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## **The Post-Assimilatory Generation of German-Jewish Intellectuals: A Map of Political and Intellectual Paths**

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I am concerned here with a peculiar generation of German Jews and their political and intellectual choices. What I have in mind is a group of people from rather affluent, upper-middle class German-Jewish families. At some point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the families took the path of assimilation and the estrangement between them and the traditional Jewish way of life grew bigger and bigger. The parents of the people I want to talk about usually kept some form of Jewish (reform) tradition and, for example, attended the service at the synagogue on Yom Kippur. On the other hand, some of the families would celebrate Christmas and even have a Christmas tree, claiming that it is not a Christian, but a German tradition.

Many of their children, born in the late eighties and nineties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for one reason or another broke with the way of life of their parents and began a very passionate quest for new beliefs and ways of living. Very often the break occurred somewhere around the First World War or slightly earlier. Most of them saw their family homes and the bourgeois culture they represented as a spiritual wasteland, a realm of political hypocrisy and personal self-deception. Their own choices included all possible paths: Communism, Anarchism, Zionism, some ver-

sions of Jewish religion or Christianity. For some the break meant a sort of idiosyncratic return to Jewish culture and/or religion, for others a final step outside the Jewish life into the new realms of Christianity or Communism. What is additionally fascinating about this whole map of paths is that those spiritual, political and even “geographic” choices are closely intertwined with each other.

I shall focus here on three outstanding figures belonging to this generation who are exceptional in the power of their minds and their intellectual achievement, but can also help us to sketch a map that is not confined to men of genius. I choose here the historian Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem, the theologian and philosopher Franz Rosenzweig and the philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin. I shall briefly look at their life and intellectual trajectories and show some connections and contrasts between them. In general, I shall use Gershom Scholem as my guide in this area, not by reducing everything to his perspective, but by treating his position and views as a convenient point of reference.

Gershom Scholem himself is a striking example of this decisive break with the assimilatory milieu. Born in 1897, Scholem discovered very soon (or so he claims) the self-deception of the assimilated Jewry. According to him, in the generation of his parents, German Jews found themselves trapped in a situation where they were almost absolutely estranged from the Jewish tradition. They tried badly to become Germans, but somehow were not accepted into the German society. Scholem thus remembers that non-Jews never visited his father who considered himself almost German.<sup>1</sup> According to Scholem, the whole process of emancipation failed in Germany. There was nothing like German-Jewish dialogue, for the precondition for any dialogue was that the Jews should break with their Jewishness.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Scholem decided quite soon to join the Zionist movement.

It should be noted here that Scholem’s Zionism was rather different from the political Zionism of Theodor Herzl and his followers. For Scholem, Zionism was a quest for a cultural renewal that involved religious dimension, but at the same time did not mean a break with secularism. He dreamt of some new cultural form of Judaism that would include both secularism and religion, but would be far from both Orthodox Judaism and the wasteland of assimilation. In some strong sense, Scholem’s Zionism was a cultural revolt against the bourgeois milieu of his parents and it is not surprising that out of his three brothers he got along best with Werner

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York 1976, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2*, Frankfurt 1970, pp. 7-11.

who was deeply involved in Communism. For Scholem, Communism was another self-deception of Jews who, as he thought, should find their way back to their own history rather than try to dissolve in the general striving towards revolution.

As far as political views are concerned, young Scholem himself was close to anarchism. In 1923 he emigrated to Palestine. Interestingly enough, he was involved in a movement called *Brit Shalom* that worked for a reconciliation with the Arabs, planning even a bi-national state. But for Scholem that was clearly only a means to what he really wanted: creation of a place for a revival of Jewish culture. *Brit Shalom* was severely attacked and in 1931 Scholem wrote in a letter that Zionism, as a striving towards some cultural (or spiritual) rebirth, had already failed.<sup>3</sup> However, all his life he remained sure that his decision of leaving Berlin for Jerusalem was the right one. His cultural Zionism was also connected to the main field of his activity, namely the historical study of Jewish mysticism. In the *kabbalah*—ignored by the bourgeois Judaism of the nineteenth century as irrational—Scholem found the sources of living Judaism. Nevertheless, he was absolutely convinced that historical criticism was the only way to approach this world. Thus, Scholem's historical work was a part of his Zionist project conceived as striving towards renewal of Jewish culture. Scholem was highly esteemed and successful as a historian, but it can be argued that he was disappointed by the development of Zionism, hence disappointed in general. It is furthermore difficult to say if he felt that through his historical work he established a contact with the Jewish tradition or that he was still waiting for some other form of religious renewal outside Orthodoxy.

Keeping this path in mind, it is interesting to look at the choices of another brilliant figure, namely Franz Rosenzweig. Eleven years older than Scholem, he studied philosophy and was fascinated by Hegel's thought. For Rosenzweig, the break with bourgeois culture of the nineteenth-century Germany was also a philosophical break with German idealism. And this meant for him a shift towards religious philosophy. He was close to conversion to Christianity, but suddenly (after attending Yom Kippur service at a synagogue in Berlin) he decided to change direction and turned towards Judaism.

Rosenzweig's brilliant book *The Star of Redemption* is a philosophical departure from German idealism, a strict theological system and a project of renewed Judaism and Jewish life. In the third part of his book, Rosenzweig sketches a vision of the ritual life of the Jewish community absolutely disentangled from history. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin - die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Frankfurt 1975, pp. 216-217.

sense, he represents a very powerful vision of Jewish religious and communal renewal which is at the same time radically anti-Zionistic. Rosenzweig claimed that Jews are ahistorical as a nation. While other (Christian) nations have their secular laws, their land and their living language, Jews have only ritual law, a land as an eternal promise, and a sacred language that they do not use in everyday life. According to Rosenzweig, this is the way it should be. Thus, Zionism is an illegitimate project that is either a mad Messianic movement or (more interestingly) a way to lose what is peculiar to Jews and to turn them into a regular historical nation—with laws changing in time, a land, a state, a living language. Jews should live in tight ritual communities among other nations, being at the same time a part of a modern state. On a more theological level, Rosenzweig believed that Judaism and Christianity are complementary religions, while Islam was a religion that got it all wrong. His life-path ended prematurely and tragically: after publishing his book he wrote several more essays and worked for the revival of Jewish education in Germany, but died very soon after couple of years of heroic struggle against a terrible paralysis.

For a better understanding of the post-assimilatory generation of German-Jewish intellectuals, it is particularly interesting to compare Scholem and Rosenzweig, and see what they thought of each other. Scholem was deeply convinced that Jews in Germany are in the trap of assimilation and that the only way to revive Jewish culture and learning is to leave for Palestine. His return to Jewishness meant a jump out of German into Hebrew language, and out of German history into Jewish history, into some continuum of which this new form of life in Palestine will be a new element. Thus, although to some extent Scholem admired Rosenzweig as a theologian, Rosenzweig's escape from history, his ahistorical view of Jewish nation and the idea of reconstructing some community in Germany deeply annoyed him (and thus they had a couple of terrible arguments).

Scholem also disliked the communal and ritual aspect of Rosenzweig's vision, which according to Scholem resembled a pietistic Protestant church.<sup>4</sup> At least two Scholem's beliefs were in opposition to this Rosenzweig's vision: one was simply individualistic and anarchic, the other stressed the Zionist idea of Jews returning to their history. One can argue that Scholem played both cards and that the personal quest was for him intertwined with a social project. Rosenzweig himself was im-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 20-21. Also: Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 1*, Frankfurt 1963, p. 232.

pressed by the strength of Scholem's belief in the necessity of leaving Germany as a precondition of Jewish revival,<sup>5</sup> but he sensed the anarchic idea in Scholem: Rosenzweig wrote in one of his letters that although Scholem might be the only one of the whole generation who had already found his way back home, he returned there alone.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, Rosenzweig could also apply to Scholem all his doubts about Zionism as such. One could argue that both thinkers saw the weak point of each other's project, but not of their own. Rosenzweig did not live to see the collapse of his idea of Jewish revival in Germany (he died in 1929), but Scholem lived long enough to see that Rosenzweig's doubts about Zionism might have been justified in many different ways (Scholem died in 1982).

It is time to draw a third line on the map of the political and intellectual paths of post-assimilatory generation of German-Jewish intellectuals, and that is the path of Walter Benjamin, a thinker five years older than Scholem and six years younger than Rosenzweig. His life's trajectory was rather unstable. He studied philosophy, but after the failure of his habilitation project he worked as a free-lance writer and literary critic, first in Berlin and after 1933 mostly in Paris. Unlike Scholem and Rosenzweig, Benjamin's break with the bourgeois world of his parents' house did not mean a return to a Jewish nation or Jewish culture, at least not in any conventional sense. While Scholem and Rosenzweig were rather persistent and clear in their choices, Benjamin's trajectory is much more difficult to define. His intellectual path wandered between esoteric Jewish theology, the peculiar Marxism of the Frankfurt School and Bertold Brecht's Communism. Benjamin was a brilliant literary critic, dealing (among others) with Goethe, Kafka, Proust, Baudelaire, and the surrealists. He presented his philosophical reflections mainly in the form of literary criticism and on this more philosophical level he was generally interested in philosophy of language and philosophy of history. Schematically, Benjamin's development is sometimes presented as a shift from a theological phase to a phase that to some extent can be called Marxist or materialist. Nevertheless, it is clear that he never completely dropped his theological inspiration, and the relation between the two (or more) aspects of his work is a subject of never-ending discussions.

Even in his Marxist phase it is difficult to reduce Benjamin's path to a typical paradigm of a Jewish Communist who is looking for a way out of his identity crisis in the class struggle and revolution. This pattern would be better applied to

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk*, Der Haag 1979, p. 741.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 694.

Scholem's brother Werner, mentioned above, who became a Communist MP and was later killed in Buchenwald. But although Benjamin's vision of revolution might have been rather complex, his Marxist faith often turned out to be extremely, one could say tragically, naïve. Scholem, Benjamin's close friend, who could not swallow his Marxist conversion, recalls one meeting when he attacked Benjamin's essay on the mechanical reproduction of the work of art. In the second part of this famous work Benjamin presents a vision of film as a tool of self-conscious proletariat and draws very far-reaching conclusions. Scholem claimed that there is no logical connection between this part and the first part of the essay in which the disappearance of so-called aura of the work of art is analyzed. Benjamin answered that the philosophical connection will be delivered by the revolution and not by himself.<sup>7</sup> I mention this story to show that to some extent Benjamin expected the revolution to overcome the fragmentation of his own views and maybe also of his own person. But this shows perhaps only one aspect of his position.

Scholem's vision of Benjamin's development is that Benjamin never stopped being some sort of a Jewish mystical theologian and that he virtually never made real use of Marxist methods in analyzing cultural or literary phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Benjamin's Marxism is just a thin disguise for theology. For some time Scholem hoped that his friend would find his way to the Jewish world and come to Palestine. One can even speculate that Scholem saw in Benjamin the person who would help to realize his dream of a spiritual renewal outside the boundaries of conventional religion. But despite all his hesitation Benjamin was quite sure that he could not, or did not want to, see this stream of Jewish culture nicely disentangled from a German and European one. He was interested neither in Rosenzweig's ahistorical ritual Jewish community nor in Scholem's Zionist return to Jewish history. As we have seen, both those thinkers looked for their spiritual (and in Scholem's case also "physical") home outside the boundaries of European history in some sort of Jewish world. Benjamin could not or did not want to take any of these paths. But he was determined to use the Jewish thread in his thought for the analysis of European culture as such, tracing what he called "profane illuminations"<sup>9</sup> and using some motifs of theological thinking far from the boundaries of any religion.<sup>10</sup> On the theoretical

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<sup>7</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin...*, pp. 257-258.

<sup>8</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2*, pp. 217-227.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus*, Frankfurt 1966, p. 212-213.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt 1977, p. 251.

level this resulted in brilliant and rich analyses of literature, film and photography and it is rather doubtful if we would have had these texts had Benjamin turned Zionist. On the political level he stuck to a rather ambivalent apocalyptic belief in revolution, which might have been dangerous mostly to himself. On the personal level the path of Walter Benjamin ends with the suicide he committed in 1940 at French-Spanish border, on his way to America.

Are these three paths followed in any sense today? Rosenzweig's vision of ahistorical, ritual community may perhaps make more sense in the twenty-first century Poland than in Weimar Germany. If anyone is seriously interested in a revival of a communal religious life, he might find guidance in Rosenzweig's book. Walter Benjamin's Jewishness without communal or geographic attachments is widespread today among intellectuals of Jewish origin, although his apocalyptic belief in revolution is not (luckily enough). Gershom Scholem's Zionist dogma might not be very popular nowadays, but his historical, academic approach to the *kabbalah* opened the world of Jewish mysticism for many almost-secular Jews who would not have approached it in any other way. In general, it seems that "geographical" choices considerably lost their meaning, and so one can be a (qualified) follower of Rosenzweig in Israel and a (qualified) follower of Scholem in Europe. And obviously, there is no problem with reading Walter Benjamin wherever you are.