abroad, had become a topic of conversation thanks to the interest of various passionate readers. In a 1935 letter from London a young admirer asked Roth about the existence of an adaptation, and made the alternative proposal of the Jewish-Lithuanian actor Alexander Asro for the role of Mendel Singer<sup>37</sup>. In November 1936 Hollywood star Marlene

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<sup>34</sup> «Variety», 24 June 1936, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> «Motion Picture Daily», 6 April 1936, p. 13. From a letter of Joseph I. Breen (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) to Jason J. Joy of 20th Century-Fox, it emerges that an early working title of the film was *Job*. Letter dated 17 February, 1936, held at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 306. The Austrian writer and director Berthold Viertel (1885-1953) moved to Hollywood in 1928.

<sup>37</sup> Unpublished letter of Glyn Roberts to Joseph Roth of April 24, 1935, held at the



Dietrich also revealed that *Hiob* was her favorite book in an interview for the magazine «Sunday Referee»<sup>38</sup>. But despite the attention surrounding the novel, anything that Roth himself learned about the film seems to be the result of incidental, second-hand information, as in the case of an ironic comment that Stefan Zweig made to him from his London exile in May 1936, shortly before the American release of *Sins of Man*. Zweig reports some astonishing rumors about the transformation of the original narrative: «Ihr Hollywooder Hiob soll zum Brüllen schön sein. Aus Mendel Singer haben sie einen Tiroler Bauer gemacht. Aus Menuchim einen Sänger. Ich muß den Film bald sehen. Ich werde für Sie fröhlich sein»<sup>39</sup>.

Zweig is incorrect here in describing the main characters of the film, as no farmers or singers, are portrayed in *Sins of Man*. While alluding to some controversial modification of the novel to Hollywood standards, however, he anticipated the general reaction to the movie in German expatriate circles and among Roth's friends. The reinvention of the story, with new characters and an alpine Christian setting in place of the Jewish shtetl, was considered disrespectful to the literary model, and a blatant example of simplifying Americanization. This response was exemplified by Harry Kahn, a journalist (and former assistant to Max Reinhardt), who wrote about *Sins of Man* two months after Roth's death, on the occasion of a theatrical adaptation of *Hiob* staged in Paris in July 1939. Kahn provides a brief account of the convoluted circumstances of the film's production, linking them with its presumably poor quality:

Joseph Roths Roman *Hiob*, hat lange vor seiner Dramatisierung (die dieser Tage im Théâtre Pigalle ihre Erstaufführung erlebte) auch eine Verfilmung über sich ergehen lassen müssen. Mit dem nach dem Werk

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Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Bornstein Collection, Series V: Joseph Roth 1917-1939, Subseries 4: Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 10.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Halley, *Marlene Dietrich Confesses*, interview in «Sunday Referee», 1 November 1936, held at the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Roth Collection, Series II: Writings, Subseries 4: Reviews, Box 2, Folder 80. Roth hoped that Dietrich's attention would promote his name in Hollywood, and a few months later he referred to the interview (with some exaggeration) in a letter to his French translator Blanche Gidon: «Meine einzige Hoffnung ist noch Marlene Dietrich, die ein ganzes Interview über mich gegeben hat. Vielleicht kauft sie einen meiner Romane», Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-1939*, cit., p. 490. Roth also wrote about Dietrich's interview to the expatriate journalist Max Winter, who had urged him to move to California: «Wenn Sie so freundlich sein würden – da Sie nun schon einmal in Hollywood sind – bei ihr [Dietrich] in meinem Namen vorstellig zu werden, damit sie mir die Möglichkeit verschafft, unter einem Pretekst [*sic*] eine bezahlte Reise nach Hollywood zu bekommen», letter of 7 January 1937, held at the Leo Baeck Institute, Joseph Bornstein Collection, Series V: Joseph Roth 1917-1939, Subseries 4: Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 5. Roth personally thanked Dietrich for her appreciation at a dinner in Vienna in 1937. See David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, cit., p. 390.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Roth – Stefan Zweig, *Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich*, cit., p. 315.



gedrehten Streifen hat es eine eigenartige Bewandnis: kein Mensch würde nämlich, wenn der Vorspann es nicht mitteilte, ahnen, dass ihm Roths Meistererzählung zu Grunde liegt.

Die grosse Hollywooder Gesellschaft, die das Buch erworben hatte, liess ein Drehbuch erstellen, und zwar, vermutlich auf Roths eigene Initiative, von einem der besten Kenner des osteuropäischen wie des amerikanischen Judentums, der selbst einer der bedeutendsten ostjüdischen Dichter in deutscher Sprache ist: Ossip Dymow. Als filmtechnischer Berater wurde ihm Fritz Kohner beigegeben. Das Drehbuch, das aus ihrer Zusammenarbeit hervorging, soll ebenso wirksam wie sorgsam hinsichtlich des Originals gewesen sein.

Wie dem auch sei: die grosse Produktionsgesellschaft, die es hatte drehen wollen, liquidierte eines schönen Tags und wurde mit einer andern noch grösseren fusioniert. Mit der 'Masse' gingen an diese auch die Filmrechte von Roths Roman über. Das Drehbuch von Dymow und Kohner gefiel ihr anscheinend nicht. Sie liess ein neues schreiben, das sie wohl dem Bedürfnis und Verständnis ihres Publikums angepasster erachtete<sup>40</sup>.

In the article there is no mention of Gregory Ratoff as the first owner of the film rights, but the reported company merger probably refers to the foundation of the 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation in 1935 – largely brought about by Darryl Zanuck. Kahn ascribes the weaknesses of the film to the rejection of a first screenplay written by Dymow – arguably designated by Roth himself – and Kohner, both well-established Jewish authors, and to the subsequent adoption of a second screenplay (possibly the one by Samuel Engel) that was intended to be more suited to the commercial expectations of an American public. This version of events seems to be indirectly confirmed by Roth in an earlier conversation reported by the Hungarian filmmaker Géza von Cziffra: «Niemals wurde ein *Hiob*-Film gedreht! [...] Das Drehbuch, das ich genehmigt hatte, schrieb kein geringerer als Ossip Dymow. Aber den Dollarscheißern gefiel das Buch nicht, und sie ließen es umschreiben. Aber wie!»<sup>41</sup>.

Even if Roth really participated in arrangements for the first screenplay, it is interesting to note how his potential endorsement of Dymow would have been very much in contrast with some strong opinions he had previously expressed on the Russian playwright when he was a young film critic on various newspapers. In a 1924 review of latest film releases in Berlin – among which the film *Nju*, based on a Dymow's play – Roth made no secret of his feelings:

Der Film *Nju* mit Elisabeth *Bergner* in der Hauptrolle hat Paul *Ginner* hervorgebracht, ein Mann, der vom Theater kommt und der vielleicht

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<sup>40</sup> Harry Kahn, '*Hiob*' als Film, in «Pariser Tageszeitung», 6 July 1939, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Géza von Cziffra, *Der heilige Trinker*, cit., p. 83-84.





deshalb das rührselige und weichliche Konversationsstück des Ossip Dymow gewählt hat. [...] Denn Dymow ist auf der Bühne unerträglich. Im Film korrigiert sich sogar seine falsche Psychologie wie von selbst (*Berliner Filmberichte*, Roth 2, 302).

While discussing a film based on Dickens' *Oliver Twist* a few lines later, he further clarifies his general antipathy for novel-to-screen adaptations. His final remark sounds like an ironic premonition on his future connection with the Russian writer: «Man darf natürlich nicht den Film mit dem Roman vergleichen. Filme verlieren immer, wenn man sie mit ihren literarischen Urbildern vergleicht – wenn diese nicht zufällig Ossip Dymow sind» (*Berliner Filmberichte*, Roth 2, 303).

At the time of the release of *Sins of Man*, the correct indication of the screenplay's authorship actually became a matter of debate between the 20th Century-Fox and the Hollywood Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Despite its rewriting, the production company still had to recognize the work of Dymow and Kohner – a contractual obligation, which generated an unusually long and complex list of screen credits<sup>42</sup>.

At the close of his article, Harry Kahn further describes the negative outcome of the second, American-made screenplay, listing a series of regrettable changes made to Roth's plot. Because of the early disappearance of the film, Kahn's harsh review remained one of the very few available sources of information about it, and would set the tone for future discussions of *Sins of Man* among Roth scholars:

In ihm [the second film script] wurde der jüdische Melamed in einen katholischen Mesner verwandelt und die Handlung aus Zuchnow in Russisch-Polen nach Gossensass in Südtirol verlegt! In welcher Art der psychologische Gehalt von Roths Roman verbogen und verlogen wurde, das lässt sich nicht beschreiben. Es genügt, wenn man den Titel erwähnt, unter dem der Film dann lief. Er lautete: *Die Sünden der Väter*<sup>43</sup>.

Actually, as in the above-mentioned letter by Zweig, the description is wrong about some crucial elements in the film: the name of the village (Gossensass, rather than Zenbruck), the Catholic faith of the leading character (a proudly Protestant bell ringer in the film) and even the title

<sup>42</sup> The official *Data of Bulletin of Authorship Records* for *Sins of Man*, released on May 6, 1936, states: Novel: *Job*, by Joseph Roth; Adaptation: Frederick Kohner and Dr. Ossip Dymow; Screenplay: Samuel G. Engel; Contributor to the Screen Play Construction: Gregory Ratoff; Contributor to dialogue: Allen Rivkin. The Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles holds the screenplay of *Sins of Man*, along with a series of letters between representatives of 20th Century-Fox and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences regarding the correct indication of the film credits.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Kahn, *'Hiob' als Film*, cit., p. 4.



of the movie (*Sins of the Fathers*, rather than *Sins of Man*). Such important inaccuracies suggest that Kahn's critique, despite being the one that would become most quoted by future commentators, was not based on an actual viewing of the film<sup>44</sup>. Certainly, Kahn strongly criticizes the one fact he knows for sure about the adaptation, i.e., the relocation of the story into Christian background, and the resulting new identity of its protagonist.

A fairly similar reaction to *Sins of Man* – but enlivened with even more imaginary details regarding its characters – is attributed to Roth himself in Géza von Cziffra's memoirs:

Aus dem jüdischen Melamed Singer haben sie einen katholischen Messner gemacht, der natürlich nicht in Galizien lebte, sondern in Südtirol, und, nur so nebenbei, auch noch Glockengießer war. Aus dem verlorenen Sohn Menuchim machten die Hollywooder einen Sänger mit Kastratenstimme. Das hatte nichts mehr mit meinem *Hiob* zu tun<sup>45</sup>.

Once again, second-hand word of mouth reporting mixes together randomly chosen, real observations about the film with made-up ones: the protagonist is, indeed, a South-Tyrolean bell ringer (not a bell founder), and his lost son is not a castrato singer, but a composer and an orchestra conductor as in the book. More than for their inaccuracies, however, such observations are striking because of the underlying anti-American prejudice that, for Kahn, as for Roth, automatically tended to identify US-cinema with profit oriented, low-brow artistic productions; 'Hollywooder' with 'Dollarscheißern'.

Reliable viewing-based information on the film probably only reached Roth very early in 1939, thanks to Schalom Ben-Chorin (born Fritz Rosenthal), a German Jewish theologian and journalist who had settled in Palestine in 1935. Upon the release of *Sins of Man* in a Jerusalem movie theater, Ben-Chorin published a sharply polemic review in «Haaretz» on December 30, 1938, and sent it to Roth along with a German translation from Hebrew (*Mendel Singer läßt sich taufen*), soliciting a reply for the newspaper<sup>46</sup>. To date, this is the only existing review of *Sins of Man* that

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<sup>44</sup> Harry Kahn's critique is quoted in a 1975 essay by Fritz Hackert, *Joseph Roths Nachlaß im Leo-Baeck-Institute in New York*, in *Joseph Roth und die Tradition*, hrsg. v. David Bronsen, Agora Verlag, Darmstadt 1975, p. 374-399. See also David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, cit., p. 390-391, and *So wurde ihnen die Flucht zur Heimat*, cit., p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> Géza von Cziffra, *Der heilige Trinker*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> A copy of the original article from «Haaretz», along with Ben-Chorin's unpublished translation into German (*Mendel Singer läßt sich taufen*) and the accompanying letter to Roth, are held at the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Roth Collection, Series II: Writings, Subseries 4: Reviews, Box 2, Folder 80.



includes a comparative analysis of the film and its literary source, written by a critic who is familiar with both works.

A bitterly disappointed admirer of the novel, Ben-Chorin criticizes the loss of the Jewish element in the story. Assuming Roth played an active role in the adaptation, the critic emphasizes the inconsistency of the writer's cultural crusade against Hollywood, paralleling it with his much debated conversion to Catholicism: «Aber so gut man als 'Katholik und Österreicher' sich in der zionistischen Presse als 'grosser jüdischer Romancier' vorstellen lässt, – kann man wohl auch als Filmfeind von prophetischem Pathos einen Roman an die Fox verkaufen»<sup>47</sup>. Furthermore, he openly accuses Roth of having exchanged literary ethics for Hollywood profits – «aus dem Melamed wird ein Küster [...] – und aus einem Dichter ein Geschäftemacher»<sup>48</sup>.

Roth answered Ben-Chorin privately. He resentfully repudiated any involvement in the adaptation and, less truthfully, he also denied any financial gain from the film rights: «Nehmen Sie bitte zur Kenntnis, dass ich für die Verfilmung meines Romans *Hiob* in keiner Weise verantwortlich zu machen bin und dass ich nicht einen Cent von diesem Geld gesehen habe und dass ich laut meinem Vertrag überhaupt kein Recht hatte auf die Verfilmung Einfluss zu nehmen»<sup>49</sup>.

Given this troubled background, it actually appears less surprising that Roth scholars did not engage in a critical study of *Sins of Man* in the years that followed. Not only was the film apparently lost, but from the very beginning it also bore the stigma of a failed adaptation, triggering the irate reactions of *Hiob* devotees – and of Roth himself – for its disrespectful handling of the original narrative. Furthermore, for critics influenced by an ideal paradigm of the 'fidelity' of an adaptation to its literary source, *Sins of Man* probably confirmed the cliché of a Hollywood production conceived under the pressure of purely commercial interests, intrinsically unsuited to the artistic excellence of the novel, and therefore not worthy of further investigation.

### *SINS OF MAN* – A SYNOPSIS

The first sequence presents an idyllic mountain settlement dominated by a bell tower, and populated by peaceful shepherds and villagers.

<sup>47</sup> Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer lässt sich taufen*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Letter of Joseph Roth to Schalom Ben-Chorin from February 2, 1939, private collection, quoted in Wilhelm von Sternburg, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 2010, p. 378.



The opening intertitle explains: «Austrian-Italian border, Tyrol 1900». Although the film maintains the book's division into two main settings, with New York as the backdrop for the second part of the story, the initial *ostjüdisch* milieu, along with its geographical associations of small communities scattered over the vast Russian steppe, is replaced by the highly iconic scenery of an alpine village called Zenbruck. In a similar way, all the characters are transformed: the Jewish *melamed* Mendel Singer, in his long dark robes, becomes the sexton of Zenbruck's Protestant church and wears traditional alpine clothes. Religion still plays a defining role for the film's central character, emblematically named Christopher: he puts all his passion into leading a boys' choir and rings the bells for his parish community. Fully relying on God's providence, Christopher refuses to call a doctor to assist his pregnant wife, who – unlike her literary counterpart – dies at the very beginning of the story while giving birth to their second son Gabriel, the filmic reinvention of Menuchim. The eldest son Karl, an untalented singer in his father's choir but a «born genius for mathematics», stands in for all of the remaining children in the book (Jonas, Schemarjah and Mirjam). Finally, two kind neighbors, Anton and Anna, are added to the story with the main narrative function of rendering Christopher's thoughts in dialogue. In the transition to the screen, Menuchim's epilepsy and physical handicaps are also changed: Gabriel has been born deaf and will never learn to speak. Yet a good prophecy hangs over him, as a friar from a Catholic monastery across the border, like the rabbi in the novel, predicts that the unfortunate child will be healed.

The story moves forward ten years, to 1910 (the ageing process of the protagonist – which required extensive make-up sessions<sup>50</sup> – is an impressive visual quality throughout the film). As he grows, Karl's passion for science intensifies, most notably for aeronautics, and he loves to build realistic models of airplanes. This leads to an unavoidable conflict with the more conventional expectations of his father, who would rather see him take his place in the village church. Unable to obtain paternal approval for his aspirations, Karl suddenly abandons his family and emigrates to America. For the next four years Christopher refuses to open any letter from his son. Meanwhile, the local doctor gives him some hope that Gabriel will recover his hearing, a remote chance that would require specialist treatment in Berlin or New York. One day Christopher accidentally learns that Karl has become an aeronautical engineer and is still faithful to his family and to the Church. This leads to a reconciliation,

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<sup>50</sup> According to a «New York Times» article on *Sins of Man*, «it took him [the actor Jean Hersholt] nearly three hours every day just to put on his make-up». Benjamin R. Crisler, *Film Gossip of the Week*, in «New York Times», 3 May 1936.



and to the planning of Gabriel's cure in the US, a goal preceded by Christopher visiting his son. Karl welcomes his father in New York, but in the next few days a sequence of tragic events once again changes Christopher's plans: Karl dies in a crash during trials for a new plane (legendary Hollywood stunt flyer Paul Mantz was hired for the shooting of the risky flight sequence<sup>51</sup>). At the same time, World War I suddenly breaks out, preventing Christopher from returning to Zenbruck, which is completely destroyed in the first bombing raids along with other villages on the border (the film ignores the historical fact that hostilities between Austria and Italy only started approximately one year later, in 1915). Gabriel, Anton and Anna are all reported missing. Christopher ends up wandering upset through the unknown big city, a stranger with no family or home to return to. He eventually finds some relief by entering a church, where he happens to listen to a sermon on Job's perseverant faith in God. Forced by circumstances to start a new American life on his own, Christopher decides to find work.

The last part of the film gradually leads to a climactic finale, which to a certain extent reflects more closely the fairy-tale dimension of the literary ending. Christopher is now an old man with a long white beard. Just like his literary predecessor, he works as a cleaner for the owner of a New York music shop, Mr. Twitchelesko (an Eastern European name, like Mr. Skowronnek in the book). One day, as he is attending to his humble duties, he is struck when he hears some music on a gramophone that reminds him of a tune he used to play in Zenbruck. The record cover reads 'The Bells Symphony', by the famous Italian composer and conductor Mario Singarelli (the Russian Alexej Kossak in Roth's novel). By working hard, which includes wearing sandwich boards to advertise in the street, and with the help of a friend named Crusty, a good-natured leader of a small New York gang of down-and-outs, Christopher is able to buy the tickets to attend a concert by Singarelli at Carnegie Hall. Excited by the familiarity of the music, he feels the composer must be one of his former choirboys from Zenbruck, and unsuccessfully tries to meet him first backstage and then at the Hotel Savoy – perhaps an intertextual reference to Roth's earlier novel (it is the Hotel Astor in *Hiob*)<sup>52</sup>. When

<sup>51</sup> 20th Century-Fox Publicity Director Harry Brand wrote a release on *Sins of Man*, now held at the Margaret Herrick Library. The short note reports that Paul Mantz built a replica of a 1912 vintage plane on his own, using just silk, bamboo and an old OX-5 motor. Co-director Gregory Ratoff refused to witness the shoot, claiming «his heart won't stand the result of any miscalculations».

<sup>52</sup> *Hotel Savoy* was published in 1924. In *Hiob* the Hotel Astor, one of the most iconic New York landmarks of the first half of the 20th century, is wrongly located at 44th Broadway, instead of 44th Street (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 131). On this inaccuracy, see David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, cit., p. 389.



Singarelli is informed about the visit of an old man from Zenbruck, he goes and finds him at Twitcheslesko's. There he reveals that Singarelli is the name of an Italian couple that adopted him after his village, Zenbruck, was destroyed, and that he never knew his real name because he was born deaf. As a child, he could only hear the high-pitched sound of the bells – a memory he would later recall while composing – until the bombing raid restored his hearing. The long-expected turn of events is finally accomplished: Singarelli is recognized as Gabriel, and father and son are joyfully reunited. In the final sequence, Christopher plays tubular bells in his son's orchestra.

#### FROM ZUCHNOW TO ZENBRUCK: A QUESTION OF FIDELITY

*Sins of Man* seems to emphasize some recurrent characteristics of mainstream Hollywood productions of the mid-30s. The story follows a very linear biographical pattern, portraying about thirty years in the life of the protagonist with no recourse to time digressions, and with a fairly limited narrative perspective: the spectators' awareness is always equivalent to that of Christopher. The visual composition of the film also does not pose any significant stylistic challenges, as it relies on a conventional *mise-en-scène* – although not necessarily a realistic one – and on straight-forward continuity editing techniques.

Although listed in the opening credits, there is no further mention of *Hiob*, nor are there specific allusions during the film (with the possible exception of the aforementioned reference to *Hotel Savoy*) that might satisfy the more sophisticated expectations of a Roth connoisseur. On the contrary, *Sins of Man* is a typical middlebrow production that avoids any claim to intellectual distinction through more direct references to its literary source.

Among the extensive variations to the novel, the Tyrolean setting is the most disorienting one for spectators who are aware of the original story. Shalom Ben-Chorin mocked the incongruous invention of a Protestant sexton in the middle of such a proudly Catholic region, along with the completely fake representation of its inhabitants: «Nebenbei bemerkt hoffe ich, dass den Katholiken und Österreicher Josef Roth das kalte Grausen ankommt wenn er die Hollywooder Tiroler auf der Leinwand erblickt»<sup>53</sup>.

The choice of an alpine setting might appear less arbitrary, however, if we contextualize it within Hollywood's fascination for a romanticized mountain life that held sway in the 1920s and -30s, and which very

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<sup>53</sup> Shalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer läßt sich taufen*, cit., p. 3.



much paralleled the adventurous German *Bergfilms* of the period. While not indulging in the depiction of heroic endeavors against the backdrop of dramatic alpine landscapes – imbued with that mystical quality that would notoriously lead to the genre being hijacked by Nazi propaganda – Hollywood mountain films often focused on the stereotype of an idyllic provincial life: a peaceful small town world was usually juxtaposed with the reverse cliché of the modern, fast-paced metropolis. In this respect the quiet Tyrolean village of *Sins of Man*, just like bustling New York in the second part of the movie, fulfills a precise narrative requirement, not necessarily rooted in realism: the Alps are actually never shown, and the inhabitants of Zenbruck, besides being Protestant and constantly wearing *Trachten*, wake to the unlikely chanting of a horn equipped, time-telling bard<sup>54</sup>. As artificial as it may seem, this alpine exoticism – part of an overall «Rekordleistung amerikanischen Filmkitschs», according to Ben-Chorin<sup>55</sup> – was more recognizable to an American audience than the less familiar shtetl, the Eastern European Jewish town, usually Yiddish speaking, which at that time was just starting to gain some filmic popularity<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, the Alps must have appeared a perfect match for Jean Hersholt, a fairly unconventional film star who made a name for himself portraying reassuring, paternal heroes, with a deep-rooted identification with rural life or mountain settings<sup>57</sup>.

Most reviews which appeared on the movie's release in the US praised Hersholt for his intense portrayal of a simple, religious man of the Alps who «opposes progress»<sup>58</sup> (his son's interest in aviation) in the name of a traditional way of life, but then «becomes a victim of cruel circumstance»<sup>59</sup>. On the same note, no reviews questioned the choice of the Protestant-Tyrolean background. While this was a deplorable invention for Ben-Chorin – and the one that determined an *a priori* rejection of the

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<sup>54</sup> In the opening sequence of the movie this unusual character wakes up the villagers with the customary watchman's refrain «It's seven o'clock and all is well». All scenes in the alpine village were shot in the 20th Century-Fox studios. In the same period the similar insertion of an artificial alpine backdrop into a preexistent story occurred with a major Hollywood production: Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940), an adaptation of the Italian children's book of the same name.

<sup>55</sup> Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer lässt sich taufen*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> On the shtetl as a setting for Hollywood films, see: Eric A. Goldman, *The American Jewish Story through Cinema*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2013, p. 184-187.

<sup>57</sup> Besides starring in the title role in the aforementioned blockbuster, *The Country Doctor* (1936), and as the grandfather in *Heidi* (1937), in the same period Hersholt also appeared in a series of 20th Century-Fox productions such as *Reunion* (1936) and *Five of a Kind* (1938) – both sequels to *The Country Doctor* – and *One in a Million* (1936), a romantic comedy played out against the background of the Swiss Alps (again with Don Ameche).

<sup>58</sup> «The Film Daily», 12 May 1936, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> «Silver Screen», July 1936, p. 55.



film by Roth and his circle of admirers – for American critics the new setting did not pose a problem per se, it being debatable only in terms of the accuracy of the *mise-en-scène*, or its overall narrative effectiveness<sup>60</sup>.

These are two very different levels of reception, by which the forgotten story of *Sins of Man* opens the door to a major hermeneutical debate – as old as cinema itself – regarding the boundaries of film adaptations, their status as ‘intersemiotic translation’ of written works into images<sup>61</sup>, and, in a broader perspective, the long-challenged recognition of cinema as an art form on a par with others.

However unrelated Tyrolean bell towers might be to Russian synagogues, such a location change should not be a measure of the quality of *Sins of Man*, which did not, after all, require spectators to be first acquainted with *Hiob*. Ben-Chorin’s analysis – by far the wittiest critique on the film, and one that requires a somewhat deeper familiarity with Roth and his Austrian-Jewish milieu – is nonetheless affected by this restrictive attempt to explain the movie through the book, by continually censuring the many transformations that occurred in the adaptation process. Unsurprisingly, such an approach can lead to some blurred distinctions between aesthetic and moral judgments – namely Ben-Chorin’s complaint of «Der Verrat des Films an der Dichtung»<sup>62</sup> – which implies, in turn, an assumption of the artistic superiority of the literary text, and of skepticism with regard to any deviation from the source: the bigger the distance, the worse the result.

Yet *Sins of Man*, just like any adaptation, needs to be investigated according to the language of cinema, not literature, and it would not necessarily be a better film if it simply followed the book more closely – however such proximity might be interpreted. Of course, a comparative analysis of literary and filmic narration is an essential component in the study of adaptations, and will be discussed in the latter part of this essay. Nevertheless, comparison itself should not be confused with aesthetic evaluation. Filmmakers, just like writers, are not bound by any loyalty towards preexisting works, which might serve as archetypal patterns in an almost endless variety of ways, from loose inspiration to some sort of preliminary script of a movie to come. An extreme case of this was seen

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<sup>60</sup> In this respect, one reviewer notes that «While an effort has been made throughout to keep the story’s time elements properly costumed and detailed this was not always authentic», in «Variety», cit., p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> For the notion of intersemiotic translation, or *transmutation*, as «an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems», see the classic typology of translations proposed by Roman Jakobson in his essay *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, in *On Translation*, ed. by Reuben A. Brower, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1959, p. 261.

<sup>62</sup> Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer läßt sich taufen*, cit., p. 3.





with the second and very controversially 'faithful' *Hiob* film released for German television in 1978<sup>63</sup>. Adaptations exist in a state of free negotiation with their literary sources<sup>64</sup>, and in some cases – and *Sins of Man* is one such case – this leads to radical reinterpretations of an original narrative material.

In fact, such creative freedom is not an exclusive prerogative of filmmakers: Roth enjoyed a similar artistic independence when he decided to write *Hiob* along the lines of the *Book of Job*, and thus consciously positioned his novel as part of a thousand-year-old tradition of *creative use* of the Biblical story<sup>65</sup>. It has been noted that «the most important thing about an adaptation might precisely not be its adaptation status»<sup>66</sup>, and in this respect *Sins of Man*, no matter how good or bad it might ultimately be considered, needs to be discussed as an autonomous filmic work in its own right.

#### RECEPTION IN AMERICA

Unlike the aforementioned reactions of European intellectuals, the journalistic response to *Sins of Man* in America – very short articles for the most part, with some interesting insights on commercial expectations for exhibitors and theater owners – shows no interest in the preexisting novel. Nor is *Hiob*'s popularity in the US used to attract the attention of prospective spectators. As a matter of fact, critics hardly mention Joseph Roth as the author of the literary source, and *Hiob* is not mentioned at all in the criticism.

<sup>63</sup> *Hiob*, TV mini-series (three episodes) directed by Michael Kehlmann, with Günter Mack, Martha Wallner and Ludwig Hirsch. Between the 1960s and 80s Kehlmann directed four mini-series for German television based on novels by Joseph Roth, including *Radetzky marsch* (1965), *Tarabas* (1982) and *Flucht ohne Ende* (1985). On his questionable poetics of 'fidelity' to the literary text, see Michael Voges, *Literatur und Film. Michael Kehlmanns Verfilmung von Joseph Roths Roman 'Hiob'*, in *Joseph Roth. Interpretation. Kritik. Rezeption*, cit., p. 384-394. See also Francesco Burzacca, *Un mito catodico. Considerazioni sulla ricezione di Joseph Roth attraverso la televisione*, in *Fremdes wahrnehmen, aufnehmen, annehmen. Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Kultur in Kontaktsituationen*, hrsg. v. Barbara Hans-Bianchi – Camilla Miglio – Daniela Pirazzini – Irene Vogt – Luca Zenobi, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. 2013, p. 27-38.

<sup>64</sup> On the notion of negotiation in translation theory, see Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di traduzione*, Bompiani, Milano 2003.

<sup>65</sup> Ben-Chorin sees Roth's *Hiob* as a re-telling of the *Book of Job* within the Jewish exegetical tradition of *Aggadab* (Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer lässt sich taufen*, cit., p. 2). On the notion of the creative use of a literary source as a form of adaptation, see Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, cit., p. 337-344.

<sup>66</sup> Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, Rowman & Little, Lanham 2008, p. 193.



Favorable reviews mostly focus on the emotional pitch of the movie and its «relentless determination to send the audience out red-eyed»<sup>67</sup>. This tearjerker quality – «not exactly fine entertainment; it is more soul nourishment»<sup>68</sup> – was also emphasized in the official 20th Century-Fox publicity of the time, denoting a marketing strategy strongly relying on Jean Hersholt's reputation for such a sentimental genre<sup>69</sup>. Ironically enough, given Roth's original wishes about the central character, Hersholt's melodramatic acting style is very often associated with the tormented characters of German silent cinema popularized by Emil Jannings<sup>70</sup>. Various commentators, however, express skepticism regarding the actual potential of *Sins of Man*, noting that the total absence of any romantic subplot or sex appeal might redirect the audience towards lighter entertainment<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, significant female figures are totally absent from the movie: Christopher's wife dies in the first few minutes, and there is no filmic version of the attractive Mirjam, «kokett und gedankenlos wie eine Gazelle» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 18), Mendel's young daughter, who becomes a victim of her own sexual appetite.

When considering commercial expectations, the critiques of exhibitors offer a more pragmatic approach. Different to the commonplaces of professional criticism, they often provide a prophetic glimpse of the oblivion into which *Sins of Man* would fade shortly after its appearance:

I take my hat off to the exhibitor that can sell this picture to the public and get any business. On a religious theme, not any too well directed, and altogether a washout as far as business is concerned, and most of the audience expressed dissatisfaction with the picture; in other words, they did not like it. Another error for Fox<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> «Motion Picture Daily», 6 May 1936, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> «Hollywood», July 1936, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> An excerpt from a 20th Century-Fox advertisement page for *Sins of Man* in the «Motion Picture Herald», 18 April 1936, reads: «You will glory in its greatness while tears dim your eyes! Here is one of those precious rare dramas which so sincerely interpret the ebb and flow of human emotion... so understandingly capture the warmth and hunger of the heart».

<sup>70</sup> Comparisons between Jean Hersholt and Emil Jannings are made in various reviews of *Sins of Man*, including: Frank S. Nugent, *Sins of Man*, in «New York Times», 19 June 1936, p. 17. See also reviews in «Picture Play Magazine», September 1936, p. 59, «Variety», cit., p. 29, «The Hollywood Reporter», 5 May 1936, p. 3, and the interview with Jean Hersholt in «Silver Screen», July 1936, p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> On this aspect, see Frank S. Nugent, *Sins of Man*, cit. See also: «The Hollywood Reporter», 5 May 1936, p. 3, and «Motion Picture Herald», 16 May 1936, p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> «Motion Picture Herald», 22 August 1936, p. 108. This review, written by film exhibitor A.F. Hancock from Columbia City (Seattle), is part of a column called *What the Picture Did for Me*, where «the theatremen of the nation serve one another with information on the box office performance of product for their mutual benefit».



The religious undertones of the movie – the parable of a modern Job who, according to a conventional imagery, suffers and patiently resists despair – seemed far too abstract for the average spectator, who could hardly empathize with a man oppressed by such an overwhelming series of tragedies («fifty years of rotten luck»)<sup>73</sup>, but is never shaken in his deepest beliefs. On that note, some reviewers reject the overdose of good intentions and naïve optimism found in episodes like the *Shepherd's Psalm* that a missionary-like Christopher declaims in front of a New York gang summoned by Crusty:

Possibly the phoniest sequence in the film has Allen Jenkins [*in the comedic role of Crusty*] browbeating a roomful of unshaven and outspokenly cynical panhandlers to kneel on the floor and pray. Constant striving to give metaphysical meaning to the action is a flop<sup>74</sup>.

Certainly, Christopher's inability to question his religious faith generally makes him a more static and less interesting character than his literary counterpart Mendel Singer, who, more like the Biblical Job, refuses any submissive acceptance of his misfortunes and fiercely confronts God. While Mendel repudiates a whole life spent worshipping («Mehr als sechzig Jahre war ich verrückt, heute bin ich es nicht», *Hiob*, Roth 5, 102), and tries to set fire to his prayer book and devotional objects, Christopher is never subject to second thoughts, and even in his darkest moments (after Karl's death and the destruction of Zenbruck) finds consolation by entering a church and whispering the Lord's Prayer.

## THE PROMISED LAND

Although the imposing personality of Christopher Freymann might have alienated spectators' sympathies in 1936, the film offers stimulating cultural insights into the core years of classic Hollywood cinema. Among these, the invention of Christopher's Tyrolean origins (and the elimination of his Jewish ones) is instrumental in evoking an underlying conflict between a northern Protestant and a Mediterranean Catholic identity. Thus, when Christopher is advised to take his deaf newborn son south of the Austrian-Italian border to a monastery known for its miracles, he makes no secret of his skepticism («I'm not a Catholic, I'm Protestant!»)<sup>75</sup>.

<sup>73</sup> «Variety», cit., p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> The whole sequence at the monastery, as well as any reference to God and re-



Of course, as Ben-Chorin argued<sup>76</sup>, a Tyrolean churchman would have been a Catholic in the real world. But such inaccuracies, not at all unusual for Hollywood productions, should not be judged according to objective geographical parameters. *Sins of Man* is not a film that claims to offer a well-founded historical reconstruction of a specific alpine environment, nor does it require such sophisticated knowledge from the average spectator. The imaginary Protestant community of Zenbruck, just like any other cinematic microcosm, simply abides by its own fictional rules, and needs to be implicitly accepted by spectators.

Much to Christopher's surprise, his journey to Italy reveals an unexpected empathy between him and the Franciscan friar who blesses Gabriel<sup>77</sup>. However, it is only after the yearned-for reunion with his lost son in America, now an inspired composer with a stereotypically 'Italian' name *Singarelli* – probably suggesting some singing-related etymology – that the resolution of the long-standing ethnic and religious clash between the two sides of the mountains is complete<sup>78</sup>.

On a broader level, *Sins of Man* promotes the ideal of tolerance not only between different religious faiths, but also between a traditional/religious and a modern/scientific lifestyle. Christopher's reconciliation with his eldest son, although tragically interrupted by the flight accident, will only be possible when the old man stops 'opposing progress' and accepts Karl's genuine desire to specialize in aeronautics. The father-son conflict is thus a symbolic opposition between old and new worlds, and is only resolved when Christopher, albeit remaining faithful to his Tyrolean identity, renounces the self-imposed boundaries of a backward way of thinking and visits Karl. In other words, the conflict only ends when both parties find themselves in America.

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ligion in the film, underwent the strict examination of Joseph I. Breen of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), who was responsible for the application of the Motion Picture Production Code. Censor reports are preserved at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles.

<sup>76</sup> Ben-Chorin ironically refers to Christopher as «erster protestantischer Küster des rein katholischen Landes Tirol», Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer läßt sich taufen*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> The blessing of the friar (played by Fritz Leiber) takes place in a nocturnal scene below the statue of Mary, and is almost identical to that pronounced by the venerable rabbi in the literary situation: «Der Schmerz wird ihn weise machen, die Häßlichkeit gütig, die Bitternis milde und die Krankheit stark. Seine Augen werden weit sein und tief, seine Ohren hell und voll Widerhall. Sein Mund wird schweigen, aber wenn er die Lippen auftun wird, werden sie Gutes künden» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 11).

<sup>78</sup> As already mentioned with regard to representing a pseudo-Tyrolean folklore in Zenbruck, stereotypical ethnic characterization is common throughout the movie: the German name of Christopher's good-hearted Tyrolean neighbors is *Engel* (Angel) and when Christopher asks for Singarelli at the Hotel Savoy, the doorman pretends to talk to his secretary by calling him further 'Italian' names such as *Gorgonzola* and *Pesto*.



As part of this tradition vs. modernity tension, medical science assumes a narrative function similar to that of aeronautics. By deciding to leave his wife without assistance from a doctor at the beginning of the movie, Christopher displays a religiously obscurantist, fatalistic attitude, closely resembling that expressed by Mendel in the book, when there was a chance that Menuchim might be cured properly («Gesund machen kann ihn kein Doktor, wenn Gott nicht will. [...] Man wird nicht geheilt in fremden Spitälern», *Hiob*, Roth 5, 7). Unlike Mendel, however, Christopher eventually changes his mind and puts his trust in science. Moreover, while in the book Mendel emigrates to preserve Mjriam's reputation from her affairs with Cossack soldiers, Christopher decides to go to the US in order to find a cure for Gabriel.

All in all, America gradually emerges as a mythical destination where the heavy legacy of past conflicts dissolves, where religion and science can actually coexist, and where all opposites eventually find a common ground for appeasement. At the same time, America is the Promised Land, encouraging a necessary rebellion against the father, as progress looms large, and the opportunities to pursue one's own dreams are at hand: «I believe in aviation and its great future and what's more I want to follow it», says Karl – the real Job-like, 'rebellious' character of the film – just before leaving his father's home. Such a clear optimistic vision of human development and individual self-accomplishment permeates the whole second part of the movie – set in the US – and there seems to be no room left for the cynical, at times humorous, disillusionment that Roth instilled in his literary alter ego:

Die Amerikaner waren gesund, die Amerikanerinnen schön, der Sport wichtig, die Zeit kostbar, die Armut ein Laster, der Reichtum ein Verdienst, die Tugend der halbe Erfolg, der Glaube an sich selbst ein ganzer [...]. Bald werden die Menschen fliegen wie Vögel, schwimmen wie Fische, die Zukunft sehen wie Propheten, im ewigen Frieden leben und in vollkommener Eintracht bis zu den Sternen Wolkenkratzer bauen. [...] Dennoch mischte sich in seine Bewunderung für die Zukunft ein Heimweh nach Rußland, und es beruhigte ihn, zu wissen, daß er noch vor den Triumphen der Lebendigen ein Toter sein würde (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 86).

In line with a typical Hollywood pattern, America is celebrated as the land of opportunity: Karl is able to pursue his passion for flying, while Christopher exemplifies the newcomer who needs to go through a painful process of hard work and self-humiliation before experiencing his own final resurgence. Significantly, *Sins of Man* emphasizes scenes – non-existent in *Hiob* – where the protagonist is seen carrying out degrading tasks, like cleaning floors on his hands and knees or wearing heavy sand-



wich boards in the midst of an indifferent crowd on the streets of New York. In the book, Mendel is always a respected member of the immigrant community, surrounded by friends and living at the Skowronnek's after the loss of his family. Conversely, Christopher is a social outcast, bonding with beggars and sleeping in a common lodging-house in the infamous Bowery district. When the great Singarelli searches for his father, he is told that Christopher «is not the kind of man the maestro will know»: indeed, he is found washing piles of dishes in the kitchen, while in the analogous literary situation Mendel is celebrating Passover at the dinner table with Skowronnek's family.

Yet Christopher adjusts rather well to the harshness of his life as an outsider. Unlike Mendel, immediately overwhelmed by the hectic pace of the metropolis<sup>79</sup>, Christopher moves comfortably through unknown neighborhoods, without conveying even the slightest hint of the social criticism that characterized Mendel's stream of consciousness: «Amerika hat uns getötet. Amerika ist ein Vaterland, aber ein tödliches Vaterland. Was bei uns Tag war, ist hier Nacht. Was bei uns Leben war, ist hier Tod» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 96). Resolute in his religious beliefs, Christopher transfers his Protestant work ethics from the alpine parish community to the American way of life, investing his freshly earned money in the unlikely event of meeting Singarelli at the concert, as he clearly explains to a doubtful Crusty:

- *Crusty*: «But Pop, the cash would sleep you for two nights...»
- *Christopher*: «I don't want to sleep. I want to see the Maestro!»

As in the Biblical Parable of the Talents, Christopher risks all of his poor resources, while Mendel, in the book, hides his money under the floorboards, secretly hoping he will finally return to Russia. Christopher's determination to get to know Singarelli evokes the positive obstinacy of some contemporary cinematic hero à la Frank Capra: ordinary men from the provinces struggling for redemption, glorified through Hollywood mythology in the years after the Great Depression. This couldn't be further from Mendel's blasé attitude in the corresponding segment of the book, where it is actually the music star Kossak who strives unsuccessfully to meet the old man:

«Ja», sagte Frisch, «und es scheint, daß dieser Kossak Sie sucht. Er will Ihnen wahrscheinlich etwas mitteilen. Und ich soll Sie fragen, ob Sie es hören wollen».

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<sup>79</sup> «Amerika drang auf ihn ein, Amerika zerbrach ihn, Amerika zerschmetterte ihn. Nach einigen Minuten wurde er ohnmächtig» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 74).



[...] Er [Mendel] trank da Himbeerwasser, lehnte sich zurück und sagte: «Ich danke Ihnen, Mister Frisch. Aber es ist nicht so wichtig. Dieser Kossak wird mir alle traurigen Sachen erzählen, die ich schon weiß» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 119).

Trapped by his defeatist fear of any unexpected event<sup>80</sup>, Roth's hero avoids all new encounters, and shares nothing of the inspired activism of his filmic counterpart. At the end of the novel, the weight of previous tragedies finally dissolves into a quietly surreal dimension – «Und sie gelangten in eine Welt, wo der weiche Sand gelb war, das weite Meer blau und alle Häuser weiß» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 134) – where Mendel, overwhelmed by events, falls asleep. In the very last shot of the movie, on the contrary, Christopher actually becomes a member of his son's orchestra, playing bells just as he used to in Zenbruck, thus symbolically connecting his old life with the new American Dream.

#### FROM GOD'S FAULTS TO *SINS OF MAN*

The glorious finale of *Sins of Man* is a celebration of Christopher's perseverance in maintaining his principles and faith in a benevolent God. This positive turn of events, although still relying, as in the novel, on a climactic unveiling of Singarelli's real identity, does not evoke any supernatural intervention, but appears as the long-awaited result of painstaking groundwork. As a matter of fact, Christopher has reacted against adversities – *homo faber* rather than *contemplativus* – and found his lost son thanks to his own initiative. More than a passive recipient of a miracle – the «Größe der Wunder» that concludes the novel (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 136) – he is the typical character intent on that constitutionally upheld *pursuit of happiness* that defines the New World. And from this perspective, even the ambiguity of the somewhat obscure title *Sins of Man* – a generic reference to human frailty that disappointed many reviewers<sup>81</sup> – seems to be suitably resolved.

It would be hard to find sins, at least in a conventional interpretation of evil or immoral behavior, in the literary character of Mendel Singer. By structuring the novel as a narrative equivalent to the *Book of Job*, Roth focused on the classical theological dilemma of the unjust suffering of the good man, and on his consequent rebellion against a distant God who

<sup>80</sup> «Es konnte nur etwas Böses sein. Es würde von selbst früh genug kommen» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 117).

<sup>81</sup> On the inappropriateness of the title, see: «The Hollywood Reporter», 5 May 1936, p. 3, «Motion Picture Herald», 16 May 1936, p. 29, and 19 September 1936, p. 59, and «Variety», cit., p. 29.



is unable to help, and even clearly hostile. This is a leitmotiv throughout Roth's fiction starting with the central character of his early novel *Die Rebellion*. «Und warum war Menuchim krank?» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 104) Mendel rhetorically asks his pious friends who, as in the corresponding Biblical episode, vainly attempt to explain his misfortunes through a formalistic consideration of the sacred writings. But no sins can justify such extreme suffering<sup>82</sup>. Consequently, Mendel has become a self-sufficient man, who can proudly do without any mystical bond: «Er fühlte sich leicht, ja, leichter als jemals in all seinen Jahren. Er hatte alle Beziehungen gelöst» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 100).

The movie, however, avoids such a radical standpoint by transforming rebellion into a confident acceptance of sorrow, and Roth's defense of agnosticism – «Gott will ich verbrennen» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 102) – into a reassuring allegory of perdition and redemption. Unsurprisingly then, the question on the nature of evil – which is at the core of the exegetic tradition of the *Book of Job* – shifts from a metaphysical to an earthly dimension: God's original cruelty becomes, more generally, the *sins of man*. Christopher, unlike Mendel, does repent and atone for the errors *he* made in his early life, such as his refusal of modern science and medicine and, to some extent, his mistrust of Catholicism. Most of all, in line with a story that subtly revisits an archetypical American perspective of Oedipal rebellion against its European father, the movie puts forward the idea that Christopher's worst sin was to claim that he could decide his son's destiny. In this respect, the real turning point in the narrative is not found, as in the novel, in the final reunion with his musician son, but in Christopher's acceptance of Karl's legitimate rebellion in pursuing his career in aeronautics<sup>83</sup>. «I can't pretend any longer. I was wrong about the boy», admits Christopher just before deciding to reconcile with him in America. Only from that moment of repentance on, roughly midway through the movie, will Christopher be able to halt his own fall from Grace and, in a Weberian perspective, to identify God's will with his own good fate.

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<sup>82</sup> At the end of the novel, Mendel admits that he is a sinner, but only as a reaction to his suffering: «Schwere Sünden hab' ich begangen, der Herr hat die Augen zgedrückt. Einen Ispawnik hab' ich Ihn genannt. Er hat die Ohren zugehalten. Er ist so groß, daß unsere Schlechtigkeit ganz klein wird» (*Hiob*, Roth 5, 131). In Claudio Magris' view of *Hiob* as part of the Eastern-Jewish literary tradition, Mendel's faults are rooted in the gradual weakening of his family ties and the emergence of a desacralized modernity. Claudio Magris, *Lontano da dove. Joseph Roth e la tradizione ebraico-orientale*, Einaudi, Torino 1989 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1971), p. 124-129.

<sup>83</sup> The movie highlights the fact that Karl's rebellion was only against his father oppressive authority, and not against God. This is clarified when Karl writes to Zenbruck from the US: «Tell father before you tell him anything else about me that I go to church every Sunday mornings».





## CONCLUSIONS

Die Tatsache dass *Sins of Man* eine Woche in Jerusalem laufen konnte ohne dass es zu irgendwelchen Störungen kam zeigt wie wenig die öffentliche Meinung des Jischuw noch ausgebildet ist. Ein etwas kritischeres jüdisches Publikum hätte die Vorführung dieses Erzeugnisses widerlichster Assimilationsucht als Provokation empfunden und dementsprechend geantwortet<sup>84</sup>.

With these somewhat apocalyptic words Ben-Chorin ends his review of *Sins of Man*, condemning it as a deceptive attempt to assimilate the Jewish identity into a dominant Hollywood standard. To some extent this adaptation, by simply evading themes like the Jewish diaspora from Eastern Europe at a time of growing anti-Semitic fanaticism, can be seen as the product of an entertainment industry that encouraged disengagement from burning political issues, while promoting a simplified vision of America as a happy island surrounded by troubled seas. Certainly, *Sins of Man* offers some instructive glimpses into American-European intercultural dialectics in the years of classic Hollywood cinema.

In an unpublished letter of 1938 to Count Franz von Treuberg, a film producer who would become an assistant to Roberto Rossellini after the war, Roth sketched out a commercial agreement for the sale of the film rights to *Radetzky marsch*. On closing, he pointed out: «Sie selbst werden dafür sorgen dass der Film im österreichischen Geist gedreht wird. In den Fragen von Uniformen habe ich Recht Einspruch zu erheben»<sup>85</sup>. It has been argued that such a recommendation should be interpreted as a response to the disappointing experience of *Sins of Man*<sup>86</sup>. In any case, it reflected Roth's desire to be more directly involved in future adaptation projects.

A chronic alcoholic, in his final months Roth suffered an alarming physical decline. After a heart attack in late 1938 he could barely walk and write on his own. Nonetheless, in such dramatic circumstances he continued to consider the option of emigrating to America, and the idea of a new adaptation of *Hiob* must have crossed his mind: only about a month before his death, he received a letter from Antwerp, asking him about a possible new acquisition of the film rights of the novel<sup>87</sup>. It was

<sup>84</sup> Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Mendel Singer lässt sich taufen*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Letter of May 2, year missing (probably 1938), held at the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Roth Collection, Series III: Correspondence 1906-1939, Box 4, Folder 5. The proposed agreement was presumably not valid, as the film rights for *Radetzky marsch* were already part of an earlier contract signed with the Viking Press in 1932.

<sup>86</sup> Klaus Westermann, *Joseph Roth, Journalist*, cit., p. 105.

<sup>87</sup> Unpublished letter of Josef Dolinger to Joseph Roth of April 26, 1939, held at



again Roth's old acquaintance and *Hiob* translator Dorothy Thompson, now in her role as President of the American PEN club, who one last time, again opened the doors of the States to him. In January 1939, ten years after her collaboration on the composition of *Hiob*, Thompson wrote to Roth to invite him to the international PEN congress that was being held in New York the following May<sup>88</sup>. The long contemplated move was now a more concrete possibility than ever before, but at that point there was no longer any time left to pursue it.

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the Leo Baeck Institute in the Joseph Roth Collection, Series III: Correspondence 1906-1939, Box 4, Folder 5.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-1939*, cit., p. 527.