‘An American Type’ is an illuminating, moving and exquisitely detailed account of New York immigrant life during the Great Depression.

Call It Sleep, Henry Roth’s novel about David Schearl, a slum-bred, but not slum-bound, “Yiddle,” received mixed reviews in 1934, and fairly quickly went out of print. Roth was acknowledged, however, as a writer of promise. Hobbled by depression, sexual obsessions, disillusionment with communism and a break with Judaism, he remained “on the meat hook of a second novel” for decades, working as a tool and gauge maker, a psychiatric attendant at a mental hospital and a Latin and math tutor.

When Call It Sleep was re-reprinted in 1964 and hailed by critics as a great American Modernist novel, eventually selling more than a million copies, Roth’s writer’s block began to break. Slowly. Another 30 years passed before his literary hibernation ended with the publication of A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park, the first of four volumes of his landmark series, Mercy of a Rude Stream. When he died in 1995, he was acclaimed one of the most important Jewish-American writers of the 20th century.

Roth’s novels are thinly disguised autobiographies, infused with a distinctive combination of intensity, anxiety and ambivalence. Posthumously published, and brilliantly rearranged and condensed by Willing Davidson, a fiction editor at The New Yorker, An American Type is no exception. Set in 1938, the novel follows Ira Stigman, Roth’s alter ego, “a humanist and a Marxist (more or less)” and “always belated, insecure in his political insights, fearful of heresy or error,” as he criss-crosses the United States, trying “to bring his faculties into focus by composing an autobiography”; letting go of Edith Welles, his lover and literary patron; committing to “M,” the blonde, Anglo-Saxon pianist he met at Yaddo, the artists colony; and identifying the essence of America.

More episodic than plotted, An American Type is an illuminating, moving and exquisitely detailed account of life during the Great Depression. Consider, for example, Roth’s treatment of the experiences of hitchhikers and hoboies. Buying a round of doughnuts and coffee in a truck stop, he reveals, gave travelers thumbing their way out west the right to solicit drivers directly. And made it more likely that they’d be able to roll west in a concealed bunk in the back of a cab.
When riding the rails, Roth writes, hoboés never grab the steel ladder at the end of a boxcar, because a miss “might mean plunging headlong under the wheels of the following car, while the miss of a front ladder would only send them slamming against the freight wall, and they would be hurled back, away from the train.”

*An American Type* is at its best, however, when Roth recounts, in perfect pitch, the dreams, delusions, resentments and rages of Jews without money in the 1930s. At the Model Cafeteria, between 71st Street and Columbus Avenue in Manhattan, Ira’s uncles, Max and Harry, work as short-order cook and counterman, and Rose, Max’s wife, is a waitress. In the ’20s, when he was a “greenhorn,” Max tells Ira, he tried to impress a girl by spending $4.40 for theater tickets every Saturday night – and telling her he owned apartment houses. When her father said, “I think it’s a match,” Max disappeared.

Although he took night courses in architectural engineering at Cooper Union, and then learned the sign painter’s trade, Max had to work in a restaurant “because I wanted to eat. To eat. To eat. To eat.”

And now, he cries, the restaurant business is shot: “We used to give them a ham sandwich between two slices of bread. Plain. Ten cents. Along comes the drugstore, and puts in a piece of lettuce between. So we have to go and put in a slice of tomato. So the drugstore adds two olives. So we add French fries. So shit. Where’s the profit?”

Like so many second-generation American Jews, Roth’s Ira remains conflicted about his identity. He senses that his conversation with Max and Harry encompasses “the tragedy of the immigrant experience in the New World,” with its sacrifice of self to success. He broods that “they” – his parents – had no right to move him from the East Side, where he had been “in his milieu, amid jabbering Jews under the omnipotent sway of a Hebrew God,” to the “incomprehensible goyish maw of East Harlem,” plucking him out “like a radish, like a beet, like a scallion” from among his own and forcing him “to grow, hydroponically, a root crop like him, that adored the dirt and the din of the two-score streets of his Jewish mini-state.”

And yet, just as often, he says – and believes – that he “left Judaism, and damn glad to.” Because as painful as it was, “it was incomparably worse not to venture.” And worse yet to live his life without M, his “soul’s treasure.”

It’s significant, perhaps, that toward the end of Henry Roth’s last novel, Ira feels increasingly at home as an American type. He introduces M to his mother, and the two sit at opposite ends of an oblong kitchen table, “an absurd distance from each other.”

Mrs. Stigman serves white fish, lox, a chunk of smoked sturgeon – and M relishes “the new textures, the new saviors.” “She’s comely,” mom says in Yiddish, before telling M in English that Ira was not a fool, “for, after all, he had exchanged the old and jaded for the new and fresher.”

On the way to the subway station after the luncheon, Ira remarks that “Jews immediately include the whole world – the whole world of feeling anyway – in what you’d call a homey social discourse.”

“I like it,” M. replies.

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