Eichmann in Jerusalem

A Correspondence

The capture of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina by Israeli agents; his abduction to Israel; and his trial, which was held in Beit Haam (now known as the Gerard Behar Center) in Jerusalem between April and December 1961, were formative in the Jewish world with respect to the memory of the Holocaust and the internalization of its significance. One of the results of these events was the storm raised by Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which was first published in 1963 and was based on her coverage of the trial as a correspondent for the *New Yorker*. The series of articles that Arendt published and, later, her book provoked many responses—unprecedented in their vociferousness—from Jewish intellectuals, especially in the United States and Israel. In the opinion of Richard Cohen, the importance of Arendt’s book for her generation was because her analysis “sparked an unparalleled public airing of historical issues relating to the Holocaust. For the first time since the war, laymen, journalists, intellectuals, jurists, social scientists, and historians—of both Jewish and non-Jewish extraction—placed the events of the Holocaust in central focus.” Critiques of the book itself generally revolved around the same axes, and Arendt’s various opponents, most of whom were Jews, emphasized similar points in her book. The critics mainly addressed Arendt’s writing style; her position regarding the actions of the Judenräte, the Jewish leadership appointed by the Nazis during the Holocaust; and the way she described the figure of Eichmann as demonstrating what she called “the banality of evil.” These central points appeared in Scholem’s famous

Once, years ago, I heard a provocative statement from Scholem: “After Hitler, there exists between every German and every Jew a necessary intimacy, which everyone can treat this way or that, but no one can deny it.”

*Amos Oz, Kol Hatikvot*
letter to Arendt, in which he severely criticized her book and her motivations for writing it. This letter, dated June 23, 1963, and Arendt’s answer, dated July 20, 1963, are among the most important documents in the dispute, both because of Scholem’s arguments and because Arendt’s answer (which Scholem published, with her grudging consent) is one of her few direct responses to the fierce accusations leveled against her.4

In his letter, Scholem analyzed Arendt’s book as dealing with two central problems: Jewish leadership during the Holocaust and Eichmann’s responsibility for his deeds. According to Arendt, if the Jewish leadership had not cooperated with the Nazis, fewer Jews would have been murdered in the Holocaust. One sentence in her book infuriated many people: “To a Jew, this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter in the whole story.”5 She described Eichmann as a passive bureaucrat who was incapable of independent thought. In response to Eichmann’s personality, as she understood it, Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil,” which was also widely criticized.

Throughout most of his letter, Scholem struggled with Arendt’s claims that the Jewish leadership shared the responsibility for the dimensions of the destruction. His criticism was based on the assumption that “our generation is [not] in a position to pass any kind of historical judgment [on the Holocaust]. We lack the necessary perspective, which alone makes some sort of objectivity possible.”6 Scholem’s central accusation against Arendt dealt not with the content of her book but with its form and vehemence. In his view, the book lacked all empathy with the victims of the Holocaust and thus revealed more than a little of Arendt’s inner world and motivations for writing. This understanding of her book led him to level one of the most famous accusations against her in the Arendt polemics:

It is that heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone with which these matters, touching the very quick of our life, are treated in your book to which I take exception. In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as Ahabath Israel: “Love for the Jewish People . . . [ellipsis points in the original].” In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who come from the German left, I find little trace of this. A discussion such as is attempted in your book would seem to me to require—you will forgive my mode of expression—the most old-fashioned, the most circumspect, the most exacting treatment possible—precisely because of the feeling aroused by this matter, this matter of the destruction of one-third of our people—and I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way. Thus I have little sympathy for that tone—well ex-
pressed by the English word “flippancy”—which you employ so often in the course of your book. To the matter of which you speak it is unimaginably inappropriate.7

The confidence with which Arendt passed judgment on the Jewish leadership and actions of Jews in extreme circumstances that she had never experienced seemed to Scholem to both sin against the subject she chose to write about and violate the principle of ethnic solidarity, which he expected her to honor since he counted her as part of the Jewish people. This accusation of lack of love of Israel was the first point to which Arendt referred in her reply to Scholem, contrasting his demand for Jewish solidarity and the demand for it on a personal and human basis: “You are quite right—I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this ‘love of the Jews’ would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything that I know is part and parcel of my own person.”8

In her letter, Arendt repeated several times that Scholem had not understood her book properly—meaning not in the way that she had it. Indeed, the central example presented here clearly demonstrates the incompatibility of their positions, which, in my view, was the reason for the absolute lack of understanding that created the rift between them. Whereas Scholem based his arguments on the emotional and tribal level, Arendt based hers on rational grounds. Scholem refused to judge the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon, stating that no one who had not experienced that extreme event in person could pass judgment on it. In contrast, Arendt felt that she could analyze a phenomenon with an enormous emotional burden under “sterile” laboratory conditions, solely by exercising her reason. An example of the lack of understanding between the two can be found in the fact that even the term “love of Israel,” which was central to the dispute in the passages quoted above, was not understood by Arendt in the context that Scholem intended it to be understood. Arendt reduced the broad and slightly fuzzy term (one may assume that Scholem intentionally avoided translating it in his German letter, to keep it fuzzy) to the ethnic and political level, and in doing so she missed various levels of its meaning that certainly lay behind Scholem’s choice of the term.9

In my view, the argument that this bitter dispute and the deep differences between Arendt and Scholem were based on great closeness between them accurately describes their relations.10 Indeed, one can point out many similarities between the two on the surface. For example, they both had a German-Jewish
background; they were both close friends and great admirers of Walter Benjamin; both of them had rebelled against the German-Jewish bourgeois world of their youth; their participation for a certain time in Zionist activity was based on similar values (as discussed below in this chapter); and they had both been disappointed with the direction taken by the Zionist movement and had shifted to a critical position regarding it. With respect to their public and intellectual activity, David Suchoff is largely right in stating that both Scholem and Arendt “created new models for the transmission of tradition and the relation between ethnic culture and political action.” However, despite these points of similarity, which are mainly external, there were abysmal differences between them that were connected to the essence of the tradition to be preserved and transmitted to the future. First of all, in this context, one must note the difference in their attitudes toward the Hebrew language. In contrast to the centrality that Scholem attributed to Hebrew as a vital force in Jewish existence and Zionist activity, Hebrew did not occupy a central place for Arendt, even during her years of Zionist activity. While Scholem, as a Jew, was drawn to the East and to the Land of Israel, on various occasions Arendt expressed sharp reservations about and even revulsion toward Eastern Jews—whether they be Jews from Eastern Europe or the Israeli police force at Beit Haam, who, in her opinion, cut Judaism off from its true source, which was Western European culture. In the context of the Arendt-Scholem dispute, Dan Diner has shown that, in contrast to nationalism on an ethnic basis, represented by the Jews of Eastern Europe and Scholem, Arendt represented nationalism anchored in the culture of the West and the process of emancipation. Unlike Scholem, Arendt never considered moving to Palestine, and after Hitler’s rise to power she chose to move to Paris.

Hence, it may be said that, despite the similarity of their backgrounds and certain aspects of their lives, Scholem and Arendt were essentially very different, almost opposites. In their dispute, this prevented almost all positive communication and led to repeated misunderstandings. This is not to say that the two did not have a connection with one another or that they did not respect or influence each other. In the dialectics between closeness and distance, between the similar and the different, Scholem and Arendt stood opposed to each other as in a mirror, each reflecting the other. Steven Aschheim wrote that “paradoxically, their negative personal evaluations of each other also looked like mirror images.” Consciously or unconsciously, willingly or not, Arendt’s counter-image helped Scholem determine where he stood on the questions of personal identity and membership in the collective within the Jewish world after the Holocaust.
In Relation to Zionism: Questions of Belonging

One of Scholem’s principal arguments toward the end of his letter to Arendt was that in the way she described Eichmann, she made a mockery of Zionism. Indeed, it seems that the differences between Scholem and Arendt in their attitudes toward Zionism are central for understanding the bone of contention between them in the Eichmann case and also serve as the background of that dispute. In discussing the trial of a Nazi war criminal by a political body that represented world Jewry, Arendt’s book linked the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel as historical phenomena. It is therefore easy to understand the powerful emotions accompanying the polemics of both sides, such a short time after these two pivotal events. To better understand the background of the Scholem-Arendt controversy on Eichmann, one may refer to correspondence about an earlier controversy that in form and content was amazingly similar to the correspondence of 1963: the exchange of letters between the two following the publication in the United States of Arendt’s article “Zionism Reconsidered,” toward the end of 1945. To a large degree this article summarizes Arendt’s position on Zionism, and it contains vehement and blunt condemnations of Zionist policies, because of which it had been rejected by the editor of Commentary. Immediately the article was published, Arendt sent a copy of it to Scholem, and he responded with a long, fierce letter. The arguments that Scholem made in this letter are very similar in character to those he raised in his later letter about her book on Eichmann. For example, in both letters Scholem did not conceal the deep disappointment and bitter feelings that Arendt’s writing aroused in him; his tone was emotional; he argued that her argumentation derived from her belonging to circles of the German left; and Arendt’s tone was central to Scholem’s critique, for he saw it as mocking, contemptuous, and arrogant toward Zionism and Judaism.

In both letters Scholem also criticized Arendt’s theories about the conscious and unconscious collaboration of the Jewish leadership, both Zionist and non-Zionist, with the aims of antisemitic regimes, especially the Nazis. Arendt’s article is permeated by hints of what would be more clearly articulated in her book: the Jewish mentality and the Jewish leadership (in this case, Zionist) played a certain role—even if it was passive—in the dimensions of the destruction of the Jews of Europe. For example, in 1946 Arendt wrote that the Zionist ideology of Herzl and his followers, which regarded antisemitism as a positive factor binding the Jewish people together and something with which it was possible to negotiate, led to great confusion, because of which the Jews could no longer distinguish allies from enemies—which made their true enemy even more dangerous. She went on to write that Weizmann’s Zionism, which regarded settlement in the Land of Israel as the answer to antisemitism, had proved to
be ridiculous when Erwin Rommel and his army directly threatened Palestine in World War II. In fact, according to Arendt, the Zionists’ error lay in their hope that Palestine would be a place where the Jews could escape from antisemitism, and that their enemies would miraculously become their allies there:

At the core of the hope which—were ideologies not stronger for some people than realities—should by now be blown to bits, we find the old mentality of enslaved peoples, the belief that it does not pay to fight back, that one must dodge and escape in order to survive. How deep-rooted is this conviction could be seen during the first years of the war, when only through the pressure of Jews throughout the world was the Zionist organization driven to ask for a Jewish Army—which, indeed, was the only important issue in the war against Hitler. . . . That an early instinct and demonstrable participation of Jews as Jews in this war would have been the decisive way to prevent the antisemitic slogan which, even before victory was won, already represented Jews as its parasites, apparently never entered their heads.18

The fact that the Yishuv was so focused on itself ostensibly caused its separation from the Jews of the rest of the world and led it to form ties with imperialist forces of all kinds—including the Ottoman Empire, which was slaughtering Armenians at that time,19 and the British, who had their own interests. The motivation for this behavior was the desire to establish an elitist center that would be concerned only with its own survival for the future of Jewry as an ethnic group, and have no concern for the masses. Consequently, the Zionist leaders sought to rescue only the Jews who suited that ideology: “Zionists used to argue that ‘only the remnant will return,’ the best, the only ones worth saving; let us establish ourselves as the elite of the Jewish people and we shall be the only surviving Jews in the end; all that matters is our survival; let charity take care of the pressing needs of the masses, we shall not interfere; we are interested in the future of a nation, not in the fate of individuals.”20

The failure of the Zionists lay in their being focused on themselves, so that they took no independent initiative in the form of establishing a Jewish army or cooperating “with the revolutionary forces in Europe.”21 Rather, in their limited efforts to be rescued, they reverted time and time again to the Diaspora Jewish practice of what she called “shtadlonus” (pleading with the authorities) in their relations to imperialism and the great political movements, including Nazism.22 The implication here is that, because of the weakness of the Zionist movement in Palestine and the separation between it and the Diaspora, the Yishuv was indirectly responsible for the failure to assist the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust and for its dimensions. At least this is how Scholem understand her in his response to this passage:
I think that meanwhile experience has proven that every one of us, in this situation, would have had to act the way the Zionist Organization acted, and the only thing to be regretted is that in a corrupt world no use was made of the possibility of saving Jews from fascism in time and more decisively. You ought to know—and if you don’t know, then this must be emphasized to you—that we were prepared during the war to buy Jews from the Gestapo and for this purpose good and hard currency of the JDC [Joint Distribution Committee] and Zionists flowed to Germany in large amounts, and that the people who took this complex mission upon themselves did not betray the Jewish people as you would categorize them according to your logic. Rather, they were people who did their duty. I would like to know whether we were permitted to save Walter Benjamin by means of a deal of this kind, if it depended on that! I have to say that I believed you would have more understanding for a dialectical situation [of this kind], and your naïve bickering is out of place in this instance, as well as in a discussion of the values of Zionism in itself.23

Scholem made his position clear in his exchange with Arendt by referring to the Yishuv in the first person plural and unequivocally defending its actions during the war. His words indicated his need to confront Arendt as a representative of the Yishuv and to defend his reference group against her attack. He went on to declare, in response to Arendt’s ironic interpretation of Weizmann’s statement that the response to antisemitism is Zionist settlement in the Land of Israel, that he and Arendt had no common ground for discussion.24

These differences in how Scholem and Arendt understood the political realities of their day are extremely important, because they also shaped the personal relations between the two and the way in which Arendt appeared to Scholem in the following years until they broke off all contact in 1963, in the wake of the controversy surrounding Eichmann in Jerusalem. This article was a turning point in relations between them because, for Scholem, it placed Arendt for the first time as a figure absolutely alien to his world, despite the many things they still had in common. In relation to “us,” the leadership of the Zionist Yishuv, which Scholem opposed domestically, Arendt was defined as other and alien. Scholem’s later accusation that she lacked empathy for and a sense of human solidarity with the Jewish collective is expressed here in presenting the example of Benjamin as a worthy person to rescue. With this example, he was addressing Arendt’s emotions, but in hindsight, given what she wrote him in 1963, it also seems to apply to her ability to love only her friends.

In his earlier letter Scholem did not conceal his disappointment with a woman whom he had called five years earlier “a marvelous woman and an excellent Zionist,”25 and who now proved to be a person who had developed a “great
anti-Palestinian complex." In her reply, Arendt also emphasized that she had expected something different from him, and that she was disappointed with the position he had expressed in his letter: “I always thought and understood your position as a Jew politically, and I felt great respect for your decision to deal seriously with the political reality in Palestine. To tell the truth, I never would have dreamed of thinking that for that reason you would have a Zionist Weltanshauung, if only because of my hopes that in fact you do not have [such an outlook].”

The great disappointment they each expressed about the other could have emerged only in the context of their realization that they shared a practical political worldview. That realization on Arendt’s part could have been grounded in the similarity of her views to the ideas of the Brit Shalom circle, such as its critique of political Zionism and the dependence of the Zionist leadership on the strength of imperialist powers. Scholem also criticized Zionism in this spirit in the years following his immigration. The two also shared a great concern for the fate of the Yishuv. As Arendt wrote in her response to Scholem’s criticism in 1946, her article had been written “with great concern, bordering on panic, for the fate of Palestine.” However, the closeness of Arendt’s view to the political line of Brit Shalom—which was expressed in her support of Judah Leib Magnes and the Ihud Association, which he founded in 1942—was after the time when Scholem was active in Brit Shalom. Arendt’s leanings toward Zionism began only in 1933, after Brit Shalom had ceased to exist. Scholem’s refusal to join the Ihud Association when it was established, despite a certain affinity with Magnes and his ideas, points to Scholem’s retreat from the political line he had espoused until the collapse of Brit Shalom, with Hitler’s rise to power. The Holocaust caused a reversal in Scholem’s conception of the purpose of Zionism and the Land of Israel, moving him even further from Arendt. He understood that a political solution to the Jewish question had become a matter of necessity. In fact, in the wake of their dispute about Arendt’s reappraisal of Zionism after the Holocaust, she became a person of great importance for Scholem, who felt the ambivalence of being both distant from and close to her at the one and the same time. In the following years, Arendt espoused positions opposed to those of Scholem, which reflected for him his own place in the Jewish intellectual world, and more than any other colleague she helped him sharpen his opinions regarding his belonging to the Zionist collective. A feeling of belonging is naturally relative: for someone to belong to a certain group, he or she must be able to define one or more people as not belonging to it—especially if he or she has experienced a crisis in his or her relation to it. For Scholem, Arendt was that person who was outside the various groups to which he saw himself as belonging. By seeing her in this way, through emphasizing their differences despite the many points of
similarity between them, Scholem was able to formulate parts of his Zionist and Jewish identity, and this helped him cope better with the crises and inner doubts that gnawed at him about the path of Zionism. An example of this can be seen in his response to Arendt’s 1946 article, in which Scholem referred openly to how he positioned himself in the light of her remarks about the situation of Zionism in the Land of Israel and its future: “I never believed it would be easier for me to agree with Ben-Gurion than with you! After your article I have no doubt about the matter. I regard Ben-Gurion’s political line as a catastrophe, but still a more noble catastrophe and a smaller one than what can be expected for us if we follow in your footsteps.”

In contrast to the figure of Arendt, which he defined as external to the groups he belonged to, Scholem identified with David Ben-Gurion, whom he placed inside those groups although he strongly opposed Ben-Gurion’s path. Scholem also expressed his opposition to the central stream of Zionism and bitter disappointment with its path in “Reflections on the Science of Judaism,” an article he wrote in 1944, toward the end of the war and the Holocaust and under their influence. However, Scholem’s critique in his article, which was also extremely vehement, was in his view internal to Zionism and thus legitimate. He identified Arendt’s critique as external and thus rejected it categorically, although it had a few points of similarity to his own critique.

The deep differences between Scholem and Arendt, along with their closeness and similarities, were also expressed in their personal relations. The dialogue between them appears to the reader as a kind of intellectual Maskentanz [mask dance] in which each of them acts out the reflection of his or her image in the view of the other—the opposite side (sitra achra) of his or her very self. In the course of this elusive, dialectal dance, which was not devoid of mutual provocations, one can sometimes feel moments of closeness and great honesty, which are quickly and repeatedly replaced by a mask of distance and alienation. Perhaps the donning of these masks was necessary for them to overcome the feeling of closeness and focus on their estrangement, the source of which was political. Arendt sensed this tendency in her relationship with Scholem and even complained about it in a letter to Kurt Blumenfeld: “It is only natural, that I cannot manage with Scholem, especially in Fania’s presence, no? The nationalistic speech, which he himself doesn’t mean seriously and whose source is understandable fear, is something I can’t stand.” In my opinion, Arendt’s feeling that the nationalistic positions that Scholem presented to her again and again did not reflect his true opinions touches on the essence of what I have called a dance. In fact, along with his attacks on Arendt and even within his letters to her, the great admiration that he felt for her is also visible—an admiration that was...
sincere to the same degree as his critique of her. An example of this can be found in a diary entry of August 3, 1963, in which Scholem reports a long conversation that he had had in the home of the English philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Arendt’s book was one of the subjects they discussed, and Berlin told Scholem that he had refrained from reviewing the book or even from reading it because it was “an obvious case of Jewish self-hatred.” Scholem disagreed with this statement and, in parentheses, he wrote in his diary: “I don’t think this is the kernel of the matter—coldness of heart, yes—self-hatred, no.”36 Later in the conversation Scholem expressed his opinion of Arendt to Berlin, taking an almost defensive position toward her. In any event it represented an effort to understand her in context and to alleviate the severity of judgment against her: “I said that I thought that H. A. was extremely gifted and in any event honest on a much higher level than Prof. [Bruno] Bettelheim, who is truly a scoundrel, whom I regard as the height of Jewish assimilationist charlatanism. In comparison to him, H. is quite a saint. [Berlin] wanted to read out our correspondence and to see whether it was appropriate for Encounter, where it can reach a broad readership.”37

The fact that Scholem had taken a defensive and empathetic position toward Arendt indicated the closeness he still felt for her, in spite of the sharp criticism he leveled against her. Apparently with Berlin as an intermediary, an English translation of their correspondence was published in Encounter, where it received extensive circulation, despite Arendt’s initial objection to its publication.38

For Arendt, too, Scholem was a figure who reflected her image, but he also represented everything she rejected in contemporary Zionism: the focus on itself based on a conception of the ethnic collective coupled with arrogance toward the Jews of the Diaspora and people of other nations (Arendt’s husband, Heinrich Blücher, was not Jewish), and based on the belief that the State of Israel was the true representative of Judaism and therefore was the center of the world. No better example of this could be found than Arendt’s famous remark about the impression Scholem made when he was in the United States in 1957: “He is very intelligent, but not really wise. Aside from that, he is so self-involved, that he has no eyes to see (nor even ears to hear). Basically he thinks: the center of the world is Israel; the center of Israel is Jerusalem; the center of Jerusalem is the Hebrew University; the center of the University—is Scholem. The gravest aspect of all this is the fact that he seriously thinks the world has a center. And just that, thank God, is what it doesn’t have!”39

Bernard Wasserstein has recently showed how Arendt’s mocking and amused view of Scholem was a double-edged sword that could just as accurately describe her own self-image: “On Arendt itself it might with no less truth be said that she saw the Jews as the centre of history, the German Jews as the centre of Jewry, the
stateless, exiled refugees as the centre of German Jewry, and herself as the queen bee among those intellectual émigrés.” Although Scholem accused Arendt of heartlessness, one aspect of their relationship was the powerful emotions—both positive and negative—they felt about each other. This dialectical relationship continued until the common elements that drew them together could no longer counteract the factors that separated them, which were expressed in Arendt’s reporting on the Eichmann trial and Scholem’s attack on it. Reading the two exchanges of letters discussed in this chapter allows one to say that for both of them, their dispute was based on the Holocaust, the way each of them interpreted the world after it in its shadow, and the way each understood how the other saw this point of crisis in Jewish and human history.

Facing the Holocaust: A Look toward the Future

The differences between the ways that Scholem and Arendt understood the Holocaust can be described in the context of their similar backgrounds. Both of them were active immediately after the war in efforts to locate and reclaim stolen Jewish property. They both made trips throughout Germany for the purpose of their work, and they both published accounts of their journeys. To a great degree, a comparison of their reports on the situation in Germany shortly after the war points up the essence of the differences between the two: Scholem’s report focuses on the situation of the displaced Jews (though he did not always view them favorably), whereas Arendt’s deals with “the effects of twelve years of totalitarian rule on the German people,” without mentioning the Jews who remained in Germany at that time. To a great extent this difference in recording their impressions of the situation in Germany after the war also characterized their positions in the dispute over Eichmann in Jerusalem. Arendt’s position regarding the Holocaust brought her closer to the experience of the German collective, as Diner has shown, while the nature of Scholem’s criticism placed him on the side of those who attacked Arendt’s book, a group that included other Jews of German origin. The response of this group was so uniform in character that at a certain stage it seemed to Arendt that an organized campaign was being waged against her. In Richard Cohen’s opinion, Arendt’s feeling was not entirely mistaken: “Their past experience as Jews of German extraction was the formative factor in their almost uniform response. This lent their critiques an image of an organized response, but, in effect, it was their individual appropriation of and profound attachment to a collective past memory that provoked the similarity. Their perception was anchored in their German-Jewish past, and few turned to issues outside this purview.”

In contrast to Arendt’s rationalistic and universalistic attitude in her book—
which derived from her feeling of affiliation with the German intellectual world, which was not necessarily Jewish—the Jewish position expressed by Scholem (like other Jews of German origin) was based on emotion, which to a great extent reflected his personal attitude toward the Holocaust. As Cohen wrote: “The response of Jews from Germany sheds light on a characteristic attitude of individuals who have undergone a major trauma and whose identity has become deeply intertwined with this experience. They deny the outsider’s ability to penetrate authentically into their experience, perceiving that only someone who has experienced a similar event can reach the depths of true understanding.”

Thus Arendt’s book touched a painful nerve for world Jewry and Scholem himself, which explains why his response was vehement and pointed. However, it would be a mistake to think that the Eichmann trial was not an emotional confrontation with the Holocaust for Arendt. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has pointed out the feeling of mission that accompanied Arendt’s desire to be present at the Eichmann trial and her view of a face-to-face confrontation with him as a retroactive cure. If it is possible to imagine what that cure was, in light of Arendt’s book, we may say that it was the ability to discuss events from a distance and rationally, and in a manner that would make it possible for her to maintain her connection with Germany and German culture. The solution Arendt reached was to divide the blame for the events between the perpetrator and the victim, removing the stigma of the aggressor from Eichmann and placing some of the guilt and responsibility on the shoulders of the Jews themselves. Thus, the Germans and the Jews could together bear the burden of guilt, which would be the shared basis of a future connection for them.

Scholem also struggled with the Holocaust and with the awareness of the need to renew the connections between Germany and Israel and between Germans and Jews. However, for him, the Holocaust was a living and painful event, and he was unable to observe it from a distance or with self-criticism. But as the next section of this chapter shows, for Scholem, too, the abyss that the Holocaust opened up between the two nations was paradoxically the basis for a renewal of the connection between them, which would follow new rules. An example of this can be found in Scholem’s opposition to the execution of Eichmann, which he expressed in an article published in 1962. In this short article Scholem presented both nations as victims: “the Jewish people, whose millions were murdered, and the German people, who became a nation of murderers when it allowed the Nazi doctrine to gain power over it.” Since the guilt was borne by an entire nation, the execution of an individual criminal, as central a figure as he was, created the illusion of the conclusion of a chapter, which was out of place. This act might create the impression in Germany that “something
was done to ‘atone’ for the act, for which there is no atonement,” which would be entirely contrary to the Jewish and human interest:

As Jews and human beings we have no interest in such a phony “finis.” It was an easy, slight ending in two senses: it was slight both in significance and judgment. This hanging was an anticlimax, the satyr play after a tragedy such as had not been seen before. One fears that instead of opening up a reckoning and leaving it open for the next generation, we have foreclosed it. What superficially seems severity of judgment is in reality its mitigation, a mitigation in no way to our interest. It is to our interest that the great historical and moral question, the question of probing the depths which this trial has forced all to face—How could this happen?—that this question should retain all its weight, all its stark nakedness, all its horror. The hangman who had to execute Eichmann’s sentence added nothing to the situation, but took away a great deal. . . . He introduced the misplaced suggestion that this marked “the end of the story.”51

Like Arendt, Scholem also saw a cooperation between the aggressor and the victim and the need to continue the connection between the Jewish and German peoples, especially in view of their shared catastrophe. In this respect, Arendt’s book was consistent with Scholem’s call for a spiritual accounting. Therefore her identification—which surprised Scholem—with the German side and her harsh criticism, in content and form, of the Jewish side, offended him. However, beyond the personal insult that Scholem saw in Arendt’s words, especially their tone,52 there was a paradox that accompanied him all his life: his saw the Holocaust both as a historical event that must be researched and as a living mystery that could be spoken of only via symbols, and whose profound essence could not be grasped. After Scholem’s death, Nathan Rotenstreich wrote of Scholem’s attitude toward the symbol, which is meant to express something whose essence cannot be known or understood: “The symbol thus serves as a sort of a bridge between man and the universe, even as the individual realizes that it does not comprehend the mystery, either of his own existence or of that of the universe beyond.”53

**German-Jewish Dialogue**

**Before the Holocaust**

In the fall of 1962, Scholem received a letter from Manfred Schlösser, the editor of a series of books called Agora, inviting him to contribute to a Festschrift in honor of the ninetieth birthday of Margarete Susman, a German Jewish author. In his letter, Schlösser asked Scholem to write something appropriate for
general framework of the planned volume. According to Schlösser, the purpose of the book was to restore awareness of Susman and call attention to her writing. At the same time, he wanted the book to bring out a central aspect of Susman’s work: “Beyond this, the volume seems to me to be an important contribution to a reflection on the indestructible spiritual symbiosis of German-Jewish intellectual life.”\(^{54}\) Susman had been born in 1872 to a Jewish family, and as a young woman she lived and studied in Munich and Berlin, among other places. In those cities she became acquainted with members of the circle of the poet Stefan George and studied with Georg Simmel, the famous Jewish sociologist. Afterward she was connected with the circle around Franz Rosenzweig and the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus, the adult education institution which he founded in Frankfurt. Susman was close to Jewish intellectuals and activists such as Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer, and in her writing she emphasized her connections and commitment to Judaism and to German culture, and the closeness between Christianity and Judaism. In 1933 she was forced to leave Germany and shortly afterward settled in Switzerland, where she lived until her death in early 1966.\(^{55}\) Scholem had met Susman for the first time during his visit to Zurich in 1946, during his mission to locate the treasures of the Diaspora. She made an ambiguous impression on him: on the one hand, he felt close to her, and in his journal he wrote that his conversations with her gave him pleasure, but on the other hand, her attitudes toward Christianity distressed him. The fact that Susman almost converted to Christianity as a young woman and her deep emotional connection with Christianity, which was expressed in the book she published that year, Das Buch Hiob (The Book of Job) disturbed Scholem.\(^{56}\)

Susman sent Scholem a copy of the book when it was published, and he quickly replied that, although the book touched his heart, he was unequivocally critical of the second chapter, which sought to connect her world of Judaism to Christian Europe (especially Germany): “According to my conception, the metaphysical equilibrium between these two worlds, upon which you work, cannot abide forever anywhere.”\(^{57}\) In the following decade and a half, the two remained in contact, and Scholem occasionally sent Susman copies of his books and articles. However, his criticism of 1946 still stood between them, and it certainly recurred in his memory when he received the letter of invitation from Schlösser to contribute to the Festschrift. The barrier between Christianity and Judaism, which Scholem maintained throughout his life—considering himself and most of what was precious to him to be Jewish or identified with Judaism\(^{58}\)—was in absolute contrast to Susman’s attempts to combine the two worlds in her work and life. Perhaps this contrast lay in the background of Scholem’s refusal to contribute an essay to the volume. The goal of the book, as presented by Schlösser,
was another factor in Scholem’s refusal to take part, since it was defined as a “reflection on the indestructible spiritual symbiosis of German-Jewish intellectual life.” Schlösser’s pleas managed to change Scholem’s mind, and a short time later he accepted the invitation and sent an open letter to be published in the volume, in which he fiercely criticized the view that saw conversation and dialogue in the relations between Jews and Germans before 1933 and called it a “German-Jewish symbiosis.”

This letter, dated December 18, 1962, provoked a short dispute between Scholem and Schlösser in their correspondence as well as in the pages of the Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts. Scholem’s letter and his position in the dispute shows his attitude toward the relations between Jews and Germans before the Holocaust: “I deny that there has ever been such a German-Jewish dialogue in any genuine sense whatsoever, i.e., as a historical phenomenon.” According to Scholem, such a dialogue, which Schlösser presented as self-evident, never took place because the Germans did not respond to the Jews’ call for it. In his opinion, the Jews tried to create a discourse of this kind in every possible way, but they always encountered a contemptuous and arrogant attitude: “The allegedly indestructible community of the German essence with the Jewish essence consisted, so long as these two essences really lived with each other, only of a chorus of Jewish voices and was, on the level of historical reality, never anything else than a fiction, a fiction of which you will permit me to say that too high price was paid for it.” Scholem revealed exactly what price had been extorted by this illusion from the Jewishness of the Jews of Germany in his article in answer to two polemical letters against him: “The liquidation of the Jewish substance by the Jews themselves must in large part be held responsible for the fact that this dialogue did not come to take place as a historical phenomenon. This liquidation certainly has deep and far-reaching reasons, only a part of which have hitherto been expressed, but the dialectical connection between this liquidation and the fate of the Jews in Germany, for good and for evil, seems evident to me.”

The order of things as presented here by Scholem is clear: the liquidation of the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish tradition by the Jews of Germany is connected, though indirectly, to their physical liquidation. This position is surprising, especially in view of Scholem’s harsh criticism of a similar principle proposed by Arendt in her 1946 article, discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Arendt claimed that the similarity between the goals espoused by the Zionist movement and antisemitic tendencies in Germany deceived the Jews of Germany and prevented them from identifying their true enemy, and in Eichmann in Jerusalem she argued that the Jews bore some responsibility for their bitter fate during the Holocaust. The similarity between Scholem’s remarks here
and Arendt’s positions is unexpected, especially in the light of the severe criticism Scholem voiced against Arendt. In any event, both Scholem’s and Arendt’s positions were developed after the Holocaust and as a result of judging events according to their consequences. However, Scholem left open a small window open on the future, as shown in the end of his letter: “It is true: The fact that Jewish creativity poured forth here is perceived by the Germans, now that all is over. I would be the last to deny that there is something genuine about this—[which is] at once gripping and depressing. But it no longer changes anything about the fact that no dialogue is possible with the dead, and to speak of an ‘indestructibility of this dialogue’ strikes me as blasphemy.”

Scholem tried to distinguish between Susman and Schlösser, directing his criticism only to the latter. Moreover, in his correspondence with Susman from the publication of the book until her death in 1966, he attacked only Schlösser as representing a tendency in postwar Germany to see Jewish existence in that country before the destruction in a romantic light. In fact, the language of the invitation to contribute to the Festschrift for Susman was only one of the factors that motivated Scholem to respond as he did. Another factor was the figure of Susman, whom he saw as standing between two worlds, the Jewish and the German Christian. That figure and the sector of German Jewry that it represented for Scholem made him feel a need to have an accounting with the German Jewry of his youth, before its violent elimination.

As the previous chapters have shown, Scholem’s youth in Germany was colored by his rebellion against the bourgeois milieu that characterized assimilated German Jewry and by his moral commitment to a separate Jewish culture in the Land of Israel. However, in none of his writings before his letter to Schlösser did Scholem address this issue separately and systematically, but after this episode it is evident that the subject had begun to preoccupy him, and in the following years he struggled several more times with the question of Jewish-German relations before the war in a more comprehensive way. The first time was shortly after the dispute with Schlösser, in a lecture Scholem gave at the plenary session of the World Jewish Congress in Brussels in August 1966, and the second, which I discuss at the end of this section, was more than a decade later, in a lecture at a conference in the United States.

In the 1966 lecture, Scholem expanded on the position he had expressed in his letter to Schlösser by surveying the stages in the history of German Jewry. Scholem presented one sentence that Susman had written in 1935 (she had died before the lecture) and that called on the Jew to abnegate himself at that time in history as an example of “a perversion whereby Christian ideas—rejected by Jews unto their dying breath—now presented themselves as the demand of the
greatest Jewish minds.” 67 Another passage at the end of the 1966 lecture was devoted to the future of relations between Jews and Germans, and there Scholem left an opening for a new beginning:

Fruitful relations between Jews and Germans, relations in which a past that is both meaningful and at the same time so horrible as to cripple communication may be preserved and worked through—such relations must be prepared away from the limelight. But it is only through an effort to bring them about that we can guarantee that official contacts between the two peoples will not be poisoned by counterfeit formulas and demands. Already the worm of hypocrisy is gnawing at the delicate roots! Where love is no longer possible, a new understanding requires other ingredients: distance, respect, openness, and open-mindedness, and, above all, good will. 68

As noted, Scholem’s point of departure was after the Holocaust, and he projected the eventual destiny of the Jews of Germany onto their beginnings, and thus onto all their history. He judged this history retroactively, in view of the tragic outcome. However, along with his deterministic and negative attitude toward the past, another tone is perceptible in his words, emphasizing the future and the continuation of relations between the Jews and the Germans after the catastrophe and expressing his personal decision to try to build a bridge between the nations. Perhaps, paradoxically, one may postulate that, for Scholem, the trauma of the elimination of German Jewry in fact made an opening for future dialogue.

After the Holocaust

In two different periods during his life Scholem rejected the possibility of maintaining a productive connection between Jews and Germans in Germany. The first was before the Holocaust, especially in his youth, and the second was immediately after the Holocaust, during his journey in 1946, after meeting the remnant of the Jews of Germany and the displaced people living in temporary camps throughout the American occupation zone. His impressions and conversations during that journey led him to the conclusion that “there was no restoration for Germany Jewry,” and he saw a moral flaw in the Jews who remained there. 69 Perhaps it is surprising that at the same time Scholem adopted a conciliatory tone toward Germany itself, during his efforts to transfer the manuscript of the Talmud from the Bavarian National Library to the Hebrew University during his visit to Munich. 70 In a letter to the university authorities he described this gesture on the part of the German authorities as “a symbolic act towards the Jewish people and as a first step toward bridging the awful abyss that has been created between the two peoples.” 71
This early statement about the continuation or renewal of relations between Jews and Germans, so soon after the Holocaust, was not a slip of the pen. Rather, it represented an important aspect of Scholem’s attitude toward Germany and the Germans after the Holocaust and in light of it.

One of the first public discussions regarding cultural connections between Jews and Germans took place during a minor dispute that occurred shortly before the major disagreement surrounding the negotiations on reparations with Germany, which began in 1952. At that time the young Israeli society felt anger and hatred toward Germany and the Germans in general, and there were calls for revenge. The official policy toward Germany of the State of Israel during its first years was guided by principles that rejected direct contact between the states as well as between Jews and Germans, especially on German soil. Against the background of this atmosphere, in December 1951 Martin Buber was awarded the Goethe Prize by the University of Hamburg. When Buber, who had immigrated to Palestine in 1938 after years of Zionist activity in Nazi Germany, agreed to accept the prize, there was a public outcry in Israel, including condemnations in the daily press. In the wake of this pressure, Buber refused to travel to Hamburg to receive the prize and to speak publicly, and he donated the prize money to two Israeli journals. In response to the public condemnations of those awarding the prize and its recipient, on December 30, 1951, Scholem wrote a letter to the editors of Haaretz, in which he defended the city of Hamburg. Scholem agreed with those who had attacked Buber that he ought to reject the prize, “as long as an abyss still yawns between us and them.” However, while the connection with the German collective was problematic, there was no reason to condemn the intentions of the individuals who had offered the prize to Buber, for their intentions might be pure, “to break through the tragic vicious cycle of guilt and shame and eternal sorrow”:

I believe that in the existing circumstances it is the duty of the Jewish side to be wary of any contact and negotiations with Germans, especially with those who speak not in their own name but in the name of the German public. All those among us—and I am one of them—who have acted in Germany after the war on missions for the Jewish public, have experienced this difficult problem. Individuals might be decent, and there were even, here and there, those who deserve to be called righteous, but the German public in this generation is not decent. However, for this reason must we spit in the face of such individuals, when an entire public supports them, or, shall we even say: exploits the purity of their heart? Acceptance of a prize from the German public is not conceivable, because that public necessarily includes a majority of people unknown to those awarding the prize, and certainly many among them
are people with hands soaked with the blood of our people. But one may ask: must one therefore condemn the intentions of those awarding the prize, which might be exceedingly pure?76

Although he rejected any connection with Germany as a nation and collective, Scholem did not reject communication with individuals whose innocence during the Nazi period and pure intentions could be verified. At the end of 1952 Scholem received a letter from the editor of the Deutsche Universitätszeitung, asking him to write for it. Scholem refused to take part in this project, but he expressed admiration for the work of the editors of the newspaper, as members of a new generation acting to build a future for their nation. He explained his refusal by stating his view that many German academics would prefer to forget their activities during the period of Nazi rule, feigning innocence when confronted with questions. In Scholem’s opinion, this tendency undermined any possibility of sincere conversation in the present. However, he hoped that the situation would be different in the future: “I wish wholeheartedly that you will be given the opportunity to take part in creating an atmosphere in which sincere words can have an influence once again, one in which a Jew can once again speak to an anonymous group of Germans, who are unknown to him, without reflecting on their past.” This letter of Scholem’s was printed in the magazine.77 His rejection of cooperation at the time, along the empathetic and encouraging tone of his reply, heralds Scholem’s tendency in the following years to build a new personal dialogue with Germany. In the beginning of this process, he often expressed admiration, respect, and closeness for individual Germans whose past was not suspect, and at the same time he avoided contact with anyone whose Nazi past was made known to him.78 Perhaps this is why Scholem did not appear before the general public in Germany during the following years.

This attitude began to change in 1957. In July of that year Scholem gave three lectures in the Loeb series, devoted to the history of Jewish religion and thought, in the Philosophy Department of the University of Frankfurt. Scholem was invited to give the lectures by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and they dealt with the history of Kabbalah in Safed during the sixteenth century. In the same year, the first German edition of Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism was published. Although the book was published by Daniel Brody’s Rhein Verlag, in Switzerland, Scholem wrote a few words in his introduction about his views on relations between Jews and Germans then and in the future:

Between the German nation and the Jewish people a deadly earnest (blutigen Ernst) chasm opened up during the years of catastrophe and destruction, in the full meaning of the word, and any effort to ignore it would be in vain. The publication of this
book in German only now is connected to this state of affairs. Whether scientific understanding and a historical outlook can do anything to bridge this chasm is difficult to say. However, I believe that deep discussion of significant phenomena in the history of the Jewish religion, such as I sought to present in this book, can be of special significance in this situation. A Jewish author cannot do very much by himself to change this situation, but he can provide tools and materials, and perhaps also insights, that can be important for the discourse (Aussprache) that might, perhaps, begin anew.79

The chasm between Jews and Germans during the Holocaust gave importance, in Scholem’s opinion, to the publication of scholarship in German about Jewish history and the Jews, for examination of the past had the potential to provide tools for the creation of a future discourse. In other words, Scholem suggests that academic research in Jewish history can create an opportunity to build a bridge over the chasm and renew relations between Jews and Germans. This tendency toward a gradual approach to Germany through Scholem’s academic work continued in the following years. In 1959 he wrote a short introduction to Georg Langer’s book on Hasidism, which was published in Munich,80 and in 1960 the first volume of his Eranos lectures were published in Zurich.81 Also in 1960 Scholem gave a lecture on the Sabbatean Dönmeh sect at the Tenth International Conference on the History of Religions, which took place in Marburg.82 And in 1962 the Berlin publishing house of Walter de Gruyter published an expanded version of his book on the origins of Kabbalah,83 and the second volume of Scholem’s Eranos lectures was published in Zurich.84

One of the most important years in the history of Scholem’s connections with Germany was 1963, when for the first time he received an invitation to serve as a visiting professor of Judaism at the University of Heidelberg, an invitation he refused because of the Nazi past of several people at the university.85 That was also the year in which the dispute with Arendt broke out and Scholem was invited to contribute to Susman’s Festschrift. As discussed above in this chapter, this letter prompted him to begin to deal with the question of Jewish-German dialogue or its lack before the Holocaust. However, the most significant event in the development of Scholem’s relations with Germany in that year might have been the publication of the volume Judaica by the Suhrkamp publishing house in Frankfurt.86 This volume contained eight articles by Scholem intended for the general public and was the first book Scholem published with Suhrkamp. His long and close relations with the director of Suhrkamp, Siegfried Unseld, which are discussed in the following chapter, led to his publishing five other books with that publisher.
Thus it may be said that as early as the beginning of the 1950s, while Scholem severely criticized the view that Jewish-German dialogue had existed in the past, he was trying to promote dialogue of this kind—at first with individuals and gradually in a more institutional manner. In 1963, against the background of the Eichmann dispute and in response to the Susman Festschrift, Scholem objected to taking a romantic and nostalgic view of the past by presenting the end of the Jews of Germany—their destruction—as the point of departure for understanding their history. However, the Holocaust, the chasm separating Germany and the State of Israel was also a point of departure for him, opening up the possibility of renewed discourse or, if one accepts Scholem’s claim that such a discourse never existed, the beginning of true dialogue.

This dialogue could begin and establish itself, as Scholem wrote in the introduction to his book quoted above, through study of the past, which would lead to knowledge of it. He also repeated this principle during his dispute with Schlösser: “I am not among those who altogether refuse and oppose the resumption of such relations. In order to render such a resumption fruitful in a serious sense, one requires, however, not only knowledge of what is, but also of what was.” The way in which the past was studied and understood was thus the key to improved relations between Germans and Jews in the future. Research into the history of Judaism and Jewish life created the possibility for Scholem of building a bridge over the abyss that had opened between Jews and Germans and provided an opportunity for renewal of relations between them.

If we understand Scholem’s interest in the history of the Jews of Germany before the war in this context, then we may say that, paradoxically, his position and preoccupation with the lack of conversation between Jews and Germans in the past was the key for him to creating the possibility of such a dialogue. In other words, Scholem’s views regarding the lack of dialogue in the past was at the same time a call for dialogue and expressed his hope for discourse in the present. Not coincidentally, his letters to Schlösser and others that were part of this dispute were published again in 1970 with a lecture about Jews and Germans in the beginning of his Judaica 2, the second volume in the series intended for the general public.

In late 1972 Scholem received a letter from Martin Broszat, a historian of anti-semitism and later of Nazi Germany and the director of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (Institute of Contemporary History) in Munich. The letter contained an invitation to come to Munich in the following year and lecture about German-Jewish relations before the rise of the Nazis, as part of the annual meeting of the academic advising committee of the institution. The idea of inviting Scholem, who was at that time the head of the Israel Academy of Sciences, occurred to
Broszat after he had a long conversation with Scholem in the home of the historian George Mosse, during which Scholem told many stories about his youth, and after reading *Judaica* 2, which had just been published. Broszat proposed a possible subject for the lecture: “Judaism in Germany before the First World War. The social and social-psychological obstacles before German-Jewish cooperation. And it might almost be best, if you spoke about this subject through analysis of memories and reflections, which you often prefer in your writing.”

Scholem immediately accepted the invitation and the proposed subject for the lecture, which was scheduled for March 15, 1973. The official title of the lecture was: “Judaism in Germany: the Social and Social-Psychological Problematics of Jewish-German Relations before Hitler.” He delivered it at the Institute of Contemporary History with great success, before representatives of the intellectual elite of Germany. The enthusiastic audience’s only disappointment was that no time remained after the lecture for discussion or questions. In his introduction to the lecture, Broszat presented Scholem and his work as evidence of the success of the renewal or creation of dialogue between Jews and Germans: “He, Gershom Scholem himself, has succeeded through his life’s work—after the catastrophe of Hitler—as a Jew, in making the Germans faithful listeners. In changes such as these, after all, lies the best condition and the decisive condition for enabling dialogue between true partners.” From this lecture was born his last long and comprehensive article about relations of Jews and Germans before the Holocaust, an article that extended the lines of his 1966 lecture about Jews and Germans and that combined the style suggested by Broszat: incorporating Scholem’s memories and personal impressions into the subject. In April 1976 Scholem gave a lecture in English in Saint Louis, Missouri, that was presumably a reworking of his German lecture in Munich. This lecture was published shortly afterward in English and German, and it is a deeper examination of the matter, combining the personal aspect with a general historical survey. In the published version the emotional and extreme formulation that had characterized the dispute surrounding the Susman Festschrift more than a decade earlier gave way to a more balanced and cautious inquiry. The ambivalence that had characterized Scholem’s attitude in the early 1960s toward the need to discuss Jewish-German dialogue before the Holocaust with Germans gradually disappeared, and Scholem found that his attraction to the German intellectual world and his desire for a place in the discourse with it overcame the resistance and doubts that he had harbored. In the published version of the lecture in English the issue of the renewal of dialogue between Jews and Germans was not mentioned, nor was the fact that a German version of the article had preceded publication of the English version by a year, which shows that by the end of the 1970s Scholem
already acknowledged the existence of post-Holocaust discourse of this kind. Incidentally, this last lecture has not yet been translated into Hebrew.

A History of Reception

From Zurich to Frankfurt

In the evening of September 1, 1952, immediately after participating in the Ernäos conference in Ascona, Scholem arrived in Frankfurt on a flight from Zurich. A lot of work awaited Scholem in Germany in connection with the treasures of the Diaspora, and he had scheduled an important meeting with Salman Schocken about the Hebrew University. However, before turning to all that, he devoted a few days to visiting his friend Theodor Adorno, whom he telephoned as soon as he reached the city. Adorno had been known to Scholem before the war through their common friend, Benjamin. Adorno headed the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research, IfS), a research institute for Marxist theory and criticism, which had been founded at the University of Frankfurt in the 1920s and was the home of the Frankfurt school. In 1934, after the Nazis’ rise to power, the institute moved to New York, where it remained active under the direction of Max Horkheimer. After the war it returned to Frankfurt, as did Horkheimer and Adorno. The latter invited Scholem to dinner at his home the following day, with several other friends. In addition to Scholem, the guests included half-Jewish philosopher Helmuth Plessner and his wife, Monika; and the German publisher Peter Suhrkamp and his wife, Annemarie Seidel. This meeting with Suhrkamp in Adorno’s home took place a short time after Scholem had made an agreement in principle in Ascona with Brody, to publish his work with Rhein Verlag. Scholem’s meeting with Suhrkamp at this point and its outcome indicate Scholem’s interest in making his works available to the German public.

The Suhrkamp publishing house is usually said to have been founded in 1950, when it finally separated from the S. Fischer Verlag. However, Suhrkamp’s roots extend further back and are closely connected with the actions of Peter Suhrkamp under Nazi rule. In 1932 Suhrkamp began to work in the S. Fischer Verlag—which had been established in 1886 by Samuel Fischer, a Hungarian Jew—and he quickly became the editor of its magazine Neue Rundschau. In 1936 the owners of the publishing house, Fischer’s heirs, were forced to flee from Nazi Germany, and they turned the firm over to Suhrkamp, who ran it in their absence. Beginning in 1942, he was forced to change the name of company to Suhrkamp Verlag vorm[als] S. Fischer (Suhrkamp Publisher, formerly S. Fischer). Under Nazi rule Suhrkamp helped many of S. Fischer’s authors, including Berthold Brecht, escape from Germany, and he obtained permission to
publish the writings of otherwise banned authors such as Hermann Hesse. In April 1944 Suhrkamp was arrested by the Gestapo and was imprisoned for nearly a year in various prisons in Berlin and the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He was suddenly released in February 1945, on the verge of death from serious pneumonia. Although he recovered from that illness, he was never again entirely healthy, and he died in 1959 at the age of sixty-eight. After the war Suhrkamp became the first German publisher to receive the right to operate in Berlin from the American authorities. After the return of the owners of the S. Fischer Verlag, he decided, with Hesse’s encouragement, to establish his own publishing house. Thirty-three of the forty-eight authors of the publisher who remained in Germany and worked with Suhrkamp during the Nazi years, including Hesse and Brecht, decided to leave S. Fischer and move to the new house, which soon settled in Frankfurt. In 1952, Siegfried Unseld, a young and energetic editor, joined the publisher, and he built up the sales and public relations departments. Unseld had been born in 1924 and served in the German army during World War II. He was promoted to partnership in January 1958, due in large part to the influence of Scholem’s friend Hanns Wilhelm Eppelsheimer, the director of the Frankfurt municipal library, who lived in the apartment above the publisher’s offices in Frankfurt and was Suhrkamp’s confidant. After Suhrkamp’s death, Unseld became the director of the publishing house and shaped its image over the following five decades.

It may be assumed that Scholem met Suhrkamp—or at least his right-hand man, Friedrich Podszus—for the first time along with Adorno in 1950 in Frankfurt, during his visit to Germany after attending his second Eranos conference. The subjects of their meeting, to which the following section of this chapter is devoted, was the publication of a collection of Benjamin’s work under Adorno’s editorship, and the possibility of cooperation with Scholem and receiving some of Benjamin’s letters in his possession for future volumes. Scholem and Suhrkamp began to correspond directly in 1953, and their letters focused on the plan of publishing a complete edition of Benjamin’s writing. The connection between Scholem and the publishing house grew closer after Suhrkamp’s death and Unseld’s assumption of the directorship. In 1959, a short time before the publication of a volume of Scholem’s Eranos lectures, Unseld expressed interest in the volume and indirectly proposed, through Adorno, to had Suhrkamp publish it. Scholem rejected the proposal because he had already signed a contract with the Rhein Verlag. However, in the early 1960s Unseld suggested that Scholem might publish a small volume of his collected articles with Suhrkamp. This proposal led to the publication of the first volume of *Judaica* in 1963. This and subsequent volumes reprinted articles by Scholem intended for a wider
audience. Three volumes in all were published during Scholem's lifetime, and three more were published posthumously; collectively, they played a major role in Scholem's reputation among readers in Germany.\footnote{102}

While the first volume was being prepared for publication, tension emerged between Scholem and the Rhein Verlag, where he had published three books by 1963. During the summer of 1962, Brody mistakenly thought that Unseld was trying to convince Scholem to transfer all his future work to his house and also to take over the Rhein Verlag by spreading a rumor that it was on the verge of collapse and then purchasing it, which aroused Brody's anger. After a short exchange of letters on the matter, Scholem and Brody resolved the misunderstanding. However, in that year Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, the founder of the Eranos conferences and a close friend of Brody, died, and a short time later he decided to retire from publishing.\footnote{103} In 1966 Brody sold the literary rights in his possession—including rights to the works of James Joyce, Hermann Broch, Adolf Portmann, and Gershom Scholem—to the Südwest Verlag, which was located in Munich.

When Unseld informed Scholem about this, he wrote to the Südwest Verlag and protested the transfer of the rights to his work without his knowledge. He justified his unequivocal opposition to the transfer in the following way: “You must understand that for a Jewish author, who intentionally published his books with a Swiss publisher, it is not the same thing if the publisher of his books remains in Switzerland or [the rights are transferred] . . . to a book publisher in Germany.”\footnote{104} He went on to explain his decision in detail: “I am not prepared to have the publishing of my work pass without my knowledge or clear agreement into the hands of a German publisher, and I wish to assume that you will honor this view. Were the rights to my work to pass into the hands of Suhrkamp Verlag, I would have no objection, considering the countenance and character of that publishing house. In any other instance I expect that the rights to my books will pass from the Rhein Verlag to myself.”\footnote{105}

These words emphasize the importance that Scholem gave at that time to personal acquaintance with the people with whom he was in contact in Germany. However, the fact that this letter was written while Scholem was in Frankfurt leaves some room to assume that his desire to transfer his works to Suhrkamp was stronger than his objection to German publishing houses in general. Perhaps this letter is part of Unseld's effort to obtain the rights to the work of desirable authors who had been connected with the Rhein Verlag and the rights to whose works had been passed from Brody to the Südwest Verlag. In any case, a month later, to the joy of Scholem and Unseld, an agreement was signed between the publishers according to which the rights to the works of Scholem,
Portmann, Broch, and Joyce would be ceded to Suhrkamp, an agreement that received newspaper coverage.106

This official transition marked the beginning of close cooperation and warm friendly relations between Scholem and Unseld and the Suhrkamp publishing house. During the following decades, Scholem published all of his German books with Suhrkamp, including two more volumes in the Judaica series and his two autobiographical books.107 It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Unseld and his activities in the process of Scholem’s entry into public consciousness in Germany and the presentation of his writings and figure in a manner that aroused interest among German readers. At the same time, it appears that the story of Scholem’s acceptance in Germany is also related to the history of the reception of another important German Jewish intellectual, whose writings were also published by Suhrkamp. I refer to Benjamin, who had a great influence on Scholem in his youth, and in the publication of whose writings in Germany after the war Scholem played a large part.

The Story of a Friendship

In 1966 Suhrkamp published two volumes of the correspondence between Benjamin and his friends, edited by Scholem and Adorno.108 The publication of these letters was an important milestone in the reception of Benjamin in postwar Germany and a turning point in Scholem’s entry into the consciousness of the German reading public. Although from the end of the war until that year, six of Scholem’s books had already been published in German, most of them were intended for a limited academic audience and had been published by small publishing houses. Scholem’s work with Adorno on Benjamin’s correspondence and the controversy that arose following the publication of these volumes were a breakthrough for Scholem into the awareness of German readers and the vibrant intellectual world in Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In 1940, soon after learning about Benjamin’s suicide and its circumstances, Scholem wrote to Adorno about the need to publish the letters in Benjamin’s literary estate, many of which were in Scholem’s possession in Jerusalem.109 In another letter to Adorno, Scholem emphasized the great importance of editing and publishing an edition of Benjamin’s letters to his friends and colleagues.110 The figure of Benjamin was central to the relationship between Scholem and Adorno over the years, and their correspondence revolved around their joint efforts to perpetuate the memory and thought of their late friend. They had met through Benjamin, and despite certain reservations that Scholem had about Adorno, which were connected to what Scholem had heard from Benjamin, their first meetings in 1938 in New York had made a very positive impression on Scholem:
“The good spirit that prevailed in the meetings between Adorno and me was due not so much to the cordiality of the reception as to my considerable surprise at Adorno’s appreciation of the continuing theological element in Benjamin. I had expected a Marxist who would insist on liquidation of what were in my opinion the most valuable furnishings in Benjamin’s intellectual household. Instead I encountered here a man who definitely had an open mind and even a positive attitude towards these traits, although he viewed them from his own dialectical perspective.”\footnote{111}

In other words, Adorno’s way of interpreting Benjamin did not negate what, for Scholem, was the basic condition for understanding his friend’s theories, thus changing Scholem’s earlier, negative opinion about Adorno and opening the way for dialogue with him. Indeed, Adorno was the person closest to Scholem during his visit to the IfS, which, as noted above, had moved from Frankfurt to the United States in 1934. Their complementary interpretation of Benjamin was always in the background of the deep intellectual differences between them—primarily about Adorno’s Marxist thought and the activity of the IfS that was influenced by this worldview—but it was also the basis for their understanding and cooperation over the years.

No one had more influence on the first stage of Benjamin’s reception in Germany than Adorno. Thanks to Adorno’s persistence in collecting and arranging Benjamin’s writings, Benjamin went from being a forgotten intellectual to being one of the most important thinkers of Germany and a beacon for various thinkers.\footnote{112} Starting in the early 1950s, Scholem helped and advised Theodor and Gretel Adorno in their editing of the two volumes of Benjamin’s collected work, which Suhrkamp published in 1955. Among other things, Scholem sent them copies of Benjamin’s writings that were in his possession.\footnote{113} In the fall of 1959 Adorno wrote to Scholem, informing him that the Suhrkamp publishing house, under the new leadership of Unseld, had decided to publish a 250–300-page volume of Benjamin’s letters. Adorno added a proposal to this information: “I would like to ask you whether you would be willing to take upon yourself, along with me, the task of editing.”\footnote{114} Scholem immediately answered in the affirmative, and the two began to search for letters among Benjamin’s friends.\footnote{115}

The joint task of editing, which was the basis of the correspondence between the two at that time and for the purpose of which they met almost every year around the time of Scholem’s stay in Ascona, brought the two men close personally as well. This closeness, based on their mutual friend, was always charged with tension deriving from the large differences in character and temperament between the two. A good example of this can be seen in the way Adorno introduced Scholem in the 1960s to Lotte Tobisch, a Viennese society matron who
was his close friend, while they were at Sils-Maria, a Swiss resort. When Adorno presented his friend with all the honor due her, including her titles of nobility, as “Baronin Lotte Tobisch von Labotaýn,” Scholem’s immediate and spontaneous response, in Berlin slang was, “Mensch, det ooch noch!” (loosely translated: “Man, not this, too!”). This response, absolutely opposite to the way Tobisch had been introduced to him, made her laugh heartily, and from that moment on they were fast friends. Adorno, however, remained stunned by what Scholem had done till the end of his life, and every time he was reminded of the episode, he said seriously, “How Scholem behaved! Just dreadful!” Adorno could not cope with Scholem’s occasional bluntness and with his need to be in the center all the time. In a later letter to Tobisch, Adorno described the way Scholem had behaved during Adorno’s sixty-fifth birthday party:

On my birthday, Unseld gave a little party for me with a small circle of friends. Scholem was there, and he behaved in an egocentric manner, without tact, and, I must say, repulsively. You need the patience of an angel to cope with him. He simply could not stand that the party was in my honor (and I didn’t manage, you can believe me, to feel that way at all!) and not for him, and in fact he exploited the opportunity just to attack me facetiously. The others thought it was disgusting to the same degree. Two days later he was at our house, businesslike and entirely sober. But what’s the meaning of it in the end, when you want to believe that he [Scholem] is so decent and at the same time his primary instinct is so base. I’m only complaining to you. Please don’t speak to anyone about this, or immediately a dreadful scream will arise out of Israel.

In his memoir about Scholem, Rolf Tiedemann, Adorno’s student and the editor of the complete edition of Benjamin’s work, described Adorno and Scholem as absolutely different from one another—opposite in their nature like “a sea creature and a land animal”—but at the same time as belonging to the same family and the same element: “Adorno’s enthusiasm and Scholem’s skepticism were two sides of the same coin.” According to Tiedemann, Scholem’s fame preceded him at the IfS as a supreme authority, though it was not clear to the members of the institute just what that authority was. His research in Kabbalah, his being the oldest and closest of Benjamin’s living friends, and his authoritative appearance made a big impression on the members. Of course, Adorno—who was eight years younger than Scholem—shared this impression, and it certainly was an element in the complex relationship between the two.

Their work together on the correspondence lasted about seven years, and although during those years and even before them, various writings by Benjamin were published (some edited by Adorno and others by Scholem), one may see...
the publication of the two volumes of letters as a turning point in Benjamin’s reception in Germany. These volumes were important both because of their content and because of the political circumstances in Germany in the years after their publication. With respect to their content, for the first time they showed not just Benjamin’s ideas but the man himself in a comprehensive fashion in his social context. Hence they were a significant contribution to the formation of a biographical picture of Benjamin. With respect to the circumstances in Germany, the controversy aroused by the printed correspondence is bound up with its content. Criticism of the way the correspondence had been edited was mainly leveled at Adorno, and it was connected to the ideological world of the student revolution of 1967–68 in Germany. On the intellectual level, ideologists of the student movement appropriated and enlisted Benjamin’s Marxist thought as inspiration for their revolt, so that he became their philosopher of history (Geschichtsphilosoph). This appropriation was bound up with the process of “patriicide” with regard to Adorno, and it included harsh criticism of his interpretation and understanding of Benjamin. At the beginning of the protest movement Adorno supported the students, and the IfS in Frankfurt was an intellectual hot-house for a worldview that nourished the revolt. However, when Adorno later expressed opposition to the extremism, violation of the law, and violence that began to characterize the actions of the students, the violence was also directed against him. Together with Horkheimer and the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, Adorno became a representative of the establishment for the students and was seen as a conservative and even a reactionary, and as a man not brave enough to draw practical conclusions from his theories. In this context, the criticism of the way Adorno had edited Benjamin’s writings was part of the effort to locate him politically and socially with relation to the events of the day, to a large degree under the influence of the attitudes of the students who represented the new Marxist left and led the events in Germany.

The main accusation against the editors of Benjamin’s letters was the tendentiousness in their choice of what to include. The critics claimed that behind the editorial policy lay a conscious endeavor to blur Benjamin’s affiliation with Marxism and with influential figures with a Marxist world view such as Brecht and Asja Lacis, his friend and lover. Adorno was accused of having systematically attempted to hide the Marxist side of Benjamin’s thought in editing his writings, and of administering the Benjamin archive in a tendentious manner and as if it were his personal property. Moreover, the critics claimed that Adorno and Horkheimer had removed the communist tendencies from Benjamin’s articles since the 1930s—the ones he had sent at the time for publication in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, the journal of the IfS—by means of extreme editing, which
Benjamin had been forced to accept because of his economic dependence on the institute.\(^\text{127}\) Arendt argued in a three-part article in *Merkur* that the editing of the correspondence reflected Scholem’s desire to make Benjamin closer to Judaism or Adorno’s dialectical Marxism. Arendt accused both sides of exploiting Benjamin’s economic distress to attach him and his thinking to their worldview.\(^\text{128}\)

Adorno was deeply wounded by the attacks against him, and he expressed his indignation in a letter to Scholem. Adorno asked Scholem to defend him against his attackers and to speak on his behalf regarding his capacity to interpret Benjamin—a capacity that had been doubted by his critics.\(^\text{129}\) In his long answer to Adorno, Scholem advised him not to take the criticism so seriously. He refused to write an answer justifying Adorno’s legitimacy in interpreting Benjamin because he had no doubt of that legitimacy. To the same extent, Scholem had no doubt of the legitimacy of other interpretations of Benjamin that disagreed with his and Adorno’s, even if he and Adorno thought them erroneous.\(^\text{130}\) In his letter, Scholem analyzed the various criticisms at length, coming to the conclusion that most of the arguments were aimed at Adorno and were in the realm of legitimate controversy, although they came to the figure of Benjamin from an entirely different position from that of the editors and contained many errors and inaccuracies. Scholem explained this by the very character of Benjamin’s writings: because of their complexity, he argued, they could not be given a single, authoritative interpretation that would negate other interpretations.\(^\text{131}\) This was also the weak point of the criticisms of Adorno’s position: “To tell the truth, the nature of Benjamin’s writing in his last ten years was such that I am convinced that one cannot offer an apparently unequivocal interpretation of his thoughts, which are sometimes expressed in opaque terms.”\(^\text{132}\)

To help Adorno out of his difficulties, Scholem proposed initiating a public discussion with the critics of the published correspondence, in which the critics would be confronted with their arguments and be forced to provide precise answers. To take part in such a discussion, which Scholem suggested could even take the form of a radio program, he was willing to come to Frankfurt for a few days, if financing could be found for such a trip. In the margins of the letter, apparently while reading it, Adorno wrote down his doubts regarding the effectiveness of such a debate, and in fact, it was never held.\(^\text{133}\) Nevertheless, Scholem’s letter helped Adorno cope with the criticism.\(^\text{134}\)

In his letter to Adorno Scholem also tried to shift the debate from the personal to the professional level, and thereby to deflect it from Adorno to the various interpretations of Benjamin and his theories—which he thought were more legitimate subjects for discussion. However, it did not escape Scholem that the background of the criticism was a personal attack anchored solidly in the ide-
ology of the day. The criticism went beyond the area of research and was aimed directly at Adorno and what he represented for his critics: “These attacks are not directed primarily at me, because for clear reasons they have nothing against me, and they feel no resentment toward me. Rather, they are mainly attacks upon you. This is an expression of rage accumulated over a long time and deep resentment of your lack of Marxist activism, but maybe also against your position in German intellectual life in general.”

As a postscript to the letter, Scholem added a curious sentence that is consistent with what has been said here. He noted that the method used by Adorno’s critics “remind me very much of Kurzweil’s polemic against me.” His mention of the Israeli literary critic Baruch Kurzweil in this context was not coincidental. Kurzweil’s critique of Scholem over the years had dealt less with his scholarship than with his person, and the attacks shifted away from Scholem’s research to what Scholem represented for Kurzweil politically, socially, and religiously.

In 1967 Kurzweil wrote a series of critical articles about Scholem, some of the fiercest he ever wrote. In one of these articles, he referred to Benjamin’s published correspondence and Scholem’s interpretation of Benjamin: “Scholem’s interpretation of W. Benjamin’s attitude toward the Land of Israel and Judaism is extremely subjective, and his effort to ‘judaize’ Benjamin is derived from Scholem’s efforts to interpret Benjamin as if he were G. Scholem.” Scholem attributed the character of the critiques of Adorno to current political trends in Germany and thus removed himself from the storm center by, among other things, making it parallel to the dispute about him in Israel. Interestingly, while Scholem chose not to respond publicly to Kurzweil’s accusations in Israel, he was willing to come to Frankfurt especially to confront the criticism there alongside Adorno. The reason for this might have been the comprehensive character of Kurzweil’s critique, or perhaps he made the offer because he had been merely a guest in Germany and had not experienced the criticism intensely. Moreover, the possibility of public exposure that attended the polemics might have interested him. In any event, Scholem differentiated his situation in Israel from that of Adorno in Germany, though he saw them as parallel.

As noted, the dispute about the significance of Benjamin and the manner of understanding his life and writing that arose after the publication of his letters was a turning point in the history of Benjamin’s reception in Germany and contributed greatly to the increased interest in him, while attributing current meaning to his thought. The role of Adorno and Scholem in this process was decisive, and their critics did not deny their large part in raising Benjamin from oblivion and interpreting his writings. However, while Adorno’s contribution was mainly in editing and publishing Benjamin’s work, Scholem’s contribution was in tracing...
the outline of Benjamin’s biography. After Adorno’s death from a heart attack in the summer of 1969, Scholem continued to devote a significant part of his intellectual powers to work connected to Benjamin, both assisting in the project of publishing all of his writings with Suhrkamp and publishing essays on his life and thought. Actually, everything that Scholem published about Benjamin and all of Benjamin’s work that he edited shed light on Benjamin’s life and dealt with the connection between that life and his thought. Tiedemann claimed that one of Scholem’s aspirations was to write a comprehensive biography of Benjamin, but because of the paucity of sources, he gave up on the idea, though it preoccupied him all his life, and until his death he never ceased placing tesserae in the mosaic of his late friend’s image. Noteworthy among these were his memoir about Benjamin, which became Scholem’s first autobiographical work; the late correspondence between Scholem and Benjamin, which was recovered from an archive in East Germany and was published in 1980; and the last article that Scholem wrote, dealing with the Benjamin family tree, which was published a short time after his death.

While a deep analysis of Scholem’s way of interpreting Benjamin is beyond the scope of this discussion, a short discussion of what Scholem believed to be the key to understanding Benjamin is certainly in order. As noted above, Scholem saw the common denominator for the collaboration and mutual understanding between Adorno and himself in their agreement that the metaphysical Jewish element was the basis of Benjamin’s thought and life, though the two men drew different conclusions from the study of Benjamin’s writings. The
view that Benjamin was a Jewish thinker and that his thought had a hidden, esoteric aspect was the essence of Scholem’s understanding of Benjamin, and this view did not change during his lifetime. In his articles he often criticized the Marxist interpreters who, because of their secular outlook, neutralized the Jewish and metaphysical element in Benjamin’s writing. Scholem also criticized his friends and colleagues for not giving that aspect of Benjamin’s thought sufficient weight, and of course he criticized those who regarded his interpretation as his own tendentious and political position. Along with Adorno, Scholem constructed the image of Benjamin as a central Jewish thinker and intellectual in Germany, and Benjamin’s acceptance as such by the Germans served as a catalyst for Scholem’s own acceptance. In other words, the story of Scholem’s successful acceptance in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s was bound up with his friendship with Benjamin and, to a large degree, thanks to that friendship. Because of his work on Benjamin’s writings, increasing attention was paid to Scholem and his own work. In this process Scholem, known at first only to a handful of scholars and experts, became one of the most important intellectuals of his time in Germany.

An important point in this context is the fact that everything that Scholem wrote about Benjamin was in German and was published in Germany and, with a single exception, none of what Scholem wrote about Benjamin was translated into Hebrew during his lifetime. The question of why Scholem chose to revive the memory of his friend in Germany and not in Israel is an interesting one, and it is certainly impossible to answer it unequivocally. Did Scholem think that Benjamin’s thought and nomadic character were irrelevant to or inappropriate for an Israeli audience? Or is the answer that Scholem attached Benjamin to the German side of his life, which he had officially given up when he moved to Palestine? Perhaps, paradoxically, only in Germany could Scholem present the tragic figure of Benjamin with its full poignancy and attractive power for him, as he understood and identified with it. Nostalgia and longing for the German empire, which permeated large parts of Benjamin’s work, were alien in Israel and known only to those who had experienced that period in a primary or secondary manner and yearned for it in the time of the Federal Republic. In this context, the feeling of not belonging, which characterized Scholem, is also important. In an interview with Jörg Drews, a German literary scholar, filmed in Scholem’s home in Jerusalem in 1976 and broadcast on German television that year, Scholem described Benjamin with the following words: “I always believed that he had a decidedly Jewish consciousness—and at the same time the consciousness of a man alien in his society, in any society. He was, as I put it, an outsider, just as Freud and Kafka were outsiders in the societies in which they lived.”

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