

# The guided Jewish tour



AVI KATZ

Ben G. Frank embarks on an enviable itinerary; sadly, he fails to take us along for the ride

**Tibor Krausz**

**T**HERE IS A CERTAIN PATHOS to the life of Jews in far-flung places. A few hardy souls, usually elderly, often neglected or beleaguered, hold on to vestiges of religious ritual in tumbledown old synagogues in a last-gasp attempt to remain Jewish. Their struggles can make for poignant tales and are rich material for writers and journalists, who come calling in search of those private little dramas that are inherent in conflicts of identity.

Then there's the other type of "Jewish World" story: the tales of Jews abroad. A member of any other ethnicity on a prolonged stay abroad is simply an expat; a Jew is a citizen of the Diaspora – a sort of geographical purgatory, a halfway house between exile and redemption. Theology considers all Jews outside the Promised Land to remain in a state of exile, even if they have never set foot in Israel and feel perfectly at home in the land of their birth.

In *The Scattered Tribe*, Ben G. Frank has both kinds of Jews in his sights. Frank, who is billed by his publisher as one of the US's

"most distinguished travel writers and commentators on Jewish communities around the world," is the author of several travel guides, including "Jewish Europe" and "the Jewish Caribbean and South America."

This time around he sojourns from Russia to Cuba with Vietnam, India, Myanmar, Morocco and Tahiti along the way. That's an enviable itinerary. Sadly, the author fails to take us along for the ride.

**A curious mishmash of vignettes about various ports of call, many of them only tangentially related to local Jews**

Frank chronicles his experiences in the style of travel guide writers, which doesn't benefit a book intended to be more in the genre of reportage than guidebook. He often lapses into travel brochure prose, complete with tips on where to eat, what to do, where

to shop and when.

"Step up from the waterfront area and you will behold inviting shops, especially jewelry, including of course pearls, pearls and more pearls, pearls by the thousands and at all prices," he writes apropos Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, in one of the book's many Lonely Planet-style passages. "[In buying one] be sure to look for a certificate of authenticity on the wall of a shop... Best advice: Shop around." That's good to know. Alas, he learns rather less about the lives of local Jews.

During his visit to St. Petersburg, Frank tells us more about Jews who lie underground, in a local cemetery, than those above it. "One always meets 'ghosts of the past' in Russia," he notes. Be that as it may, the reader may also yearn to meet a few living souls.

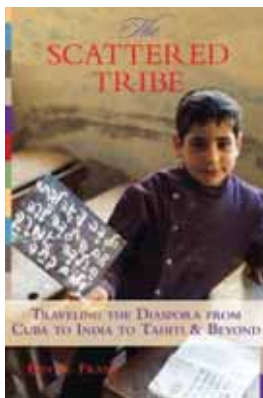
In Moscow, the author writes, "I visited Jewish day schools, met with college students, and recorded the rising of new Jewish community and cultural centers." But he leaves it at that without further detail. In Irkutsk, Siberia, Frank visits a community center where he sees elderly Jewish veterans of the "Great Patriotic War" (as WWII is known to Russians),

their jackets bedecked with their wartime medals. If they have tales to tell about their exploits, we never learn what they are.

Here and there, we do alight on telling details. The floor of the Main Synagogue in Odessa, a city that Russian Jewish greats from Isaac Babel to Haim Nachman Bialik once called home, still bears the lines of a Soviet-era basketball court.

In Papeete, the 200 or so Jewish residents – who have organized themselves into the Cultural Association of Israelites and Polynesian Friends – can boast of living in “the farthest place on Earth from Jerusalem, the exact antipode,” Frank writes, quoting a magazine article. The congregation is also the last on Earth to begin and end every Shabbat, which its French-speaking Orthodox Jewish members do without a resident rabbi. “Paradise is only in Jerusalem,” Mrs. Joseph Sebbag, a prominent local Jew, tells the visiting writer wistfully.

Frank is a proud Jew with a restless curiosity about “my people” in far-flung places. His love of things Jewish suffuses *The Scattered Tribe*. Yet with its curious mish-mash of vignettes about his various ports of call – some informative, some bland, many of them only tangentially related to local Jews – the book often reads like a collection of a casual traveler’s diary entries. It may not have helped matters that almost everywhere Frank went, he apparently did so on guided tours. ●



### The Scattered Tribe: Traveling the Diaspora from Cuba to India to Tahiti & Beyond

By Ben G. Frank  
Globe Pequot  
320 pages; \$17.95

# Roth's wrath



PRODIGIOUS TALENT: Joseph Roth in 1926

## Ralph Amelan

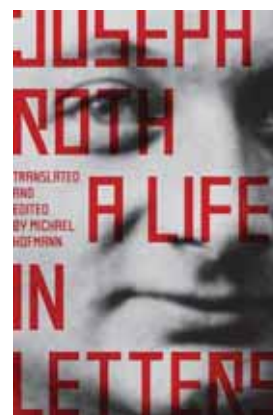
**A**LITERARY CORRESPONDENCE is bound to be lively when the person conducting it is “a ferocious, gifted, principled, and implacable hater.” Take a bow, Joseph Roth: the prodigiously talented Jewish author of *The Radetsky March* and chronicler of the moral collapse of German-speaking Central Europe in the early decades of the 20th century. He fell out with pretty much every newspaper and publisher, which published his sharply observed feuilletons and novels.

But other passions make themselves felt. His turbulent spirit ached for the tolerant times of the Habsburg Empire, and sought pockets of relief elsewhere in Europe. His friendship with fellow author Stefan Zweig also gave him solace. Yet many of these letters are screams, not cries, for help, as despair and alcohol tighten their grip. “I am finished.” “I am dying.” “Save me.” They do not make easy reading.

If Roth was Austria’s “poor lieutenant,” then Michael Hofmann is Roth’s aide. Hofmann, who has translated almost everything Roth wrote, fills these letters with a jagged, mercurial and febrile energy that

captures the inner man in all his rawness. The “implacable hater” quotation comes from him.

And it is Hofmann who describes these letters as “the protocol of a man going over the edge of the world in a barrel.” Roth completed the process by drinking himself to death in Paris in May 1939, cheating Hitler by a year. Those with a strong interest in Roth, and the German-speaking literary milieu in which he moved, will find this collection essential. For those who find this sort of correspondence too painful to read (and it is painful), my suggestion is to concentrate on Roth’s other works instead. ●



### Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters

Translated and edited  
by Michael Hofmann  
Granta Books  
512 pages; £25