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Gershom Scholem. *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913-1919.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007. 374 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02669-8.

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Making the German Gerhard Scholem into the Jew Gershom Scholem

Gershom Scholem stands like a giant astride the field of modern Judaic Studies. He was integral in founding the field of academic Kabbalah studies. He helped transform the discipline of Jewish history from one dominated by rationalism to one that accepted irrationalism and messianism, or at least placed them into their proper historical context. However, before Scholem could transform Judaic Studies, he had to transform himself. Born into an unreligious family of bourgeois German Jews with deep roots in Berlin, young Gerhard Scholem embraced cultural Zionism and immersed himself in the study of Judaism. After earning his doctorate in Munich, he immigrated to Palestine in 1923 and became Gershom Scholem. Within a few years, he was a university professor in Jerusalem. As the holder of an endowed chair and president of Israel's Academy of Sciences and Humanities in his later years, he stood at the center of the Israeli intelligentsia.

The most accessible window into Scholem's personality has always been his letters and diaries. With graphomaniacal zeal, Scholem kept a diary and maintained a prolific correspondence with his family and friends. In the 1990s, coinciding with a rediscovery of Scholem and an explosion of interest in Kabbalah, JÃ¼discher Verlag issued a two-volume edition of Scholem's diaries from 1913 to 1923, and C. H. Beck Verlag published a three-volume selection of Scholem's letters. Those were followed in 2002 by a one-volume selection of his letters, published in English by Harvard University Press and edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner.[1] The same editor-translator has now made Scholem's youthful diaries available to an English-speaking audience.

Indeed, this book offers a selection drawn from the aforementioned German-language edition of Scholem's diaries. While the original diaries featured virtual essays on myriad topics (including Scholem's participation in the Zionist youth movement) alongside traditional diary entries, this version has been radically pared down. Nearly 1,300 pages have been brought down to less than 400. Literally hundreds of diary entries have been omitted, while many others have been abridged. In doing so, Skinner has sought to present Scholem's diaries as a *Bildungsroman* and has highlighted Scholem's friendship with Walter Benjamin.

When Scholem began keeping a diary in early 1913, shortly after his fifteenth birthday, the young Berlin Jew was alienated from the assimilated and minimally Jewish, German nationalist, bourgeois milieu of his parental home. He was clearly on a quest for intellectual and religious moorings. His intellectual precociousness is striking. Well before his twentieth birthday, he was conversant with an immense body of literature and philosophy. His diary entries provide a running list and critique of all that he read, including philosophy (such as Friedrich Nietzsche and SÃ¸ren Kierkegaard), literature (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Leo Tolstoy), and works of Jewish theological import. As Scholem wrestled with his own Jewish identity, he moved far beyond the question of what it meant to be a German Jew in the 1910s. He plumbed deeper, more enduring existential questions, ultimately forging his own particular view of Judaism and Zionism. The urgency of forming and disseminating a new worldview was fueled by turbulent debates in the world of Judaic learning and the impact of the World War.

It would probably not be an exaggeration to write that young Scholem was a fanatic. With the exuberance of youth, he occasionally saw himself as a prophet. In one entry (May 22, 1915), he wrote of the Chosen One "who was to search for his people's soul." The Chosen One emerged from an assimilated family, saw through political Zionism, and drank heavily of Martin Buber en route to becoming the prophet: "And who is this dreamer, whose name already marks him as the Awaited One? Scholem, the Perfect One" (pp. 54-58). As he relates his own ideas on Judaism, his depiction of others' ideas reeks with self-righteousness and condescension. When asked by one acquaintance what exactly he meant by his idiosyncratic use of the terms "Torah" and "the Teaching," he replied, "I can be understood only by those who think like me, whereas to others I remain a closed book because they do not understand my language" (p. 353).

Even when he did not place himself at the center of a Jewish renaissance, he used his diaries to pour forth his views on Jewish identity, Jewish theology, Hebrew, and many other Jewish topics. The diaries are thick with these intellectual explorations. In his youth, Scholem published a short-lived newsletter called *Blue-White Spectacles*. The name was exceptionally appropriate as he viewed the world through Jewish lenses. A Jewish outlook colored even his views of art. Scholem held intense debates with his friend Werner Kraft over the so-called silence of the Hebrew language and the so-called German heart, and Scholem did not want to be seen as a German Jew. Meanwhile, Scholem dreamed, with trepidation, of his future life in Palestine.

The diaries also provide a window into Scholem's most important friendship: that with Walter Benjamin. Skinner finds Benjamin's influence on Scholem both critical and unacknowledged. The diaries leave no doubt that young Scholem was increasing in thrall of his older, supremely gifted friend: "In grasping what Benjamin has to say, the same astounding thing always happens to me: at first I'm standing somewhere on the wide earth while Benjamin's in heaven. Then what is said comes closer to me, and suddenly I am in the center" (p. 168). Later, when young Scholem was torn by actual and potential romantic attachments to various women, he confided to his diary, "The only relationship that always and unconditional holds firm is to Walter. I love Walter" (p. 208). Upon receiving permission from the authorities to leave wartime Germany, Scholem moved to Muri, Switzerland, to live with Walter and Dora Benjamin. The budding literary and cultural critic's views deeply influenced Scholem, who tried his hand at literary criticism. However, Scholem's admiration for Benjamin was tempered when his idol did not live up to expectations. Benjamin certainly did not share Scholem's views on Judaism and Jewishness. Moreover, Benjamin, already with a wife and child, did not reciprocate the friendship quite as passionately as it was given to him, and Scholem was clearly a third wheel in their minute circle. At times, Dora resented his presence, and he complained about her in his diaries.

Though less present than in the original edition, the Great War also looms heavily in the background of Scholem's diaries, and his contempt for it is clear. When he went to the enlistment office, he gave a clever, planned performance to earn the distinction of being unfit for service, but he lived in fear of conscription. Only a feigned psychosis kept him out of the trenches and in the mental ward. Scholem's friends went off to war, and some never came back. Both the Social Democrats and the Zionists suffered internal feuds over the issue of support for the war. And Scholem's disdain grew. On August 1, 1916, the second anniversary of the general war, Scholem wrote, "Today in heaven a mighty Kaddish will be said for Europe. But rather than a prayer of renewal, it would be a prayer of condemnation: Calling out from Zion, God lifts up his voice against the seducers in Berlin and the wretches in St. Petersburg" (p. 123). Indeed, the war's all-consuming fury only strengthened Scholem's hope for a renewal in Zion. Regrettably, the vicissitudes of World War I-era German Zionism receive only secondary attention in this condensed edition.

Scholem's diaries are not solely an intellectual autobiography. Behind the curtain of intellectual fury and sociopolitical pronouncements, the development of a genuine young man is evident. There were family struggles. There was the torment of first love and the difficulties of romantic involvement. There were fears about future employment. These, too, permit insight into Scholem's character and indicate that the great, uncompromising intellectual-in-the-making had a human side.

The volume is divided into four sections, each with an introduction by the editor that presents the larger historical context and germane biographical detail on Scholem. These introductions as well as the volume's general introduction are interesting and will be all-but-essential for readers not already familiar with the contours of modern German history and with Scholem's life. Unfortunately, these preliminary remarks are marred by inaccuracies. For example, the claim that Scholem "was not from the educated assimilated bourgeoisie" (p. 12) is not correct. Even if the Scholems did not and would not convert to Christianity, they had assimilated considerably, celebrating Christmas and not observing Jewish dietary restrictions. Though neither haut bourgeois aesthetes nor exclusively members of the liberal professions, Scholem's family members were uncommonly educated by the standards of the time. His father Arthur and Arthur's three brothers received at least some secondary education at a *Gymnasium* or *Realgymnasium*, an educational level achieved by less than 6 percent of their peers in Prussia at the time. Moreover, Scholem's Uncle Georg (not "George") held a doctorate from the University of Leipzig, his Uncle Hans held a doctorate from the University of Berlin, and his Aunt KÃ¤te held a doctorate from the University of Freiburg. Additionally, in 1917, his father expelled Scholem from his parental home, but it is not entirely accurate that he "ended up in a hotel in a working-class neighborhood" (p. 161). Scholem did move into a kosher pension, but this guesthouse was located in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, historically one of the more affluent areas of the city.

Skinner has done a fine job of rendering Scholem's dense prose into readable English, but the diaries' explanatory notes have been taken with minimal revision from the original German editors' notes, allowing small errors to slip in. For example, Gershom Scholem wrote that his great-grandfather was buried in the Jewish cemetery in the SchÃ¶nhauser Allee. This is located in Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg and is not synonymous with the larger and more famous cemetery in Berlin-WeiÃensee, as is claimed in the notes. Also, in contradiction of the notes, the Soviet Union did not exist as such until 1922. Some endnotes refer to specific earlier diary entries that do not seem at all germane. Perhaps the relevant passages were excised in the process of condensing the original entries. Translation is a difficult process, but confusingly for a reader not familiar with both German and Hebrew, German transliterations of Jewish terms are sometimes retained and not exchanged for English ones (for example, *siwwug* rather than *zivug*, *zimzum* rather than *tzimtzum*, *zaddik* rather than *tzaddik*).

This translation of Scholem's diaries will be of interest to an English-speaking lay audience for Jewish studies already familiar with Scholem and to scholars of Judaic Studies scholars. Scholars of German, comparative literature, and German history will probably prefer to delve into the unabridged German edition. As more English-speakers discover Jewish mysticism, it is good that they can also discover its chief modern interpreter. Skinner's translation and edition of Scholem's diaries open the door for them to become familiar with young Scholem's inner life.

Note

[1]. Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters, 1914-1982*, trans. and ed. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).