

Memoirs

THE TAUBER INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF EUROPEAN JEWRY SERIES

Jehuda Reinharz, *General Editor* / Sylvia Fuks Fried, *Associate Editor*

The Tauber Institute Series is dedicated to publishing compelling and innovative approaches to the study of modern European Jewish history, thought, culture, and society. The series has a special interest in original works related to the Holocaust and its aftermath, as well as studies of Zionism and the history, society, and culture of the State of Israel. The series is published by the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry—established by a gift to Brandeis University from Dr. Laszlo N. Tauber—and the Jacob and Libby Goodman Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel, and is supported, in part, by the Tauber Foundation.

For the complete list of books that are available in this series, please see www.upne.com and www.upne.com/series/TAUB.html

- | | |
|---|--|
| Hans Jonas | Margalit Shilo |
| <i>Memoirs</i> | <i>Princess or Prisoner? Jewish</i> |
| Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, editors | <i>Women in Jerusalem, 1840–1914</i> |
| <i>Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present</i> | Haim Be'er |
| | <i>Feathers</i> |
| Christian Wiese | Immanuel Etkes |
| <i>The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions</i> | <i>The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader</i> |
| Eugene R. Sheppard | Avraham Grossman |
| <i>Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher</i> | <i>Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe</i> |
| Samuel Moyn | Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, editors |
| <i>A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France</i> | <i>Orientalism and the Jews</i> |
| | Iris Parush |
| | <i>Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society</i> |

HANS JONAS
Memoirs

Edited and Annotated by CHRISTIAN WIESE

Translated from the German by KRISHNA WINSTON



BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Waltham, Massachusetts

Published by University Press of New England

Hanover and London

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by University Press of New England,
One Court Street, Lebanon, NH 03766
www.upne.com

© 2008 by Brandeis University Press

Originally published in German as Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen*,

© 2003 by Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig

Printed in the United States of America

5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Members of educational institutions and organizations wishing to photocopy any of the work for classroom use, or authors and publishers who would like to obtain permission for any of the material in the work, should contact Permissions, University Press of New England, One Court Street, Lebanon, NH 03766.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jonas, Hans, 1903–1993.

[*Erinnerungen*. English]

Memoirs / Hans Jonas. — [1st ed.].

p. cm. — (The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 1-58465-639-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-58465-639-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Jonas, Hans, 1903–1993. I. Title.

B3279.J664A313 2008

193—dc22 2008007651

[B]

This book was translated from the German by Krishna Winston with the exception of chapter 14, which was translated by Ammon Allred.

This translation was made possible through
the generous support of Eleonore Jonas.



University Press of New England is a member of the Green Press Initiative.

The paper used in this book meets their minimum requirement for recycled paper.

CONTENTS



Foreword *by Rachel Salamander* vii

Introductory Remarks *by Lore Jonas* xv

I. EXPERIENCES AND ENCOUNTERS

1. Youth in Mönchengladbach during Wartime 3
2. Dreams of Glory: The Road to Zionism 22
3. Between Philosophy and Zion: Freiburg – Berlin – Wolfenbüttel 39
4. Marburg: Under the Spell of Heidegger and Gnosticism 59
5. Emigration, Refuge, and Friends in Jerusalem 73
6. Love in Times of War 95
7. A “*Bellum Judaicum*” in the Truest Sense of the Word 110
8. Travels through a Germany in Ruins 131
9. From Israel to the New World: Launching an Academic Career 149
10. Friendships and Encounters in New York 170

II. PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

11. Taking Leave of Heidegger 187
12. On the Value and Dignity of Life:
Philosophy of the Organic and Ethics of Responsibility 194
13. “All this is mere stammering”: Auschwitz and God’s Impotence 214
14. Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas, 1944–45,
translated by Ammon Allred 220

Afterword *by Christian Wiese*:

“But for me the world was never a hostile place” 246

Chronology 255

Notes 261

Bibliography 293

Index of Names 309

Illustrations follow page 134

FOREWORD

Rachel Salamander



One thing is clear: this is the book the good Lord had in mind when he made you.

—Hannah Arendt, upon reading a chapter in *The Imperative of Responsibility*

When Hans Jonas's book *The Imperative of Responsibility* appeared in Germany in the fall of 1979, even his publisher, Siegfried Unseld, had no way of knowing that he was bringing out a work of philosophy that would become something of a best seller. Probably no twentieth-century work by an academic philosopher has enjoyed such rapid and wide dissemination in the German-speaking countries as this "attempt at formulating an ethics for technological civilization." No one was more surprised by this success than Hans Jonas himself. In the 1930s he had published a significant study of gnosticism in late antiquity, yet he was known only to readers with a particular interest in that subject. Now in postwar West Germany Jonas achieved a fame enjoyed by none of the other German-Jewish philosophers of his generation who had fled Hitler to countries in the West—including such eminent philosophers as Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Alfred Schütz, and Leo Strauss. Jonas became a media celebrity, the star attraction at every conference on the world's prospects. Interviewers clamored for time with him, and during the 1980s no Catholic or Protestant academy worth its salt would plan a program that did not include him as a participant.

Seldom has a book appeared at such a propitious moment. Jonas's topic resonated with the spirit of the times, which, after the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* and the oil crisis of the early 1970s, was attuned to the environment. Postwar optimism had given way to skepticism toward progress and an unblinking awareness of the dangers posed by constant expansion in the scientific and technical realm. The project of modernism—liberation of human beings through ever-increasing control over nature, that utopia of all avant-garde thinking since the beginning of the modern era—had lost its power to persuade. Hans Jonas countered the new fatalism with his defense of the normality of human life. In his thinking, schooled on Plato and Kant, he focused on identifying the questions and answers to be obtained from a rational approach to the immense knowledge and the unprecedented and

potentially overwhelming power of the natural sciences. Rejecting both technophobia and unquestioning faith in science, Jonas placed his trust in a middle way. His ethics of responsibility was based on working out rationally all the possible outcomes of a given technological innovation or a new form of experimental research. His unpretentious manner in public, his rejection of rhetorical fireworks and attention-getting ploys, stands in welcome contrast to the sterile sensationalism we have witnessed recently in debates over genetic engineering. Amid the current din, we miss the calm voice of Hans Jonas, who, without whipping up panic, would call attention to inhumane aspects of the latest scientific research.

Hans Jonas was almost eighty when we first met in Munich. He drew one's attention less by his appearance than by his riveting way of speaking. Not a tall man — in fact, we were about the same height — Jonas was clearly an intellectual giant, and he spoke with such eloquence that his words could be printed almost verbatim. Even half a century of living abroad and writing and teaching in other languages had not impaired his German at all. On the contrary, in his slightly Rhenish diction he had preserved a piece of Germany that one hardly encounters nowadays. It vanished along with the highly educated middle-class Jews who went into exile or were exterminated by the Nazis. A comment Jonas made in the mid-1980s revealed to me that he felt cut off from changes in the German language and from developments in the German Federal Republic. He said he was considering canceling his longtime subscription to the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* because he kept stumbling over new expressions and topics he did not really understand.

After years of abstinence, Jonas returned to the German language when he set out at seventy to write *The Imperative of Responsibility*. In the late 1930s, as an instructor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he had composed his lectures in Hebrew, a time-consuming undertaking. Then, as a professor of philosophy in Canada and the United States, he had become proficient at writing in English, although he still spoke with a heavy German accent. Now he acknowledged that his mother tongue enabled him to articulate things as he really wanted to. Because at his “advanced age” time was becoming a precious commodity, he decided, in spite of all that had transpired in the meantime, to write the book in German. But in the preface he anticipates any possible criticism of the book's language by announcing that he intends to treat “a highly contemporary topic” not in a contemporary style but in one that might even be called “old-fashioned.” The over-

whelming response the book elicited proved him right. As an old man he finally received in Germany the recognition and the honor he deserved.

Our paths crossed in 1983, when Hans Jonas was offered the first Eric Voegelin guest professorship at the University of Munich. The circumstances of our meeting were propitious. My partner, Stephan Sattler, had studied with Eric Voegelin, a non-Jewish professor of political science who had emigrated to the United States in 1938 but later taught in Munich between 1958 and 1969. Stephan was well acquainted with the scholarly debates between Jonas and Voegelin over gnosticism in the ancient and modern worlds. After attending one of Hans Jonas's lectures at the end of February, Stephan and his brother Florian arranged to meet Hans and Lore Jonas in a restaurant in Schwabing, near the university. As Stephan told me, the Jonases wanted to know all about me. A day later they stopped by the bookstore to see me. Fortunately I had worked my way the previous summer through both volumes of Jonas's *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*. Hans Jonas could not get over his amazement that someone outside academia would take a serious interest in intellectual movements from late antiquity, let alone "such a young woman," as he put it.

The friendship between Stephan and Hans Jonas began with their despair over Plotinus. Stephan was working on a study of Plotinus and was only too happy to discuss it with Jonas, who had never finished his own chapter on that thinker. The philosopher was delighted that when he recited Homer in Greek, Stephan was able to chime in. And indeed, almost always when we came together with Jonas, he would recite wonderful poems for us or read aloud meaningful passages from literary works. Like all Germans raised in cultivated circles before the war, this young man from a good Jewish family had known the poetry of Goethe and Schiller through and through, and Heine's likewise. In his last years, Jonas fascinated us on many an evening with the treasures of German culture stored in his memory.

Stephan and I loved to hear his stories. His memories conjured up a world of long ago. In Hans Jonas were resurrected the great minds of the educated German-Jewish elite who had been scattered to all points of the compass and had been forced to survive far from their home and their inherited culture, while their absence from Germany from that time on meant a terrible loss. As one of their last representatives, Hans Jonas offered a brilliant example of what had been driven out of Germany. Like most of the contemporaries of whom he spoke to us, he came from a largely assimilated family that still maintained ties to the Orthodox tradition but did not

hesitate to show patriotism. His father, a respected textile manufacturer in Mönchengladbach, belonged to the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, whereas after 1918 Hans cast his lot with the Zionists. That decision would save his life. His father died “just in time” in 1938, but his mother was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Hans Jonas did not learn of her death until after the war. It would remain a wound that never healed.

As a Zionist, Hans had seen the handwriting on the wall and left Germany in 1933, going to Palestine by way of England. In Palestine he met others who shared his fate — at the Hebrew University, Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber, and, roaming the streets of Jerusalem, the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. He joined a literary circle; he found it much easier to compose German texts in the style of Thomas Mann or Goethe for the weekly meetings than to write his lectures in Hebrew. This intellectual gentlemen’s circle was highly distinguished, with members such as Gershom Scholem; the physicist Shmuel Sambursky from Königsberg; the journalist George Lichtheim, whose father, Richard Lichtheim, had been a force in the early years of Zionism; the classicist Hans Lewy; and the Egyptologist Hans-Jakob Polotsky. These men competed to see who could imitate most successfully the style of famous German writers. The group dubbed itself “Pilegesh,” a word composed from the first initials of the members’ names that meant “concubine.” The circle dissolved after several members married and were expected to stay home with their wives.

A number of factors account for Jonas’s emigration to North America. The two chairs for professors of philosophy at the Hebrew University were already taken. Jonas also found that conveying his ideas in Hebrew was not getting any easier, and the political situation was becoming increasingly hostile. After five years as a soldier in the British army during the Second World War, Hans Jonas was called up again in 1948–49 for the Israeli War of Independence. By then he had had enough of war. In 1949 he accepted a visiting professorship at McGill University in Montreal, and moved the following year to Carleton University in Ottawa. At last he was closer to New York, where Karl Löwith, a person he greatly admired and considered the most gifted of Heidegger’s students, was living and teaching. Hannah Arendt, his dear friend from their student days, also lived in New York. In 1955 Jonas was finally offered a teaching position at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. There he enjoyed a collegial relationship, albeit not always free of tension, with another philosopher, Alfred Schütz. Schütz was committed to Husserl’s phenomenology, while Jonas had been

deeply influenced by Heidegger's revolt against Husserl; thus the major controversies that had raged in German philosophy during the 1920s continued on the banks of the Hudson. At the New School Jonas enjoyed a fulfilling life as a scholar and teacher, retiring in 1976.

In the 1950s, Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt became close again. That was possible only because each of them liked the other's spouse so much. After the terrible blowup that occurred in 1963 between Jonas and Arendt when Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a quarrel that resulted in a break of several years' duration, Lore Jonas intervened to restore the friendship. After all, the two philosophers had known each other ever since they had both studied in Marburg with the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann and with Martin Heidegger. Hans Jonas had been impressed by the courage of the young Arendt, who went to see Bultmann before taking his seminar on Saint Paul and made it absolutely clear that he should not try to convert her to Christianity. She was and would remain a Jew. Hans Jonas saw her as the prototype of a German "defiant Jew." It caused him immense emotional distress when he became the first to know about the love affair between Hannah Arendt and his revered "Herr Professor" Heidegger.

Whenever Hans Jonas touched on the subject of Heidegger, he expressed his profound disappointment in Heidegger as a human being. In 1924, Jonas had left Husserl in Freiburg and gone to Marburg to study with Heidegger, the rising star in philosophy. Almost everyone interested in philosophy in those days fell under his spell, including many Jews: Günther Anders, Herbert Marcuse, Jeanne Hersch, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Even later, few managed to escape from that spell. Hans Jonas was one of the few. Although he put Heidegger's "existentialism" to productive use in his book on gnosticism, this young man who had turned to philosophy with such enthusiasm precisely because he assumed that "dedication to the truth ennobled the soul" could not understand his teacher Heidegger's shameful alliance with the Nazis. "A philosopher should not have been taken in by that Nazi business," Jonas thought, least of all one of the "greatest philosophers of our time." Jonas saw this betrayal as a "catastrophe for philosophy" itself. He meant not only the infamous inaugural address Heidegger delivered when he was made rector of the University of Freiburg; he also could not forgive Heidegger's behavior toward his teacher, Husserl, whom Heidegger maligned as a Jew and forbade to enter and use the university library. Jonas emphasized the political danger posed in tumultuous times by a philosophy that "hurled" the individual fatefully into the current moment.

In 1945, when Hans Jonas first set foot on German soil again, he knew there was one person he “could not visit”: Heidegger. Upon leaving Germany in 1933, he had sworn to himself that he would return only as a soldier in a victorious army. And so it was. He returned as “a Jew conscious of his dignity,” proudly wearing the uniform of a British officer. For five years he had fought Hitler as a volunteer in the Jewish Brigade. With the British troops he had made his way to Germany through Italy and Austria. The person he sought out immediately was Karl Jaspers. Through the entire war Jaspers had remained in Heidelberg at his Jewish wife’s side. Both of them had always kept poison handy, “in case worse comes to worst.” Jonas described the reunion with great feeling. He had rung their bell during the “sacred midday rest period,” when Jaspers was not to be disturbed. Frau Jaspers opened the door and without the slightest hesitation immediately took him to her husband, whose exclamation, “It is our fault that we are still alive!” Hans Jonas repeated with a sob.

Next he went to see Rudolf Bultmann in Marburg, and his publisher Ruprecht in Göttingen, who immediately insisted that he should write the conclusion to the second volume of his book on gnosticism. Only much later did a meeting with Heidegger come about. Again Jonas’s hopes were dashed. He had expected Heidegger to say something “by way of apology.” Nothing came. After twenty minutes Jonas got up and left.

More and more Stephan and I felt it was incumbent on us to preserve this body of precious memories and share it with the world. Hans Jonas did not think highly of a philosopher’s portraying himself in an autobiography. Nonetheless, in the summer of 1983 I persuaded him to speak at the bookstore. First I had to dispel some of his doubts as to whether his experiences would be of any interest to the public. It was a hot day, and the room was filled to bursting, but the audience hung on his every word. Jonas spoke without notes, yet everything sounded as if it had been carefully formulated in advance. Suddenly he realized that beyond the two of us there was a German audience eager to hear his life story.

The Jonases came to Germany every year after that, usually in June. (Lore Jonas still makes the trip.) We spent a good deal of time together, taking excursions into the Upper Bavarian countryside, usually stopping for lunch at country inns that served cèpes, a type of mushroom Hans Jonas adored and could not get in America. During these outings I realized that he still had a childlike capacity for amazement, as if he were seeing things for the first time. His comment “You don’t say—really? really?” made every con-

versation exciting. We introduced the Jonases to our friends and families, and went to see them whenever we were in New York. They lived half an hour by train outside the city, in New Rochelle, where they had one of those wood-frame houses with a nice lawn that are typical of the area. Nearby lived several mathematicians or scientists who taught in New York or at the Hastings Institute, and with whom Jonas carried on lively discussions. Upon entering the Jonas's white house, one felt transported to another place and time. The rooms were invitingly furnished with splendid Biedermeier pieces; the library shelves were filled for the most part with works of German and Jewish intellectual history. It was easy to forget that one was in America. On the second floor hung lovely drawings done by Hans Jonas when he was a young art student. We met the Jonas children and were present when the family celebrated important birthdays and a very special occasion—the conferral of the Peace Prize of the German Publishing Industry in 1987. We had become friends of the family. Hans Jonas once described the situation thus: we had come to them “like two stray young dogs” with whom they had fallen in love.

We never ran out of things to talk about. Everything became a topic of discussion, above all the problem that preoccupied Hans Jonas during his last years: dealing with modern life. As in his book, he was preoccupied with the question of how to formulate an ethics appropriate to an age of runaway technology. Human beings had to take responsibility for their fragile environment, with the very future of the world at stake. “Man is the only being known to us that can take responsibility. Because he can do so, he is responsible.” This imperative (“Ability brings with it obligation”) accompanies me every day of my life. In the bookshop I have put up a poster, a wonderful portrait of Hans Jonas, with this dictum as a caption; it is read and commented on admiringly by many people.

But our conversations also dealt with less earthshaking topics, for instance our own happiness. Hans Jonas repeatedly stressed that Stephan and I should legalize our long-term relationship. At some point we could no longer evade his probing questions, so we tied the knot in June 1990, with Hans and Lore Jonas as surrogate parents. Along with my brother, Hans served as a witness. The chuppah or wedding canopy was put up in the Jonases' cherry orchard in New Rochelle. Speaking at the wedding dinner, repeatedly overcome with tears of emotion, Hans Jonas invoked the high points and low points of the German-Jewish relationship.

We had spent our most intense hours together in September 1989. I had

persuaded Hans Jonas to tell, one more time, in one fell swoop, his life story, of which we had heard many versions over the years. I wanted to record it on tape. Once Lore had consented, nothing more stood in the way. The Jonases were staying as usual at the Hotel Biederstein in Munich, not far from the Englischer Garten. Over a period of two weeks, we met every day in the adjoining lounges on the hotel's ground floor. Stephan and I took turns asking Hans questions about his life, which in the meantime had become part of ours. Each session lasted no more than an hour and a half. Hans was already suffering from emphysema, but he did not want to give up cigarettes. At regular intervals he would light up, though he sensibly took only a few puffs, then put out the cigarette and trimmed off the smoked end with a little scissors that he kept in the cigarette pack for this purpose. Lore plied us with cookies and tea or coffee. Sometimes we allowed ourselves a swig of brandy from the silver flask that Hans always had on him. Our conversations filled thirty-three tapes. It would have been impossible to convert them into a book in Jonas's style had it not been for his polished speaking style. Upon reading the transcript, we knew we had exactly what we needed. Our questions turned out to be superfluous; we could let Jonas speak for himself.

When I was organizing a discussion series under the heading "The End of the Century" for May and June 1992, Lore Jonas helped me persuade Hans to give his last major public address. At eighty-nine, he had doubts about his own stamina, but his speech, "Looking Backward and Forward at the End of the Century," earned him standing ovations in the packed Prince Regent Theater in Munich. That speech has meanwhile been published in book form.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Lore Jonas



Upon being asked to write an introduction to this book, I found myself wondering what I could possibly add to Hans Jonas's own words. Eventually I decided I should try to convey a sense of the character of this man, whose life I shared for more than fifty years.

If curiosity lies at the root of all philosophy, as the ancients asserted, my husband possessed this gift to an unusual degree. I am tempted to say that he was naïve—in a way that made it possible for him to look at things in a new light, as if no one had ever looked at them before. Occasionally this trait caused others to rebuke him for not citing earlier thinkers. In response he would invoke his friend Gershom Scholem's witticism: "Thinking for yourself is good for you."

He gazed upon the world with fresh, perennially astonished eyes, and was as excited by his grandson's first brave attempts at walking at a year and a half as by a magnificent sunset seen from our garden or the works of the great poets, many of which he could recite from memory even at an advanced age.

He was a proud and loving father to his three children, Ayalah, Jonathan, and Gabrielle.

Hans had received an education in the grand humanistic tradition that was typical of his generation, and is almost unknown today. He could quote Homer in Greek and Cicero in Latin, learned Hebrew in secondary school, and was fond of the Prophets. He learned English in his late forties, and in America that became his medium of communication; native speakers of English attest that he achieved considerable mastery in that idiom. Not until his seventies, when he wrote *The Imperative of Responsibility*, did he return to his mother tongue.

If other men could charm one with their good looks or manners, he could charm one with his speech. I still recall the first time I invited him to dinner; it was in Palestine in the late 1930s. The meal included olives, and he held up an olive and delivered a paean to the olive that began with the anointing of Homer's Greek heroes, went on to the use of olive oil by the high priests of the Old Testament, and eventually arrived at Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*.

Between 1940 and 1945 he served in the British army. He wanted to join the armed struggle against Hitler. During his military service, when he was far from any libraries, he thought about *life*—for obvious reasons, given the ever-present danger of being wounded or killed—and that sparked his interest in the natural sciences. While he was in the field, I sent him, at his request, seminal scientific works by such authors as Charles Darwin, Aldous Huxley, John Haldane, and many others—whatever I could lay my hands on in Palestine.

He first recorded his thoughts about science in his “didactic letters” from the field, which he later developed into the book *Organism and Freedom*, which in later editions bore the title *The Phenomenon of Life*. His love for the natural sciences and his knowledge of them deepened in America, where he spent much of his time in the company of scientists and mathematicians. There were quite a few of the latter in New Rochelle, where we took up residence in 1955. They were mathematicians from Göttingen who had moved to New Rochelle on the urging of Richard Courant, the former head of the University of Göttingen Mathematics Department. He had left Germany in 1933 and wanted to be able to have discussions with his mathematical colleagues even on weekends.

Then came the Hastings Center, where Hans Jonas was made a fellow in 1969 and where he befriended both humanists and scientists who came together there, discussed ethical questions, and, amazingly enough, listened to one another.

He was an enthusiastic and impassioned teacher. One of his earlier students, Howard McConnell, recalled his experience with Hans at Carleton University in Ottawa this way: “Some of my most wonderful memories are connected with Hans Jonas. In his courses, philosophy became a lively and fascinating subject. He told us that we were participating in the eternal search for the answer to the great moral and cosmic questions that had occupied thinkers from Thales on, and that each generation had to confront anew.”

In my husband’s work I can make out three phases: he called his study *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity* his “beginner’s piece”—a historical work. In *Organism and Freedom* he turned his attention to the present, and in *The Imperative of Responsibility* he articulated his concerns about the future. At the time he was seventy-five, yet no lessening of his powers could be detected, and it was lovely to see the feistiness of his earlier years giving way to a more conciliatory attitude, while the urgency of the problems he was treating demanded greater effort on his part.

It is well known that he had the best teachers one could possibly have in the 1920s in Germany—Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Rudolf Bultmann. That experience set a standard that he never wearied of striving to meet, yet also never allowed him to be satisfied. In a poem he wrote in English on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday (he did write poetry at times), the line occurs, “You and I know I did sometimes, not always my best. / Now is the time for the long, long rest.”

He had no fear of death, but held the view that he expressed in “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality”: “As far as each one of us is concerned, the knowledge that we are here for but a short while, and that a non-negotiable limit is imposed on the time we may expect to have, may well be necessary as an incentive to count our days and to live them in such a way that they count for something.” I believe that is what he did.

CHAPTER 7

A “Bellum Judaicum” in the
Truest Sense of the Word



As a boy he stared in fascination
At maps of the great battles, and his imagination
Showed plains bristling with the weapons he loved so much,
While near by, almost close enough to touch,

In coastal waters Roman triremes rock,
On board their grappling hooks point toward the dock
As victors in a clash at sea they seek the bay.
But later something tore the youth away,

Something that once saved from the world's misery
People seeking the light in higher ecstasy.
He studied with passion all the phases
Of true existence, of which Proclus sings the praises,

And wrote them down, in colors far more bright,
Than they deserved, infusing them with light.
Then came the war, dashed the man to the ground,
Leaving the *nous* behind, reality he found.

And peering round to catch the enemy in his sights,
Far from all books and scholarly delights,
He recovered the dreams he'd had once as a boy
Loading his cannon now, no longer a toy.

This poem, with the title “The Philosopher’s Fate,” which George Lichtheim wrote on the occasion of my fortieth birthday, expresses in a cheerful tone the serious circumstances that kept me for years from getting on with my research on gnosticism. England’s declaration of war on Germany in September 1939 came as a great relief to me. I knew that now we’d at least be able to fight for our survival instead of merely watching from the sidelines as things ran their inevitable course owing to the weakness of the other

side. The first thing I did was to sit down and compose an appeal, to which I gave the title “Our Part in This War: A Word to Jewish Men.” It began with the words “This is our hour, this is our war.” I argued that we shouldn’t be content to owe our survival to the efforts and sacrifices of others, and I demanded that we make our own contribution in an unmistakable way. I spoke of what had been done to us and what threatened us, though the thought of violent extermination hadn’t occurred to me yet. There were people who said, “If there’s war, all Jews will be in mortal danger.” But my focus was on what had already happened and what would inevitably happen if Hitler won, and I tried to make it clear that Palestine was no safe harbor, but on the contrary a post from which we could take up the struggle. So I summoned Jewish men to join in the war against Nazi Germany — not only men who’d just come to Palestine after being driven out by Hitler, but all sons of the Jewish people. Here’s my manifesto, verbatim:¹

This is our hour, this is our war. It is the hour for which we have been waiting, despair and hope in our hearts, through these deadly years; the hour when it has been granted to us, after we have borne helplessly every disgrace, every injustice, every physical deprivation and moral humiliation of our people, to look our mortal enemy in the eye at last, to meet him with weapon in hand, and to demand satisfaction; the hour of reckoning when we can claim what is owed us; the hour when we can actively participate in striking down the enemy of the world, who was ours first and will remain ours to the end.

This is the war without which this evil cannot be crushed; the war without which it would have continued to spread through the world without limit or measure, leaving us destroyed in its wake: for this reason it is our war. We have a primary right and a primary duty to wage it. We must join in the fighting because this war is being fought for us. We must wage it in our name, as Jews, for the outcome must restore our name. Our willingness to give our lives must be no less than that of the sons of those nations that have now declared war on Hitlerism. Individual dignity, national honor, and political considerations all call equally for our full participation in this war. It is our duty and must be incumbent upon any man worthy of the name.

We do not wish to speak of the feelings of the individual, feelings born of the personal experiences of these years — of the cloud hanging over us, of the feeling, burning deep within our hearts, of the grievous

hurt inflicted on us, of the righteous thirst for revenge. But we do wish to speak of the reasons for which this war against Hitlerism is our people's concern, since our concerns are at stake in it, in the absolute sense of the word. If any people was provoked by Hitler, it is ours. If any people is obligated by honor and self-interest to take up the struggle and carry it forward, prepared to make the supreme sacrifice if necessary, it is our people. To an incomparably greater degree than any of the countries now allied against Hitler we have been attacked by him and threatened with total destruction. To an infinitely greater degree, we risk *everything*. For the others, one interest or another, one aspect or another of their national, cultural, or imperial existence is at issue; they are threatened in one aspect of their being on earth, however significant, whereas in our case the Nazi principle, which aspires to impose itself on the entire world, strikes at the heart of our human dignity and, at the same time, at the very possibility of our existence on earth. We are the Nazis' metaphysical enemy, their designated victim from the very first day, and we shall know no peace until either that principle or our own people is no more.

For us, therefore, it is not a part but the whole that is at issue. Directed against us is truly *total* war. For we are *negated as a category of human beings*, plain and simple, no matter what political, social, or ideological form our existence takes. No accommodation, no adaptation is possible. Our mere existence is incompatible with the existence of Nazism. Here we have a confrontation that has taken on mythological dimensions, and it can end only with the destruction of one or the other. No other people is in this situation. For all the others, some sort of accommodation — however distasteful — is at least conceivable, and was attempted for a long time: a good thing for us that the willingness to make concessions is at an end, and that the call "This far and no farther!" has finally rung out. This turn of events gives us the longed-for opportunity to enter this struggle at last.

If today there existed a Jewish state, it would have had to be the first to declare war against Hitler's Germany, following England and France. That it does not exist changes nothing in the basic fact that we must regard ourselves as at war with Germany, and does not absolve us of the duty to conduct ourselves like citizens of a state at war — i.e., to do our share at the front.

In truth we have already been engaged in this war for six years —

passively. In the year 1933 war was declared on us, and since then it has been waged against us without pause, with ever-increasing ruthlessness, with an ever-expanding geographical reach, and accordingly with growing ruin on our side. Up to this hour, it was a *one-sided* war. We have had to stand by helplessly and bear what was done to us and our name. Thousands of Jewish lives destroyed, thousands of Jewish hearts broken, thousands of Jewish people robbed, tortured, persecuted, driven to suicide, loaded up like cattle and hurled into the void. Think of the refugee ships with their desperate cargo, this hellish vision of our century. Think of Shanghai. We had to watch as our name was besmirched, our values cast down, our synagogues torched, our Holy of Holies desecrated. Wherever we were citizens, we were treated worse than animals, and every lout was allowed to spit on us — we had to bear it! We saw even the defenseless souls of our children subjected to this truly satanic hatred and crushed in the bud. This pain is branded on our souls and cannot remain silent. And no defense was possible, not the slightest attempt at striking back! We were at the mercy of this boundlessly impudent power, which heaped scorn on our wretchedness.

What has been portrayed here as a human fate reveals itself collectively as a national fate: during one year of horrors after another, we saw highly civilized Jewish populations in the core lands of the Golah [Diaspora] cast down and wiped from the face of the earth. We saw a war of extermination declared on us wherever we existed in the world and advancing like a juggernaut. We had to yield one position after the other to the irreconcilable enemy. A world began to expand in which *Jewishness* had no right to be, Jews had no right to live — and in which it would not have been worthwhile for a Jew to live. The mere proximity of the Nazi Reich began to undermine the foundations of Jewish emancipation even beyond its borders, and even the most distant Jewish populations learned to tremble, something that will long remain with them. All of them felt the ground beneath their feet quake. But not only the *emancipation* of the Jews was threatened, a status that no nationalist Jew, no Zionist may relinquish; even for the *ghetto* life, a condition some already saw making a comeback, there would be no room in this system: the retreat to the yeshiva, which mighty Rome granted to a politically defeated Jewish population, would not be granted by victorious Hitlerism to its victims, even supposing this population were

willing to seize such an opportunity. The torched and dynamited synagogues testify to that.

Jewishness of the “Pharisee” and the “Sadducee” brand is equally impossible in a world ruled by National Socialism. No intellectual life can flourish under the heel of the Gestapo. The structure of the totalitarian state has no neutral zones where anything nonconforming might flourish; this state spares the soul as little as the body. Its antisemitism can imply only one thing: extermination — or that ultimate humiliation that is even worse.

This antisemitic principle of “domestic policy” must of necessity become an instrument of foreign policy: just as a demonic fate unflinchingly drives the Hitlerian expansion into the very areas where Jewish mass settlement has taken place and thus provides a constant supply of material for the machinery of destruction — so, too, Hitlerism is compelled by the law according to which it developed to take aim at us in all facets of its world policy — and most of all in areas where we mean something. Therefore, what was said of the Golah applies also to Eretz Israel, which we had been so eager to see as an exception to that tragic law. Let us not deceive ourselves: to this enemy, a proud Jewish people must be even more unbearable than one that is cowed; and however far this enemy’s influence extends, it cannot tolerate our political and national self-fulfillment, the sovereign evolution of a free Jewish people, our flourishing as human beings, drawing on our people’s own strength, for that would serve as the living refutation of the Nazis’ image of Jewish inferiority. In a practical political sense, too, the enemy had to bump into us here, and sooner or later Jewish Palestine, far from enjoying an exceptional status, would have had to experience the full impact of a Nazism that had become a world power.

Let no one believe, then, that this germ of our future could have flourished or even preserved itself in a world in which Nazism triumphed. Let no one succumb to the Little Palestinian delusion that a blooming Jewish oasis could long survive amid the desert of a destroyed Diaspora — *al horban hagaluth*; that Jewish freedom could raise its head in a world from which freedom was disappearing; that a self-sufficient Jewish island could maintain itself in a world ruled by hostile powers. The opposite is true, as has become evident in the course of the current unrest, in the mandate government’s retreat in the face of the greater threat lurking behind it. And this was just the first hint of the

shadow Hitler cast. What “Hitler in the Orient” would really mean to us can be imagined only when we contemplate the fate of the Armenians.

That is how the world in store for us looked, to the extent that it was not already a reality. A flood tide was rising that would have swept away both our Diaspora and our national existence in this land. And the most desperate aspect, the most destructive aspect of all this was the awareness that we were condemned to complete defenselessness. In the long run, no individual, no people can endure such impotence without suffering damage to the soul. The victim of abuse sooner or later becomes a pariah. Many among us were already beginning to accept the notion that this evil was all-powerful, that nothing could halt its advance. A kind of fatalism was setting in, paralyzing us. At the sight of the sinister growth of the boa constrictor, of its ability to transfix its victims with its gaze, a fatalistic certainty that this fate was inescapable was spreading, i.e., a certainty that *the death sentence imposed on us as a people could not be reversed*. It becomes difficult to breathe when the air is filled with hatred and a dull premonition of destruction.

But there were also some among us who were just waiting for their hour, who had vowed not to feel at home again in this world or to take pleasure in its beauty until fate had granted them an opportunity to fight and settle accounts. This hour has now struck. It is our great chance — a political and a moral chance at one and the same time.

Politically it means that the Jewish people, by committing its sons to the struggle, can do its part to turn aside the evil fate aimed at it, and, by visibly joining on the front lines the forces allied against Hitler, by accepting the same risks and sacrifices in order to overthrow him, can regain its right of citizenship on earth — and that means both its right to live anywhere on earth as well as its particular right to Eretz Israel. Morally this opportunity means that for the sake of our self-respect and the respect of the world we can prove that we are not pariahs, helplessly swallowing their pain, but rather men who know how to take responsibility for their lives and strike back. The honor of which National Socialism deprived us would be truly lost the moment we entertained the thought of letting other peoples defend our cause and then received at their hands the gift of our recovered equality or merely the elimination of our mortal enemy.

The appearance of Herzl in our history has the following significance: he made such a ghetto attitude impossible for us henceforth —

an attitude in which we duck our heads to let the storms of history pass over them, while we wait to see what the outcome might be for us. When Zionism proclaimed to the people of the ghetto that they were a nation, it brought that people into the world arena and obliged it to assume the risk of an *autonomous historical existence*. And the partisan position that the diasporic situation had up to now prevented us from taking in the conflicts between peoples — this remnant of paralysis when it came to acting decisively in the realm of foreign policy has been dissolved by National Socialism: with inescapable clarity it has shown us which side we are on in the larger conflict and thereby propelled us to the front where we shall stand or fall. This time no conflict of loyalty can cloud the clarity of our position as a unified national actor.

This is not the first war in modern times in which Jews are participating. But it is the first in which the Jewish people is fighting as such. Yet never *in our entire Galut history* has the Jewish people, through its sons, been able to fight as an entity on one side and in defense of its own cause in a world war. Now this situation is at hand. That is what is historically new and unique about this war. That is why this is a “*bellum judaicum*” in the truest sense of the word — the first since the end of our existence as a state. But in contrast to that last *bellum judaicum*, this one, we hope, is not a war of catastrophe but a war that will rescue us from the Jewish catastrophe; not Judah against the world, but Judah with the world against the enemy of the world.

This war is also in a figurative sense the first war of religion in modern times. This spiritual aspect transcends all political calculations on the part of the governments waging war and originates in the very definition of the two sides. Of necessity — and independently of the degree of conscious choice — this constitutes a clash between two principles, one of which, in the form of Christian-Western humanism, also represents the heritage of Israel, the other of which represents the cult of power that mocks human values, the absolute negation of that heritage. National Socialism first recognized this clash when it maligned Christianity as the Jewification of European humanity and made Christianity a target of its metaphysical antisemitism. The churches recognized this clash when they realized — for the first time — that this struggle against Judaism was an attack on their own spiritual origins, rooted in Jewish tradition. The rational humanist civilization of modern Europe,

too, which has freed itself from religion yet espouses instinct control, an ethics of conscience, and respect for the human individual, is ultimately descended from that great spiritual tradition originating in revelation. Thus National Socialism, as the adversary of all these values, as *heathenism* in the most profound sense, has created the apparent paradox that a *bellum christianum* can at the same time be a *bellum judaicum*. Europe's earlier wars of religion were struggles within Christianity and did not affect us Jews; this one is the quintessential struggle against the heathen, and when reduced to its simplest terms suddenly reveals the foundations shared by our Jewish culture and that of the Christian West. Our people's ancient tradition, our still relevant contribution to the ethical formation of the human race, is summoned to the lists in this struggle. In this sense as well, which extends far beyond mere self-preservation, this war is a *bellum judaicum* and calls us to arms.

What form can our participation in this war take? For the individual, it must of course entail activity in all the arenas in which modern war is fought, directly and indirectly. But since here collective and absolute matters are at stake, let only the most extreme form of participation be spoken of here — military participation. It is our wish and hope that Jewish units, presenting themselves as such, will fight in the Allies' ranks, precisely in those locations where there is direct confrontation with our enemy, with the armies of the Third Reich: we want a *Jewish legion on the western front*. In several countries, Czech and Polish legions are being formed. It would redound to the Jewish people's eternal shame if we, who are more affected than either of those two peoples, did not show our flag next to theirs in the main theater of war. We expect this deed of the Jewish people, this proof of its manhood, this contribution to seizing control of its own destiny.

This legion should be an all-Jewish legion, i.e., a legion representing world Jewry. Its recruitment territory is the entire Diaspora outside the area under Hitler's domination, in particular all the places where refugees from Hitler's tyranny forgather. Unless we are sorely mistaken about the Jews' sense of honor, these refugees will be particularly receptive to this call to arms, indeed will be awaiting it with impatience, and will answer it with enthusiasm. We place hope, furthermore, in the greatest pool of Jewish people, and, since the blows of the last few years, the only one that remains intact: America.

In such an all-Jewish legion, Palestine must be represented as well. As the group of Jews most mature in a political sense, as the only one that is nationally emancipated, the Palestinian community has a higher obligation to seize the initiative and serve as an example to Jews everywhere. Palestine is not a refuge from the vicissitudes of the Golah; it is the avant-garde of the Golah. Zionism is not confined to Little Palestine. This pan-Jewish duty imposed on Palestine is an additional one for the Yishuv: it does not conflict with our duty to protect our positions here, but from a higher vantage point complements it. The natural priority that must be given to local defense is uncontested; but it is not enough for the fighting power of Jewish Palestine to be restricted to serving as a garrison when entire peoples face off. Waiting to see how things develop here must not provide a convenient excuse for the individual to place limitations on his willingness to sacrifice.

Under current conditions, the actual front lines for a country may be located at a great remove. Attending to the purely local aspect would do justice neither to Palestine's inextricable involvement in global decisions nor to its moral obligation to Jews throughout the world. It would be a failure of the true national idea, a failure on the part of Palestine to realize the true meaning of Zionism, which calls for Chaluzi-uth [pioneer existence] for Israel, wherever it may be. The fate of Palestine will also be decided on the battlefields of Europe. Only there can a new legitimation of our claim to Palestine be obtained. A Palestinian division — we can say nothing about its size — must not be absent from the all-Jewish legion in the war against Hitler. In this military kibbutz hagalujoth [gathering of Jews from the Diaspora], a Zionist core must be represented.

Seeing to the proper deployment of the Palestinian Jewish forces is the responsibility of those in charge, who can use their judgment when it comes to implementing the outcome of this appeal, which can only be on too small a scale, never on too great a one; this has nothing to do with the personal decision for the *more dangerous* assignment at which this appeal aims. The individual will hardly be in a position to judge whether the border is located ahead of or behind him; he must merely ask himself: What am I prepared to do? Ultimately his decision is a human one, not a political one. In choosing the most difficult assignment he will not let himself be deterred by the fear that there might be too many like him. It is easy to deal with too many: anyone

who has volunteered for the more ambitious assignment will always accept an order to take on a more limited one. The reverse is less easy to deal with.

Let one more thing be said to clarify our inner attitude and our outward position: whatever we may hope for from the outcome of this war in the way of Jewish political gains, of advancement of goals that are dear to us—and everyone is free to harbor such hopes—this may not be made a condition of our participation. Toward whom could such a condition be asserted in any case? Our axiom is that from a purely Jewish perspective this is “our war.” For that reason it is not a matter of our offering to help with someone else’s cause and expecting something in return, but of doing our part in a situation in which we are implicated from the outset, in which we have no choice. A “do ut des” attitude would falsify the entire basis for this struggle as the cause of the Jewish people par excellence. We should be clear on this, and not let any doubts on this score arise among others: in fighting, we are not helping others in expectation of a reward; rather we are helping ourselves by averting our annihilation—and by restoring our honor. Our volunteering to join the struggle would only be devalued if it came with the expectation that others would reciprocate. In any case, in this war our cause is automatically at stake—and the whole world knows that. We are the party at war, and with as much justification as those at whose side we want to fight—no, with more justification. That is why it is not true that we choose to back them and join them as allies, but the other way around: their declaration of war on Hitler now gives us the opportunity to wage the war that was imposed on us a long time ago. The basis for our alliance is the prime minister’s declaration that this war shall continue “till Hitlerism is destroyed.” No further basis is needed. The annihilation of Hitler is a sufficient purpose—at the moment the purpose—and we can amply justify our claim to participate (not our “offer”) by citing our preeminent interest in annihilating Hitler. Therefore the Jewish people as a whole has no other war objective than this, and our commitment may not be conditional; it must be unconditional. The moment we are able to participate in achieving this goal, indeed when this goal itself first became possible, is not the moment for considering other commitments, even those to our otherwise valid causes. We must go into this war without looking to left or right, without contemplating any outcome other than this one. Only then will we be able

to say that the first war the Jewish people has fought in its modern history was a purely *defensive* war.

Jewish men! A generation that was old enough to be fully aware of the First World War is inoculated against going to war frivolously, against succumbing to self-deception when it comes to the horrors of war. But armed with this knowledge, to which is added knowledge of the six years of outrage we have endured at Hitler's hands, we swear that this war must be taken up by Jews and fought wherever it rages most fiercely—and where we can look our chief enemy in the eye. We need not condition our participation on the illusion that we are certain of the outcome. It is enough to know the alternative: if the Western powers prove victorious—and that we believe will be the case—Hitler will fall, and the Jewish people will again have a *prospect* of survival. If Hitler proves victorious, that means our downfall, here and everywhere else: so at least we want to go down fighting. But it is pointless, at the beginning of such a momentous historical process, to want to see beyond the immediate goal and to ask how the world may look after it is all over. As a spur to action the immediate goal is more than sufficient: the overthrow of Hitler. Let us conduct ourselves in such a way that one day our grandchildren will have no reason to be ashamed of us.

It was clear to me that since my appeal was composed in German it would reach mainly those who'd immigrated from German-speaking regions. So I began to peddle it around. First I organized a meeting; it took place [on 6 October 1939] in the apartment of a prominent figure in German Zionist circles, an older fraternity brother of mine called Gustav Krojanker. A goodly number of people attended,² none of whom could be expected to join the military themselves, but whose moral support and influence I needed in order to move this cause ahead. All those present were immediately persuaded that we had to try for a visible Jewish involvement in the war on the Allies' side, on the model of the so-called Jewish Legion formed by American Jewish volunteers in the First World War, which at the time—already under the aegis of the Balfour Declaration—helped conquer Palestine under the British flag.³ In this case, however, it was a question of taking on the enemy of the world, who was also the enemy of the Jewish people and whose victory would mean our total destruction. The group agreed unanimously that we absolutely had to be present and active in the theaters of war, not somewhere on the periphery. I thought, of course, that the cen-

ter of the struggle would be located in France, as in the First World War, for I was betting on the quality of the French army and the British expeditionary corps, which I hoped would mount an effective military resistance to Hitler. At the time no one could have predicted France’s rapid collapse.

After I’d won over this circle, I disseminated some copies of my appeal, with the help of other Jews from Germany. It’s unlikely, however, that at the time it reached many people, because it wasn’t written in Hebrew. From my perspective, the most important thing was to gain access to the army, and that was where I directed my efforts for the time being. I managed to arrange a meeting with a British military commander or his adjutant, and presented our request: the creation of units in which Jews could volunteer to serve in the various branches of the service, units that would fight under British command but be identifiable as Jewish, with their own flag. I made no bones about it: “We want to be deployed to the western front.” The English reaction was frosty: “We’ll handle things as we see fit.” Other than pleasantries I received not one encouraging word, not even the concession that our request would be forwarded to London. Alas, mine was a private initiative, with far too little authority behind it. The Jewish Agency (Sochnut), which otherwise represented international Zionism and the Yishuv to the British, wasn’t involved at the time, and from that quarter, too, I received no encouragement. The agency told me, “This is a political matter, one that we’ll take up with the proper offices in the correct manner at the proper time,” and they weren’t pleased to see this kind of thing being pushed from below and without authorization. It became clear to me that the Jewish Agency was interested exclusively in Palestinian issues and would insist on linking any Jewish fighting force with the Zionist cause. I, on the other hand, was convinced that this war went far beyond Zionist local interests. Up to then we’d been subjected to active Arab attacks, which had ceased only because after the war began the English forces in the country were reinforced so much and received so much more authority to intervene that the Arab uprising was essentially stopped in its tracks.⁴ Palestine or the Middle East had now become a theater of war, or at least a potential theater of war. Actually this didn’t really happen until Italy entered the war, which, as we know, didn’t occur until 1940. Italy had of course colonized Libya, while Germany originally had no foothold in the Middle East. Be that as it might: it was clear that the Middle East was a potential theater of war, and even though I didn’t know the Jewish Agency’s plans at the time, I was certainly aware that the agency was by no means enthusiastic about putting

our military strength to work far from Palestine, despite the possibility that situations could arise in which the presence of armed Jewish units might be critical. I countered all these considerations with the argument that our fate would be decided by the outcome of this war; everything we undertook locally in Palestine would be completely meaningless if Hitler won, while a victory of the Allies would also give us freedom of movement for our efforts in Palestine. To my mind, the top priority was to overthrow Hitler, an idea that not all Jews accepted. I engaged in debate with Jewish groups who said, “First of all we must make ourselves very strong in this country and see to it that we’re armed when hostile forces come here.” During one discussion in Tel Aviv someone raised the following objection to my position: “The Red Army is practically close enough to touch; a hop, skip, and jump from Russia’s southwestern border, and it will be in Persia and on the Black Sea. But that’s such an immediate danger that it may not be Hitler at all we have to fear.” Such things were going through people’s minds.

After we’d been turned away by the British, who were polite and amiable, Walter Gross and I requested a meeting with the French consul general in Jerusalem and presented to him our wish — I’d prepared our statement in French — to place a Jewish volunteer fighting force at the disposal of the French high command on the western front. We emphasized that while these troops would be placed under French command, they would fight under their own flag — “pour l’honneur du drapeau.” The consul was polite and friendly, too, and said, “Yes, we have a channel for citizens of other countries who wish to volunteer: the Foreign Legion.” I explained to him that this was precisely what we didn’t want. Not the Foreign Legion, but Jewish troops fighting under their own flag! French uniform — yes, French command — yes, French officers — yes, but not in the Foreign Legion. Yet the offer of the Foreign Legion was the most he was willing to grant us, and that was where we left it. Our efforts had come to a dead end. Both the Jewish Agency and the British and French commands turned a deaf ear to our proposal. On the other hand, it was fairly clear that without the support of the Jewish Agency we couldn’t do anything for the time being but stand by and observe the course of the war. Developments were not slow in coming, and the result was that in 1940 England suddenly found itself sustaining the war effort all alone.

My initiative was backed by only a small group of enthusiastic amateurs, who thought it was possible to take on and implement something like this without much organization. We flattered ourselves that this undertaking

would have instant appeal to Jewish pride and Jewish capacity for self-sacrifice, and that young Jewish men who were waiting impatiently for their chance would flock to us. We'd miscalculated, however. A further problem was that no Jewish organization wanted to support us. What was taking place behind the scenes I had no way of knowing. George Lichtheim, with his superior knowledge of politics and his ironic temperament, explained to me that I was rushing into this situation like Parsifal, the “dumb fool,” while the political dynamics were moving in an entirely different direction. And that was indeed the case. My friends were very impressed by my determination, but initially breathed a sigh of relief — not for my sake but for theirs — when nothing came of my efforts. When the moment was ripe, it turned out that I was the only one who volunteered, at first with the exception of Walter Gross, who, however, dropped out between September 1939 and August 1940 because his extremely decisive wife, Lola, who already had one child, quickly and intentionally got pregnant. She wanted to prevent her Walter from joining Hans Jonas in this madness.

After the collapse of France, word reached me from the Jewish Agency and the Haganah that certain agreements had been made with the British High Command, and now Palestinian volunteer units were being formed. You could go to Sarafant for a military physical exam. I went and was found fit for service. At thirty-seven I was no longer young enough for the infantry, but I was accepted into the First Palestine Anti-Aircraft Battery. At the time you could join the infantry, the artillery, the engineers, and the air force, but the latter only for service on the ground. For training as a pilot you had to go to England. The volunteer units weren't organized under one command but were scattered: the infantry units were deployed to North Africa, while the anti-aircraft batteries were set up in Haifa to defend against aerial attacks from Damascus and Beirut, where the Vichy French were now fighting on the side of the Germans. The battery in which I received my training was made up of young Jews — some of them brand-new immigrants, who'd fled Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia,⁵ but also men from the kibbutzim, who'd been urged by the Haganah to volunteer so we could gain experience in all branches of the service as the basis for building the future Jewish army. The Jewish Zionist agencies' interest was focused primarily on the postwar period. Accordingly, the Haganah decided who would receive training in the British army and who would stay in Palestine. Lore's brother, Franz, for instance, was denied permission to volunteer, because he was needed locally. So my battery consisted on the one hand of individual

volunteers, who, like me, had spontaneously decided to report for duty, and on the other hand of volunteers secretly picked by Jewish organizations. The kibbutzniks all belonged to the latter category. Among them were Sabras, born in the country and raised as farmers, sturdy boys and excellent soldiers, in whose eyes Hitler and German Jewry were part of another world. On the other side were those who felt directly affected because they came from Europe and were acutely conscious of the fate of family members who hadn't got out in time. Among them was a volunteer originally from Metz, the only academic besides me, who'd given up his position as a botanist at the Hebrew University. His name was Michael Evenari, originally Walter Schwarz, an irrigation specialist who'd made the greening of the Negev his life's work, an excellent man, a few years my junior. When it came to military matters he was much more gifted and eventually became a sergeant major — the highest noncommissioned rank. He refused to go to England for officer training because he — like me — wanted to be with the enlisted men.⁶

In the course of the war, some of those with real military talent were sent to England for officer training, and some of them didn't return until we had the Italian campaign long since behind us. Among the officer trainees was one man of whom I had a particularly high opinion and with whom I remained in contact later on: a man born in America who'd come to Palestine as a child with his Zionist parents, a corporal, who was my direct superior on Cyprus and in Italy, and then also in the War of Independence. His original name was Josef Levin, but he changed it to Josef Nevo. Eventually he became a general in the Israeli army. His example showed me the difference between someone who really has what it takes to be a military leader and someone who merely has the honest desire to be a decent soldier. I count myself one of the latter. Josef Levin, however, was the kind of person who remained cool under fire, as if he didn't fear for his life at all, and could thus give orders while in danger himself. I wanted to mention these two people, Evenari and Levin, as comrades in arms with whom I spent the entire five years. I saw both of them again afterward, and whenever we met, we fell into each other's arms. Sharing the experience of war forges unbreakable bonds. I remember running into Josche Levin, by now Nevo, after many years. He already had a great military career behind him and had been a general in the Sinai campaign of 1956 and the Six Days' War of 1967. Later he'd gone into politics and become the mayor of Herzliya. I'd seen him once in America, where he was visiting, but then we hadn't heard anything

of each other for years. One day, he told me, he'd turned on the radio, and his wife had said suddenly, “That’s Hans Jonas. That’s his voice.” I happened to be at a conference in Israel, and had mustered all my Hebrew to take part in a little panel discussion in Haifa, which was being broadcast. They then invited me to visit, and that was the beginning of a close friendship.

In our anti-aircraft battery we generally spoke Hebrew, though the soldiers from Central Europe spoke German among themselves. At first our superiors — real officers — were British. The fact that those among us who had the greatest military talent were sent to England for officer training made it possible for the British officers to be replaced more and more by Hebrew-speaking Jewish officers from Palestine. Initially we were stationed in Palestine to defend the oil refineries of Haifa, but then we were transferred to Cyprus, which was also being bombarded. The North African campaign, in which the Germans were very successful, posed a lasting threat to British supply ships in the Mediterranean, and Cyprus was an important base. On Cyprus I began to learn modern Greek, and the Greek Cypriot farmers in the wine taverns were thrilled to hear me recite Homer. It was nice on Cyprus, but I was getting impatient to be where the action was. I was one of the foolhardy ones who applied for a transfer to England, so as to participate in an invasion of Europe. Nothing came of that. Instead we accomplished something else, something very important, namely that Churchill realized the moral significance of the Jewish cause and our participation in the war, and, over the resistance of his generals, ordered that our units, scattered among the various branches of the service, be joined into a single military entity. Thus in September 1944 the *Jewish Brigade Group* officially came into existence.⁷ It made a great difference whether there were Jewish units here and there, fighting in North Africa, in Tobruk or in the western desert, while the artillery was stationed only in parts of the homeland, as opposed to a special Jewish brigade. Churchill then ordered that we should receive our own insignia — blue and white with the star of David embroidered in gold. Furthermore, Churchill opened this brigade for transfer applications from other parts of the British armed forces, so that we suddenly had an influx of young Jewish soldiers from England, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and were now no longer merely Palestinian but a bona fide Jewish brigade. It was amazing how many soldiers seized this opportunity to transfer in.

The Jewish Brigade Group, which included all branches of the service except the air force, was finally deployed in the last stages of the war, for

we were sent to Italy. The invasion of Europe began from the south, after all. The decisive phase took place in Normandy, but first came the landing in North Africa, just as I'd wagered years earlier, and from that moment on I knew we'd get our chance, too. The brigade formed at different locations until we were all loaded onto ships, and in 1944 we first came together in southern Italy. In the meantime I'd become a specialist in automatic anti-aircraft guns, and, after receiving additional training in the mechanics and repair of these guns, assumed the position of master gunner in my battery. First we were sent to Alexandria, and from there to a large training camp on the edge of the western desert, where we were trained in field artillery. In addition to our anti-aircraft guns — Swedish Bofos guns — the most important weapon we were now equipped with was the British army's main field cannon, a 75-mm fieldpiece. In contrast to heavy artillery, this is a mobile artillery piece, relatively easy to operate, which is used on the front lines, directly behind the infantry. This retraining took several weeks, and then we were granted home leave, for it was clear we wouldn't be able to get away once we were deployed. So in quick succession every soldier received a three-day furlough. Since there was no time to write home, the first group were asked to deliver a message for their comrades: "Please tell my wife or so-and-so that I'll be arriving at such-and-such a time." That was how Lore learned that I was coming. I hadn't had a leave in a long time, for once you were outside the country leave was seldom possible. We traveled by train from Alexandria, crossed the Suez Canal at Port Said in large livestock transports, rolled north across the Sinai, and reached the railroad station in Haifa at three in the morning. From there I tramped up Mt. Carmel with my gear. At about two or three hundred meters above sea level, located on a slope, was Hadar Har Karmel, a part of Haifa that was purely Jewish. I knew that Lore had a room on the fourth floor, and when I saw a light up there, I whistled our special signal. Lore opened the window and then came down to open the front door for me. Because we knew that this would be my last leave, I'd sent word to her that she should take a room for us for two or three nights at the best, most expensive hotel on Mt. Carmel. When Lore woke up the next morning, I wasn't sleeping beside her but on the floor! During my time in the military I'd become so used to sleeping on hard boards that I couldn't sleep on a soft mattress. After Lore fell asleep I'd spread something on the floor and was sleeping on a somewhat firmer mattress — the tiles.

And then back we went — by way of Alexandria — to Italy. We landed in Taranto, the ancient city of Tarentum, located on the instep of the Ital-

ian boot. From there we made our way north. Wherever we arrived, Jews crept out of their hiding places, for word got around fast: “Jewish troops are approaching!” We’d already heard rumors about the fate of the Jews in Europe. Some attempts had been made to penetrate this secret, among them the famous mission of Enzo Sereni, the Italian Zionist, who renounced his pacifism after the defeat of France, joined the British secret service, and in May 1944 was dropped over Yugoslavia with a group of paratroopers to make contact with partisans. Sereni was captured by the Germans and later murdered in Dachau, and most of those in his group lost their lives.⁸ The messages that made their way out of Eastern Europe were vague and uncertain, and how accurate they were, no one could tell. What was clear, however, was that terrible things were happening in the areas under German occupation. We’d also heard about deportations — entire regions being cleared of Jews, something that even in wartime couldn’t be kept secret. But where they were moved to, and what happened to them, was largely unclear. We knew about the ghettos and also about the concentration camps, but we hadn’t heard about the gas chambers. Not until we reached Italy were our eyes gradually opened, for the farther we advanced the more terrible were the things we heard. But we also learned that in many cases the Italians had hidden Jews, saved them from the Gestapo, and smuggled them from place to place. The love I already felt for Italy was transformed during this time into a love for the Italians, who distinguished themselves from all other European peoples, including the Dutch, by never falling prey to worship of the state. They’d never paid that much attention to the laws and directives issuing from Rome, for there was a deeply rooted anarchic element in their psyche. The ordinary Italian, whether a villager or a city dweller, was infinitely superior to the German in the way he refused to let the state tell him what to think about the things that really mattered in life. Even fascism, which is an Italian invention, after all, never managed to delude the population as to what a person owes a fellow human being. We heard stories that brought tears to our eyes. We met a mother and her daughter, about seventeen or eighteen at the time. Both of them — they came from Germany, and there was no father — had fled to Italy and wandered from place to place for years. Finally, when the deportations began in Italy, supervised directly by the Gestapo, they reached a village where they sought refuge, illegally, and without ration cards. On the Sunday after they arrived — they’d been taken in by a farm family — the priest said in his sermon in church, “There are a few among us who are suffering persecution. They have sought our

protection, and our Christian duty commands that we protect them. No child in my congregation may speak of their presence and report it to any outsider.” Those instructions were followed—people fed them and kept them hidden. It was often the parish priests who helped, while the highly placed churchmen stood by and said nothing.

At the end of the war, when the German troops in Italy capitulated on 29 April 1945, we had just fought the battle of Senio, the only larger battle in which I participated, and one that ended with our breaking through the German lines. We were advancing after the battle, and entered Bologna as liberators, greeted by girls who kissed us.

For months, indeed years, my connection with Lore, by the way, had been maintained only through letters. I wrote two kinds of letters; some I characterized as love letters, some as “didactic letters.” In the latter, I began to develop my philosophy while I was serving in the field. Far from books, lacking any materials for scholarly research, I was thrown back on the question that should actually preoccupy every philosopher, namely the question as to the meaning of our existence and the existence of the world around us. So I began to wonder what it implies in ontological terms that there are organisms, and what significance the nature of organic being holds for life, including the nature of consciousness, of emotion, and of the spirit; all this I developed in letters.⁹ We weren’t allowed, by the way, to divulge our location in letters from the field, since that was a military secret. Nonetheless I often managed to convey this information to Lore in code. When we were in Rome (which was also no particular secret, since it had been taken by the Allies long before this), and we visited the collections of the Vatican, I sent her a picture.¹⁰ It showed a remnant of a fresco that had once adorned some part of the Vatican, but then had been removed: Melozzo da Forlì’s angel playing music. Melozzo is the artist’s name, da Forlì indicates the place he came from. A harmless picture. Hugs from your loving Hans. Later we were stationed for a while not far from Ravenna, where the front ran along the little Senio River. Our headquarters were in the village of Forlì, and in one of my letters I simply reminded Lore that I’d sent her that picture of the angel from the Vatican. So she knew we were near Forlì. That’s how you can sometimes fool the censors.

Finally we were bivouacked in Udine, in northern Italy. There I heard the most wonderful story to come out of the whole war. In the town marketplace, a few fellow soldiers and I, who were recognizable by our blue and white shoulder patches with the Star of David, were approached by two

older Jewish women. They asked whether we spoke German, and we sat down with them in the middle of busy Udine, where it happened to be market day, and had them tell us their story. They came from Trieste, which had belonged to Austria until the end of World War I, but as a result of the Italian defeat had then become Italian. When the persecution of the Jews was already in full swing in Germany, they were still relatively safe in Trieste, for Mussolini hadn't immediately adopted Hitler's anti-Jewish policy. But eventually the threat of deportation reached Trieste as well, and they decided to move farther south. Apparently that was the watchword among Jews: the farther south you could get, into Italy proper, the safer you'd be. So they packed only hand luggage, including jewelry and cash, and set out for the station to head south. Just as they were approaching the barrier where you had to show your ticket to get onto the platform, they noticed that Gestapo agents or their Italian equivalent were standing beside the conductors. As they stood there at a loss, trying to think what they should do, they saw one of the Italian railroad officials wink at them and wave them to a spot where they could get through the barrier onto the platform without being checked. Not a word was spoken; the man had simply recognized what was happening. They got on the train, and got off in Udine, where they found an unfurnished garret, lacking even beds. There they could go into hiding at any rate, without registering with the police. In the neighborhood, however, people were aware that they had moved in. Two days and nights after their arrival, a truck pulled up to the house. Several men unloaded two bed frames with mattresses, carried them up the stairs, and knocked on their door. When the women opened the door, trembling, the men explained that His Eminence the Archbishop of Trieste had learned of their circumstances and was sending them this furniture to make their lives easier. From then on they lived in this attic room, sacrificing one piece of jewelry after another to buy food on the black market, because of course they had no ration cards. One day, when their means were almost exhausted, they learned that in another part of town a woman was selling lard on the black market. They hurried there and bought a kilo, at an outrageous price, and brought it home. After nightfall, there was a knock on their door. When they opened it fearfully, there stood the woman from whom they'd bought the lard that afternoon. She said, "Please forgive me. You bought something from me this morning. I didn't know who you were. Later someone told me, and said where you live. I don't want to take any money from you." She gave them back their money, turned, and left. The two women, who were sisters,

by the way, told me this story, and then said, “And now you understand why we don’t want to go to Palestine, but prefer to spend the rest of our lives among the Italians.” Of course we saw it as our duty to tell all the surviving Jews we met that they had to emigrate to Palestine, and to advise them as to whom they should get in touch with to make it happen. Apparently other members of the Jewish Brigade had already conveyed this message to these ladies, and now they were giving us their reasons for wanting to stay — this lovely story. You can see why I have especially warm feelings for the Italians; I heard many such tales.¹¹