Martin Buber's Formative Years: From German Culture to Jewish Renewal, 1897-1909
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From German Culture to Jewish Renewal, 1897-1909

Gilya Gerda Schmidt

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In memory of Mordecai Gustav Heiser (1905-1989)
and in deep gratitude to
John Neubauer and Alexander Orbach
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*Ex libris:* "Mein ist das Land" (Jerusalem, National Library, Buber Archives, Ms. Var. 350 A/7a).
Preface

When I was a child in post-World War II Germany, my father brought home wallpaper samples for me to draw on. At a time of extreme material and spiritual poverty, I created on scrap paper worlds of richness and beauty that I had never seen but was sure existed. Later, I began to realize the dreams I held step by step, some already at a young age, others not until I was a mature woman. One dream, I was told, I would never fulfill that of becoming a teacher, perhaps a university professor. I didn't believe the pessimistic forecasts but held on to my inner vision. Already well on my way to graduate school, I encountered Martin Buber. In his writings, I found my own worldview confirmed as a path to fulfillment but on a much broader scale than I had envisioned. It was not a question of following him blindly, too, am not a herd animal but of experiencing the courage I already had for a nobler purpose, a greater task than personal gain. Martin Buber taught me to have the courage to be myself and to be not only for myself. He loved the two cultures that are also mine and reminded me of where I had been and where I had to go.

During my undergraduate years, Professor John Neubauer skillfully guided me through the maze of German literature. His sensitivity and brilliance set a standard for my own teaching and scholarship. In an effort to free me from the grasp of Franz Kafka's world, my first mentor introduced me to Buber's writings. Then Cantor Mordecai Heiser, of blessed memory, a Holocaust survivor, who had studied with Leo Baeck and was a schoolmate of Emil Fackenheim's at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin, epitomized the lovable "Yekke" of the early twentieth century, bringing to life for me a people and a culture that I never knew and that had been destroyed by the Nazis. The odyssey came to a conclusion of sorts under the skillful and patient guidance of Professor Alexander Orbach, who managed to keep me on track through a number of metamorphoses. Without his encouragement, persistence, and mentorship, my dream would have failed already in sight of the goal.

This book, which contains aspects of my work over a twelve-year
period, may be enjoyed by those who are familiar with German idealism, Vienna, and the various early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, and by those who take pride in Zionism and believe in the regeneration of Judaism and the need for a spiritual center in Eretz Israel. It is a book for the historian, the philosopher, the theologian, the Germanist, and the Judaic Studies professional because Buber was himself any and all of these. The reader does not have to agree with Buber's perspectives but ought to engage his arguments, and mine, in a lively dialogue.

I owe the chance to write this version of the book to my colleagues Rabbi Leon Weinberger and Richard Cohen, who invited me to Alabama for a postdoctoral fellowship in Judaic Studies. The friendly and congenial atmosphere of the Religious Studies Department at The University of Alabama and the quaint campus environment, as well as collegial support, greatly enhanced my creativity and desire to finish this project.

Earlier financial support was provided by a University of Pittsburgh Israel Heritage Room graduate scholarship for dissertation research at the Buber Archives at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem in 1988 and a scholarship from the Keren L'Dorot Foundation through the efforts of Rabbi Bernard Mandelbaum. I am extremely grateful to Margot Cohn and her staff at the Buber Archives for their invaluable assistance in locating the materials I was interested in and their help with copying what I needed. Over the years, the personal support of Rabbi Simon and Betty Greenberg of blessed memory was a treasured source of strength for me. I will always gratefully remember the gracious hospitality of my friends Dr. Avraham and Iris Shapira and their children Yaniv, Sivan, and Yonat during my visits to Israel. A special note of thanks to Nicole Mitchell of The University of Alabama Press for her consideration and sensitivity during the final stages of this project and to Joan Riedl for her patience in proofreading the text. I acknowledge with gratitude the fine assistance of Diane Spielmann and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York and the masterful copyediting of Trudie Calvert.

I hope that this book will encourage readers to research some of the Buber materials mentioned and discussed and to study German Jewish culture beyond the introductory level.
Figure 2.
Picture of Martin Buber from *Die Stimme der Wahrheit* *Jahrbuch für Wissenschaftlichen Zionismus*, 1, ed. Lazar Schön (Würzburg: N. Philippi, 1905), 205. Courtesy of Leo Baeck Institute, New York.
Prologue

The Problem of Individuation and Community

In 1897, Martin Mordecai Halevi Buber (1878-1965), who was an Austrian citizen by birth, returned to Vienna from Lvov, Galicia, where he had been raised by his grandparents, Salomon and Adele Buber, to pursue university studies. From 1897 to 1904, Buber continued his higher education at the universities of Vienna, Leipzig, Zurich, and Berlin. He studied art history and philosophy and, in 1904, completed a doctor of philosophy degree with a dissertation titled "Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems: Nicolaus von Cues und Jakob Böhme" ([Contributions to] the History of the Problem of Individuation: Nicholas of Cusa and Jakob Böhme).

This book presents an account of the struggles and explorations which Buber undertook, often simultaneously, during the period from 1897 to 1909. Each chapter highlights a particular concern of Buber's which he pursued in the form of an apprenticeship, covering many disparate areas. My goal is to create a composite picture of Buber's development, paralleling his own goal in his work. Each of the apprenticeships contributes a piece to the mosaic that was the early Martin Buber. Yet it is hoped that one can see that the mosaic reflects a unity that already then existed within Buber. This unity informed his moral imperative to search for the right components for a new type of Jewish personality and eventually Jewish community.

Buber's earliest papers, his earliest activities, and his many tentative probings in different directions were the first, and therefore authentic, expressions of his struggles and concerns, and they reflect his spontaneous responses upon encountering an issue. Buber was an activist of the word. He considered this activism legitimate, for "the narrative word is more than [just] speech, it actually transmits the event to future generations, the telling itself is event, it is consecrated as sacred action."

When I first contemplated this project, I hoped to examine how
Martin Buber went about developing a new type of Jewish community for post-Emancipation German Jewry, but when I began to gather and to read the materials for the early years, I realized that Buber's occupation in the years from 1897 to 1909 was not so much with the community as with the individual. While Buber's goal was community, the challenges he encountered were precommunity, dealing with matters of an individual and societal nature.

The organization of this book is organic in nature. Buber's interests were in German culture, in Jewish renewal, and in the renewal of humanity, in that order. Hence I begin in Chapter 1 by illuminating his claim that contemporary society was undergoing a crisis both of culture and of community. These crises, in turn, he believed had been caused by a crisis of personality that resulted in the absence of strong, autonomous personalities with a vision. This lack led to a glaring void of leaders capable of shaping contemporary culture and community. Buber looked to culture rather than to politics or religion for a solution because he was infatuated with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche advocated a transvaluation of the very basis for human values from morality to aesthetics. Buber suggested that people who shared a desire for togetherness beyond economic and religious associations should form a new type of community. The question not yet resolved was whether the approach to this new venture should be through art or through life. Previous attempts to transform society, such as those of the romantics, had been primarily through art. Buber likewise explored artistic approaches, but he also learned about a new form of art that occurred in life—the socialist community of Gustav Landauer (1870-1919).

Chapter 2 deals with Martin Buber's academic career. Not surprisingly, in his university studies Buber occupied himself with those subjects that most interested him at that time in his life—art and philosophy. Hence, dualism as an intellectual problem dominated the material he encountered from Aristotle to Nietzsche. The philosophical debate on the topic of dualism manifested itself in a discussion of aesthetics. Yet Buber's exploration of aesthetics moved away from contemporary philological considerations (Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ernst Mach) and toward a contemplation of the soul. He began by an exploration of the soul through the mediated experience of philosophy and art, not through faith, leading him to search for thinkers who also searched for ways to overcome this "human condi-
tion.” He found leads to the unity of the soul in the theology of Nicolas of Cusa (1401-64) and Jakob Böhme (1575-1624). They believed not only in the existence of God, but in the goodness of creation. Such a perspective necessitated the belief in a unity between the Creator and the created world, not the dualism current in Western thought. Buber drew on Cusa's and Böhme's schemes of the microcosm for his own philosophy of a harmonious universe.

Concurrent with his university life and literary activities, Martin Buber became interested in renewing his ties to Judaism. Buber's attraction to Zionism can be seen as part of his general dissatisfaction with contemporary German society. This dissatisfaction prompted him to reestablish the connection with his Jewish context, although he did not choose to return to the established tradition or the existing community. Rather, he chose Zionism as his point of departure. Buber's entrance into the world of Zionism brought him into direct contact with the views of Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) and Ahad Ha-Am (1856-1927) and the movements they spawned. Their work inspired Buber to express his own views on Zionism and to work for a Jewish cultural renewal. I shall explore Buber's commitment to what he termed the relative life in Chapter 3.

This encounter with the relative life in the form of Zionism encouraged Buber to search for what he perceived to be the missing dimension the absolute life. In Chapter 4, I explore Martin Buber's literary encounter with Hasidism, the form of Jewish mysticism that emerged in the eighteenth century in parts of Poland and the Ukraine. Along with Micah Joseph Berdichevsky (1865-1921), Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), Samuel Hayyim Landau (1892-1928), Judah Leon Magnes (1877-1948), Aaron David Gordon (1856-1922), and others in this period who were also interested in spirituality in the Jewish context, Buber looked for a way to reintroduce the spirit as the major building block for a new Jewish way of life. Buber's work was seminal to the serious study of Jewish mysticism. Not only did he introduce the study of Jewish mysticism to a new generation of scholars such as Gershom Scholem, he also brought attention to the Hasidim in a novel and positive way. Heretofore, Hasidism had been maligned as an anachronistic, pietistic, Jewish movement that stood in the way of modernization. As Steven Aschheim has pointed out, after Buber, German Jewry's encounter with the East was nothing short of a venerated cult. 5
In the Epilogue, I will sum up how Martin Buber's various efforts provided building blocks for his future worldview and what this meant for the future of Jews, Judaism, and humanity. By 1909, only about a decade since the beginning of his Zionist activities, Buber had considerably matured in his conception of what mattered in life. No longer did he aim simply to awaken the people to the cause of Judaism, for that had been accomplished in the years between 1897 and 1904. He now demanded a total commitment of body and soul to Judaism in the form of Jewish knowledge, the Hebrew language, and the land of Israel. All these efforts were to lead to communal revitalization, an idea on a higher level than that of personal redemption which Buber advocated during his primary Zionist period. Redemption was perhaps the key concept in Buber's philosophy of this period of the self and, through it, of the people. It was, however, a redemption wrought by humanity, not bestowed by Divine grace, resulting from a union of past and present in anticipation of the future.

Martin Buber was a complicated and complex young man. His views were always enthusiastic, often brilliant, sometimes too polar, at times frustrating and circular, sometimes contradictory, and at times the somewhat inflexible attitude of the "Yekke" clearly obscured his objectivity. Nevertheless, drawing on European, Jewish, and Oriental insights, Buber during these years was one of the bright young stars on the horizon of Jewish renewal who fashioned a synthesis that was to serve him and a new generation of European Jews until the rise of Adult Hitler. His commitment to human rejuvenation through communal revitalization became the basis upon which he developed the views for which he became famous after World War I. He would not have been able to do so without the preceding struggles, which are discussed and analyzed in this book.
A Time of Crisis: 
Contemporary Cultural Concerns, 1897-1901

Turn-of-the-century Vienna was unique in every respect. Politically, it was the center of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian monarchy; culturally, it was at once fiercely Austrian nationalistic and proudly European, influencing the entire German-speaking domain. The period known as Viennese Modernity lasted from about 1890 to 1911. 1 A host of culture critics such as Karl Kraus (1874-1936), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Max Burckhard (1854-1912), Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Peter Altenberg (1859-1919), Hermann Bahr (1863-1934), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), and Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931) wanted to bring about change for the sake of progress.2 According to sociologist Max Burckhard, the word modern was given currency by Hermann Bahr,3 and came to signify progress.4 The four Viennese poets Bahr, Altenberg, von Hofmannsthal, and Schnitzler belonged to an elite literary group, Jung Wien (Young Vienna) and considered themselves the conscience of contemporary Vienna. This "circle of young poets, focused around Arthur Schnitzler and Hermann Bahr . . . the most distinguished of them being Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig"5 (1881-1942) and met at the Cafe Griensteidl.6 They had been raised in a society that thought it natural "to center its life upon the theater, which formed the standards of speech, dress and mores; . . . and in a city in which the standards of journalism were exceptionally high." These artists were interested in contemporary issues such as dilettantism, decadence, narcissism, neuroticism, alienation, fragmentation, and resignation, as well as the consequences of imitation. Such key words of the period identified what Bahr called a "romanticism of the nerves."7 The language reflected the "sickness" of the culture, and the literature
disseminated the message of the fin de siècle. There was a concerted effort to bring about a renaissance of earlier periods such as romanticism or neoclassicism, which were perceived to have been more authentic. But instead of a re-creation, contemporary thinkers achieved only an imitation of the ideal. The enfeebled mood of "imitation" that had pervaded nineteenth-century Europe, and which Karl Immermann (1796-1840), Nietzsche, and others called the period of the Epigonen (imitators), 8 carried over into the twentieth century. The Young Vienna literary circle under the leadership of Hermann Bahr endeavored to turn the trend around.

When Martin Buber came to Vienna in 1897, he already held an appreciation for the great critical minds of the late nineteenth century, especially Friedrich Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra served as a hero model for him.9 Nietzsche's assertion that God is dead had opened the door to a complete transvaluation of values. No longer was a Divinely based morality the only possible foundation for life. In The Birth of Tragedy (1872) Nietzsche claimed that aesthetics could serve as a better foundation for modern life than morality.10 Therefore, Buber found a ready-made context for his intellectual and cultural curiosity as well as for his energies in the lively exchange of contemporary cultural criticism that occurred in the coffee houses as well as the literary journals of the period. During his first year in the city, Wittgenstein's Vienna became Buber's Vienna as well, for, as he himself told us, he did succumb to the power of the Burgtheater.11

Buber nevertheless saw the problem of the individual in a society in crisis sharply and clearly. This is apparent from his critical 1897 essay "On Viennese Literature" about the four Young Vienna writers Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Peter Altenberg, and Arthur Schnitzler.12 In this article, written in Polish, for a Polish journal, Buber attempted to come to grips with the nature of the crisis of personality that he perceived.

Buber's analysis of the worldview of these four poets illuminated his perception of the contemporary cultural situation in Vienna. Buber was most fascinated by Hermann Bahr, who was the decisive figure of this period, the founder and leader of the Young Vienna literary circle. Although Bahr took exception to the pessimism of such contemporaries as Ernst Mach (1838-1916), who maintained that "the self cannot be saved," Bahr's stand lacked fortitude.13 Buber criticized Bahr as a butterfly, who "has taken to heart all the trends