

Nahum Glatzer: Exile and Renewal

“What you have inherited from your fathers you must acquire in order to possess it.” Goethe.

I am working on a documentary film about my father, Nahum Glatzer (1903-1990), a preeminent Judaic scholar whose life and work exemplifies scholarly integrity and the revivification of the Judaic tradition as an existential and moral force. My father was a man of deep faith but not without a sense of irony, paradox and humor. His life is a paradigm of forced movement from culture to culture and an emblem of what lives on in the transition.

For some time I have been gathering material for this project, conducting interviews, translating the remarkable private papers and correspondence he left to me, filming on location, and collecting photographs, documents and footage of his lectures. With Ruth Schocken I have been translating hundreds of letters my parents wrote to each other from 1928 to the early 1940s, which recount the unfolding events of that tumultuous period. My goal is to set my father's extraordinary life within the context of his German-Jewish *Bildung* and the theological, literary and philosophical worlds to which he contributed.

My father's life was emblematic for his generation in being a life of exile and renewal. Born to a pious German-speaking family in Lemberg, he attended a German-language gymnasium, where he was rigorously trained in Greek and Latin. In 1919 he came to Frankfurt-am-Main to study in an Orthodox Rabbinic

Academy but soon was deeply involved with the new liberal thinking in Jewish circles around Rabbi Noble and Leo Baeck and became the leading disciple of the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (who entrusted him with preparing the list of all Jewish sources for the second edition of *The Star of Redemption*.) He also worked with Rosenzweig and Martin Buber on their translation of the Old Testament into German and taught at the newly established Judisches Lehrhaus. At Rosenzweig's urging, my father studied at the University of Frankfurt, Oriental languages with Jacob Horowitz, religious history with Buber, and theology with Paul Tillich. At this time he also came into contact with old German Jewry through my mother, Anne Stiebel, whose family traced back to an 18th century court Jew and included Leon Feuchtwanger, Erich Fromm, certain Oppenheimers, and the art dealers Rosenberg and Stiebel.

Glatzer succeeded Buber in teaching Jewish religious history and ethics at the University of Frankfurt. Forced from this post in 1933, he and my mother decided to go to Palestine, where his father had immigrated in 1926 but was killed in an Arab raid in 1929. Involved with Zionism since his youth, and in response to his own father's tragic death, he embraced the idea of a binational state, joining Buber, Ernst Simon and Jehudah Magness in the movement of *Brit Shalom*. Glatzer remained committed to the hope of cooperation between Jews and Arabs throughout his life.

Via London, in 1938, my parents moved to the United States. When Salman Schocken opened Schocken Books in New York after the war, he invited my father to be editor-in-chief. Along with the publication of important scholarly and literary Judaica books, the house was among the first to publish Franz Kafka's works in English. (Together with Hannah Arendt, my father oversaw translations and edited and introduced many editions.) His fascination and identification with Kafka lasted his whole life. He greatly appreciated Kafka's sense of alienation, absurdity, and paradox and modeled his own writing, in part, on Kafka's aphoristic style. His much-admired essay "Kafka and the Tree of Knowledge" (1958) was followed by *I Am a Memory Come Alive* (1974)—a Kafka biography in the author's own words—and *Kafka's Loves* (1986). Glatzer served on the committee for the definitive edition of the works of Kafka.

After considerable frustration—a condition shared by so many of Europe's exiled intellectuals as they struggled to find a position in a new country and in a new language—Glatzer was finally able again to teach at a university. With the founding of Brandeis University, he was asked to develop and chair the department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, which he did from 1951 until his retirement in 1973. He represented a concept of Judaic scholarship as a living force and had a major impact on a generation of Judaic scholars, among them, Paul Mendes-Flohr, Michael Fishbane, and Everett Fox.

Glatzer's legendary course "Job and the Problem of Evil," which illuminated the connections among the Book of Job, the biblical motif of the Tree of Knowledge, and Kafka's writings, drew hundreds of students each year, and his book *The Dimensions of Job* (1969) remains one of the most important reviews of the interpretive literature on Job. He dedicated himself to making Hebrew texts available through literary translations and exquisite anthologies and continued to publish extensively on Jewish history, philosophy, and the midrashic literature as well on Franz Rosenzweig. My father wrote the first biography of Rosenzweig in 1951, introducing the philosopher to an English-speaking public. He then edited two other volumes of Rosenzweig's works, including the first publication of *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* (1953).

Nahum Glatzer's life is not only worth documenting for the sake of his scholarly admirers but will interest, more broadly, a general public in the way it shows how a brilliant Jew could come to terms with the cataclysm of his century, address philosophically and theologically the problem of evil, and more practically, make a new life for himself. For this project, I have chosen to make a film rather than to write a book, drawing on the liveliness of the medium to evoke his worlds and making direct use of his own words and the words of others. The film will underline not only my father's qualities as a great scholar but also his deep humanity in addition to documenting the many worlds in which he lived. I have been invited to present the finished film at the meeting of the World Jewish Congress.

For some years I have been filming conversations I have had with people of my parents' generation who knew them, the worlds from which they came, and the value of my father's contributions to Jewish thought. Bishop Krister Stendahl, former dean of the Harvard Divinity School, speaks of my father's contribution to the understanding of the Jewish sects at the time of Jesus. Freya von Moltke, whose husband James my father knew in Frankfurt when he had invited him to speak about the kibbutz movement in 1930, speaks about my father's relationship to Rosenzweig as she understood it from Rosenstock-Huessy, with whom she lived after the war, and whose wife, Gritli, had been Rosenzweig's great love. Yulla Lipchitz, widow of Jacques Lipchitz, talks about my father as a young man and of how his contemporaries responded to him. My father's students Paul Mendes-Flohr, Michael Fishbane, and Susannah Heschel, in their interviews, speak about the value of his scholarship and teaching.

Michael Fishbane and I posthumously edited and introduced *The Memoirs of Nahum Glatzer* (1997), which my father wrote at my urging. The book describes, among other things, his encounters with the Hebrew poet Bialik, as well as with S. Y. Agnon, Buber, Rosenzweig, Salman Schocken, Lipchitz, and many others.

There is an extensive correspondence yet to be translated for possible inclusion in the film—from S.Y. Agnon, Buber, Abraham Heschel, Werner Jaeger, Jacques Lipchitz, A. Momigliano, Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss, Paul Tillich, among others. I would hope, with help, to work on these translations while at the

American Academy in Berlin. My father also kept cryptic journals, German transliterated into Greek letters, which need deciphering and which I would hope to start on from Berlin. In all, German-language immersion in Berlin would greatly help my understanding of my father's love of German literature.

In addition to my work as a scholar of 19th century French art history, I have made 22 documentary films on a range of subjects from Jasper Johns to Claude Monet. These have received various awards and been broadcast in the US, the UK, and France and have been shown at the Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée de l'Orangerie, the Centre Pompidou, the Metropolitan Museum, the National Gallery in Washington, the Museum of Modern Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Stadel museum in Frankfurt and elsewhere. (In 2007 I was decorated by the French government as a Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres). Perhaps the most relevant for this project for this film is *Rachel of the Comedie Francaise* (enclosed), an hour-long documentary, suggested by a book by Rachel Brownstein about a 19th century French Jewish actress who came from the margins and transformed the French classical tradition.

I have worked on Jewish subjects at various points in my career and have a deep interest in Jewish history and philosophy, which helps prepare me to do this film on my father. (I enclose here a piece on the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky's use of the Hebrew alphabet as well as an article on the late 18th century physiognomer Lavater's use of Jewish stereotypes.) I came to art history after

majoring in Judaic Studies at Brandeis, where I studied with Alexander Altman, my father, and Erin Goodenough. At the Hebrew University in Jerusalem I attended Gershom Scholem's classes in Jewish mysticism, studied with Hugo Bergman in a small group reading the Zohar, took courses in Spinoza with Jakob Fleischman and phenomenology of religion and Islam with Zvi Werblowsky. My subsequent work with Meyer Schapiro, to whose lectures I was introduced by Gershom Scholem when I was a student in Jerusalem, determined my own transition from Judaic studies to art history and then from medieval art to 19th century art. Indeed, my understanding of 19th century French art in its cultural context was formed under Schapiro's influence, together with the writings of Walter Benjamin, and underlies my book, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth Century Paris* (1983).

A semester at the American Academy in Berlin would help me greatly as I forge ahead on translating the rest of my father's letters, bring together the material I already have, and write the script, to be comprised substantially of the words of my father and others. Most helpful, too, would be immersion in an intellectually congenial environment in Germany, the country that did so much to nurture father's intellectual development before the universal tragedy of National Socialism fundamentally altered the course of his career—as well as the very nature of his theological and philosophical thinking.