There, in his valuable library, the witty and up-to-date Scholem gathered a dozen professors and authors, all of them German speakers, and all of them speaking in German, about German memories, about German literature, even about the politics of German literature. As Werner Weber used to say, they dispatch some rival from the distant past or one who is still living, and they raise up some chosen one to the stars. Everything is as it was fifty years ago. They are as knowledgeable as they once were, they are brilliant and express themselves articulately, but something entirely new is added to each of them, which they would like to deny: nostalgia, deep yearning (Heimweh), which endows even their critical remarks with a romantic (verklärt) tinge.

Karl Burckhardt to Max Rychner, November 19, 1962
Therefore—and may every sanctimonious German maiden roll her eyes in virginal surprise—I hope from the depth of my soul that Ascona will someday become a place of refuge for liberated or fleeing prisoners, for homeless, persecuted people, for all those victims of circumstances . . ., who wander with no direction, hunted down, tormented, and yet they have not lost their aspiration to live a human life among people who respect them as people like themselves.

— ERICH MÜHSAM, “ASCONA (1905)”

The Eranos Conferences

Shortly before the establishment of the State of Israel, Scholem turned fifty. He was then at the height of his scholarly career, which had already made him one of the outstanding intellectuals and academics of Israel. He had taken part in many academic projects and would participate in even more, and his scholarly activity would eventually be honored with almost all the prizes and titles that the State of Israel could offer. The height of this recognition was his tenure as president of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, from 1968 to 1974. In addition to his activities in Israel, Scholem contributed scholarly energy and strength to the academic world of the United States, while in residence at various universities to pursue his research. By publishing giving lectures in English, and developing close ties with his colleagues overseas, Scholem also made his mark on American intellectual life.

The third place where Scholem was active was the Federal Republic of Germany, which was founded in the same year as the State of Israel. World War II and the Holocaust had abruptly put an end to his writing in the German language, though he had previously attributed great importance to doing so. In a letter to Walter Benjamin of August 1, 1931, Scholem stated his intentions regarding the language in which he would write: “It is my serious intention to write more in German because no historian of religion is capable of reading Hebrew.”
Though he ceased to do so for almost a decade, this intention was not forgotten, and after the war the place accorded to German increased in his intellectual life, with much of his creative power directed to a German readership. The first forum where Scholem presented his research in German after the Holocaust was at the Eranos conference in 1949, and the publication of his first lecture there symbolized his return to the German-speaking academic world.

The Venue: The Foot of Monte Verità

The history of the Eranos conferences begins even before their establishment in 1933. In fact, the root of the conferences—which are held to this day in the Swiss village of Ascona, on the shore of Lake Maggiore, which marks the border with Italy—lies in the intellectual and cultural phenomena that preceded them by several years. Until the period when the annual meetings discussed in this chapter were established, the focus of the social, ideological, and spiritual ferment of Ascona was on the mountain where the village is situated. The mountain (actually, a hill) is called Monte Verità, “the mountain of truth.” During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the history of Monte Verità was to a large extent the history of alternative and antibourgeois German culture of that time.

Monte Verità first became a center for alternative trends and marginal movements in the fall of 1900, when a group of seven people that had formed around Henri Oedenkoven, the son of a Dutch banker, and Ida Hofmann, a pianist and music teacher, arrived with the intention of settling on the hill. In the following years the place became a center for antibourgeois movements whose members advocated the principles of Lebensreform (life reform) and opposed modern industrialization. A sanatorium was established on the hill, where vegetarianism and the eating of raw vegetables, sunbathing, physical labor, and nudism were practiced. The sanatorium also offered artistic and musical programs for its residents. In a short time, the group that had established the first sanatorium broke apart, and some members established another convalescent home on the hill. In the following two decades, the hill attracted settlers from almost every alternative and esoteric movement in Germany at that time: vegetarians, nudists, anarchists, pacifists, modern dance groups, theosophical organizations, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Anthroposophists, and advocates of psychoanalysis. The author Hermann Hesse stayed in one of the sanatoriums on the hill to treat his alcoholism; and the Jewish anarchist Erich Mühsam and two members of the avant-garde group of German painters called der blaue Reiter lived in the area at the same time. The hill was a refuge for opponents of World War I, and in 1917 an antinational congress was held there, at which lectures on cultural and esoteric topics were delivered. Monte Verità became a meeting place for proponents of
various alternative trends and ideas, who met and influenced each other. Most of these people were members of the German bourgeoisie who were rebelling against their parents’ way of life, but who were financially supported by those parents while in Ascona. Many of them belonged to Jewish families. Along with the spiritual content of the activities on the hill, the alternative convalescent aspect of it remained in existence, and many patients were treated there in body and soul. After World War I, the sanatorium and its hospital encountered economic difficulties, and during the 1920s the residents of the hill began to disperse.

Another element central to the activity in Ascona during its peak was the meeting between East and West. The esoteric doctrines of the Far East interested proponents of almost all of the trends that were represented in Ascona. For example, Martin Buber gave a lecture there in August 1924 on Lao Tse and the Tao Te Ching. This lecture was of decisive importance for the Eranos conferences.

One member of the audience at Buber’s lecture was a widow named Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. The daughter of a Dutch engineer, she had been born in London in 1881. Around 1900, the Fröbe-Kapteyn family moved to Zurich, and in 1915 her husband died in a plane crash. In 1919 she went to a sanatorium on Monte Verità for a cure, and because she liked the place, her father bought her a villa named Casa Gabriela, on the shore of the lake at the edge of Ascona. He also provided her with monetary support. At that time Fröbe-Kapteyn was connected with the theosophical and esoteric circles that were still active on the hill, and through them she ended up at Buber’s lecture. Following the lecture, she resolved to establish a center for religious and spiritual renewal, which would also be a place where religions and philosophies from the East and West could be discussed. For that purpose, in 1928 she built a lecture hall with a seating capacity of two hundred attached to her residence, and a year later she built another house for guests.

In the following years Fröbe-Kapteyn formed connections in the United States and Germany with people interested in learning about Eastern and Western cultures. In 1930 she met Carl Gustav Jung for the first time—the man who, perhaps more than anyone else, influenced the direction of the first two decades of the Eranos conferences. In 1932 Fröbe-Kapteyn went to Marburg, Germany, to meet Rudolf Otto, a famous scholar of religion, and to consult with him about the possibility of holding a series of conferences centered on encounters between East and West. Otto was enthusiastic about the idea and helped develop and improve it, as well as suggesting the name by which the meetings have been called from the summer of 1933 to this day: Eranos.

The name first appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where it describes a social encounter centered on a banquet to which every participant brought some of the
food. In its original context in the classical world, Eranos is a kind of potluck supper that takes place as a social institution, and it has a religious dimension as well, since the banquet is a sacrificial meal. In the late nineteenth century, renewed use was made of the name Eranos to describe intellectual and spiritual groups in various places in Europe. An association in Vienna that was dedicated to the study of classical culture was founded in 1876, a journal of classical studies in Sweden was established in 1896, a circle of intellectuals in Heidelberg was created in 1904 to discuss of religious topics, and a Festschrift in honor of the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal published in 1904 all bore the name Eranos. Recently Tilo Schabert has proposed regarding all of the phenomena as a single Eranos movement, a European cultural trend that could be considered to include the establishment of the Eranos conferences in Ascona. Thus the Eranos conferences in Ascona can be seen as drawing on intellectual trends that existed in Europe and on cultural and spiritual trends centered at the foot of Monte Verità. However, at the time of the 1933 meeting—the first in a long series, whose subject was “Yoga and Meditation in the East and the West”—little was left of the vital life that had characterized the hill of truth for more than twenty years. Nevertheless, what did remain and memories of the past affected the local landscape and made it a symbol of the social role that the area had played in earlier years, as a meeting place chiefly characterized by social and political freedom. This symbol still had great resonance for the participants in the Eranos conferences, and it had a moderate and indirect influence on the spirit of the place, its genius loci.

The Spirit of Eranos

Among the bushes next to Casa Gabriella, Fröbe-Kapteyn’s villa, is a small statue, a kind of stone monument, with the inscription: “Genio loci ignoto.” This little monument was erected in 1949 in memory of what Jung and the theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw called “the unknown genius of Eranos.” This proclamation of the existence of an unknown spirit, perpetuated in stone, was also an effort to grasp a bit of that spirit and link it to the place where the meetings were held. Indeed, there are few intellectual events in which the setting and location played such an important role as in the Eranos meetings. From 1933 to 1988, intellectuals from all over the world met every August in the two villas that look out among the cedar trees at the blue waters of Lake Maggiore, at the foot of Monte Verità and on the outskirts of the picturesque Swiss village of Ascona. Each conference lasted ten days, and in the morning of each day a prominent intellectual in the field of religious studies delivered a two-hour lecture about his or her research. The rest of each day was devoted to conversation and to a common meal around a large round table on the terrace of Casa Gabriella. This part
of the day, in which the boundary between lecturer and audience disappeared, was regarded by many of the participants as the most important one. While eating and drinking in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, they could meet each other and discuss the morning’s lecture and various subjects of mutual interest. Adolf Portmann, a Swiss zoologist, was one of the regular participants and an organizer of the conferences for many years. He described the setting evocatively:

In the shade of the great cedar tree whose branches extend over the balcony of Casa Gabriella the meal is served to the lecturers at the conference. Around the large, round table, they meet at noon and in the evening, along with some guests of the house, in colorful succession. The landscape extends in the direction of Lake Maggiore. At noon the breeze from Italy moves the surface of the water; the evening passes with the vivid colors of the slopes of Monte Tamaro in view, and from the calm lake the last light is reflected. For everyone who has taken part in the conferences, these hours around the Eranos table are a significant part of the whole. The personal conversation deepens the impression of the lecturer by means of the broad

FIGURE 7  The Eranos Round Table, probably in 1947. Photographer: Margarethe Fellerer. Courtesy of the Eranos Foundation Archives.
experiences of the people who meet here. The multitude of languages and ways of thinking, the treasures of the world that each and every person brings from his various origins, all of these make the event flourish and ripen, in a way that the larger appearances in the lecture hall alone could not supply.¹¹

The social atmosphere described by Portmann is reflected in the very name of Eranos. Along with the lectures, the personal encounters among the participants were the heart of the annual conferences. The encounters took place in a relaxed atmosphere of leisure in both of the villas. Mircea Eliade, a Romanian scholar of religion and another regular participant in the meetings, described this well: “Eranos is like a dance that begins anew every year, but always with different dancers.”¹²

These words of Eliade are also reminiscent of the bourgeois leisure and health culture at Central European spas, where people returned each year to the same spa and, in a relaxed atmosphere, improved their bodily and mental health and enjoyed merry festivities.¹³ Such visits to spas were common among the German bourgeoisie before World War II, when the health resorts—including Ascona—offered their visitors temporary refuge from the worries of the modern age and everyday concerns. This cyclical structure was resurrected in the academic Eranos conferences, at the heart of which was a combination of intellectual activity, the culture of relaxation and leisure, and contact with spirituality in the midst of a breathtaking landscape. Over the years the Eranos conferences became a territory in their own right, a kind of separate space ruled by its own summer rules. Sometimes these rules were aligned with the outside world, and sometimes they contradicted it. Henry Corbin, a French scholar of Islamic mysticism and another pillar of the conferences, saw the significance of the encounters and believed their secret lay in their being a time in itself, not subject to time: “What we should wish to call the meaning of Eranos, which is also the entire secret of Eranos, is this: it is our present being, the time that we act personally, our way of being. This is why we are perhaps not ‘of our time,’ but are something better and greater: we are our time.”¹⁴ This definition points to the central role that the participants in the Eranos conferences played in constructing the image of the meetings and the way they constructed their own identity as members of Eranos. This quotation also reflects the views of other Eranos participants, who felt that the meetings belonged to a separate temporal and geographical dimension. Like Monte Verità in its early years, the Eranos conferences created a protected space or alternative world, related to prewar Europe. In this separate world, people whose youth had been spent in the age of imperialism met every summer and had an intellectual experience of a type that had been familiar but that had dis-
appeared in the aftermath of World War I. All the aforementioned components played a part in creating the special atmosphere of the conferences, known among the participants as well among researchers of the phenomenon as the spirit of Eranos. This was the atmosphere that awaited Scholem in the summer of 1949, when he gave his first Eranos lecture on “Kabbalah and Myth.”

The Path to Eranos

Scholem’s long connection with Eranos began a few years before he gave his first lecture in Ascona, and it is directly connected with Jung. This fact is important for the present discussion, since Jung was one of the most influential people on the conferences and their character in the years preceding Scholem’s participation in them, and since Jung had been a Nazi sympathizer in the early years of the movement. Jung and his psychological theory were a challenge for Scholem, with which he had to cope when he was asked to clarify his relations with the participants in Eranos.

As noted in chapter 5, Scholem met Jung for the first time in Zurich in 1946, through Siegmund Hurwitz and the circle of Jung’s disciples there. In spite of Scholem’s suspicions regarding Jung’s Nazi past, once Scholem had returned to Jerusalem, he sent Jung a copy of the second edition of his book on Jewish mysticism, which was published in New York in 1946. Jung thanked Scholem via Hurwitz at the end of April 1947 and asked for Scholem’s address so he could send him one of his books. In early May, at Jung’s instigation, Scholem received a letter from Fröbe-Kapteyn containing an official invitation to lecture at the conference in August 1947. Fröbe-Kapteyn told Scholem that Jung had also suggested a possible topic for Scholem’s future lecture: “The Central Ideas of Lurianic Gnosis.” In his reply, Scholem accepted the invitation willingly, but financial problems stood in the way of his participation: the organizers of the conference paid only the cost of the trip from the border of Switzerland, and he was unable to pay for the trip from Palestine to Europe. In any event, Scholem asked Fröbe-Kapteyn to write to him again in a year and invite him to the conference in the summer of 1948. The invitation, dated September 10, 1947, is in the Gershon Scholem Archive, but without Scholem’s reply. A letter from Scholem to Hurwitz indicates that, along with the financial difficulty, historical events—the establishment of the State of Israel and the ensuing war—also prevented his participation in 1947. But Scholem did give a lecture at the conference in the summer of 1949, attending it with Fania on their way back from a stay of several months in the United States. The meeting that year was devoted to the subject of “Man and the Mythical World,” and Scholem’s lecture was titled “Kabbalah
and Myth.” Scholem’s participation in the Eranos conferences extended over three decades.

After Jung’s death more than ten years later, Scholem was asked by Aniela Jaffé, Jung’s last secretary, how and why he had agreed to take part in the Eranos conferences, although Jung’s Nazi past was well known to him. In his reply, Scholem attributed his willingness to lecture to a conversation he had had with Leo Baeck in the summer of 1947, in which he expressed his doubts about participating in the event. Baeck had urged him to accept the invitation, telling him how Jung had sought him out in Zurich, after Baeck had been liberated from Theresienstadt, and how they had met in Baeck’s hotel though Baeck had tried to avoid him. On the emotional conversation between Jung and Baeck, which lasted more than two hours, Scholem wrote to Jaffé: “Jung defended himself, referring to the special situation in Nazi Germany, but at the same time he confessed to him: ‘Indeed, I stumbled,’ in connection with Nazism and his expectations, that maybe something great would burst forth here. Those words—indeed, I stumbled—which Baeck repeated to me, I remember with great vividness. Baeck told me that in this conversation they settled everything that stood between them and parted reconciled with one another. On this basis of Baeck’s declaration I also accepted the invitation to Eranos, when it came a second time in 1947.”

Scholem’s later account differs at some points with findings that emerge from his archive. As noted, in his letter to Fröbe-Kapteyn of May 1947 he had already accepted the invitation, and his writing shows no essential hesitancy, merely regret that he could not finance the trip that year. By contrast, in his subsequent letter to Jaffé, Scholem reports having doubts about participating in the conferences in the summer of 1947. Of course, there is reason to assume that Scholem would not have divulged any hesitations to Fröbe-Kapteyn, but to the same degree one may assume that Scholem’s description in his letter to Jaffé was written with apologetic intentions, to explain after the fact why he took part regularly in meetings that were directly associated with the name of Jung.

The matter of the degree to which the Eranos conferences were marked by the figure and ideas of the prominent and controversial psychologist is extraneous to the present discussion. However, it may be said that the extent of the influence of Jung, his theories, and his disciples on the Eranos conferences has not yet been sufficiently investigated. Certainly Jung was one of the central figures of Eranos during the first years of the conferences, and he had a strong influence on Fröbe-Kapteyn, who administered the encounters on her private property and who alone determined what topics would be discussed and which speakers would be invited. However, in 1951, only two years after Scholem first lectured at Eranos, Jung gave his last lecture there. He was present at the Eranos
meeting of 1952, which is discussed at length below. At that conference he left the lecture given by Herbert Read, a British scholar of art history, in a fit of anger, and he also expressed discontent with the lecture given by the philosopher Karl Löwith. But Jung never again attended an Eranos conference. He died in 1961, and after Fröbe-Kapteyn’s death in the following year, Portmann took over the administration of the conferences. Scholem never heard Jung lecture at Eranos, and Jung could not have heard Scholem lecture more than three times. These facts contradict the statement made by William McGuire that there was a warm intellectual friendship between the two men in those years. Thus, it is very doubtful that Jung exercised high-handed control over the proceedings at Eranos and determined their character in an arbitrary fashion. Examination of the sources clearly shows that one of the things that can be said with certainty about Eranos is that it was a broad and varied cultural phenomenon, and that over the years there were changes in the composition and character of its meetings. The effort to confine this rich phenomenon within the Jungian mold and to argue, as Joseph Dan has done, that Eranos was a “conference of Jung’s disciples,” diminishes it, in my view, and makes it difficult to understand its complexity and diversity. Moreover, in my opinion it is not possible to refer to the participants in Eranos as a single circle. Rather, they were part of a network of personal, intellectual, political, and emotional connections among various circles and individuals. The Jungians were one of these circles—perhaps even the central one, but doubtless not the only one. In the introduction to the printed edition of his journal, Eliade wrote: “Jung was the spiritus rector of Eranos, but one cannot say that the lecturers constituted a Jungian group. Most of them were only superficially acquainted with the problems of modern psychology.”

An examination of the list of participants in Eranos over the generations supports the view that they were a diverse group, many of whose members were decidedly individualistic. They included Karl Kerényi, a scholar of classical culture; Ernst Benz, an evangelical theologian; Erich Neumann, an Israeli Jungian psychiatrist; Gilles Quispel, a Dutch theologian and scholar of Gnosticism; Max Knoll, a German physicist; Portmann, a Swiss zoologist; Paul Tillich, a Protestant theologian; Helmut Wilhelm, an American sinologist; Chung-Yuan Chang, a scholar of Taoism; Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, a scholar of Zen Buddhism; Paul Radin, a Jewish anthropologist of native Americans, who was influenced by Jung; and many others. In addition, guests were invited to hear the lectures every year, and they took an active part in the social activities. Sometimes there were fifty to a hundred guests, including authors, artists, intellectuals, and physicians. This heterogeneous group, which was certainly not composed solely of Jung’s disciples, also affected the atmosphere, though very little written evidence
of this exists. Hence, it is very hard to find a single political or theological idea that could define Eranos. The only stable framework according to which it is possible to identify the regular participants in the conferences is the Eranos Jahrbuch, the scholarly organ in which the lectures given at the conferences were published, accompanied by introductions by Fröbe-Kapteyn or Portmann. These annual publications, a landmark in the history of the twentieth-century study of comparative religion, were published in Zurich by Rhein Verlag, which was owned by the Jewish publisher, Daniel Brody.

In addition, an examination of what can be called the inner circle of Eranos shows that its connection with Jung and his theories was doubtful. In the end of 1960, Portmann sent a letter to Scholem and five other regular participants in the Eranos conferences: Corbin, Eliade, Read, Wilhelm, and the musicologist Viktor Zuckerlandl. It appears that the death of Neumann, who was a central figure in the conferences and regularly gave the opening address during the decade before his death, led Fröbe-Kapteyn, now elderly, to think about the future of the conferences when it would become her ability to organize them. To that end Portmann called upon the six men who received his letter to take part in an inner circle of Eranos, which would decide the fate of the conferences in Fröbe-Kapteyn’s absence: “At this stage, the formation proposed here of an inner Eranos Circle, indeed the Kernel of Eranos, is meant to create the possibility that the faithful participants in the forum and its shapers can decide on the continued existence or cessation of Eranos.”

Although no reply to this letter has been found in Scholem’s archive, it shows the central place accorded to him at the Eranos conferences and indicates his feeling of belonging to them. At the same time the participants whom Fröbe-Kapteyn chose to be the inner circle shows that at the end of 1960, half a year after Jung’s death and about two years before her own demise, the influence of Jung’s theories on the participants in the conferences was not decisive. Steven Wasserstrom’s book—which deals with Scholem, Eliade, and Corbin—shows that although the latter two maintained a certain connection with Jung and his theories, especially via the phenomenological approach that characterized their work, they cannot be regarded as Jungians. The only one of the three other members of the inner circle who can be placed in Jung’s school was Read, who edited the English edition of Jung’s writings. But the letter of 1960 places the cart before the horse, and it is mentioned here to show not only that Eranos should not be viewed as a closed society, but also that one must doubt the extent of the influence of Jung and his theories on the conferences during the years when Scholem took part in them. Over the years, in part because of Scholem’s
influence, constant changes took place in the group of people who attended the conferences and determined their content. In 1949, after returning from his first Eranos conference and before realizing that these meetings would play such a central role in his life, and that he would play a role in determining their path, Scholem wrote Alexander Altmann about the experience and his impressions of his stay in Ascona. In his letter Scholem did not conceal the interest the event had aroused in him, especially its social aspect:

The time I spent in Switzerland was excellent, and I enjoyed it greatly. The conference in Ascona was interesting though not shocking. My lecture was apparently a success, judging by the impression and echoes, but it is easy to succeed in this topic, which has a strong stimulus for a Jew and even for a gentile these days, especially if you come from the State of Israel and speak as a Jew, and nothing but a Jew. Kerényi was there and I found him to be a very special person in all his ways and interests, an attractive and strange mixture of deep science, excellent intuition, and outstanding fantasy—everything all together. They are imploring me to return next year, and if I can only obtain the money for the expenses of the journey, I would also like that, because it is worthwhile to meet with strangers and people close to one about matters of the study of religion. This time I got to know three or four people, just the acquaintance with whom made the trip to Eranos worthwhile.34

The enthusiastic tone in Scholem’s letter is typical of his attitude toward Eranos in the long years that followed his first participation in the conferences. During the next thirty years, Scholem gave twenty-one lectures and attended a number of other conferences where he did not make a presentation. His fields of research and interest were perfectly suited to Eranos, and he also fit in well with the diverse group of the conference participants and the atmosphere of intellectual freedom, which encouraged original thinking and social exchanges between people. Nonetheless, it is evident that over the years Scholem had to cope with the inner and outward complexities that accompanied his participation in the conferences. Outwardly, because of the image in Israel of Eranos as a Jungian event, Scholem had to explain his close associations with Jung and Eliade, given their previous associations with the Nazis and the fascists, respectively. Inwardly, Scholem’s participation in the events was, in many respects, a return to Europe after the Holocaust and the doorway for him into the postwar German-speaking intellectual world. The contradictory feelings that accompanied this process of return will be discussed at length in this chapter. Their outer aspect is discussed below, but the next section is devoted to the inner conflict that arose in Scholem during his visit to the Eranos conference in the summer of 1952.
Inner Contradictions

The 1952 Conference

To a large extent, the decision to focus on Scholem’s visit to Switzerland in 1952 is because only during this visit did he record the events and his thoughts in his diary. An examination of the diary makes it possible to discuss the details of the visit and clarifies some of his impressions of the encounter. It may also be said that in many respects this year was important in the history of Eranos. It was the twentieth conference and the last one that Jung attended. To a certain degree this year signals the beginning of the departure of Fröbe-Kapteyn and Jung from Eranos and the renewal of the conferences. As for Scholem, this was his third trip to Eranos, and it may be assumed that his time he felt more confident in his ability to participate in the scholarly and social activities, and he had begun to know the regular participants better and to feel that he was part of Eranos. In addition, unlike in previous years, he traveled without Fania. The conference of 1952 dealt with the subject of “Man and Energy,” and Scholem gave a lecture on “The History of the Development of the Shekhina as a Kabbalistic Concept.”

As one may certainly assume that attending one of the conferences required preparation, and some of the lecturers who had become friends remained in contact with each other during the winter and spring in anticipation of the coming conference. Thus, in March 1952 Scholem wrote to Kerényi, who lived in Ponte Brolla, near Ascona: “The prospect of seeing your wife and you again, along with other friends, already gives me pleasure. In hopes that no impediment will arise, and that you won’t depart exactly then on a worldwide trip! I offer, in return for coffee at Ponte Brolla, a report about the new mythology in the State of Israel! Please ask your wife what her opinion is about this? (Most regrettably, I can only come by myself).”

Kerényi was not in Switzerland when the letter arrived, as he was giving lectures and doing research. Therefore, his wife, Magda, answered Scholem’s warm words and discussed the dates of his visit to Ascona so that they could meet, because that year Kerényi was not planning to give a lecture at Eranos. She responded to Scholem’s proposal with great friendship and affection: “Coffee in Ponte Brolla in return for a report on anything whatsoever is not a proportionate transaction. All the advantages remain on our side, but with a joyous welcome and gratitude for your human and spiritual glow, we will try to even out the situation.”

That year Scholem’s trip to Europe included additional tasks. During the first days after his arrival in Zurich, along with visiting friends, he participated in
meetings and negotiations as the vice chairman of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc., the umbrella organization established to deal with the restoration of Jewish property that had been plundered by the Nazis. On August 10, he met with two of his colleagues in the organization: Hannah Arendt, the general secretary, and Salo Baron the chairman. Scholem spent the following two days with Arendt, writing in his diary: “Relations with H. are very cordial, we don’t talk about what separates us. We each make an effort to ease things for the other.” They spent their time in long conversations and in visits to mutual friends. In the evening they went to the circus together: “It had been thirty years since I was at a circus, and how we enjoyed it! We were like happy children!” The next day, Arendt invited Scholem to a formal meal in an exclusive restaurant in Zurich, after which they went their separate ways.

In the evening of August 18, Scholem took the train to Ascona. On the way there he met one of the people who had attended a conference and was also on the way to Ascona: “On the train I traveled with my ‘student,’ who addressed me because she had heard me speak three years earlier. Miss Hégi is an expert on . . . bats! A pleasant conversation.” Immediately after arriving in Ascona, Scholem spent two hours with Quispel and his wife, and immediately afterward he had a private conversation with Fröbe-Kapteyn. As he got out of the car at the entrance of his hotel, he met Brody and his wife, and they spoke at length, as Scholem accompanied them back to their house. When he returned to the hotel he ran into the Kerényis, who had come to find him: “Great joy, and we sat for another two hours until nearly midnight.” The intensity of social encounters continued in the following days. Scholem spent the next afternoon with Karl Kerényi. Scholem’s impression of him was that “he is a most fair-minded gentile, and he doesn’t understand a thing about what’s happening in history.” Scholem ate dinner with Portmann and was with the Kerényis and Brody until late in the evening. “I described what we eat in Israel and how we eat,” he wrote in his diary.

The conference started on August 20. Scholem’s lecture began the proceedings, and his remarks on the concept of the Shekhina (the Divine Presence) made a strong impression. “It appears that I have succeeded greatly,” he wrote that day. “[The hall] was packed, and the attention was close.” In the audience were the Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann and his wife, with whom Scholem spoke afterward about German reparations and Israeli demands. After this conversation, they agreed that Scholem should join a meeting on this matter with Moshe Sharett, the Israeli minister of foreign affairs, which was supposed to take place two weeks later in Paris. After an hour’s discussion with thirty of the people who had listened to his lecture, Scholem began a series of meetings with friends and acquaintances: Corbin, Erich von Kahler, Knoll, Löwith, and their wives,
and of course the Kerényis. “I’m hoarse from so much conversation,” Scholem summed up the day in his diary.45

Scholem spent the following days listening to the other lectures, eating, drinking, and conversing. Among the most important encounters of that conference was a conversation he had with Brody. Brody was a Hungarian Jew who had been a publisher in Munich until he was forced to flee from the Nazis, first to Holland and later to Mexico. After the war he returned to Europe and settled in Zurich, where he continued to be active in publishing and remained in contact with Fröbe-Kapteyn and the participants in Eranos.46 Scholem wanted Brody to publish a German edition of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: “I sat with Brody and we discussed the publication of the book in German. Will something come of it? He wanted to look at the book and I gave him my copy.”47 This meeting was very important for Scholem’s academic path in Germany after the war. Five years later Brody published a German translation of Scholem’s book, and in 1960 he also published the first volume of Scholem’s Eranos lectures—followed by another volume of the lectures in 1962.48 During the 1960s, until Scholem moved to the Suhrkamp publishing house in Frankfurt, Brody was the main publisher of Scholem’s writing in German. This was in part because Brody also published the

![Figure 8](image_url)
Eranos Jahrbuch, which contained the lectures given at the Eranos conferences. Despite the professional and social importance of Scholem’s stay in Ascona, and despite the good atmosphere and the intensity of the participants in the conferences, he did not feel completely at home. On August 25, after Löwith lectured on “The Dynamic of History and Historicism,” which Scholem found “very good,” he wrote in his diary: “Jung was enraged by the ‘abstract nonsense’ and left after the first hour. A conversation with Jane Untermeyer and Erich von Kahler. Afterward with Corbin and his wife. Everything is very nice. I feel very well, but it disturbs me, how foreign our matters seem from here. No one pays attention to them. My influence here depends more on my Berlin-ness (auf meinem Berlinertum) than on the opposite side, I should say.”

The ambivalence described in this diary entry relates to questions about Scholem’s feeling of belonging in Ascona. The foreignness of Eranos with relation to the reality from which he came—presumably he was referring to Israel—both charmed and disturbed Scholem. In his view, his arrival from a non-European environment into a world entirely nourished by European culture, and his awareness of the gap between these worlds, separated him from those around him in Ascona. This diary entry shows that what most disturbed him was that none of the other participants noticed his Israeliness, and that he fit into the group by virtue of the “opposite” aspect of his life, his Germanness. The fact that at Eranos he was less identified with Jerusalem than with Berlin made Scholem uncomfortable. Yet the source of this discomfort actually arose from the fact that he felt quite at ease and comfortable in the European environment. In other words, the extreme physical and psychological change of his transition from Germany to Israel in his youth and in his effort to replace his German sources with Zionist Jewish roots was not evident to his colleagues in the extra-territorial space of Eranos, and this change played no role in his great success there. As a consequence, contradictory feelings arose in him. These feelings persisted during his participation in the conference and were expressed again in a diary entry dated August 26, two days before the conclusion of the conference: “I don’t think I’ll come here next year (the subject: man and the earth!!!), despite the hint that my expenses will be covered in full by the Bollingen Foundation. I have to restrain myself a bit. Despite and because of the clear success. Mrs. F[röbe-Kapteyn] told Portmann in a preliminary conversation: I very much want Scholem next year, with him you know what to count on (she said: [you know] what there is). Was her meaning 100 percent positive as I understood it? That would surprise me!”

The following year, Scholem gave a lecture at Eranos titled: “The Image of the Golem in Earthly and Magical Contexts.”
Identification and Distance: Henry Corbin

In the summer of 1979 Scholem lectured at Eranos for the last time. In fact, he did not deliver a prepared lecture but rather made improvised remarks in place of Portmann. For years Portmann had been accustomed to conclude the ten-day conference with a lecture, but that year he suddenly felt weak at the beginning of his speech, and Scholem immediately rose from the audience and took his place. Portmann and Scholem were the two most veteran participants at that conference, and Scholem took advantage of the opportunity to present his reflections on the three decades in which he had taken part in Eranos conferences and their meaning.

Along with the words of praise he had for Portmann and his contribution to the organization and spirit of the conferences, Scholem pointed out something that had struck him over the years and created a certain difficulty for him in relation to Eranos:

There is a difficulty that exists for all the participants in Eranos and also for most of the lecturers, perhaps all of them. This is the necessity to speak from within the tension between distance from the subject under discussion and identification with it. For Olga Fröbe this was almost a decisive consideration. She sought speakers who identified with the topic of their lecture. She wanted lecturers who were engaged in the subject of their research (ergriffene Redner), not professors, though they were all called professors. This was a sort of deception. The identification that led Olga Fröbe to choose us might perhaps have depended—more than once—on an error; because most of us—and I have to include myself among them—spoke specifically from the tension between these two extremes, that means, from this distance as well, without which scientific knowledge is impossible. Indeed, I believe that someone who identifies completely with the subject of his research loses the scientific standard, and without that it is not research. A scholar (Gelehrter) is not a priest (Priester); it is an error to aspire to make a scholar into a priest. But the tension between distance and identification, which became so vital for us here at Eranos, is the factor that characterized my activity, for example, in these meetings over these many years.51

Scholem was objecting here to Fröbe-Kapteyn’s demand, which was also to a great degree the criterion by which she chose the participants in the conferences, that the lecturers be absolutely identified with the subject of their scholarship. In place of this demand, Scholem proposed that there be a tension in the scholar’s attitude toward his subject, which derives from the dialectic between identification and distance. The question of how much one may identify Scholem with his scholarship has been widely discussed. One approach tends to regard Scholem’s
work as a camouflage for his personal, political, or theological tendencies; the other tends to separate the ideological side of Scholem’s character from his scholarship. A good example of the way in which Scholem understood his relationship to his field of scholarship and the material he was studying can be found in his friendship with Corbin. The way that Scholem saw Corbin’s attitude toward his work can help us understand Scholem’s conception of himself in the light of the great closeness he felt for Corbin, as well as the connection between his field of study and that of his colleague. Late in his life he wrote about this in a letter to Stella Corbin, after he learned of the death of her husband in October 1978:

For me he was not only a friend and a fellow but a man who devoted a life to understand, to penetrate as a scholar a world as near to the one which I had devoted a life to understand. We were in the truest sense honest and possibly the first scholarly excavators in the world of esotérica imagination such as Islamic and Jewish Gnoese. Of all the speakers at the Eranos [Conferences] it was he to whom I felt the greatest affinity. He alone had that kind of inner sympathy that enabled him to light up the dark and difficult ways of the mystical world which I considered essential to do really important, and at the same time scholarly work in these spheres. His passing away means to me the loss of a spiritual brother.

Like Scholem, Corbin was a researcher and intellectual who gave the imagination a place in his scholarship, and whose creativity derived from within the tension between the two extremes: identification with the subject of his research and academic distance that gave his scholarship scientific validity. In the remarks Scholem made in 1979, immediately after touching on the tension between distance and identification, he pointed to Corbin as an example of someone whose work lies within this tension. One may easily surmise that, in speaking of his late colleague, to a large degree he was also referring to himself: “We heard lecturers like Corbin, who spoke with a primary feeling of penetration to the essence of things, of near identification with them, but at the same time with the distance of a profound scientific spirit. He did not appear as the representative of a particular interest, but as an observer, as a person who acts out of contemplation and distancing consciousness, which would be impossible without this distancing.”

Corbin’s “near identification” with the subject of his research, which existed together with a distance from it, also had a practical religious meaning, which he did not conceal from his close friends among the circle of participants in the Eranos conferences to which Scholem belonged. The religious value of Corbin’s scholarship is shown in a letter he wrote to his colleague David Miller on February 9, 1978, shortly before his death, after reading Miller’s recently published
book on polytheism: “I believe our researches open the way, of necessity, to angelology (that of a Proclus, that of Kabbala) which will be reborn with increasing potency. The Angel is the Face that our God takes for us, and each of us finds his God only when he recognizes that Face. The service which we can render others is to help them encounter that Face about which they will be able to say: Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui (I am able to grasp such as I have seen). . . . But let us understand clearly that for yet some time we shall be few in number and that we shall have to take refuge behind a veil of a certain esotericism.”56

Corbin’s words to Miller recall Scholem’s understanding of religious anarchism to a large extent, with a personal belief in God and his manifestations while denying any single general religious authority.57 However, unlike Corbin, Scholem understood the role of the scholar of religion as being entirely different in essence from that of a clergyman, even if they are similar to one another at many points. “A scholar (Gelehrter) is not a priest (Priester),” he stated in 1979. The points of similarity between the scholar and the mystic are reflected in his essay “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbalah” (Ten unhistorical aphorisms on Kabbalah), which published in the Festschrift for Brody.58 For this volume Scholem was asked “to contribute something that I would not consider publishing at all under ordinary circumstances,”59 and he sent ten aphorisms that convey his thoughts about his field of research from a personal point of view, rather than from the professional position of an academic. The first of these related directly to the researcher’s attitude toward the subject of his research:

There is something ironic in the philology of a mystical field such as Kabbalah, since its concern is the veil of fog which, with respect to the history of the mystical tradition, surrounds its body, its space, and the matter itself, and the fog bursts out of its very self. Is anything left to the philologist of the workings of the matter itself, or, in fact, does its essential foundation disappear in this projection into the historical realm? The uncertainty in offering an answer to this question is bound up in the nature of the way the philological question itself is presented, and therefore there is something ironic in the expectation from which this work is nourished, and this irony cannot be removed from it. But is this element of irony not found already in the subject of Kabbalah itself and not only in its history? The kabbalist claims that there is a tradition of truth, which can be transmitted from generation to generation. This claim is ironic, because the truth spoken of here is everything except transmittable. It is possible to become aware of it, but it is impossible to convey it. Indeed, that part of it which can be conveyed no longer contains the truth. The tradition of truth remains hidden; but the tradition that has disintegrated is crammed into one matter, and in its disintegration it is known to its full extent.60
In this passage Scholem expresses an idea that appeared in preliminary form in a letter to Salman Schocken in 1937, referring to the question of the religious meaning of the attitude of the man of science to the subject of his research. In fact, the irony that Scholem pointed out is shared by both the kabbalist and the scholar, since it is immanent in Kabbalah itself: the effort to express in language that which cannot be expressed—or the effort to convey something to someone else that cannot be conveyed but can only be a personal experience—and that therefore loses its force during the effort to remove it from the realm of the esoteric to the exoteric as a subject of human communication. According to Scholem, the irony here lies in the fact that both the historian and the kabbalist belong to a tradition that requires communication as a condition for existence, and their goal is to ensure the continuity of the tradition across generations. This tension, in his view, is the common aspect that makes the historian and the kabbalist parallel figures, but different from one another in essence and purpose. The paradox lies in the effort to grasp that which cannot be grasped without absolute identification with the object of study, and to express in words what cannot be expressed at all. The necessity of doing this to satisfy the common rules of communication in the academic community produces the tension that makes scientific consciousness and creativity possible. It is this tension to which he referred at various points in his life, including his last remarks at Eranos.

In Corbin’s letter to Miller the same tension appears: between the scholar’s search for the countenance of his personal God and marking out the personal path of others, without the ability to convey the experience itself. Here an important difference between Scholem and Corbin should be pointed out. They both referred to two opposing poles, the historian and the mystic, but Scholem was closer to the side of the historian and Corbin closer to the mystic, or prophet. However, they were both aware of the tension in the need and desire to convey to others what cannot be communicated. Perhaps one may also say that both men (and perhaps participants in the Eranos conferences in general) were aware that creativity, whether in science or in religious experience, is born of this paradox.

Now, what is this tension shared by Scholem, Corbin, Eliade, and many of the other intellectuals who took part in Eranos? If it can be characterized in the area of theory and research, then one may say that it is the phenomenological approach to the history of religions. However, while the phenomenological approach underlay Corbin’s scholarship, Scholem’s commitment to phenomenology was not so complete. Moshe Idel has suggested viewing Scholem, under the influence of his participation in the Eranos conferences, as “the founder of the phenomenology of the Kabbalah.” Indeed, it appears that in his scholarship
Scholem did accord a large place to the phenomenological study of the history of the Jewish religion, but this was always as a method that complemented historical and philological research, building on a scholarly foundation anchored in the sources. In April 1955 the Swiss magazine DU devoted an entire issue to the Eranos conferences. The issue included many articles by participants in Eranos, some of them about the conferences themselves and their personal and experiential side, and some about the participants’ areas of research. Scholem contributed an article whose title was “The Thoughts of a Scholar of Kabbalah,” in which he referred to the dialectic between closeness and distance in his research:

The endeavor to understand what was here enacted at the heart of Jewry cannot dispense with historical criticism and clear vision. For even symbols grow out of historical experience and are saturated with it. A proper understanding of them requires both a “phenomenological” aptitude for seeing things as a whole and a gift of historical analysis. One complements and clarifies the other; taken together they promise valuable findings. The scholars who gathered for the Eranos conferences contributed greatly to uniting these two approaches. Research in Kabbalah, whose serious undertaking began in our generation, “came home” here, in the good sense of the word, though it is only a guest from Jerusalem.

These words of Scholem’s once again show that the tension between identification and distance did not exist solely in his relationship to the area of his scholarship within the confines of Eranos but rather in the way he understood his complex place at the conferences, simultaneously at home and a guest.

**External Criticism**

**Carl Gustav Jung**

In addition to the inner and personal ambivalence that Scholem felt in Eranos, a complication arose because of the way his participation was perceived by those around him in Israel and the Jewish world as a whole: it aroused tension because of Jung’s influence on the proceedings. As we have seen, the assumption that all of the Eranos conferences were a stage for Jung and his theories is a dubious one, and the collection of individuals involved in the conferences was too rich and complex to be called a circle of any sort, let alone a Jungian circle. Nevertheless, the claim was made that Jung’s influence on the conferences was paramount—mainly within the Jewish intellectual world, where criticism was also leveled at Scholem for participating in them. Idel, who began participating in them many years after Scholem did, observed: “The unfortunately strong rightist affinities and affiliations of Jung and Eliade before the Second World
War created in Israel a negative reaction against their scholarship, and by extension, a reticence towards Eranos.”

Scholem’s way of dealing with the fact that he had been invited to the conferences by Jung, a former supporter of Nazism, so soon after the Holocaust, has been discussed above. For this reason, Scholem had to explain not only his personal relationship with Jung, but also his attitude toward Jung’s ideas. This need became acute after the publication of Jung’s _Antwort auf Hiob_ in 1952, for the book evinces an antisemitic worldview. Scholem read the book when it appeared and was aware of its antisemitic element. In a short diary entry dated May 18, 1952, he wrote: “I read Jung’s _Antwort auf Hiob_, which triggered extreme reactions (auslösenden Affectreaktionen). Schocken lent it to me. This is the way a man writes who is capable of combining gnosticism with the antisemitism of a Swiss peasant.”

Nevertheless, as shown above, Scholem had no essential reason to abstain from participation in Eranos: the variety of the conferences made it possible for him to attend without intense interaction with Jung. Moreover, the conference of the year when Scholem recorded his impressions in his diary was also the last one Jung attended. Scholem’s outward difficulty during his years of participation in the conferences was actually with the image of Eranos in Israel, which identified the conferences with Jung, his past, and his theories.

Scholem’s most important and severest critic, who identified Scholem’s research with Jungian psychology in the wake of his participation in the Eranos conferences, was Baruch Kurzweil, an Israeli literary critic who devoted a considerable part of his critical writing to Scholem and his research. As part of this extensive critical project, which was published over the years in _Haaretz_, in 1967 Kurzweil published an article explaining the common denominator on the level of ideas that made it possible for Scholem to take part in Eranos. Kurzweil argued that Scholem’s type of secular study of Kabbalah, which exalts myth without faith in God—that is, without belief in absolute morality—opened the way to a nihilistic theology that denied the uniqueness of Judaism and was fascist in character: “The absolute difference of the God of Israel is obliterated in Jung, and his theory makes possible a theology without God, which is a nihilistic theology. More than that: Jung also gave a writ of divorce to the absolute claim of morality. The deep nihilism that underlies his thinking . . . —the nihilism of the modern admirer of myths—is what caused him to be, for a certain time, a follower of the Nazi movement as well. . . . It appears to me that Jewish studies has found the terminus of its adventurous journey in the shadow of Jung. It would be impossible to decree a more bitter fate for the path of Jewish studies.”

Scholem did not answer Kurzweil’s accusations directly, but they certainly were one reason why he needed to clarify his attitude toward Jung’s theories.
He explained his objections to those theories in an interview that he gave in the 1970s:

In treating the history and the world of Kabbalah, using the conceptual terminology of psychoanalysis—either the Freudian or the Jungian version—did not seem fruitful to me. Even though I should have had a strong affinity to Jung’s conceptions, which were close to religious concepts, I refrained from using them. For twenty-five years I lectured at the Eranos meetings, and in that circle there was a considerable Jungian influence. But in those lectures I deliberately shied away from all psychoanalytical and Jungian psychopathological concepts. I was not convinced that those categories are useful. I particularly avoided using the theory of archetypes, of which I remain highly skeptical.71

Scholem’s unequivocal words here are slightly surprising, seeing that elsewhere in his writings and scholarship—especially in the published lectures from Eranos—he did make some use of ideas from Jung’s school, such as the concept of archetype and the ideas associated with it.72 Although Scholem did not make much use of Jung’s theories in his scholarship, his ambivalence about the use he did make of them and his rejection of them point to the mixed emotions that he felt about them. On the one hand, it was natural for Scholem to be influenced by other theories that were central at the Eranos conferences, and nothing in the way he used Jung’s ideas implies that he was deeply influenced by Jung. But on the other hand, it cannot be said that Scholem did not use and grapple with Jungian models at all.73 In any case, what is important for the present discussion is that Scholem’s extreme rejection of Jung’s ideas had an apologetic and defensive tone, the purpose of which was to reduce the bewilderment in the Jewish world about his taking part in Eranos.74 In addition, Scholem never sought to blur or conceal Jung’s affiliation with the Nazi movement, although he doubted its depth and seriousness. Thus, for example, he responded to the criticism leveled by George Steiner on this matter in a letter to the Jungian analytical psychologist, James Kirsch: “Indeed I am convinced that Jung was not a full-fledged Nazi, and the reading of his works proves that to me. However, I do not wish to deny that he had ‘ties’ to the Nazis, and that he defended certain theses in a time and place when their evil influence was doubled and redoubled. [These theses] went far beyond what he ought to have permitted himself according to his own theories.”75

Jung’s influence on Scholem, therefore, had two aspects: one positive and the other negative. The positive aspect is noticeable in several places in Scholem’s writings—especially in the published Eranos lectures—where he used Jungian categories and models to shed light on phenomena in the realm of religion. The negative aspect, which is more significant, is evident in his rejection of any hint
of a connection between his scholarship and Jung’s theories. Scholem’s participation in Eranos was always accompanied by a certain need to excuse himself for it to the Israeli public by defining himself as intellectually foreign to the Jungian circles at Eranos. In other words, Scholem’s regular presence at Ascona required him to demonstrate a skeptical approach to Jungian psychology. To a great degree this rejection represented the rejection of Jung’s Nazi past and his antisemitic aspect, which enabled Scholem to accept Jung’s physical presence in the summer of 1952 and the presence of his spirit and disciples in the following years at Ascona. For this reason, perhaps, Scholem always preferred to characterize Jung’s Nazi past as a misstep, a minor episode that could not be excused but—seeing the remorse Jung expressed to Baeck—could be lived with. Scholem could not take such a forgiving attitude toward Eliade, another controversial figure in Israel.

Mircea Eliade

It was during his second visit to Eranos, in the summer of 1950, that Scholem met Eliade for the first time. Eliade had not participated in the conferences before, and he recorded his impressions in his diary, devoting considerable space to his acquaintance with Scholem. Eliade had known of Scholem and his scholarship before their meeting, and he was surprised to hear that Scholem had read all of his books. From the first Scholem made a positive impression on Eliade, who described it in his diary in an entry dated August 20: “A very pleasant face, with large ears that stand out from his head. He speaks broken English with a delightful accent.”76 Scholem’s lecture, titled “Tradition and Innovation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists,” also impressed Eliade greatly. As he later wrote in his memoirs: “The next day Professor Scholem lectured; he fascinated me from the moment I met him on the evening of my arrival. I had long admired his scholarship and perspicacity, but that evening what impressed me were his gifts as a storyteller and his genius for asking only essential questions.”77 In the following decade, Eliade became one of the regular participants in the Eranos conferences, and he was a member of the inner circle mentioned above in this chapter.

In the course of time, the two men formed a professional and personal friendship, whose peak is symbolized by Scholem’s contribution to a Festschrift in honor of Eliade that was published in Chicago in 1969.78 However, after that they grew apart. In 1972 the first issue of Toladot, a Hebrew journal for the study of the history of the Jews in Romania, published an article by the historian Theodor Lavi that vehemently criticized Scholem’s participation in the Festschrift. Lavi claimed that between the two world wars Eliade had been a member of the Garda de Fier (the iron guard), a Romanian fascist and antisemitic organization
“whose murderous activity is engraved in our history with the blood of tens of thousands of Jewish victims in Romania.” According to Lavi, Eliade had supplied the philosophical background for the heinous activities of the organization, and his membership in it had a decisive influence on its success because Eliade was one of the most prominent intellectuals in Romania at the time. Therefore, Lavi argued, there was an ethical flaw in the intellectual connection between Scholem and Eliade, who continued to adhere to his former opinions: “Professor Gershom Scholem cannot, therefore, justify his actions by ignoring Eliade’s past. A few years ago he also took the initiative of inviting Eliade to give a series of lectures at the Hebrew University. Even then he had been informed of the political biography of the scholar from Chicago, but Professor Scholem was apparently of the opinion that these were merely youthful sins, which could be forgiven. In fact, even today Eliade is far from secluding himself in the ivory tower of scholarship. He contributes to various publications in the same spirit, which are published by former members of the Iron Guard in their places of exile.” As proof of this claim about Eliade’s dubious political affiliations, Lavi quoted passages from the diary of Joseph Hechter, a Romanian Jewish author, for the first time. Hechter, known by his pen name Mihail Sebastian, was a close friend of Eliade at that time.

Scholem’s reaction to the criticism leveled against him was twofold. He sent a letter to Lavi in which he cast doubt on the truth of Lavi’s accusations, stating that neither the article nor the passages from the diary provided actual evidence about Eliade’s past, and at the same time he sent Eliade a copy of the issue of Toladot in which the statements were made, along with a personal letter asking him, in a friendly but insistent manner, for a convincing explanation that would refute the claims. After presenting Eliade with Lavi’s accusations against him, Scholem explained the embarrassment to which he was subject as a result:

You will understand that I am most concerned about these things, and I would like you to react to these accusations, to state your attitude at those times and, if necessary, your reasons for changing your mind. In these long years I have known you I have no reason whatsoever to believe you to have been an antisemite, and even more so an antisemitic leader. I consider you a sincere and upright man whom I regard with great respect. Therefore, it is only natural to ask you to tell me, and through me those concerned, the mere truth. If there is anything to be said on this score, let it be said, and let the atmosphere of general or specific accusations be cleared up. Of all your writings prior to 1940 I know only your scholarly work in the field of Indology and History of Religion. When we first met I regarded you as a close colleague and later even as a friend to whom I could speak unreservedly. I hope this
openness of mind and human relations can continue. I think, however, that we must answer this attack which, no doubt, will be given wide publicity in Israel, where untold thousands of Romanian Jews have bitter memories of “The Iron Guard” and its activities.83

The caution and decisiveness with which Scholem addressed Eliade demonstrate the great respect he felt for Eliade along with the great importance of the subject for Scholem. He placed himself on Eliade’s side in the letter, as a fellow target of criticism, and at the same time he reminded Eliade of the openness of their relations as the basis for his demand to know the truth. Hence we may surmise that a detailed confession about the antisemitic chapter in Eliade’s life along with an expression of remorse — such as Jung’s — would have sufficed to sweeten the bad taste of these accusations for Scholem.

The importance of Israeli public opinion on this matter was intensified because Eliade planned to visit Israel. In a relatively short time, Scholem received a long and detailed letter from Eliade in which he denied all the claims raised against him in the journal.84 Scholem confronted Lavi with Eliade’s counterarguments in the letter, but in response Lavi stated once again that in Romania at that time, it was commonly known that Eliade belonged to the Iron Guard, and that it was not possible to be a member of that organization without subscribing to an antisemitic worldview. Moreover, Lavi claimed, Eliade avoided confessing and expressing remorse for his past because he “still maintains his close connections with the authors of the Iron Guard camp.” Scholem recorded these words in his notes of the meeting with Lavi, which he wrote in his own hand, indicating the importance of its contents for him. Scholem summed up his conclusions from the meeting as follows: “Even now the matter is a draw. Lavi was unable to prove any concrete or literary antisemitic actions on his [Eliade’s] part, though I asked him to tell me what he [Eliade] in fact had done.”85 Thus Scholem was not entirely convinced of the proof of Lavi’s accusations, but Eliade’s evasions made him uncomfortable, and perhaps for this reason he chose not to answer Eliade’s letter. Eliade was uncomfortable with Scholem’s silence, especially because he received indications from Corbin and other colleagues that Scholem was not entirely convinced by the explanations in the letter. In March 1973 Eliade wrote to Scholem once again, revealing that he knew about Scholem’s doubts about his past. In this letter Eliade again summarized briefly the important points he had made in the longer letter, the first and most important of which being that he never had antisemitic views. “I have never been an antisemite,” he wrote.86

In his reply, Scholem expressed pleasure about Eliade’s planned visit to Israel and about a possible meeting, which would provide a good opportunity for a
face-to-face conversation about Eliade’s words in his letter, “which are, as I feel, in need of a friendly and openminded discussion and elucidation.” Scholem reviewed the claims made by Lavi in their conversation and described the feeling of discomfort he had felt after it, because of his inability to come to a conclusion about the subject, and he observed that this discomfort had prevented him from replying to Eliade’s previous letter: “I did not know what to tell you especially since you had not been specific about the Jewish point which interested me most.” Scholem told Eliade that he had considered writing a public and well-grounded article in response to Lavi’s accusations, but, lacking unequivocal information that would support Eliade’s claims, he had not done so. At the end of his letter, Scholem laid what could be seen as a little trap for Eliade, before his visit to Israel: “I have the same personal feeling for you as before and I would welcome the occasion of a visit of you here. Perhaps there would be an occasion for you to meet Dr. Lavie and have a frank discussion with him.”

Coincidentally—or possibly not—in his reply, Eliade announced to Scholem that, because of illness, he was forced to cancel his visit to Israel, though he would have been very pleased to meet Scholem in Jerusalem and clarify what he called the “malheureux malentendu” (unfortunate misunderstanding).

Eliade’s evasive answers did not allay Scholem’s growing suspicions, and he received a long letter from Mihail Sebastian’s brother, André, that confirmed what the published passages from the diary had said about Eliade. Scholem’s reply to Sebastian was typical of the way in which he related to the episode in general: despite the suspicions raised in various quarters regarding Eliade’s past, and despite Eliade’s evasive behavior, Scholem refrained from taking a position about him as long as he had not received official, conclusive proof. He concluded the letter to Sebastian with the following words: “But I found nobody who was ready to produce any tangible proof . . . answering Eliade’s challenge to do so from among the hundreds of articles which, according to Eliade’s own statement, he had published at that time. I am of course utterly unqualified to judge in these matters.” Thus Scholem took the middle ground, between the accusations leveled against him in Israel and his need to defend his connections with Eliade, on the one hand, and on the other hand, his own need to discover the truth and uncover further information about his colleague and friend. Outwardly his tone was defensive, as expressed by his backing Eliade and demanding conclusive proof, but inwardly his writing to Eliade is characterized by growing suspicion and mistrust, concealed behind expressions of affinity. The latter tendency is corroborated by the fact that Eliade’s letter to Scholem of April 1973 is the last one in the correspondence between the two as preserved in Scholem’s archive.
While Scholem apparently severed relations with Eliade in writing, this does not indicate that he had reached a conclusion in the matter and regarded it as resolved. In 1978 Scholem’s colleague Zvi Werblowsky shared a letter with him that Werblowsky had received from Kurt Rudolph, the East German scholar of religion through whom Scholem had tried to glean further information about Eliade’s past. Rudolf had told Werblowsky about the many difficulties in obtaining relevant material from the libraries and archives in Bucharest under the Communist regime. At the end of 1979 Seymour Cain, an American scholar of the history of religion, asked for Scholem’s assistance in uncovering further details about Eliade’s past. Since Cain intended to research Eliade’s thought, he was trying to gather information from people in Israel about the basis of the accusations against him. Because Cain was unable to obtain concrete evidence about Eliade’s activities, he wrote a letter to Scholem, whom he had met in Israel, in which he defended Eliade and argued that the accusations against him recalled the system of guilt by association, so common during the anticommmunist witch hunts in the United States during the 1950s. Scholem answered him as follows:

You are certainly right in saying that there is to this very day no precise documentation of any antisemitic activity on the part of young Eliade, but I must confess that there is an uneasy feeling which is partly based on the evasive nature of Eliade’s own writings, especially the published diary from his first years in Paris, which I have read. . . . You say that you dislike the technique of “Guilt by association” practiced on Eliade. You may be right, but the case of the leading circle around the Iron Cross [sic] is indeed a problem which could be solved only by detailed knowledge about the persons concerned and their activities. In this respect, one cannot say that Eliade, who is a very vocal man, has been particularly responsive.

One senses a tone of increasing skepticism in Scholem’s words about Eliade’s past. Eliade’s evasions during the six years that had passed since the beginning of their correspondence on the subject, providing neither a clear answer nor proof to refute the accusations against him, apparently deepened Scholem’s doubt despite his abiding admiration for Eliade as a scholar. Until the last year of his life, Scholem remained in contact with Cain about Eliade’s past and kept up with every scrap of information that Cain gathered, though Scholem was unable to solve the mystery completely before his death. Even today, after the libraries in Bucharest have been opened and it has become possible to examine documents touching on the matter, Sebastian’s testimony remains one of the important sources in the search for an answer to the question of to what extent Eliade was involved in the activities of the Iron Guard—a question that has yet to receive an unequivocal answer.
Scholem’s relations with Jung and Eliade demonstrate his stance between the wish to regularly participate in Eranos and the need to explain this participation to a critical public opinion in Israel. However, the case of Jung should be distinguished from that of Eliade. Scholem’s acquaintance with Jung was only superficial and was free of any personal involvement. Hence, the attacks on his connection to Jung did not touch him directly and were rapidly displaced to the level of scholarship: the question of whether or not there was Jungian influence on Scholem and his research. In contrast, Scholem regarded Eliade as a friend and close colleague, so that the criticism of Eliade and Scholem’s relationship with him disturbed him more. The question of Eliade’s fascist and antisemitic past vexed Scholem far more than that of Jung’s past—both because of the fog surrounding Eliade’s past and because he repeatedly avoided providing a clear and unequivocal answer. This point was particularly problematic for Scholem, especially because of the close relations, both intellectual and personal, that the two men had had.98 In any case, both of these episodes express the ambivalence that accompanied Scholem’s participation in Eranos, although the attractive force of the conferences outweighed the deterring factors. The effort to understand the essence of the attractive force of Eranos for Scholem will help shed light on the place and meaning of the annual conferences in his life and in the history of his attitude toward Germany and Europe after the Holocaust.

The Meaning of Eranos

Scholem became a mainstay of the Eranos conferences, and they were an important component of his intellectual, academic, and social life. However, the question still remains: what caused him to participate in the conferences and persist in attending them for three decades, despite the ambivalence that often accompanied them?

In an article about Scholem and Eranos, Joseph Dan writes about the dreadful crisis that struck the Jewish world in the wake of the Holocaust and the difficult political position of the young State of Israel, which influenced the possibilities for research, as the principal reason for Scholem’s attending his first Eranos conference in 1949. In addition, Dan mentions the attraction of the chance to use German in an academic framework after more than a decade, when Scholem had refrained from doing so. According to Dan, Scholem had no alternative: “Scholem did not go to Ascona because he chose that place and that circle from among many other possibilities. At that time there was almost no alternative to this type of circle.”99 Though I agree with the explanations Dan
offers for Scholem’s participation, I disagree with his negative conclusion. In my opinion, Scholem’s choice to go to Ascona was deliberate and derived from positive motives. Though it is true that at that time Jerusalem was undoubtedly on the margins of the international academic community, and not only was the Hebrew University cut off from scholarly activity in the rest of the world, but also its library was inaccessible, surrounded by Jordanian territory on Mount Scopus. However, if Scholem had wanted one, he had an obvious and excellent alternative to Switzerland—the United States. Sooner or later, research in the United States and acceptance there would have provided a forum no worse than that of the Eranos conferences. Scholem’s conscious choice—despite the alternatives available to him over the years and despite the contradictions accompanying his participation—to continue to appear at Eranos conferences indicates the special place that they occupied in his life. The return to the German language of course played an important role in this choice, and here we may consider the language as representing the whole of German culture and its intellectual world, which remained an important part in Scholem’s personal world even after World War II.

Furthermore, at that time Switzerland constituted a neutral territory for him, where he could present his research in his mother tongue to an audience that belonged to his native culture, for two uninterrupted hours. The large number of scholars and intellectuals who took part in Eranos and the great popularity of the Eranos yearbooks among scholars of religion offered an appropriate platform
for him and a stopping point for him on his way back to Germany after the war, as well as a place where he could make connections and get to know colleagues with whom he had much in common. And perhaps more than anything, Eranos had nostalgic value for Scholem.

In her book on nostalgia, the sociologist Janelle Wilson notes the various aspects of this term and the complexity that characterizes it as a symbol of a human emotion. For example, one characteristic of nostalgia is its belonging to leisure activity, and another is its being an emotion that can be communicated to and shared by other individuals or groups. Indeed, nostalgia is yearning for a place or time identified with a certain degree of security for the person who feels nostalgic—a person whose present life lacks that element of stability. Yet another characteristic of nostalgia is that its aim is to connect the past with the present and create the continuity needed to construct a personal or collective identity. This need usually arises at times when that continuity is in jeopardy because of a lack of security in the present, often following a traumatic experience or crisis that threatens the present. Here are the criteria proposed by the sociologist Fred Davis in his book on the subject: “(1) The nostalgic evocation of some past state of affairs always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties, even though they may not be in the forefront of awareness, and (2) it is these emotions and cognitive states that pose the threat of identity discontinuity (existentially, the panic fear of the ‘wolf of insignificance’) that nostalgia seeks, by marshaling our psychological resources for continuity, to abort or, at the very least, deflect.” The continuity of identity made possible by nostalgia is central to the research of Davis and Wilson, and its significance lies in the ability of the person who experiences nostalgia to create an empathic connection with his or her former self, which, for some reason, is no longer accessible in the present, and thereby to create a clear continuum of identity for that person between past and present, aimed toward the future.

It is possible to identify strong nostalgic elements in the Eranos conferences in the period after World War II. The annual cycle of vacationing, the creation of a separate space for an academic event combined with leisure and communication among the participants, and the location in a place that had been a center of alternative spiritual trends before World War II—all of these looked, to a large degree, toward the past, toward the imperial era in Central Europe. Hence they fit the hypothesis advanced in Wilson’s book, that nostalgia is “longing for a Utopia, projected backwards in time.” For Scholem the nostalgic aspect of the conferences was inordinately important. To a great degree, the shock that he experienced because of the Holocaust and his trip to save the treasures of the
Diaspora, along with the establishment of the State of Israel, undermined his confidence in his surroundings, and without doubt they contradicted the manner in which he had understood the meaning and function of Zionism. Through Eranos he was able to heal the rift that had opened in his identity and ensure continuity in it, by the ability to create an empathic connection with an important part of his life that had grown dim after his emigration to the Land of Israel and been lost to him after the Holocaust: German culture and language as he had known them, before the deep changes that took place under Nazi rule. Thus Scholem himself stated in 1974, in a lecture given in Munich after he received a prize from the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts:

In 1946 I was sent to Germany with the special mission of examining the destiny of the Jewish libraries, to report on those remnants which survived, and to present overall proposals pertaining to their care. It is difficult for me to describe the shock that I experienced in my encounter with the German language of those days. There was in it something Medusa-like, something paralyzing, something that had absorbed the events of those years in a manner which cannot be explained. And if, in 1949, I began to write more extensively in the German language, this too had a certain bearing upon that selfsame shock. My lectures at the Eranos Conferences in Ascona were an additional factor. There I was given the opportunity to arrive at a synthesis of things upon which I had worked for thirty years, without sacrificing historical criticism or philosophical thought. In the atmosphere of those conferences, I felt that I could once again express myself properly in the German language without submitting to the provocation originating in that same shock.

In the 1950s the Eranos conferences provided Scholem with a transitional stage in his life, on both the temporal and the geographical level. With respect to time, the conferences renewed his direct connection with his past—with the German culture and language—that he had lost. Geographically, Ascona was a protected intermediary space, a German-speaking realm that had no direct connection with the events of the Holocaust. Furthermore, Scholem had a personal connection with the place, since Switzerland had been important for him in the past. He had spent family vacations there during his childhood and youth, and he had fled to Switzerland after being exempted from military service toward the end of World War I. He had also passed a significant period in his life there, in the company of the friend of his youth, Walter Benjamin. This was the place where, after the Holocaust, Scholem laid the groundwork for once again being active in the German intellectual world, with which he had maintained a close connection after his emigration to Palestine. Of course that connection was
severed during the war, but it became important to him because of his increasing disappointment with the possibility of implementing his Zionist utopia in the Land of Israel. Symbolically, the nostalgic atmosphere of Eranos provided a personal intellectual refuge for him, to which he could transplant his utopia from the collective future to the personal past: from Israel to Germany.