Gershom Scholem

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BERLIN, AGAIN

THE FINALE

So I notice: I love this old man. “Why? There’s no knowing!” You, in any event, would also have felt that way!

HARTMUT VON HENTIG TO NINA FRITZSCH, WINTER 1981

A Public Figure

In 1965, at the age of sixty-eight, Gershom Scholem retired from the Hebrew University after forty years. During that time he had played an important role in setting the path of the university and Jewish studies in general at several crossroads. His involvement in the various activities of the university and the National Library left a deep impression on those institutions that is noticeable to this day. He had taken part in the activities of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography, and the Hebrew Codicology and Paleography Project and had helped train a generation of scholars and their students, who were until recently the backbone of the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University and similar departments at other universities. However, his greatest contribution, as was noted at the ceremony at the Hebrew University where he was awarded an honorary doctorate in the winter of 1968, was “that he made research into Kabbalah a truly scientific field of Jewish studies by building and raising it to its heights—he created the tools and he did most of the work, baking the bricks and building the entire building.” Of course, these words of praise are extravagant, and the many important innovations in the study of Kabbalah since Scholem’s death, some of which conflict with his basic assumptions, show that the work of building this structure is far from finished, and indeed it may never be. Nonetheless, Scholem did establish the field as a scholarly discipline, and he did so in three countries and three different languages.

Scholem received recognition for his work in Israel before his retirement, but that recognition increased after he left the Hebrew University. He received the
Israel Prize in 1958, and the Rothschild Prize in 1961. A year after he received his honorary doctorate from the university, he was named Yekir Yerushalayim (distinguished citizen of Jerusalem) for his activity on behalf of the city and honorary member of the Weizmann Institute of Science. In 1957 he received the Harvey Prize from the Technion in Haifa. He also received the Bialik Prize for Jewish Studies in 1977 and an honorary doctorate from the University of Tel Aviv in 1980. At the end of 1958 David Ben-Gurion had appointed Scholem a member of the committee that prepared for the establishment of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and he served first as the academy’s vice president and then as its president, in 1968–74.

Scholem also enjoyed growing renown in the United States, both as a scholar of Kabbalah and as a Jewish intellectual. In recognition of his academic prowess he received honorary doctorates from Hebrew Union College in 1949 and Brandeis University in 1980. In 1970 he was made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He devoted a significant part of his intellectual energy to teaching and scholarship in the United States, and he served as a visiting professor at many academic institutions such as Hebrew Union College, Brandeis University, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Princeton University, and Yale University. An interesting example of Scholem’s influence as an intellectual is found in Chaim Potok’s Book of Lights, published in 1981. There Scholem is represented by the character Jacob Keter, who became an influential figure in the life of the main protagonist, a stand-in for Potok.

From the end of the 1960s on, he began to reap the fruit of his work in Germany as well. In the fall of 1969, at the age of seventy-two, Scholem received the Reuchlin Prize from the city of Pforzheim, where Johannes Reuchlin, a Christian Hebraist, had been born in 1455. The prize was awarded every two years for outstanding scholarly work in the humanities, and the recipient was chosen by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. The head of the academy, Georg Gadamer, discreetly asked Scholem if he would be willing to accept the prize. After considering the matter, Scholem said he would, although the Nazi past of earlier recipients aroused certain doubts in him. His willingness to accept ultimately derived from his connection with Reuchlin, “for whom the Jewish people has preserved an honorable place in its memory, and he was, one might say, my first predecessor in Germany.”

On September 10, 1969, the prize was awarded to Scholem in the presence of the notables of the city, and in his short words of thanks at the beginning of his lecture—titled “Kabbalah Research from Reuchlin to the Present”—he drew a parallel between himself and the Reuchlin: “Were I to believe in reincarnation, perhaps I might sometimes be drawn into thinking, that under the new

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conditions of scholarship in our day, the soul of the first scholar of the language and world Judaism, especially of Kabbalah, was reincarnated in me—Johannes Reuchlin, the man who, about five hundred years ago, founded Jewish studies in Europe.”8 This interesting and obscure sentence has been interpreted in various ways. Moshe Idel saw in it the great centrality that Scholem accorded to Reuchlin in research into central concepts of Kabbalah—which connected Reuchlin’s period to that of Scholem.9 Peter Schäfer saw a parallel only in the pioneering situation of the two figures in Scholem’s eyes, a parallel that neither pointed to Scholem’s connection to the Christian tradition of Reuchlin nor shed light on Scholem’s attitude toward Christianity in general.10 In my opinion, it is also possible that in his first public occasion on this scale in Germany, Scholem wished to shift the emphasis from the significance of the event for relations between Germans and Jews to a different dimension, slightly mystical, slightly humorous, and related to scholarship alone. By doing so he evaded an encounter with Germany to the full extent of its meanings but still connected the event to himself.11 By taking this position, in contrast to those he took in his later speeches,
Scholem was able to restrict the lecture itself to the subject of his scholarship and not discuss his life.

The historical import that lay behind granting the Reuchlin Prize to Scholem is shown in Gadamer’s explanation of the choice of recipient. In addition to mentioning Scholem’s contribution to research in Kabbalah, which brought him close to Reuchlin’s spirit, Gadamer spoke of the symbolism of the award: “However, on the other hand, the City of Pforzheim is honoring a clear and convincing representative of his people, who stands for the unity of human culture with scientific and ethical reason (Vernunft)—and this is in spite of the doubts that arise in the wake of the crime committed against the Jews by National-Socialist Germany.”

The award ceremony, which was Scholem’s first occasion on this scale in Germany, received little publicity, and that only in local media. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that this initial public recognition influenced other bodies to give him subsequent awards. In 1970 three books by Scholem were published by Suhrkamp, including *Judaica* 2, and in 1972 he was made a fellow of the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften (North Rhine–Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities, and Art). However, the turning point that symbolizes Scholem’s entry into the consciousness of the German intellectual world took place in the summer of 1974.

At the end of 1973 Scholem received a letter from Friedheld Kemp, the director of the Literature Department of the Bayerische Akademie der schönen Künste Archiv (Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts), announcing that at the latest meeting of the department it had been decided to give Scholem the academy’s literary prize for 1974. Scholem already knew Kemp, who had been present at his lecture on the Jews of Germany in March 1973 at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich. The letter shows that Kemp was slightly uncomfortable with awarding a literary prize to a man who regarded himself primarily as a scholar, and after the announcement of the decision, he immediately added: “Please don’t be surprised: we decided long ago that for us, not only poets and novelists are regarded as literary.” Scholem immediately and unreservedly agreed to accept the honor offered to him, but in his reply he did not conceal his surprise and amusement at the irony of awarding such a prize to a scholar:

Your letter of December 20 was a great surprise for me. How could I imagine, that after many decades of academic research and its expression in German, Hebrew, and English, I would receive a literary prize from a German academy! I call this signs and wonders. I am very curious to hear the reasons for giving the prize, which are doubtless connected to my writing in German and its style. I thank you very much for
this esteem, which I certainly owe to your deep acquaintance with my writing, and I
will accept the prize that your academy has decided to give me—though I must ask
in concern why I received it. But I remember a line from the poems of Karl Kraus:
“We want to be surprised.”16

The ceremony was held on July 15, and Scholem asked the organizers to send
invitations to several of his close friends, including Jörg Drews (a journalist and
specialist in German literature), Martin Broszat, Jürgen Habermas, and Siegfried
Unseld.17 The awarding of the prize in Munich naturally received more media at-
tention than Scholem’s receipt of the Reuchlin Prize five years earlier, especially
in the pages of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, where Drews published an article about the
awarding of the prize in which he called Scholem “a Jewish scholar and German
author.” In the article Drews pointed out the small number of Scholem’s readers
in Germany, in contrast to his English and French readers, and the opportunity
for change created by the awarding of this prize: “This situation must change,
and perhaps the literary prize will bring about a small alteration.” On behalf of
the German reading public, Drews reminded Scholem in his article that people
hoped to read more books by him about Walter Benjamin and about prewar Ger-
man Jewish intellectual life, which had been irretrievably lost.18

The lecture that Scholem gave was printed in entirety in the weekend edition
of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, along with the judges’ explanations for awarding the
prize to him.19 Scholem’s speech concentrated on his personal situation, as
someone standing “between German and Hebrew, [and between] German lit-
erature and Hebrew [literature].”20 The speech was decidedly autobiographical,
and it contained the outlines that Scholem would later flesh out in From Berlin to
Jerusalem.21 But in contrast to the book, toward the end of the lecture he included
a retrospective look at the later years of his life, especially about his dealing with
Germany and the German language after the Holocaust, in the light of his trip in
1946 and his regular participation in the Eranos conferences. Scholem had not
presented such an accounting in public before this, nor did he do so afterward,
either in Germany or in Israel.

Another thing that Scholem did for the first time during the award ceremony
was publicly and consciously shake the hand of a former Schutzstaffel (SS) man: 
Hans Egon Holthusen, the head of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, which
was giving the prize to Scholem. Holthusen’s membership in the Nazi party in
his youth was known because of the refusal of the Jewish poet Mascha Kaléko to
accept the Fontane Prize of the Berlin Akademie der Künste (Berlin Academy of
the Arts) in 1959, since Holthusen was one of the judges,22 and also because his
memoirs as an SS member had been published in Merkur in 1966.23 In Munich

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in the 1970s, the ambivalence that had characterized Scholem’s attitude to the public realm in Germany after the Holocaust completely disappeared. As noted, the awarding of the prize in Munich can be said to symbolize the turning point in the reception of Scholem and his writing in Germany. This became evident as events unfolded in succeeding years. In the summer of 1975 he was appointed as an extraordinary member (Ausserordentliches Mitglied) of the Literature Department of the Berlin Academy of the Arts. In a letter to his brother Reinhold in Australia, Scholem complained that he had to go to give a speech the following year at the annual meeting of the academy. “Most likely I will be the only Berliner there,” he wrote.24

In the fall of 1975 Scholem’s autobiographical book about his friendship with Benjamin was published, and parts of it appeared on the front page of the weekend supplement of the Süddeutsche Zeitung shortly before its publication.25 The book was widely reviewed in the literary supplements of most of the important newspapers of Germany. The book was received against the background of the disputes of the late 1960s about the way Theodor Adorno and Scholem had presented Benjamin and the influence of his thought on the extreme left circles of the students at that time. The importance of the book lay both in its providing another element for understanding the image of the philosopher, who had become a symbol, and in its biographical aspect. A review published in Die Zeit stated that the book presented Benjamin “as he was, not as he should have been” and argued that Scholem thus also drew a portrait of the history of the collapse of Jewish emancipation in Germany.26 Indeed, Scholem’s book was regarded as the
first biography of Benjamin, or as the most important contribution until then toward such a biography. However, along with the interest it aroused by presenting the admired figure of Benjamin in a new light, the book also called attention to Scholem and his life for the first time on a large scale and with wide circulation, since his memory and the documents in his possession were decisive sources for presenting Benjamin and his life to the German reader.27

Less than a year later, on June 20, 1976, the German television channel ARD broadcast a forty-five-minute interview with Scholem by Drews. The interview was the third in a series titled “Life Stories as History” (Lebensgeschichte als Zeitgeschichte). The first had been devoted to the philosopher Manès Sperber and the second to the Austrian author Friedrich Torberg (a friend of Scholem), both of whom were Jews. Scholem’s interview was filmed in his home at 28 Abarbanel Street in Jerusalem, partly in the living room, against the background of his library, and partly in his workroom, on both sides of his desk. The interview treated four topics: Kabbalah, Benjamin, Zionism and the Israel-Arab conflict, and Scholem’s life during the years shortly before and after his emigration.28 In editing the film, Drews interspersed the conversation with scenes of ancient and modern Jerusalem, the eastern and western parts of the city, the Judean Desert and the covers of Scholem’s books that had already been published in German.

The interview was roundly criticized by the television critics of two of the important German newspapers. But the criticism was directed not at Scholem, but at Drews for the way he had directed and edited the interview. In addition, Scholem’s Jewishness, or at least the external, stereotypical signs of it, preoccupied the critics. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung wrote that aesthetically the program was “on an amateur level (the camera mainly roamed from Scholem’s elephantine ears to his enormous nose, like the Matterhorn),” and with respect to the content, Drews did not succeed in making the fragmentary conversation into a convincing portrait of Scholem. The fact that during the interview no question was asked about German-Jewish relations was, in the critic’s opinion, a great failure on Drews’s part: he had “missed the opportunity to examine the historical consciousness of the representative of a new generation versus a man who embodies the figure of Jewish history like few others.”29 Die Zeit also criticized both the agitated and scattered cinematography, which did not concentrate on Scholem, and the choice of displaying all the covers of the books published by Suhrkamp one after another during the interview. The program about Scholem was compared to the finals in the European soccer championship between Germany and Czechoslovakia, which was broadcast on another network at the same time: “The presentation of the figure of Gershom Scholem became, toward the end of the film, an advertisement for a publishing company. Thereby the viewer
ultimately reached the level of a soccer game: advertisements in the Belgrade stadium, advertisements in the report on Scholem. Colorful pictures, random transition from picture to picture, absurd editing. The spectators are in the bleachers. The people in the Old City of Jerusalem. The victory cup. Scholem’s collected writings.”30 The criticism did not disturb Scholem, and he was glad to have received the exposure. A short time after the interview was broadcast, he wrote to his brother Reinhold about his present condition in an amused but not dissatisfied tone: “In case this interests you, at the moment I am regarded in Germany, among the gentile scholars, ‘the second best after Buber.’”31 Indeed, Scholem’s success in German intellectual circles was expressed in the observance of his eightieth birthday, on December 5, 1977.

About two months before that birthday, Scholem’s autobiographical Von Berlin nach Jerusalem (later published in English as From Berlin to Jerusalem) was published in Germany.32 The closeness in time of these two events led to their combination in the press, and the praise of Scholem in honor of his birthday was universally mingled with praise for his book. For example, Drews spoke of the book as a present that Scholem had given to Germany in honor of his birthday.33 Scholem’s importance for contemporary German culture at the beginning of his ninth decade was reinforced by publication of the book about his youth, which presented the readers with the story of German Jewry before the Holocaust. The central narrative of the book, expressed in its title, was on his personal, Zionist decision before the war to leave Germany and settle in Palestine, and this was understood as continuing pre-Holocaust German-Jewish culture. This narrative provided a key for understanding Scholem and his work as representing entire worlds that had been destroyed. Hellmut Becker, a friend of Scholem and director of the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Education) in Germany, explained this as follows: “Scholem already parted from us in his parents’ home. However, he wrote works in the German language, which open a window onto Judaism for us, and in From Berlin to Jerusalem he gives us the key to those works.”34

In Jerusalem, Scholem’s birthday was celebrated by his students and admirers. All the daily newspapers dedicated their literary supplements to him, especially to his scholarship—without mentioning the volume of memoirs about his youth.35 In honor of the event a conference was held on December 4–5 on the messianic idea in Judaism, and relatively young scholars from various fields of Jewish studies gave papers.36 On December 12, the German embassy in Israel held an evening event in Scholem’s honor in the Recanati Room of the Tel Aviv Museum. All the proceedings of the evening were in German, and three people came from Germany to congratulate the guest of honor at the party and make
speeches: Unseld, Habermas, and Becker. The evening began with a reception at the home of the German ambassador to Israel, Klaus Schütz, who previously had been the mayor of Berlin for about a decade. This part of the evening was opened by Unseld, who congratulated Scholem and praised the importance of Scholem’s autobiography as a contemporary historical document. Then Habermas gave the central lecture, in which he analyzed Scholem’s scholarship and thought. Finally, Becker summed up the evening and mentioned the significance of Scholem’s work for how Jews and Germans understood themselves in relation to each other. After the congratulations and speeches, Scholem read the first sections of his autobiographical work in German. Years afterward Habermas recalled the reaction of the Israeli German (Yekke) crowd to Scholem’s words and the way they were spoken, a scene that touched his heart: “In the concert hall a large audience was assembled, rather advanced in age. It turned out that this audience had no difficulty in following the precisely formulated sentence of this artist of German prose. As someone coming from the Rhine region, I noticed, that with every mention of a Berlin street name, a murmuring of identification and memory was heard in the hall.”

The publication of Scholem’s autobiographical work in conjunction with his eightieth birthday created a connection in Germany between Scholem’s image in the present and his youth in prewar Germany. The language in which he wrote contributed to this connection, for it was a Berlin German full of humor that had remained free of the deformations imposed by the Nazi regime. All of these elements were a factor in the success of Scholem and his book in reaching intellectual circles in Germany. Shortly after his return from Israel, Becker reported this in a letter to Scholem: “It is especially interesting to me to see how much your book, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, is reaching members of the younger generation. It has already been given as a gift thirty times, and especially among young people we have received a very strong response. I hope that this is not a phenomenon limited to the circle of my acquaintance, and that the trend will characterize the success of the book in general.”

In November 1977 copies of the letters Scholem had written to Benjamin in 1933–1940 reached him from the archive in East Berlin where they had been held. Scholem had known about the existence of those letters for a long time, and in 1966 he had even gone to Potsdam, in East Germany, to see them. At that time he was promised that he would receive copies of the precious documents, but it took more than a decade for that promise to be fulfilled. Scholem was
pleased by arrival of the unexpected package, which he called “the most precious and welcome present I could have received on my eightieth birthday.”

In 1980, Scholem published these letters along with Benjamin’s letters to him from those years, which had remained in his possession. The book received attention in the German press, where Scholem was already a well-known figure — especially in connection with Benjamin. The later correspondence was treated in literary supplements as a kind of correction to the two volumes of Benjamin’s letters published in 1966, which Scholem had edited with Adorno. A number of reviews pointed out that, unlike the earlier work, the later letters were published in full, and they corrected and balanced the distorted picture presented by the earlier work for they also presented Benjamin’s ambivalent attitude toward the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research, IfS) in the 1930s.

Scholem also felt that the new volume of correspondence corrected a certain lack of understanding that had been expressed in the accusations leveled against him after publication of the first collection of letters that he had wanted to persuade Benjamin to move to Palestine.

On May 8, 1980, Scholem gave a public lecture in the town of Wolfenbüttel, near Hanover, Germany. He spoke in the famous seventeenth-century Herzog-August Library, which had become the headquarters of the Lessing-Akademie, established in 1971 to study the life and work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the Enlightenment period. Scholem’s lecture was given as part of a symposium on the early stage of Spinoza’s influence on religious thought, and it was titled “The Growing Dispute around Spinozism and Its Consequences.” The lecture was the finale of the entire symposium, and it—or, to be more precise, Scholem—received attention in the local press: “The words of the eighty-three-year-old scholar, who spoke full of temperament and with highly polished diction, in an absolutely clearly structured lecture, summing up the scholarly evidence with precision, were a masterpiece of philosophical and philological thought.” According to another article, “this was an opportunity, which has become quite rare in Germany, to hear a lecture characterized both by meticulous scholarly precision, a sense of investigation, and witty irony.” Scholem was pleased to have the opportunity to visit this famous library for the first time, and he even found a fragment of a kabbalistic work there, another part of which was in his possession in Jerusalem. Half a year later, Scholem was named “a member of the scientific senate” of the academy, and he remained in this office until his death.

On June 2, 1981, Scholem received almost the greatest honor he could receive from the German academic establishment: the membership committee of the Orden Pour le Mérite für Wissenschaft und Künste made him a foreign member (ausländisches Mitglied) of the order. The military distinction of Pour le Mérite was
established in 1740 by Frederick II of Prussia. In 1842 a later king of Prussia, Frederick William IV, under the influence of Alexander von Humboldt, established a humanities branch parallel to the military distinction, to be awarded in the areas of the sciences and humanities, medicine, and the arts. After the fall of the German Empire, the bearers of the distinction formed an independent association of outstanding intellectuals and artists who had been given the medal, without connection to the army. This organization was recognized by the Weimar Republic in 1924, and it began to accept new members, including the artists Max Liebermann and Kathe Kollwitz. With the rise of the Nazis, Hermann Göring removed all Jews and suspected communists from the organization’s ranks. After the war the significance of the order and its independent administration were restored to their form under the republic, and in 1954 the president of Germany placed the order under his jurisdiction. Thus the version of the order as a free organization in the republic was combined with its original form as a distinction awarded by the Prussian Empire.

Both Germans and foreigners could belong to the order. When Scholem became a member, there were always thirty German members, and the number of foreign members was not allowed to exceed thirty. Among the foreign members when Scholem was accepted into the order were two of his acquaintances, the author Elias Canetti and the art historian Ernst Gombrich. Among the German members Scholem at least knew Gadamer, who had played an important role in awarding Scholem the Reuchlin Prize in 1969, and the historian and author Golo Mann. On the German side, Scholem was known by name to many members of the order, according to the historian and physicist Heinz Maier-Leibnitz when, about a year later, he described the special atmosphere of the meeting at which Scholem was chosen for membership. His words show the special, almost mystical, place that Scholem occupied among German intellectuals: “When, during the meeting Scholem’s name was mentioned for the first time we had an extremely interesting experience. Some of us knew him, and everyone spoke in his favor with great conviction and eloquence. Everyone could also answer our questions, but it was as if they knew more than they could say. An almost celebratory atmosphere was created, and a special spirit suffused our assembly, which is usually sober. The original plan was to choose an artist, but this was almost completely set aside in response to the proposal to choose Scholem.”

Scholem met his new colleagues at the next meeting of order in the Hotel Bad Schachen, in Lindau, in southern Germany, on September 26–29, 1981. At the meeting he was given a diploma testifying to his membership in the order. “Among the twenty-seven foreign members, there are nine Jews, almost a minyan [prayer quorum], and we know half of them (most of them!),” Fania wrote from
Switzerland a short time afterward to Dalia and Malachi Beit-Arié. “Gershom is the only one from Israel, and he also emphasized that strongly, also saying that it had never occurred to him that he might be accepted in this exclusive order on the basis of his scholarship in the area of Judaism.”

The meeting in Lindau dealt with various subjects, including a possible meeting with the president of Germany, Karl Carstens, in the discussion of which Scholem took an active part. The discussion revolved around the way the members of the order could contribute to the president’s work with such a meeting. The connection between the order and the institutions of government, which went back to the days of the empire, was maintained in activities of this kind. The connection between science and the government is also shown in the form of the badge of the order, which was to be given to Scholem in June 1982, at the time of the annual meeting of the members of the order in Bonn. The design of the badge remained exactly as it had been set by Fredrick William IV in 1842, with the emperor’s initials arranged in a cross shape with crowns over them and the seal of the Prussian eagle, all in gold, surrounded by the words “Pour le Mérite” in a blue enamel ring.

Neither the seal of the Prussian emperor nor the form of the cross interfered with Scholem’s great joy in having been chosen as a member of the order. The
only thing he was sorry about, as he said to Habermas—facetiously, of course—was the paragraph in the regulations that stated that the medallion itself belonged to the German Republic, and he had to make certain that, after his death, the medallion would be sent back to Bonn as soon as possible. In fact, Scholem would not actually receive the medallion. Instead, in June 1982 a speech would be made in his memory in the presence of his widow, Fania. Some time later a photograph of the medallion was sent to her as a momento. As was customary, Scholem’s name was engraved on it, attesting that he was worthy of wearing it.

As well as becoming a member of an order with a long tradition and deeply rooted in German culture, Scholem took part in an entirely new venture—the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. The institution’s first year of activity was the academic year of 1981–82, but it time it created a tradition of its own, of which Scholem, who was a fellow during its first year and the last year of his life, was one of the founders and central pillars.

The First Fellow

The last chapter of Scholem’s life was played out on the same stage as the first act, but the scenery had changed almost beyond recognition. Berlin in the early 1980s was a divided city, and West Berlin was in the heart of, and completely surrounded by, East Germany, which was part of the Soviet bloc. Culturally and scientifically, Berlin was far from being a vital center. Its isolated location and the climate in its two universities after the violent riots of the student revolt in 1968 gave the intellectual life there a negative public image in West Germany. However, the city had great potential because of its past and because its geographical and political fate made it once again, after half a century—though in a different way—a symbol of the encounter between East and West. To change the negative image of the city and exploit its inherent potential, in 1980 the first institute for advanced study in Germany was founded there. The institute was named after Ernst Reuter, a communist activist of the Weimar period who had been persecuted and exiled under the Nazis and had served as the mayor of Berlin during the Soviet blockade between June 1948 and May 1949. It was called the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (literally, the science college “to” or “for”—not in—Berlin), with the intention of creating a certain distance between it and its geographical location. The goal of this distancing was to prevent absolute identification of the institute with the city, while also creating a connection between the two that would enhance the influence of the institute on academic life in Berlin. The main change needed, in the opinion of the founders of the institute, was the restoration of the ideals of excellence and academic elitism to the
city, since they had been absent in Berlin since the violent events of the student revolt of 1968. With this goal, Peter Wapnewski was chosen as the first rector of the institute. A professor of medieval German literature, Wapnewski had previously taught at universities in Heidelberg, Berlin, and Karlsruhe. He left the Free University of Berlin following the violent actions of the students in 1967–68. Thus, with his support of intellectual elitism, he symbolized opposition to the principles of the student movement. The institute was supposed to function according to the model of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, at which prominent intellectuals and academics were invited to spend a year to work in an optimal atmosphere and make connections with one another and exchange ideas.

Another important goal was for the institute to renew the intellectual life and scientific tradition of Berlin, which had characterized the city before the Nazi regime, and to restore to Berlin, if only for a year, artists and intellectuals who—like Ernst Reuter—had been forced to leave the city or cut off connections with Germany during the Nazi period. Thus, it would be possible to create continuity and renew the splendid past of the city during the long years before it was divided and before the moral pollution that spread in it from the 1930s until the mid-1940s.

The institute was supposed to host forty fellows every year, but during the first year the number was limited to eighteen. Thanks to Becker, in the autumn of 1980 Scholem was officially invited to serve as a fellow during the institute’s first year. To the great pleasure of the founders and director of the institute, he accepted the invitation, despite the apprehensions that naturally attended the thought of a journey and a year’s absence from home at his advanced age. The hope of the institute to reconnect the threads that had been severed under the Nazis and renew the tradition that had characterized the unified Berlin and its rich culture, which in large part had been Jewish, found its perfect embodiment in the figure of Scholem. As a close friend of Benjamin and as someone who had experienced the end of the empire and the first Weimar years, and who had taken an active part in the flourishing culture that had characterized them but who had also emigrated in time to avoid personally experiencing the period over which the institute tried to skip, Scholem was its ideal standard bearer in its first year of activity. Moreover, Scholem had made a name for himself in West Germany as a scholar of Judaism and was a well-known and well-liked figure.

For that reason, in the summer of 1981, about three months before Scholem’s planned arrival, Wapnewski made a request of Scholem that expressed the great honor and respect in which he was held by the director of the institute in Berlin and the director’s view of him as the embodiment of its aims: “In preparatory
discussions, we thought it would be worthy of this house if [at the opening cer-
emony] it were represented by itself, that is to say, by one of its fellows, or, to
be precise, by the most prominent and important of them.” Wapnewski asked
Scholem to give a lecture on the evening of the institute’s inauguration. It could
be about any subject Scholem might choose, but it would have to be limited to
thirty minutes, “since we wish expressly to make it possible for high representa-
tives of the state to speak, so as to affirm their responsibility for our house (they
are: two government ministers, the current mayor, a senator, and perhaps also
the President of the Republic).” Scholem was pleased by the invitation and the
honor it entailed, and he immediately accepted. In his answer one can sense the
tone of mischievous irony and enthusiasm that were to characterize his future
stay in the city of his youth:

It goes without saying that I cannot refuse your request. Thus, as I have been asked, I
will give, with a puffed-up chest—on condition that I do not suffer from bronchitis
exactly then, something that is quite likely to happen in November—this ceremo-
nial opening scholarly lecture, in which I will present myself properly before the
honorable gentlemen who will speak before me, as a Jew, as an Israeli, as a Berliner,
and as a scholar of Kabbalah. The restriction to thirty minutes is particularly jus-
tified, since after the five or six speakers who will precede me . . . , one must take
into account, willy-nilly, that the audience, aside from the speakers, will already have
fallen asleep in the meanwhile. Will I be able to maintain a good atmosphere in the
audience? This is a complex question, since I do not wish to exaggerate especially
my Berlin sense of humor (meinen Berliner Mutterwitz), considering the seriousness
of the subject (which I still must choose) and the greatness of the hour. Thus I will
have to count on openness on all parts, and on the possible free distribution of anti-
sleeping pills. Perhaps it would be best not to write the subject of the lecture in the
invitation, to preserve the necessary tension. Your honorable invitation came almost
at the same time as the announcement that I was chosen to be a foreign member of
the Orden Pour le Mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste, which I also was forced to
accept with gratitude (mit Dank annehme). . . . So that I can appear in good form in the
presence of the president of Germany (Bundesprisdänten), the current mayor, and the
rector of the institute.

Fania and Gershom Scholem arrived in Berlin on October 6, after vacationing
in Sils-Maria, in Switzerland. The elderly couple were housed in an apartment
that had been prepared for them in the Dahlem neighborhood, not far from the
institute—which was located in the Grunewald neighborhood, in a villa built
in the early twentieth century. The other fellows for the first year of the insti-
tute, who came from Eastern and Western Europe, America, and Israel, had also
gathered in Berlin. On November 6 the ceremonial inauguration of the institute took place, and after all the speeches and congratulations, Scholem gave his half-hour lecture, titled “Die Stellung der Kabbala in der europäischen Geistesgeschichte” (The status of Kabbalah in European intellectual history).

In addition to giving the ceremonial opening lecture, Scholem’s activities during the weeks following his arrival were many and varied. He planned to write a monograph in German about Ephraim Joseph Hirschfeld—who was an enlightened intellectual, a mystic, a Jewish Freemason, and an adventurer—for which he had been gathering material for many years. But he made time available for young colleagues and researchers to consult him and converse with him about their work. He devoted one evening to a lecture on his childhood and youth in Berlin, given to an audience that filled the auditorium of the Jewish community of the city. On the evening of October 11, Scholem took part in a public discussion about the Jews of Prussia that was held in the Hebbel-Theater, in honor of an exhibition on the subject that had opened in the national library in the city. The historians Saul Friedländer and Fritz Stern took part in that discussion, as did Schütz.

Perhaps the most interesting activity that Scholem initiated during those weeks was the establishment of small circle to study the Zohar with him every week. On November 16, ten days after the official opening of the institute, six local academics met to read the commentary on the first chapters of Genesis (on the creation) in the Zohar, in the original Hebrew. For the participants in this limited seminar, this first meeting was of special importance. In a text written the day after the meeting, Friedrich Niewöhner, a historian of philosophy at the Free University, connected the event to a seminar that Scholem had taught sixty years earlier in Franz Rosenzweig’s Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, just before emigrating to Palestine. In 1981, as he had done in 1923, Scholem taught kabbalistic texts to a limited group of people. In 1923, the subject included the hidden Midrash on the Book of Ruth from the Zohar. Niewöhner saw the seminar in Berlin as the renewal of a tradition that had ceased, and the closing of a circle that had opened when Scholem left for Palestine. However, Niewöhner also emphasized the differences between the past and the present, mainly in the purpose of the studying:

In his seminar on the Zohar in Berlin, 1981–82, Gershom Scholem, who was born in Berlin in 1897, connected with a tradition that had been severed two generations ago. Scholem is not interested here, as he was in 1923, in giving his students “access to the world of Judaism” (From Berlin to Jerusalem [Scholem 1982b] p. 182), and his students were both Jewish and non-Jewish. Scholem sought to read and clarify a
central source in the history of the spirit in an almost public manner, as “a kabbalist with the brain of a devil” (Kabbalist mit dem Gehirn eines Teufels), as he called himself in the context of the secrets of Kabbalah.71

One may assume that Scholem also regarded the seminar as a certain closing of a circle, for he sought to offer it in that format, although very few people could satisfy its requirements. This is also consistent with the great importance that Scholem attributed to his stay in Berlin. A little more than a year later, immediately after his death and the publication of his autobiographical work in Hebrew, Yoram Bronowski recalled “the rumor that reached my ears, according to which the old Gershom Scholem desired more than anything to live in Berlin and wander in the city of his youth, which no longer existed—thus Scholem spent some of the most emotional months of his last year in Berlin, which he had left more than fifty years earlier, in order never to return to it, slamming the door, one might say.”72

The changes that had taken place in Berlin between the days of his youth and his final visit there—changes that Scholem had witnessed in the making during his repeated visits to the city—were enormous. For example, the vital residential quarter where he had spent his youth had been completely destroyed during World War II, and in 1981 it was a no man’s land between East and West Berlin.73 Despite this extreme change in scenery—perhaps because of it—one cannot discuss Scholem’s sojourn in Berlin without connecting it to the earlier scenery of the city, especially that of his childhood and youth. Even in the presence of the changes, Scholem felt a deep and growing connection to the city, and this was certainly why he went there at least once in each of the last four years of his life.74 In a letter to Dalia and Malachi Beit-Arié, which was mailed from Switzerland—two days before his arrival in Berlin—he summed up his stay in Switzerland and reported his plans for his next destination: “In these six weeks I didn’t produce anything new, and I’ll try to do something in Berlin, the city of my birth, and I’m considering being called to the Torah in December [1981], in memory of my first reading from the Torah in December 1911, in a synagogue that no longer exists.”75 Perhaps better than anything else, that sentence reflects Scholem’s effort to tie together the ends of his life and create a biographical continuity in gestures toward his childhood, whose scenery had been lost.

In any event, Scholem felt at ease in Berlin and the Wissenschaftskolleg, and there is no sign of inner conflict or ambivalence connected to those places in the few remaining documents from this period in his life for firsthand testimony. In a letter to his older brother Reinhold, who was ninety, Scholem reported his impressions of the institute: “The atmosphere at the institute on the banks of
the Halensee is sympathetic. There are a total of eighteen fellows, including some very smart people, and good connections are being made with most of them (nine foreigners!).”76 The fact that Scholem did not count himself among the foreign fellows shows that his attachment to Berlin seemed natural and self-evident to him.

Another important factor in the good feelings that attended Scholem’s stay in Berlin was the love and admiration that surrounded him from every side. Whether it was the Jewish community of the city, his older friends, or his new colleagues at the institute, it seems that Scholem had never been the center of attention as much as during those weeks. He had returned to Berlin as an academic authority and an admired figure, and he clearly enjoyed that status. A letter from the pedagogue Hartmut von Hentig, one of the fellows of the institute closest to Scholem at that time, to his niece in the United States, reflects the attitude of his colleagues at the institute and the attention he received. To demonstrate Scholem’s place and the feelings toward him in the institute, von Hentig describes a photograph that was apparently taken on the evening of the inauguration. Here is his description of the moment that was perpetuated by the camera:

There is a photograph from the first days of the institute, which I would gladly send to you, if I hadn’t already given it away. It expresses something of the pleasure and honor that we feel toward the old scholar. Scholem is sitting in the middle, on a modern chair, in the form of a royal throne. To his right, on his knees, is Ivan Illich, and, to his left, your uncle. We look as if we were all talking at once. In any event, that’s what our hands are doing. The three of us are deep in pure enjoyment! Scholem gives

![Figure 14: Gershom Scholem with Ivan Illich (left) Hartmut von Hentig (right) at the inauguration of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, November 1981. From the collection of the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.](image)
that to us every day—mainly with dry humor (*trocken-keck*), sometimes melancholy, and always incidentally, and he is never arrogant.77

This moment of interaction among the three men reflects the status of the elderly scholar of Kabbalah from Jerusalem in the eyes of the younger generation of intellectuals in Berlin. However, that status received its full meaning only after Scholem’s death, about three and a half months after the picture was taken.

In early December Scholem slipped and fell, receiving a blow to his hip. After being bedridden for some time, he flew back to Israel with his wife on December 17, a flight that had been planned in advance, to spend the time of the Christmas vacation in Israel. He was hospitalized in Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and forced to stay there even after his hip healed, because he was suffering from strong stomach aches whose cause was unclear to the doctors.78 On February 21, 1982, at 3 o’clock in the morning, Scholem died at the age of eighty-four.

**Concluding Remarks**

The funeral took place the following day in Jerusalem. At 1 o’clock in the afternoon Scholem’s body was placed on a stretcher in the area between the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Van Leer Institute, wrapped in a prayer shawl and a blue cloth with the symbol of the Hebrew University and the Israeli flag. Habermas came from Germany and later reported his impressions of the official ceremony, at which many people were present—“especially older people, and of course immigrants from Germany, the Yekkes.” At the ceremony, which, in Habermas’s opinion, took place with a “lack of formality more characteristic of a quotidian action,”79 Nathan Rotenstreich and Ephraim Urbach, president of the academy, spoke. The president of Israel, Yitzhak Navon, also attended the ceremony. At the request of its organizers, despite the presence of many German-speaking Israelis in the audience and despite the fact that he had prepared a eulogy the night before he traveled to Israel, Habermas was not invited to speak in memory of his friend. Thus the German language was completely missing from Scholem’s funeral.80 The procession took a long route via the campus on Mount Scopus to the cemetery in Sanhedria. The burial area where the interment took place still lacked trees and flowers, as the author Naomi Frankel described it: “The earth was still smooth and bare and strewn with stones. This barren earth is similar to the earth of the stony, old Jerusalem, to which the young scholar of Kabbalah came in 1923, and where he died in 1982.”81 On the fresh grave “two pompous wreaths with strident ribbons on them” stood out, both placed by the German ambassador—one in the name of the presi-
dent of Germany, and the other on behalf of the mayor of Berlin. In time Fania Scholem erected a gravestone, on which was written, beneath Scholem's name, the dates of his birth and death, the words “Founder of Research in Kabbalah,” and a verse from the Book of Daniel, 1:17, with a slight change: “God give him [instead of “them”] knowledge and understanding of every book of wisdom.” Avraham Shapira pointed out that later on, when Fania replaced her husband’s gravestone with a granite slab, she added another line, hinting at Scholem’s connection with his country of origin: “A man of the Third Aliyah.”

Scholem’s death was widely reported in the Israeli press, which expressed the great admiration felt for him and his work. The widespread effect of his death in Israel intensified with the publication of the expanded Hebrew version of his autobiographical From Berlin to Jerusalem a few weeks afterward. While the publication of this book in Germany had been connected with Scholem’s eightieth birthday, its publication in Israel was bound up with his death. On the thirtieth day after his funeral, a conference was held in Jerusalem at which six of his colleagues and close disciples spoke about various aspects of him and his scholarly work. However, very slowly, an “almost oedipal” process of resistance to his dominance began. This was doubtless necessary, since for decades Scholem had played a leading role in shaping the character of academic life in Israel, especially in Jerusalem. Habermas was aware of the stirrings of this process on the evening after Scholem’s funeral, in the home of Yehuda Elkana: “There I heard in silence what the other side had to say, with restrained aggressiveness, about Scholem and the control of German culture over the Israeli educational system (Bildungssystem), which aroused ambivalent feelings. I could taste the disputes with which Scholem lived.”

Scholem’s death was reported in the press in Germany, too, especially in Berlin—where his friends and colleagues at the Wissenschaftskolleg had to cope with the surprising news. Of course, in Berlin there was neither the ambivalence nor the sense of an imminent conflict following the vacuum left by his death that colored the academic atmosphere in Jerusalem. In the corridors of the villa in Grunewald, the absence of the man who, shortly before, had filled them with his characteristic voice and temperament was felt, and Scholem’s physical presence was replaced by memories. In a letter of condolence sent to Fania Scholem, Wapnewski reported this feeling: “Since the much admired Gershom Scholem left us—left us in two meanings of the word—he has been present among us in a special way. Please don’t see this statement as a logical contradiction. No day passes without mention of his name in our house, there is no occasion when the suggestion is not made, that here he, Gershom Scholem, would certainly have told us something important, clarifying, removing doubt, or raising doubt. For
all of us here he was not only a colleague and teacher, but also a model (Vorbild), with his meticulous intelligence and the goodness and purity that were inherent in his thinking, his actions, and his statements.” 90

In fact, immediately after the news of Scholem’s death reached Berlin, Wapnewski began to organize a conference in Scholem’s memory, which was also meant to be the concluding event of the first academic year of the institute. The conference was held on July 2, 1982. Fania attended, and speeches were given by Wapnewski; Ephraim Lahav, the representative of the Hebrew University in Europe; Maier-Leibnitz, chancellor of the order Pour le Mérite; and Schütz. Zvi Werblowsky arrived from Israel and gave a lecture on Scholem’s academic work. In the name of Scholem’s colleagues at the institute, von Hentig gave a speech. In the audience of 150 people were the Israeli ambassador to Germany; Scholem’s two nieces, Edith Capon and Renee Goddard (the daughters of Werner Scholem); Becker, Unseld, and many other representatives of the press and public figures. 91 All the speeches given in Scholem’s honor reflected the central and special place he had won among his acquaintances in Germany. But what was there about the figure of that eighty-four-year-old man that charmed his German colleagues? What gave him such great importance and meaning for them—meaning that far transcended the two months and ten days that he was at the institute, a period that was the peak of the three decades in which Scholem was active in postwar Germany?

To understand the way that Scholem was perceived and accepted in the country of his youth, which was fully expressed in the speeches in his memory at the ceremony at the institute in Berlin and in the memories of colleagues and friends after his death, one must consider two important and interconnected factors: who Scholem was for “the German side,” and how this vision of him was represented in his connection with his surroundings, his way of speaking, and his conduct toward the people around him.

For his colleagues, Scholem was first of all a German Jew: “Scholem was a citizen of the world, but primarily he was a full and perfect representative of his people, of the form of its spiritual life, and of its tradition,” said Maier-Leibnitz at the ceremony in Berlin. 92 Wapnewski described him in similar terms years later: “He was a representative of the fate of the German Jews (not of Jewish Germans).” 93 von Hentig saw Scholem’s stay in Berlin as “the happy possibility of an exile’s return home (Heimkehr).” 94 In addition, Scholem was what von Hentig called an “unmistakable Berliner (unverkennbaren Berliner).” 95 His German colleagues recognized this trait in every step he took and every word he wrote or spoke. His Berlin accent and manner of speaking, which were typical of the neighborhood where he had been born and which like the neighborhood had ceased to exist
in the city, remained with him throughout his life, and his German colleagues enjoyed them.96 Schütz also recalled this prominent characteristic of Scholem in his speech in Scholem’s memory: “Scholem spoke and wrote in German in a way that many of us no longer even learned how. His use of the language remains . . . in a thought-provoking way, unblemished by the developments of the German language in the past fifty years; [Scholem’s German] ‘stands in proximity to the prose of the great German minds of the nineteenth century.’”97 The way that Scholem spoke and the humor that accompanied what he said were engraved in the memories of those around him and often attributed to the intellectual world of prewar Berlin. “The words in his mouth were still ‘clean,’ to a certain extent they were unstained,” Wapnewski wrote of him.98 Thus, for example, Scholem ironically called his colleagues in the institute, who were living in the refur-
bished villa, “die Trockenmieter” (literally, dry renters),99 a term used in early twentieth-century Berlin to describe a cheap housing solution found by poor families, who lived for half a year in new apartments whose walls had just been painted. When the paint on the walls dried, they would be replaced by wealthy tenants.100 Aside from this, it must be pointed out that Scholem attributed great importance to his being a Berliner and saw it as a central element in his life. An example of this can be found in his relationship with Walter Pagel, a pathologist and historian of medicine who had been born in Berlin and moved to London in 1933. In a letter to Joseph Weiss, one of his closest students, Scholem states humorously that his fondness for Pagel and their closeness was derived from “the shared root of our soul, mine and Dr. Pagel’s, is in the spark of the alien fire of the former community of Berlin, where our birth and origin are, and therefore we understand each other with hints.”101 I heard another anecdote that shows how Berlin German was rooted in Scholem from his niece, Renee Goddard, who was an actress. Her theater company in London put on the play I Am a Camera, which takes place in Berlin in the early 1930s. Goddard played the role of Natalia Landauer, the Jewish girl, and to portray her convincingly as a native of Berlin, on the stage she imitated the way her uncle spoke English. As fate would have it, Scholem came to see a performance, and at the end he approached her and commented in English, with a heavy accent, “yu ver zi onli von ai anderstut.”102 The former chief editor of the Suhrkamp publishing house, Walter Boehlich, re-
ported on the dominance of the Berlin aspect of Scholem’s appearance, in the words he composed in his honor: “Scholem, as mentioned, no longer wished to be German, but nevertheless he could not and did not wish to stop looking very German, in his own way. If anyone, then he was a typical German professor, of the good kind, of course, a Berliner in Jerusalem as well.”103

The third factor in Scholem’s essence that stood out in the eyes of his German
colleagues was his being Israeli. In fact, he belonged to the generation of the founders of the State of Israel and was one of the people who shaped the nation’s scientific and intellectual character. Scholem knew the leaders of the State of Israel, and for many years he was connected with the highest strata of Israeli society. For his German colleagues, he was a link to the young state, toward which their attitude was very complex. “For us he was the key to Israel,” Habermas recalled years later. “Israel was the most difficult country for us.” The combination of these three factors—that Scholem was a German Jew, a Berliner, and an Israeli—was unique in the intellectual landscape of Germany. Consequently, the history of Scholem’s reception in that country was a unique case. It may be said that no other Israeli intellectual or academic was received similarly or even close to the way that Scholem was. Being a German who had emigrated to Israel, taken part in the project of renewing the life of the Jewish people, established the field of academic research in Kabbalah, and returned to Germany gave him an authority in the eyes of his associates that went far beyond his field of knowledge. As early as the 1960s, when he was a regular guest of the IfS in Frankfurt, he was viewed by people like Adorno; Max Horkheimer; and even Herbert Marcuse, who lived in the United States, as an authority. Habermas recalled that, when he was one of the younger members of the institute, he was often perplexed by the great respect that the members of Scholem’s generation accorded him. In meetings in Unseld’s home with Scholem, Adorno, and Ernst Bloch, when Habermas was present, he always detected “an invisible hierarchy” between Scholem and those around him, a hierarchy whose meaning he did not understand. Even two or three decades later, members of the institute in Berlin thought of Scholem as a supreme authority, and although it is impossible to fully uncover the source of that authoritativeness, one can point to two likely parts of it. The first consists of his academic achievement, the enormous professional respect he received, and his great expertise in various fields. “Everything he says comes from a great treasury of knowledge and experience, from broad understanding of the world and human depth, sensitivity, and warmth,” said Maier-Leibnitz at the ceremony in Scholem’s memory.

The second source of Scholem’s authority, in the view of his German colleagues, was in his belonging to a generation or group of Jewish intellectuals who emigrated from Germany before World War II and returned afterward, whether permanently (like Adorno, Karl Löwith, Helmuth Plessner, and others), or as frequent visitors, coming every year or two (like Marcuse). Habermas knew almost that entire generation of Jewish intellectuals in the field of sociology and philosophy, scholars who had emigrated to the West and returned to Germany in one way or another, and he identified an important role that they played for the
younger generation in Germany: “They were the only ones who could tie us, the young people, back to our old tradition after the great breakdown.” For this generation, whose members had been orphaned from their intellectual and spiritual predecessors because their teachers were stained with the moral blemish that accompanied everyone who took part in the Nazi state or the ideological world of Nazism, the exiled Jewish intellectuals offered a sort of salvation. Habermas called the meaning of their presence in Germany for the members of his generation the “Erlösung eines Problems” (the redemption of a problem). Thanks to their origin, which placed them at the heart of the German cultural tradition, and thanks to their blamelessness, the intellectuals who returned from exile could fill the vacuum that had been created by the culpability of their German teachers and provide an admirable example for the generation of intellectuals that emerged after the war. As Habermas put it, “they came as a moral authority, which possessed the means that could grant forgiveness to the generation that had become guilty.”

108 Years later, in introducing a lecture by Elie Wiesel, the sociologist Wolf Lepenies—who succeeded Wapnewski as rector of the Wissenschaftskolleg—mentioned the role played by Scholem for the institute in the long term in similar fashion: “Scholem’s acceptance was fortunate for the institute; whether the good fortune that was ours by chance has become today,
fifteen years later, a good fortune that we have earned honorably, is for others to decide. It is a fact that Scholem’s agreement to come to the institute as a fellow, his presence and his work in Berlin, in the new institution, gave scientific and ethical credit (Wissenschaftsmoralischen Kredit), by which it was nourished and upon which it could flourish. We were lucky with Gershom Scholem.”¹⁰⁹

Hence, Scholem’s special place in Germany toward the end of his life derived from a unique combination of components of life. In addition, it is important to point out that Scholem was also seen as an indirect victim of the Nazi regime: his brother Werner had been murdered in the Buchenwald concentration camp; his family had been forced to emigrate to England and Australia; and his close friend Benjamin, who was identified with him perhaps more than anyone else, committed suicide while fleeing from the Nazis. As Unseld noted in a speech about Scholem’s research, “just as we are amazed by every page of Jewish intelligence and can also smile at Jewish jokes, we also cannot forget with every page, that the Germans would have murdered the man who wrote that page, if he had fallen into their hands.”¹¹⁰

One may also add the simple fact that Scholem was physically present in Germany during the years after the war, and he was available to his colleagues. This proximity, and of course his unique character, led many of his acquaintances to see him first of all as a good friend. As Becker wrote after Scholem’s death, in him “we learned to recognize a genius of friendship.”¹¹¹ But this closeness always existed alongside the estrangement derived from the double distance that Scholem represented for them. One aspect of the distance was temporal, since he belonged to the German past that had long since ceased to exist, and the other aspect was geographical, in that he was a citizen of Israel and a central figure in the academic and scientific system there—which placed him in the Levant. Of course, though this strangeness separated Scholem from his German colleagues, it was also one of his features that they found attractive. In his tribute to Scholem, von Hentig stated that those who had been with him during the first year at the institute in Berlin were not worthy to call themselves Scholem’s fellows, because in this dialectic of closeness and distance, he was for them “an elder friend, like a father, and a young teacher, like a brother.”¹¹²

As noted, the outer manifestations of Scholem’s essence were a decisive factor in the way he was received in Germany. We have already mentioned his Berlin idiom as well as the sense of humor his displayed in communicating with those around him, which was anchored in the old German conceptual world. These outward manifestations were a larger part of something that cannot be precisely defined, but that appears in almost every testimony or document dealing with him, which can be called the Scholem experience. The paradox in the
background of Scholem’s understanding of the subject of his scholarly work, the contradiction inherent in the effort to report scientifically about phenomena underlaid by personal experience and in the effort to transmit what in fact exists beyond the realm of communication, is also found in the effort to analyze him on the basis of testimony about the way he was experienced. At the same time, the various sources show that to experience Scholem’s presence and the temperament that characterized his speech and behavior was an integral part of acquaintance with him. Although his physical presence disappeared immediately after his death, his presence arose again with great vitality in all his friends’ memories. The difficult of speaking about Scholem to understand him, without the possibility of experiencing him, also emerges in the words that Boehlich wrote in his memory. After speaking of Scholem’s professional achievements and their meaning in Germany, Boehlich said that “perhaps it was necessary to experience him, how he used to say with enthusiasm and pleasure: ‘He doesn’t know! Scholem will explain it.’ and then he would explain.”113 Drews also described this aspect as central for understanding Scholem. Several years before Scholem’s death, Drews wrote:

He said, “Berliners are a resilient kind of person (resilienter Menschenschlag),” using the adjective “resilient,” what was apparently widespread in Prussia during his youth. He also knew himself to be so resilient, so unconquerable, and so rebellious, a Berliner, the sound of whose speech, even the Hebrew that he spoke, gave him away as such to his last day. At the same time, he would win over his listeners with his rough, dry charm (which he was capable of employing consciously and intentionally) and with his unique temperament.114

Although the Scholem experience characterized the relations of people in his German surroundings to him in general, it is still important to distinguish here between the way Scholem was viewed by those who knew him in the context of the IfS and the Suhrkamp publishing house—including Unseld, Habermas, Becker, Boehlich, and Rolf Tiedemann—and the way he was perceived in the last stage of his reception in Germany, at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The association of the members of the former group with Scholem mainly began in the 1960s, was built up slowly over years, and was characterized by professional collaboration along with friendship of a certain depth (one of the characteristics of which were the visits of these friends to the other side of Scholem’s world, Israel). In contrast, Scholem’s acquaintance with the other fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg was relatively superficial and began only in the last two years of his life. The new period of Scholem’s reception in Germany, added by his affiliation with the institute in Berlin, was his becoming a symbol for an entire generation, and
the appropriation of that symbol for the academic and ideological needs of the
institute. Of course, this appropriation was not a one-sided action, and its source
— discussed below — was a reciprocal need, although the differences in the way
it was understood in various circles are conspicuous.

Two additional points touching on Scholem’s reception in Germany deserve
mention. The first limits the extent of his reception, and the second enlarges
the boundaries of its importance. Scholem’s reception in Germany was never
a mass phenomenon, and although his fame grew over the years, it always re-
mained limited to relatively small intellectual circles. Scholem’s writings and the
recognition of their importance did not go beyond these circles during his life
or afterward. Hence, Scholem was never an influential or iconic figure in Ger-
many, as Benjamin and Habermas are today. The second point is that Scholem
entered German public opinion to a large extent as an author, not as a scholar.
This is shown by such events in his life as receiving the literary prize from the
Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in 1974, being appointed to the Literature De-
partment of the Berlin Academy of the Arts in 1975, and being the subject of
one episode of a television series dealing with Jewish writers. However, placing
Scholem in the category of author gave him a broader role in German intellectual
life after the war than he would have gained if he had had been regarded solely
as a scholar. Unseld commented on this role after Scholem’s death: “Scholem
wrote his works, especially all of his important works in German, in spotless
German prose, which, in addition to his erudition, gives him the name of one of
the great academic writers of our time and assures him of continued influence
on new generations.”

Scholem’s role as an author — as someone who combined all the components
discussed above, biographical as well as professional, and expressed them in his
writing — was the foundation of his influence on new generations, or the future.
Thus, one may see Scholem’s role in Germany as bridging the gap between the
past generation and the future one, while leaping over the abyss: the corrupt
generation in between. This educational role was expressed to a great degree in
his offering the coming generation a German language whose use did not suffer
from the changes of time and events and that remained in its original context. In
this way he could offer the younger generation continuity and thus retain inter-
generational cohesion. For Germany, Scholem served as an important link in
the chain of generations and the tradition of the German language, which was
necessary in the efforts of the younger generation to overcome the moral and
cultural degeneration that was an integral part of German culture in the 1930s
and 1940s. Thus, surprisingly, Scholem, in the autumn of his life, became an
author of the transitional generation that aspired to spiritual and moral renewal,
an author who had the capacity to prepare this renewal and maintain it in himself. Thus, in much the way that he understood Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s role for the generation of rebirth in Palestine and the State of Israel, almost half a century later, Scholem played the role of an author “who stands on the crossroads and looks in both directions.”

However, it would be an error to think that this role was projected on Scholem or given to him unilaterally. As noted earlier, Scholem made many efforts over the years to gain a place in the German intellectual world. His frequent trips, the books and articles that he published, the prizes he received, the lectures he gave, and the public symposia about the story of his family and his life—all of these reflect these efforts. In this context it is interesting to note that Scholem’s last monograph in Hebrew was published in 1957, when he was sixty, with another twenty-four years of productive scholarly activity before him. During that quarter-century Scholem published in German a monograph on medieval Kabbalah; six collections of articles all originally written in that language; three volumes of Walter Benjamin’s letters, which he edited; two new editions of Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism; an interview with Drews that was published as a booklet; and two autobiographical books. In English during those years Scholem published a monograph on ancient Hebrew mysticism, three volumes of articles, and two autobiographical books—all of them translated from German or Hebrew. In Hebrew three volumes of articles and one autobiographical book were published. This short list, which does not include articles, shows that the increasing honor Scholem received in Germany was a need that derived from both sides. Not only was there individuals in Germany interested in Scholem and his writing, but Scholem desired to attain recognition and honor in that country.

As noted, it is possible to view the stay of the Scholems in Berlin as symbolizing in extreme fashion the process of Scholem’s return to the German world and to Jewish-German dialogue after World War II, which was central to this section of the book. However, this journey symbolizes both Scholem’s return to a familiar world and his departure from Jerusalem and from the effort to realize the Zionist dream, which had disappointed him for so many years. In the Hebrew edition of his autobiography, Scholem mentions parenthetically his youthful hope that had gone unfulfilled over the years: “I no longer pinned any hope on the familiar combination known as ‘Deutsch-Judentum,’ whose full meaning is not conveyed by the rendering as ‘German Jewry,’ and I hoped for the renewal of Judaism only with its rebirth in the Land of Israel (and by rights my readers may ask whether I retain this hope to this day, after sixty years, and I have no answer, in the light of everything that has happened, except mere hope (tochelet), as a wise man has said: extended hope makes the heart sick).”
Perhaps the search for a cure for this sickness of heart lay behind the great effort involved in shifting the center of Scholem’s life from Jerusalem to Berlin at such an advanced age. Scholem’s life in the Berlin winter of 1981 in the modest furnished apartment with the empty shelves, surrounded by much younger people, demonstrated the less brilliant aspect of his return to the city of his childhood and youth to the observant eyes of von Hentig, and gave the return a dimension of sadness: “I was able to understand how greatly this affected him and his wife by the influence of a picture by Anna Ticho, the Israeli painter, which I helped them to hang in their apartment with a drill that I brought. The picture shows the stony landscape surrounding Jerusalem, and it nourished their souls greatly. No, it was not easy for them here!”

Perhaps, hidden in the difficulty felt by the Scholems in their small, empty apartment on the periphery of cold, divided Berlin, was a deep longing for the period before all the alterations in their lives: the period when Berlin was the center; Jerusalem was a peripheral, rocky landscape; and the dream was still a dream.