

Remembering Rosenfeld

Many years ago, visiting my sister who was living then in Greenwich Village, I chanced upon an odd place--I don't know else to call it--where a man in his fifties had set up a kind of second-hand bookstore. As I recall, it was nothing more than a room, below street level but visible from the pavement, where he had set up shop with his books. My recollection is that there were no bookcases or shelves and that the volumes were simply stacked on the floor. I think he said he had lost the lease on his previous establishment--or could no longer afford it. There was a Jimmy Durante tape on one of those old, black cassette players, Durante singing in his nasal style, not a monologue. The dealer, thin and tall, as I recall, with spectacles and a mustache, whose name I never learned, may have been living on the premises, using the public bathroom in the building. He was obviously impoverished, and I decided not to leave without buying a few items. Going through his collection, I came upon a splendid volume of art reviews and essays by Wyndham Lewis, and the most unexpected volume imaginable--the original hardback edition, with the dust jacket intact, of *Passage from Home*, the long-forgotten Isaac Rosenfeld novel that Dial Press brought out in 1946.

Exclaiming over the volume, I asked the dealer, "Have you ever heard of Isaac Rosenfeld?"

"Heard of him?" he asked rhetorically. "I once dated his daughter!"

Well, I thought, that is a good New York story for you. I don't know what else he may have said on the subject. He may have "dated" Rosenfeld's daughter, I thought, but it wasn't likely that he had actually met her father. Rosenfeld's marriage lasted no more

than a decade, if that, and there seem to have been periods of separation before it formally ended. By the time his daughter, Eleni, would have reached what used to be called the age of courtship, her father would have returned to the Midwest, first to Minneapolis, where he moved in 1952, and then a few years later to Chicago, where he had been and where he died of heart failure at age 38 in 1956.

This memory came back to me recently when reading Steven J. Zipperstein's biography, *Rosenfeld's Lives* (Yale University Press, 2009). There are many useful things in this volume. Zipperstein has done a good deal of shoe leather and notebook research, tracking down Rosenfeld's family, friends and acquaintances, some of them antagonistic to Rosenfeld's memory, others garrulous, tedious, and self-absorbed, people who were still alive when Zipperstein began the research for his book in the mid-1990s. Some survivors remained of the Village days in the 1940s, and those who take an interest in Rosenfeld's life may be thankful that this diligent scholar contacted so many sources who have died since he began his research. He was unable to interview Rosenfeld's son, George, a physician, who also died prematurely young of heart failure sometime in the 1990s. The daughter had become a Buddhist nun and was living in Plum Village, a convent in the South of France near the Atlantic coast. Rosenfeld's daughter-in-law, Claire, an odd and sad woman widowed by the son's premature death, apparently added little to her father-in-law's story, who of course had been dead for decades by the time she married his son. She was willing, though, to share part of her life story with Zipperstein, and also proved to be a rich source of archival material. Many of Rosenfeld's papers are available at the University of Chicago, where he received his undergraduate and graduate degrees, but Zipperstein uncovered a wealth of uncollected letters, manuscripts and other

documents from varied sources that he usefully exploits for the story. He obviously cares about his subject, and he seems to have read all of the relevant primary and secondary materials, and to have tracked down everyone (or nearly so) who had anything of interest to say about the writer.

The trouble is that Zipperstein cannot write. Interviewed before an audience at Skidmore College in 1994 (the transcript was later published in *Salmagundi*), Saul Bellow, whom Zipperstein also managed to interview, expressed his dismay over the expanding industry of literary biography. "The ideal biographer," he commented, "would be a fine artisan; most of the writers are rough carpenters." By that standard, Zipperstein hardly qualifies for high school workshop. This is not a minor cavil. A reader has trouble trusting the judgment of a critic or scholar who does not use the language accurately or effectively, and Zipperstein offers too much evidence of careless writing. He has after all produced a book about a professional writer. (Rather obvious questions are also raised about the Yale University Press copyeditors who worked on the manuscript.) I want to document my claim so that readers will understand that my complaint is not a matter of pettiness or ill temper.

On page 3: "The early excitement surrounding [Rosenfeld's] work...morphed into a gray, dour reputation." "To morph," if it is a verb at all, is a vulgar transmutation of the longer "metamorphosis" or "to metamorphose." "Morph" is a word employed by journalists and others trying to seem clever and *au courant*; and even with the proper verb, the sentence would be awkward. (Zipperstein returns to the usage 150 pages later, when he describes the bohemian circle Rosenfeld fell into as conducting "discussions that might well morph into arguments.") On page 13, seeking comfort in a cold room while

interviewing Rosenfeld's daughter in France, he writes, "I recall leaning my body against a radiator for relief." Why not simply write "I leaned against a radiator"? On page 29, we are told that Rosenfeld's high school friends "read vociferously." I assume he means voraciously. Other gaffes follow. On page 133, estimating the veracity of Rosenfeld's diaries, he produces this awkward comment: "How truthful or, better said, truthfully characteristic, journal entries are, is unclear..." It would be sufficient simply to remind readers that journals are not always a reliable record of a person's life. "...[A]ngst, displeasure and self-loathing surface there with far greater frequency and volatility than in life." How can emotional characteristics "surface" with "volatility"? And what exactly does that concluding prepositional phrase "in life" mean? As opposed to "in death"? On page 79, the character Willy in *Passage from Home* is described as a "hobo," a word few people have used since John Steinbeck stopped writing. (I am not sure it is even an accurate description of the character, but Zipperstein writes with imprecision.) On page 199, the reader is told that Rosenfeld "purchased an old but sporty car"; contemporary usage would probably call for "sports car." On page 183, Zipperstein confuses "disinterested" with "uninterested." Describing the sad destiny of Vasiliki Sarantakis, Rosenfeld's estranged and often poverty-stricken wife, Zipperstein reports that she remarried, to one John White, an actor who enjoyed modest success in television in Hollywood: "Although flushed for the first time, she pined for New York." He doubtless means "flush," as in "flush with cash," But the word cannot in this context be used as a verb, and as an article of slang, in any case, would be out of place in a scholarly volume.

But *Rosenfeld's Lives* is hardly scholarly at all. It is a confusing, often ill-written and occasionally maudlin text, journalistic in tone, with a number of facts--one assumes that is what they are--that are very interesting for those attracted to the subject but are not perhaps altogether essential. The book leaves the impression of having been produced by a scholar who is not a professional writer and has turned to a subject remote from his professional interests; I am sure on other topics he does better work. Zipperstein cares about his subject, but he shows little intuitive feeling for it. His treatment of the philosophical questions that engaged Rosenfeld is vague, and suggests insufficient familiarity with the material, a serious lack when discussing a writer who undertook graduate studies in philosophy and made the subject essential to his work. Isaac Rosenfeld was a brilliant talent who produced marvelous essays and stories and *Passage from Home*, a novel that I would call readable. He failed to live up to his early promise and died too young to restart his career; even those of us who admire his limited body of work acknowledge that much of the interest we taken in him is derivative--he had extremely close if troubled relations with Saul Bellow, and at different moments over a roughly twenty-year period, their lives were inextricably bound. But if Rosenfeld deserves a biography at all, it should be a stronger one than the product Zipperstein has delivered.

Rosenfeld was part of the old Jewish West Side in Chicago, near the now-dangerous Humboldt Park, a member of a group of boys who came of age in the Depression and attended Tuley High School. Their most significant member, as no one writing about this fails to point out, was Bellow. In the late 1980s, I became acquainted with a retired Chicago school teacher who began teaching at Tuley (since renamed

Roberto Clemente High) in the mid-1960s. As late as then, there were a few elderly faculty members who remembered Bellow as a Tuley student in the 1930s. Three years younger than Bellow, Rosenfeld got to New York first, having married at twenty-two the definitely non-Jewish Vasiliki Sarantakis, a Greek-American beauty. Completing a master's degree in philosophy at the University of Chicago, he left with his young wife for New York in 1941 to accept a graduate stipend at Columbia University. He and his wife lived on the Upper West Side. Falling ill one day with pleurisy, Rosenfeld sat in bed reading *Moby-Dick*. The experience turned him away from philosophy to literature, he later said, because the grandeur of the novel seemed to soar beyond the limits set by the technical philosophy he was reading; I will return to this shortly. He left Columbia and moved to the Village, where he began his career as a professional writer.

The early essays were published in *The New Republic*, *The New Jewish Record* and *The New Leader*, both long defunct, *The Nation* and *Partisan Review*, the weighty anti-Stalinist journal that initially came out two to three times a year and allowed its contributors to roam over longer space and debate ideas put forth in earlier issues by other writers. Rosenfeld's topics were usually literature, but he confidently turned his hand to politics and philosophy. Later gathered in *An Age of Enormity*, these early essays are remarkable for their acuity, learning, and style. Rosenfeld began producing this work at the age of twenty-four, and critics twice his age would be happy to write as well. It is not unusual for very young writers to produce lasting fiction and poetry--Keats died at twenty-five--but critics often take much longer to mature.

Passage from Home, his one novel, published in 1946, is an estimable piece of writing. Irving Howe, writing early in his career, called it "bright with intelligence" but

"sluggish." I think that description is accurate. An early novel of Jewish family life, the novel centers on the wanderings of fifteen-year-old Bernard, the narrator, who describes a family Passover celebration and later life with his Aunt Minna, living apart and estranged from the family, and the men in her life, Willy and Mason. The book offers a flattering picture of just about no one. The father is a hard, severe Jewish patriarch, the step-mother somewhat frantic and anal (to use a word Rosenfeld would have relished), busy cleaning up the family home continuously. The grandfather is swollen with self-importance, the grandmother somewhat mousey. After a rupture with his father, the teenaged Bernard moves in with his Aunt Minna, who is sharing her home, sleeping with, Willy, a remote and peripatetic member of the family who has recently returned to town. He seems to have triumphed over his competitor, Mason, for Minna's affections; but about two-thirds through the novel Rosenfeld gives the story a Kafka-like turn and reveals that Mason is in fact married to Minna. The novel becomes stranger by the page, and harder to read. It ends when Bernard returns to his father's home, disappointed by his contact with bohemian life.

The sale of *Passage* was poor, according to Zipperstein; while many critics and readers had encouraging things to say about it, others, including apparently Bellow, were disappointed. After the brilliant reviews and essays that Rosenfeld had been publishing, the novel seems to have fallen short of expectations. For readers past and present hoping for a picture of Chicago in the Depression, the sort of images Bellow produced in *Augie March*, the book will surely disappoint. Rosenfeld had other artistic goals, it goes without saying. There are a few fine descriptions of Bernard's impressions of losing himself in a crowd, but the city presented in *Passage* could be any large American town

with a Jewish immigrant population in the 1920s and '30s. The descriptions of urban life are generally too bare to link it up specifically with Chicago. Rosenfeld's overwhelming concern is with people, their experiences, and their relations with each other--not places or physical objects.

Here it is perhaps useful to point out the version of Rosenfeld's story that Bellow himself produced. Both Zipperstein and Bellow's biographer, James Atlas, gained access to a manuscript with the working title *Charm and Death*, perhaps 200 pages in typescript. Bellow either never finished the novel or was dissatisfied with what he produced, although Atlas describes it as "beautifully written" and calls it "a chronicle of Rosenfeld's early life in Chicago, his college years in Hyde Park, his triumph and rapid decline in Greenwich Village in the fifties." As many of Bellow's readers know, a fragment of the manuscript appeared as a short story entitled "Zetland: By a Character Witness." A splendid piece, first published in a 1984 collection of Bellow's stories, it captures the experience these young men had at the University of Chicago. The story covers some of the same ground as *Passage*, depicting the same tyrannical father and the two stepmothers, life at the university during a Depression winter, and the marriage to Vasiliki, named Lotte in the story. By contrast, *Passage* is limited to no more than a few brief months in the life of a fifteen-year-old. At a public reading in Chicago in the mid-1980s, Bellow was asked by someone in the audience to rate Rosenfeld's only novel. A friend attending the affair told me the query left Bellow utterly stricken. Silent for a long moment, he quietly answered that it was a fine first novel but that Rosenfeld would have written better ones had he lived longer.

Established as one of the most promising talents to emerge from the Depression, Rosenfeld continued to produce essays and short stories, and taught part-time at New York University. He and Vasiliki became Village "characters," often giving nightly parties. During and immediately after the war, they had children, Eleni and George, but these two can hardly be said to have had a carefree childhood. The house was in frequent commotion, because of the parties but also because of the frequent arguments between husband and wife. Rosenfeld's affections for his children seem to have been intermittent, and he declared to a friend that he and his wife had "an open marriage"; the fact is that both were having serious and casual affairs with others early in the New York years. "Naturalist that he was," wrote Theodore Solotaroff in his introduction to *An Age of Enormity*, "Rosenfeld saw the way out of the underground not through Jewish faith in another, redemptive place, but through the satisfaction of his natural desires."

He also had a prolonged affair with the bizarre Polish-Jewish psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, this one intellectual and therapeutic. Reich's books seemed to give license to the sexual freedom Rosenfeld was seeking. At some point in the 1940s, he fell under the spell of Reich and his disciples, who had set up shop in New York and a few other American cities. Reich was an early example of the left-wing analyst who sought to combine Freud and Marx with the goal of overcoming repression. He managed to offend the various state communist parties in Europe that he joined in the 1920s and '30s as well as Freud's analytic establishment. He moved from Vienna to Berlin to Sweden to Denmark to Norway, seeking a permanent home and proselytizing for new methods of treatment that promised human emancipation. In practice, this meant a freer life for women and greater sexual expression. But the communists considered analysis bourgeois

science, and after the apostasy of Jung, Freud's circle, the notorious "Committee" established to enforce orthodoxy, sought to suppress Reich's attempt to modify theory or to use it for political purposes. Immigrating to America in the spring of 1939, Reich set up a laboratory in Forest Hills, New York, then later, in rural Maine, where he experimented with the Orgone Energy Accumulator, a six-sided box about the size of telephone booth made of metal and wood. This contraption was intended to transmit to the party sitting in it bio-physical energy flowing through the universe, which Reich and his "colleagues" christened Orgone Energy. He refused to testify before the Food and Drug Administration after the war, disregarded a contempt citation, and ended up dying of heart failure in a federal prison in 1957. In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliet Mitchell summarizes Reich's teaching this way:

Reich's thesis really amounts to saying that man has animal instincts (his "unconscious") which are outgoing ('towards the world') but which then hit the conflicting social pressures moving against them. In the ensuing conflict men builds himself like an armor-plated monster, suppressing his instincts and using the hostile attitudes of the world as the main component of his armor-plating. The internalization of social mores and restrictions...is thus the same as the character structure which is, for the vast majority of the population, the equivalent of character armor. A repressive society thus automatically produces repressive people; the only way of breaking through this and settling the conflict is by loosening the character armor and releasing the satisfying sexual instincts. We always get back there in the end.

Both Rosenfeld and Bellow entered a phase of Reichian treatment just after the war, by which time Bellow had moved to New York. Bellow claims that he undertook the therapy as a means of preserving his friendship with Rosenfeld, that he had to duplicate the experience of the other man in order to maintain meaningful relations. In

letters written to Philip Roth in the late 1990s and published just after his death in April 2005, Bellow comments that the experience of Reichian therapy "was really a horror. I didn't realize how terrible it was, and that it happened under Isaac's influence. Because he insisted that I had to have this done. About three years... There was a box in the doctor's office and you had to take off every stitch and lie on the couch... You could not keep your respect for yourself if you had not faced the ultimate rigors." Often, part of the therapist's advice was to begin howling. In a *Playboy* interview in 1994, Bellow said "it would heat me up quite a lot... it released violent feelings that I then couldn't govern. I'd lose my temper horrendously." In *Charm and Death*, according to Zipperstein, Zetland's therapist instructs him to scream and kick and simulate copulation. Becoming a follower of Reich, says Bellow, in one of his letters to Roth, "would not have been possible in any other American city. It took Isaac years to cast off the Reichian influence. This ideological ordeal, one might say, followed him from Vienna to New York."

There was a connection between the experience of analysis and the social life that Rosenfeld led. The attitude behind both was to discard restrictions on sex and aggression, to willingly risk the abuse of others by being precisely who one is, to be done with the masks and uniforms of bourgeois life. Readers need to remember that this happened in Eisenhower's America, the infamous "Age of Conformity," the stifling fifties, perhaps the most socially repressive decade of the twentieth century. Bellow wrote in the foreword to *An Age of Enormity* that during his Reichian phase, Rosenfeld "questioned people impulsively about their sexual habits and estimated the amount of character armor they wore." The group that he fell in with after his novel was published seems especially unattractive, positively venomous, and Rosenfeld himself characterized

their evenings together as "throwing darts," at each other. In one of his letters to Roth published in the *New Yorker*, Bellow says that Rosenfeld's "carefree circus attracted the bohemian intellectual crowd. Isaac became one of the wits of this group, a serious man who allowed himself to play the clown following the example of Dostoyevsky's underground man." Rosenfeld recounts one such evening in a journal entry published in *Preserving the Hunger*, a Rosenfeld reader. Lionel Abel, a theater critic and author of *Meta-Theater*, suggested a game: "We sit in a circle and each person makes up insults about his neighbor. The point is to see how well we can take it." This suggestion led to a proposal involving even greater hostility and possibly physical violence; the evening, not surprisingly, ended badly. In another journal entry, Rosenfeld quotes Bellow as demanding, "Why do you have to be such a fool?" I flare up; I cry it is better to be a fool than not a fool, to dare ridicule. But for what am I daring it? What is the ideal, the principle thus served? I am aware there is none, & this makes me all the angrier & all the more ashamed." Bellow's conclusion in his letters to Roth: "He got himself deeper and deeper into the pit."

Yet Rosenfeld remained a serious writer, and his struggle for self-expression rose to a higher level. In the winter and spring issues of 1943, *Partisan Review* ran a series of essays by important figures in American philosophy, including Sidney Hook, John Dewey and the somewhat lesser-known Ernst Nagel. The subject was "The New Failure of Nerve," and dealt with the appeal of irrationality--or as Zipperstein awkwardly insists on calling it, "irrationalism"--the rise of Fascism, the attacks on science and scientific method, and the diminishing prestige of liberalism. Rosenfeld had studied with Hook during his brief spell as a graduate student at Columbia, and he found the essays

inadequate. In a review of the arguments published in the middle of the year in the *New Republic*, Rosenfeld concedes but also attacks the limitations of what might be called scientific liberalism. "Central to their exposition...is the problem of methodology. Scientific method is presented as the only reliable one (which in fact it is) of validating claims to knowledge, of confirming propositions, and of evaluating evidence and determining means of implementation of values." But Rosenfeld insists that the approach is incomplete.

The empirical tradition, which has devoted itself to the critique of rationalism, has nevertheless taken over from rationalism one of its uncritical premises: the supremacy of reason. This results in an oversimplified construction of the human personality. It is assumed, in the greatest degree by Professor Nagel, that the formal exposition of the program of reason will be a sufficient condition for halting the flight from reason. He therefore finds it unnecessary to devote his attention to the irrational, not only as a constituent of the failure of nerve but as a dominant factor in personality.

Zipperstein is not very effective in dealing with this topic. He writes that Rosenfeld's "exact attitude toward rationalism remains scattered, and much of what he wrote on the subject was characterized more by discomfort than clarity." But there is a long history going back to Greek philosophy and extending up to the early twentieth century involving ratiocination and the means of apprehending knowledge that Zipperstein simply omits from his discussion. The "empirical tradition" to which Rosenfeld refers is English philosophy beginning with Locke, which becomes the grounds of modern science. Rationalism is the tradition of Greek philosophy that begins with Plato, and resurfaces with Descartes; logic, reason and meditation, not scientific method and experimentation, are the means of approaching truth. The two traditions are

linked by what Rosenfeld calls "the supremacy of reason." The claims for science cannot account for "aesthetic, imaginative data, of the sources of poetry, art and playfulness, as well as of suffering." In other words, a purely scientific approach "has overlooked man's spiritual orphanage" and omits the experience of life that might be called, for shorthand, private or subjective. From an artistic or aesthetic standpoint, this is why his reading of *Moby-Dick* led Rosenfeld away from modern philosophy, which lacked the phenomenological fullness of Melville's creation. There is a specific reason why the novel led Rosenfeld away from philosophy, but I am not aware that Zipperstein discusses it. Beginning with Nietzsche and leading up to Bergson and beyond, modern thinkers have argued that the philosophic tradition as it has evolved is at the very least inadequate and may even be destructive of the world, that the process of generalization and abstraction by which reason works is inimical to the understanding of the individual and his experience. It is not clear from the Rosenfeld's essay, however, how the value, truthfulness, or reality of these other dimensions of life, such as art, playfulness and spirituality, are to be assessed.

In a piece published in *Partisan* in the spring of 1950, Rosenfeld expands on the question. In "Religion and Naturalism: A Personal Statement," he is very explicit. "The reason I cannot accept any of the current religious philosophies is that they are all crazy in one very basic respect--their denial of nature and attempt to push man out of nature." He goes on to declare roundly, "I am a naturalist...there is no realm outside nature and everything must be found within this world." A page later: "All that need be preserved in going from a sacred to a secular tradition is *a feeling for the religion, as distinct from belief, and this is available to a normal act of empathy* [emphasis mine]."

I am not sure how acceptable this argument is. If "there is no realm outside of nature," then "empathy" for religious feelings is an empty gesture, perhaps even a sentimental one. One "understands"--empathizes with--religious belief. That obviously does not mean that the writer himself is a believer. If "human values must be derived from nature as the sufficient ground," then Rosenfeld is declaring himself a materialist. Only those phenomena that are susceptible to measurement and observation, the standard of scientific method, are real. But religious feeling does seem to have persisted in his life. Zipperstein cites a letter Rosenfeld penned in 1941 to Nathan Tarcov in Chicago, a man who was equally close to Rosenfeld and Bellow. Rosenfeld urges Tarcov to console Bellow, still in Chicago, for the distress his troubled marriage is causing him.

Let him find comfort in himself, and not feel bad because he has failed but feel glad because he has good purposes, love in his heart and a mission in life...It's hard to explain what I mean without falling into religious phraseology, because religion has been the only discipline that has spoken of these matters, and maybe religion is right. I will say to you and to Saul, believe in God. That means believe, have faith in yourselves, love.

There is more in this vein. In an undated diary entry that Zipperstein places in 1943, Rosenfeld records an unexpected encounter with Marc Chagall while he and Alfred Kazin were strolling on Madison Avenue. An excited conversation in various languages follows, and the two invite the painter to share a drink. Chagall declines, reminding the two that it is Yom Kippur. "I hung my head in shame," Rosenfeld writes, "I resolve, and repeat it now, henceforth to fast." Is the injunction to "believe in God" and "to fast" merely a cultural or, if you prefer, a psychological, display? Simply a "matter of form"? Perhaps. But these comments, detached as they are from the original source, do not

sound purely social. They have the tone of a commitment to Judaism, though in no formal sense can Rosenfeld be considered religious; he certainly does not seem to have ever attended a synagogue service as an adult.

One value of his biography is to dispel the myth of Rosenfeld's supposedly sordid, bitter death. Bellow, who attracted considerable notice by not attending Rosenfeld's funeral service, later prepared an essay, published as an obituary in *Partisan Review*, that went through various permutations over the years. A version of it was used as a foreword to *An Age of Enormity*, and most of that in turn appeared in his essay collection from 1994, *It All Adds Up*. Rosenfeld "followed an inner necessity which led him into difficulty and solitude. During the last years of his life he was solitary, and on Walton Place in one of his furnished rooms, he died alone." Before moving to Walton Place, he had lived in "a hideous cellar room" in Hyde Park. "The sympathetic glamour of the thirties was entirely gone," Bellow writes, and "there was only a squalid stink of toilets and coal bins here."

But Bellow overdoes it, Zipperstein says. Rosenfeld left Minnesota for Chicago in 1954, for a teaching job at what was then called the Downtown College of the University of Chicago. This would probably have been in the Fine Arts building, where as recently as the 1980s the school maintained various educational programs. Rosenfeld was far from "alone" and had actually left his Walton Place residence for a pleasanter one closer to the Loop. He had social contacts in the city, was inviting women out, and had resumed an affair with a woman he had been intimate with in the thirties. He was also still writing. If, as Bellow suggests, he was fastened to a kind of depression, it did not immobilize him entirely or prevent him from acquiring a red convertible. He simply died

of a heart attack in his new apartment, his body discovered later that day by a woman he was seeing. This was quite unlike the truly squalid end of Delmore Schwartz, who had a heart attack in a hideous room in a residential hotel near Times Square, his body lying unclaimed for days in a morgue before he was identified as a once-important writer and given a well-attended funeral service. Rosenfeld's end is sad, but it is not marked by an irreversible, downward spiral characterized by emotional instability, declining literary ability and social isolation, which was the fate of poor Schwartz. Zipperstein's correction of the myth is valuable.

The family Rosenfeld left behind did not fare very well. Rosenfeld's father refused any financial help to Vasiliki, even though his son died without any money and she was left to raise two children by herself; Bellow reportedly helped her when he could. She was a sexually uninhibited Gentile who freely committed adultery, as did her husband. These considerations are the probable source of her father-in-law's ill-will. In the Bellow short story, "Zetland," there is certainly, no evidence of affection, to say the least, between the father and Zetland's wife. Vasiliki and her former father-in-law seem to have entered a quiet war after Rosenfeld died. She changed the children's names from Rosenfeld to Sarant, according to Zipperstein, and forbade them from seeing their father's family in Chicago. They were also converted to Christianity, apparently so they could attend a private sectarian school in New York. After marrying John White, the television actor, she developed a drinking problem, endured a hostile marriage with her second husband, and finally retired to Honolulu. Vasiliki outlived White but suffered a stroke, became isolated in her apartment, and entertained herself by shopping for merchandise on

TV. A sad way for a vibrant woman's life to end. Sadder still is that neither of her children seems to have liked her.

© David Cohen June 2009