

In This Hour Heschel's Writings in Nazi Germany and London Exile

Media inquiries: Suzanne Selengut, sselengut@jps.org

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Foreword

by Susannah Heschel

When my father arrived in Berlin as a twenty-year-old student in 1927, he thought he had arrived at the center of the intellectual universe. He was dazzled by the scholarly riches not only at the University of Berlin, but also at the two rabbinical seminaries, Orthodox and Liberal, all located at the heart of the city, a neighborhood that also was home to thousands of Polish Jews, recent immigrants. An abundance of synagogues led by learned rabbis appealed to him, though he most often attended the small Orthodox synagogue of Rabbi Yehiel Weinberg, one of the deeply learned authorities on halakhah (Jewish law) and also a person of great charm and warmth; when I was a child, we visited him in Montreux, Switzerland.

Berlin in the late 1920s was a city of great theatre, concerts, lectures, and intense conversations and debates. As a child, I loved asking my father about his student days, and imagining what his life was like. He was terribly poor; often he could afford to eat only potatoes for weeks on end. He would rent a room from a Jewish family, either near the university or in Charlottenburg, a neighborhood with mostly middle-class German Jews. Often other students also rented rooms with those families, and my father enjoyed the intellectual exchanges with them. He described his student years as filled with intense study – indeed, he was always reading, either a Hasidic text or a work of philosophy – but he also enjoyed the excitement of Weimar culture. Always wanting to explore and understand different ways of thinking, he took courses at both the Orthodox and Liberal Jewish seminaries, and was one of very few students to have been welcome at both. Although he already had received Orthodox rabbinical ordination while in Warsaw from Rabbi Menachem Zemba, he wanted to know how liberal Jews approached classical Jewish texts. The weekly “salon” he joined at the home of the Jewish sociologist, David Koigen, on Mommsenstrasse, was a chance for intense discussion of the Jewish future. On other evenings, my father would go to poetry recitations, often of the poet Stefan George, though he was more inclined to the work of Rilke.

My father was part of a generation of Jewish thinkers who were both products of the great German intellectual and scholarly achievements, and, at the same time, severe critics of German ways of thinking. Philology had certainly accomplished much in the study of religious texts, but it was not able to convey the essential significance of those texts: why people are religious. There was something deadening, he thought, about the synagogue services in Germany: a formality and regulation of behavior that my father felt hindered rather than enhanced prayer. The intensity of religious devotion he had experienced in the Hasidic world of Warsaw was for him authentic Jewish piety.

Just a month after my father completed his doctoral dissertation, *Das prophetische Bewusstsein*, a study of prophetic consciousness, in December 1932, everything changed. With Hitler in power, it became impossible for my father to find a publisher for his dissertation, and without publication, he could not receive the PhD degree he needed to obtain a teaching position at a university. He continued teaching, writing, and lecturing to the Jewish community, and in 1935 he published a biography of Maimonides that was received with great praise. Shortly after, he published a small book on Abravanel, as well as several articles on medieval Jewish philosophy. Soon his dissertation appeared, published by the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences. The reviewers were full of praise, and his work came to be widely known in Europe and also the United States.

But how to escape the Third Reich? My father was offered a position at the rabbinical college in Prague that was supposed to open, but could not. Martin Buber invited him to direct the *Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, an institute for adult Jewish learning that Buber and Franz Rosenzweig had founded, and my father moved in 1936 from Berlin to Frankfurt. Indeed, he helped Buber learn to speak modern Hebrew in the months before Buber left for Palestine.

Throughout those years, my father remained a deeply pious Jew in every respect, and he stayed close to his family – his mother and sisters, Gittel and Esther, in Warsaw, and his other siblings in Vienna: his brother, Jacob, his sister Devorah and her husband, Aryeh Leib Dermer, and his eldest sister, Sarah, who was married to the Kopycznitzer rebbe. My father rented a room with an Orthodox Jewish family in Frankfurt, in the center of the city, on Hansaallee; later he rented a room in the large home of another Jewish family, in a quiet street in the suburb of Eschersheim. It was in that leafy neighborhood he was arrested late one night in October 1938, held in terrible conditions at a police station, then put on a train and deported to the Polish border. He spent the next ten months in Warsaw, trying to receive a visa to the United States that Dr. Julian Morgenstern, president of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, had procured for him. Ultimately, my father arrived in the United States “as a brand plucked from the fires” in March of 1940, after a brief few months living with his brother, who had escaped with his family to London.

My father would never return to Germany, nor to Poland, and he suffered terribly when he spoke of the fate of his family and friends. Yet he retained the positive memories of his student years, and enjoyed describing those experiences. Certainly he was shaped intellectually by what he learned, though much of his scholarship was written as a critique of the limitations of the German world of scholarship. Nonetheless, he lived in the world of scholarship, and he often talked about the expectation of his youth, that he would become a professor at a German university. Who could imagine what would happen, he used to say to me when we took our walks together.

Even as he was immersed in his scholarship, my father was always concerned with his fellow Jews and the state of their spirit. He wrote not to offer comfort, but challenge, yet in his words of challenge from the 1930s, there is always hope: “moral and spiritual recovery in the

face of political catastrophe.” He spoke of German Jews as inverted Marranos who had become Jewish on the outside and Christian on the inside, lacking a sense of what it means to be imbued with a Jewish spirit. In one of his first visits for tea at Buber’s home in Heppenheim in 1936, my father challenged Buber’s assertion that adult Jews need to learn the words of the prayers: what we need to teach is not the prayerbook, but how to pray, my father said.

The essays that Stephen Lehmann discovered in German Jewish journals and among my father’s papers now appear in this volume for the first time, in a felicitous translation that he and Marion Faber prepared. They give us a remarkable picture of how my father, at such a young age – still in his twenties — sought to give insight and also comfort to the Jews of Germany prior to his own deportation to Poland in October 1938. Many of the themes we hear are echoed in my father’s later writings, after he became a professor in the United States. Special thanks go to Helen Plotkin, who has prepared excellent notes for the volume that clarify points of reference, and who has also edited my father’s notes for his lecture in London.

This volume opens a new view of the experience of German Jews in their years between dignity and despair, and demonstrates the remarkable vitality of the young Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the extraordinary figures of Jewish history.