Self-fashioning, as we know from the likes of Stephen Greenblatt and Natalie Zemon Davis, is not a skill unique to modern history. Yet it took on a new face in the “Age of Revolution,” as Alexander M. Martin argues in From the Holy Roman Empire to the Land of the Tsars. A “modern” sense of individuality emerged in the Enlightenment, according to which “the core of one’s identity was one’s unique individuality, not one’s membership in a family, trade, or other community” (p. 54). While the Old Regime remained rooted in legal norms and prejudices regarding estate, religion, and nationality, literature and revolutionary politics encouraged some young men and women to buck the norms, leaving their towns behind to forge new lives, new identities, and new communities far from home. Johannes Ambrosius Rosenstrauch and his family, the subjects of Martin’s book, embodied this ethic.

From the time he was born in 1768 until his death at the age of sixty-seven, Rosenstrauch changed residence innumerable times, tramping from Silesia in Prussia to other parts of the Holy Roman Empire, with a stint in Holland along the way, before moving to the Russian Empire. Even here, Rosenstrauch could not sit still, decamping from St. Petersburg to Moscow, Odessa, and finally Khar’kov. He also changed careers at least four times: from surgeon (or barber), to actor, merchant, and finally pastor. He even changed religion, from Catholic to Lutheran. As he moved, Rosenstrauch also covered his tracks. Already at the age of twenty, when he married a printer’s daughter, Barbara Hampe, he refused to divulge his social origins. He remained silent on this count and lied later in life to conceal his previous identity, since the professions of surgeon and actor were tainted by social opprobrium under the Old Regime. The very name Rosenstrauch was probably invented. Another detail he refused to discuss was the collapse of his marriage in 1798, which left him raising four children as a single parent. Rumors dogged him to the end of his days. As a historian, Martin explicitly compares himself to a detective. Rooting through seventeen archives, scattered across four countries, and with the help
of the internet, he tries to reveal what Rosensauroch had hoped would remain forever unknown. Martin's formidable research still leaves many secrets unsolved, with blank spaces that Martin must fill in speculatively.

Martin's detective-like decision to tail Rosensauroch across so many professions and landscapes makes for a highly original work. The Old Regime, in both the Holy Roman Empire and the Russian Empire, appears surprisingly mobile at the turn of the nineteenth century, with "soldiers, peddlers, emigrants, scholars, missionaries, and actors" on the move across towns large and small (p. 51). For each place where the barber-cum-actor-cum-merchant-cum-pastor stopped, Martin offers a religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, architectural, and cultural profile. We see the "mental map" that might have been created in Rosensauroch's mind, its embeddedness in local, national, and international trade routes and geopolitics. The rutted roads and ports that connected these many towns are rendered in sometimes painstaking detail, helping the reader to feel how bumpy and boring travel undoubtedly was. Thus, "the standard wheelspan in the states on Rosensauroch's itinerary" from Kassel to Schwerin in 1800—"in Rhineland feet, because the length of the foot also varied—was 4 feet 4 ½ inches in Braunschweig, 5 feet 1 ½ inches in Hanover, 5 feet 5 ½ inches in Lüneburg, and 3 feet 6 inches in Mecklenburg. Carriages driving on roads where their wheelspan did not match the existing ruts were in danger of tipping over or breaking their wheels" (p. 105). Fortunately, descriptions of what Rosensauroch might have seen from the road as he traveled through the unfamiliar landscape of imperial Russia are more painterly, offering Martin opportunities to venture into such topics as serfdom and the first glimmerings of westernization among commoners, not just nobles. Altogether, we come to see central and eastern Europe as a space of remarkable economic interdependence, not only for agricultural and manufactured goods but also in mobile labor, on which all regions depended despite local xenophobia and suspicion of strangers. Rendering this insight so tangible is, to my mind, the book's most important contribution.

Itinerants forged their own communities, such as Freemasonry, which spread across Europe in the 1770s with its invented rituals and cobbled-together beliefs—a mixture of rationalism, universalism, and occasional alchemic mysticism. The many lodges Rosensauroch visited and joined, working his way up the ranks from apprentice to master, the professional contacts he made there, and the development of his belief system play a large role in Martin's book. A lodge might seem familiar to an Enlightenment actor, because it "resembled the theater, or a church, in the theatricality of its rituals and its aspiration to redeem the world by elevating people's thoughts and feelings" (pp. 80-81). Freemasonry was also a means by which a lowly actor could acquire respectability by demonstrating his moral uprightness to lodge "brothers." Some German brothers, who happened to be Lutheran pastors, likely gave Rosensauroch his entry into Lutheranism, to which he converted in Rostock in 1804. A German lodge brother likely also enabled Rosensauroch to leave the acting profession and open his first store on Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg by advancing him the necessary merchandise. To become a pastor, however, Rosensauroch would leave Freemasonry behind, cashing in on the social and economic capital he had accumulated. He could not do so in Moscow, however, but only in Khar'kov, Sloboda Ukraine Province, in the empire's South, where the shortage of university-trained pastors forced the government to accept non-mainstream applicants.

Through all these transitions, Rosensauroch undoubtedly built on his skills as an actor, a "shapeshifter" by profession, yet Martin rejects the premise that he "was, at bottom, a charlatan" (pp. 97, 345). Indeed, the many reviews of Rosensauroch's stage performances, which Martin cites at length, indicate a mediocre actor, one faulted
even at the age of thirty for his “cold and soulless” acting and the “monotony and lack of variation in his bodily movements” (p. 96). Though Rosenstrauch’s reviews improved over subsequent years, it may be because his aging physique better suited the role of “that stock character of the Enlightenment” he was most frequently assigned: “the wise father figure” or “an old servant,” who “spoke truth to wives, seducers, or young lovers” (p. 115). He played it to perfection during his sermons as a pastor in Khar’kov. Speeches he had previously held at Masonic lodges in St. Petersburg and Moscow, too, may have prepared him for this part. Instead of a charlatan, Martin proposes, Rosenstrauch may have been a “Mercurian,” a term Martin draws from Yuri Slezkine: as the “face,” both literally and metaphorically, of “Russia’s never-ending Westernization” (p. 175). The fraught consequences of westernization and the tensions they caused may, in turn, help explain the rumors that plagued Rosenstrauch to the end of his life, as an “out-and-out swindler” (p. 277).

Here, again, is an original contribution, for Martin helps us reimagine westernization not primarily as the imposition of a domineering monarch, Peter the Great, or as the caprice of wealthy aristocrats but as a form of consumption facilitated by mid-ranking foreigners and beginning to spread among Russian commoners in a “consumer revolution” that Martin dates as early as the turn of the nineteenth century (p. 174). In his chapters on Moscow, the subject of his previous monograph (Enlightened Metropolis: Constructing Imperial Moscow, 1762-1855 [2013]), Martin vividly portrays just how controversial westernization was to Russian commoners and noble nationalists. To them, the arcade of foreign stores on Kuznetskii Most, where Rosenstrauch’s shop was located, was the epitome of corruption, draining much-needed capital from Russia’s heartland, where serfs were bled dry. There were consequences, for during Napoleon’s occupation of Moscow in 1812, merchandise was looted not only by French army soldiers but also by roving bands of ordinary Muscovites who violently and mercilessly expressed their hatred of foreigners. To Rosenstrauch, who never learned to speak Russian fluently, not only the roving bandits but also his own Russian clients remained so alien that he never mentioned them by name.

The only weakness worth noting in From the Holy Roman Empire to the Land of the Tsars is that the introduction and conclusion do not draw out its revelatory insights. Due to its original subject, the book’s contents defy any disciplinary label, whether it be social, cultural, economic, or religious history. Martin also eschews the label “transnational history,” which he could easily have claimed (p. 7). Instead, he chooses his own themes (such as “experience of time and space”) that hover above his fascinating materials, generalizing in a manner that buries the lead. The magic of the book lies within its densely researched chapters, which I strongly recommend. Readers, like Rosenstrauch’s theater audiences, will be much enlightened and even entertained.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia


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