The Memoirs of

Nahum N. Glatzer

Edited and Presented by

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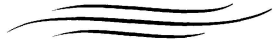

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Preface

Nahum Glatzer often cited the Talmudic adage that one should not raise one's voice above the text. My father's model was midrashic, deriving from a text a series of stories and interpretations. In this collection of memoirs, the text is his life, and the stories, fragmentary and allusive, a commentary.

Experiences and encounters, often recounted at dinner time, transformed the personal into the metaphorical. People of whom he spoke took on mythic qualities, but not as archetypes, nor for their renown. He spoke of people in a manner than reminds one at times of Borges: knowledgeable, penetrating, ironic, and pithy. My father appreciated the form people and their lives took. Events and encounters were told with unexpected turns and witty aperçus: his gentle wit a counterpoint to the weight of his concerns. He did not write a continuous narrative, both out of modesty and as an artistic choice. My father was moved by simple human gestures, chance encounters, antidotes to inhumanity. Kafka was the writer closest to his heart and I believe was his model. He writes of Kafka's motif—"Man is an exile and cannot return. . . . What drew me to Kafka was his uncanny penetration into the human condition . . . it is always yourself he is talking about." Like Kafka, my father understood memoirs more as impressions, fragments of life, a series of sketches, rather than a finished story.

Nahum Glatzer was a man of deep religious thought and feeling. The depths for him were biblical and ongoing – the problem of evil, the paradox of the Tree of Knowledge, the Book of Job. My father led a life of dialogue with tradition, keeping faith in Judaism in times of radical upheaval. He did not expect divine answers. It is up to us to instill life with acts of faith and lovingkindness. He wrote to me in 1960 while I was studying in Jerusalem:

> *The universe demonstrates law and order and thus the working of an Intelligence but not necessarily a personal principle, a Thou; this is my own thinking in the last decade or so. The universe is utterly neutral. Not so "our" world, our life. Here we have a choice. We may understand it in terms of the neutral impersonal universe (atheism), or we may view it as a realm that admits the personal; it is in this realm where we may discover the divine. (Since there is this choice, we must be entirely honest with ourselves.)*

and in another letter:

> *You see, it is Buber's "concrete situation," "responsibility," the obligation to the Thou that I interpret. I am sure you will find the way to that, if only after searching and struggle. Without this Thou – the fellow-man, the divine – we are isolated and lost.*

In the exilic life he led, first by necessity and then by choice, he reflected on the irony that those not in exile have lost touch with what Judaism is.

> *On your discussion on golah [Diaspora] and Israel: I see again how difficult, even impossible it is for an Israeli to understand the position of Diaspora. Reason: lack of knowledge, or rather, direct experience. The issue cannot be decided from a mere Israeli theory of what Judaism is.*

He suggests the paradox: those not in exile are in spiritual exile.

My father kept diaries all his life, not intended for the eyes of others. Initially, and occasionally afterward, they were encoded, German written in Greek letters. The diaries were a way of dealing with isolation. But in his later years, he began to write what he called his memoirs, mainly during sabbatical terms or summer "vacations" taken at my mother's urging. The entries were written during 1971, 1972, 1978, and 1980, on individual 5x7 inch sheets kept in a box marked *zichronot*/memoirs. Each piece is dated, but no order was set. Some sections were revised by him years later, providing some translations and explanations.

In the present selection the 78 entries have been divided into three parts, of which the first two are roughly chronological. In the first part, the memories of his early years elucidate my father's religious path from strict Orthodoxy with its Talmudic study in Eastern Europe to a more historical, cultural, and aesthetic understanding of Judaism encountered in Frankfurt, first as a student and then as a teacher. He was concerned with reconciling secular life with the sacred. There are entries up until events in 1980 and a reflection on the course of his scholarly career in the section "Midrash." The second part, called "Encounters," contains anecdotal and at times humorous accounts of some of the key figures in twentieth-century Jewry whom my father knew, among them S. Y. Agnon, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Salman Schocken. Particular pleasure is

taken in moments in which they are caught off guard. The final section is concerned with the faces of faith.

These memoirs are a testimony to a life lived in the arena of history by one who moved from language to language, country to country, sphere to sphere, in the conjunction of the personal and the public. They reveal a wisdom born of scholarship, tempered by life, and leavened by irony and gentle wit. Anecdotal, aphoristic, poignant, they give a sense of Nahum Glatzer's appreciation of the paradoxical and the improbable.

My father indicated that these memoirs were a document for the family. The idea for their publication came from Rabbi Ben Zion Gold, who stressed their historical significance. I hope my father would not have objected. I think they were written to be read. Professor Michael Fishbane worked with my mother and me in the preparation of the manuscript, providing not only the explanatory notes but also the introduction, giving an historical and scholarly context from the perspective of a former student and colleague. I am grateful for his dedication to this project.

The memoirs reveal a different dimension of my father, complementary to his scholarship, recounting worlds since passed whose legacy we strive to remember and whose spirit revive.

—Judith Glatzer Wechsler

Introduction

A teaching in the Jerusalem Talmud says that when a student transmits something in the name of his teacher, he should imagine his teacher's face and behold it while reporting the tradition. This is a sacred duty – a duty of piety to one's teacher and a demand of faithfulness to the past. But it is also a reminder that learning comes from teachers who, through their presence and voice, embody the past in a living way. Nahum Glatzer was such an honest servant of tradition and memory, and his face is before me now as I attempt to convey something of his remarkable life of learning and teaching. I have no doubt that his image is also etched on the hearts of all those who knew and loved him, and who learned from him how the texts of Jewish religious history could become a source of inner power and personal destiny for the patient, attentive student.

In a revealing personal aside, Franz Kafka once remarked, "I am a memory come alive."[1] The same could be said of the memoirist, who ponders the landscape of a life. Shaped by the experiences one has lived through and formulated as fragments of identity, the memoir is something like a second living. The fundamental past is revived – but in an older heart and mind whose ongoing life bears witness to its formative significance. There is thus something particularly poignant in the memoirist's summing up of a lifetime – a "coming alive" to oneself for a final time, and a recreation from disparate events of a sustained "I am."

But rarely and preciously, one's memories may be paradigmatic as well for a certain course of history. Then the personal memoir may invoke a collective "I am." Just this, I believe, is the case with the memoirs of Nahum Glatzer collected here. Reflecting the rich and vigorous life of one who experienced the complex movement of Jewish existence from tradition to modernity and enjoyed the friendship of some of the most remarkable Jews of the age, these recollections are a unique document by any standard. They are the product of Glatzer's final decades – from sundry times and circumstances. As typical of the man, the facts were all duly recorded in their season in detailed diaries and daybooks; but the motivation to give his notes a voice came in response to the family's request for a more permanent record of his life. Nevertheless, features of the manuscript and its style suggest that Glatzer knew his place in history and the particular

historical value of his private reminiscences. Just how much this sensibility guided his hand and expression we shall never know. What we do know is that otherwise irretrievable vignettes, voices, and events of the past come alive in these pages in unanticipated ways, and this is a great and precious gift. Those who knew him will quickly recognize the characteristic candor and cadence of his voice – but especially the honest eye of one who saw much. The deeply private Glatzer was a man filled with memories. They are presented here in carefully crafted words.

Nahum Norbert Glatzer was born on March 25, 1903 in Lemberg (Lvov), Galicia and grew up in a deeply pious and traditional atmosphere. His father was his first and most influential model of a life guided by faith and humility.[2] But other figures also had a dramatic impact upon him. Glatzer recalled two teachers of this sort – one, sometime near the outbreak of the First World War, lived in a room bare of all earthly essentials but a chair, a table and a Talmud; the other lived in the most abject poverty and once startled the young boy with the question why did God give him two hands, and with the equally unexpected answer that one was to mark the text, while the other was to point to the commentaries for guidance.[3] Glatzer absorbed these images of modest dignity and made them part of his own inner truth.

In the unsettled atmosphere that sundered communities at the outbreak of the Great War, the young Glatzer began the first of many exilic wanderings. After an initial period in Tetchen (Bohemia), his father ultimately determined upon the city of Bodenbach in the hopes of retaining a traditional atmosphere, although very few of the Jews there (beside the refugees) were observant. This parental decision meant that Glatzer could continue his secular studies at the local Gymnasium, alongside his Talmudic tutorials. This combination had a decisive impact upon him. He soon developed the notion that it was up to him to preserve Judaism among this remnant and to teach it in ways responsive to the hour and its needs. And this he did amidst a group of fellow students known as the *Matteh Aaron* (Aaron's Staff), to whom he taught the classics of Judaism along with translations and specimens of wisdom from the broader world of Jewish and secular learning.[4]

The materials young Glatzer developed for the group show a remark-

able and distinctive creativity.[5] He produced a small library of pamphlets copied out in an exquisite Hebrew and German hand. Each announced its subject on the title page, with its author or editor. The materials included sermons for the Holy Days, with quotes from the classical sources, historical information, and bits of moral guidence; anthologies of translations from medieval Hebrew poetry (ibn Ezra being a favorite) and excerpts from historical books (like Heinrich Graetz's classic work) and from various books of the Bible (like Lamentations) as well as Rashi's commentary (to Leviticus). In addition, Glatzer composed original Bible commentaries, including exegetical and philological remarks on the book of Judges and annotations to the sacrificial rites found in the book of Leviticus. And beyond all this there are also excerpts from his broad reading in the history of religions (e.g., a forgotten study on the Baal Shem Tov and Jewish monism) and discussions of selected topics (e.g., the Babylonian myth of creation, with numerous terms in the original). It is hard to conceive all this as the educational project of a young person – eager to provide his students with booklets that were both scholarly and aesthetic. But so they are. Remarkably, Glatzer the lover and editor of books is already evident here, as is his vision of a Judaism that draws from the well of tradition and remains open to all knowledge. A synthesis of the religious and literary imagination has seemingly burst nearly fully formed from his head. Perhaps the influential essay by S. H. Bergman (entitled "Kiddusch Ha-Schem") provided some literary inspiration, as he suggests; but living examples of this new blend of Jewish spirituality were not so easily found, and certainly not in Bodenbach.[6]

For this one would have to go elsewhere, like Heppenheim, located just outside Frankfurt. There lived Martin Buber, already famous and influential; and there went the young Glatzer, soon after the war, with his father's permission (and admonition to beware the influence of this freethinker). The circumstances that led to Glatzer's request for an interview may be reconstructed from the letter he sent in 1920 to Buber (addressed as *geehrter Meister* [revered master]) in advance of his visit, and from the memoirs and personal reports.[7] According to the letter, Glatzer wished to discuss his concerns for a revitalized Judaism and mentions his readings in classical texts and modern Jewish writers. But from the later writings we learn that he also intended to discuss his own thoughts regarding Buber's translations of Hasidic teachings. One can only marvel at Glatzer's

youthful temerity. In the event, however, the meeting was a short one – despite the intense period of preparation that preceded it. Overwhelmed by the personal presence and "deep eyes" of the "great Jew," Glatzer blurted out that Buber's stylistic renditions misrepresented the rough quality of the original sources. In Glatzer's recollection, Buber became somewhat defensive about his translations, and the hoped-for encounter turned into a mismeeting.[8]

An enduring connection was nevertheless established soon thereafter, and continued for some fifty years – as Glatzer served Buber (and Rosenzweig) as special assistant in their Bible translation, studied intensively with Buber as a seminar student and doctoral candidate (eventually succeeding his mentor in the position in Jewish Religious Thought and Social Ethics at the University of Frankfurt), and was a major catalyst in the dissemination of Buber's works in America in the 1960s. In all these roles Glatzer remained respectful and devoted, but never failed to give Buber sharp and honest reactions when he felt it necessary. Particularly poignant was Glatzer's rebuke (after Rosenzweig's death) that Buber had improperly downplayed Rosenzweig's collaboration in the translation project by the way he referred to their work on the title page.[9] The first meeting was thus prophetic. Equally significant was the meeting of eyes. Several photographs from the 1950s show the already mature Glatzer leaning toward Buber in conversation, in deep and attentive gaze.

Many years later Glatzer would say that his contact with great men gave him perspective – and humility. One such influential figure was Rabbi Nehemiah A. Nobel. Although the young Glatzer first went to the Breuer Yeshivah in Frankfurt to fulfill his father's desire that he become an Orthodox rabbi, the style and atmosphere of the learning there were not to his liking (an official holiday photo of the boys in his group shows him half-hidden near the rear), and he soon found himself attending the morning services and Talmud study session in Nobel's home. Here was a new atmosphere rich in literary and cultural references (especially Goethe), which the learned and worldly Nobel would infuse into the discussions of rabbinic literature. Similarly, Nobel's Sabbath sermons were equally filled with Jewish and literary passions, often rising to near-prophetic thunder ("the Spirit as 'cloudburst'").[10] In all this, the young Glatzer found embodied the combination of tradition and universal knowledge he had intuited on his own.[11] The moral energies and historical learning of fellow

students such as Ernst Simon, Siegfried Kracauer and Leo Lowenthal also made an impression and confirmed that here was the new Judaism of his longing.[12] Soon Glatzer said a decisive No to the Breuer Yeshivah and took on his Hebrew name of Nahum at Nobel's suggestion. This Yes was in every way a new direction and new birth.

Another student in Rabbi Nobel's Talmud group had an even more decisive impact. That was Franz Rosenzweig, who had only recently come to Frankfurt after the war (in 1919), and who was urged by Nobel himself to stay in that city and be involved in the *Volkshochschule* (Institute of Adult Jewish Education), whose establishment was then in the planning stage.[13] Glatzer was deeply affected by the force of Rosenzweig's personality and became his devoted friend and life-long disciple. Innumerable activities bound their lives together. Glatzer regarded Rosenzweig's powers of thinking and learning with awe, and many times in later years Glatzer would refer to Rosenzweig as a "genius." Indeed Glatzer often expressed deep amazement at Rosenzweig's ability to absorb as much Jewish study as he had in the short period between his "return" to Judaism and the composition of his *Star of Redemption* several years later. This massive learning is evidenced in the list of Jewish sources that Glatzer compiled (at Rosenzweig's suggestion) for the second edition. The supplement also gives a hint of the erudition Glatzer himself possessed – for at best the classical Jewish references in the *Star* are merely alluded to, and never cited. Glatzer's control of texts from all periods and genres made him an invaluable aide to the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation; tracking down sources and finding overlooked comments was one of his tasks.[14] And somewhat later, when Buber and S.Y. Agnon (a Nobel laureate in Literature) needed an assistant in their projected compilation of a corpus of Hasidic materials, once again "young Glatzer" was the obvious choice.[15]

But it was not simply (or ultimately) the book learning of Rosenzweig that attracted Glatzer. Far more compelling was his sagacity and humor. All these served as models of a new Judaism. When Rosenzweig established the new Center for Jewish study in Frankfurt (the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*) to propagate an open and nonapologetic encounter with the sources of Jewish thought and faith, Glatzer was one of its first instructors in Bible and Midrash – and its most careful chronicler over many years.[16] Interaction with such fellow teachers as Buber himself, Ernst Simon, Erich Fromm, Rudolf Hallo, Ludwig Strauss, and even Gershom Scholem pro-

duced an electrifying atmosphere. All questions were opened, all theological matters discussed, and all care was exacted to hear texts and students (in the right but varying proportions) speaking in their own voice. Texts were teachers and teachers texts; students were teachers and the teachers students. The classroom became the center of living Torah – as revelation was heard in written and oral forms. For a select few there were even more intense and unforgettable experiences. One was a small seminar conducted by Gershom Scholem on the Zohar, and commentaries on the messianic sections of the book of Daniel (the meetings began at midnight); another was (in 1922) when some of the Hebraists heard Agnon read from his story *Aggadat Ha-Sofer* (The Legend of the Scribe). The "voice and tenor" of that "reading" entered Glatzer's ear forever: "it was reverent, humble, submissive, but not tragic."[17] Several years earlier (in 1917), a comparably young Gershom Scholem heard Agnon read the same story before the *Bet Ha-Va'ad Ha-Ivri Klub* in Berlin, and his "delicate, plaintive voice" made a similarly "profound impression."[18] These moments of learning and listening were received by Glatzer as a precious gift, which he transmitted through his own voice and being to generations of students.

Indeed, the challenge of the "New Learning" and "New Thinking" embodied in the Lehrhaus was to put knowledge and intellect to the service of patient listening to the voice of texts – and to the service of life, in whatever shape that might take. Such "service" was in fact the revolutionary principle in Rosenzweig's well-known letter to his mentor, the historian Friedrich Meinecke, when he firmly declined the offer of an academic position and career;[19] and such service was the core of Rosenzweig's life in the Lehrhaus and his radiation of the truth of his Jewish learning through nobility and humor during the long period of his fatal illness.[20] The concept was internalized by Glatzer as a life-long ideal of teaching, discipline, and devotion.[21] As he noted near the end of his life, service as the spiritual embodiment of the truths of Judaism was modelled first and foremost by his father, but also heroically and humbly by Rosenzweig. The spirits of both men lived in Glatzer's soul and were revived in heart and mind through his lifetime.

Glatzer recalled poignantly how Rosenzweig had cried when he told him that his father was killed during an Arab riot on Moza (a village outside Jerusalem) in 1929; and during the years of Rosenzweig's illness, Glatzer served his friend with loving devotion and acted as cantor in the

intimate circle of prayer that formed around the master's bed.[22] There was a haunting martyrological aura to Rosenzweig's final suffering and death; and Glatzer wrote of it in a magisterial Hebrew essay. Glatzer often showed images of that time to his students. When they came to his home, he invited them upstairs to his study. Across the room was a photograph of Rosenzweig harnessed to his chair, from which he indicated with eye movements his intentions and concerns. The heroic magnitude of his commitment to life was compelling beyond words. From a lower panel in a bookcase Glatzer would produce the death mask. Its presence always seemed a revelation of human transcendence; and it was at this moment that we sensed how one face, one life, could transfigure another.

Frankfurt was the "beloved" home for Glatzer – the place to which he returned eagerly after brief holy day periods in the silent and unhappy homelife at Elberfeld, or other times nurtured by the hospitality and care of Mrs. Adele Rosenzweig (Franz's mother) in Kassel. He treasured Frankfurt for the vitality and intensity of his friendships there, for its library and books and writing projects (translations and feuilletons), and for the rigor and discipline of its University. In the course of preparations for his university qualifying exams, Glatzer quipped that he had fallen in love with "Orientalia," a maiden whose enchantments held him in thrall. Hebraica of all sorts was a personal passion; but devotion to Arabic language and literature (under the stern tutelage of Professor Josef Horovitz)[23] made one of the deepest impressions upon him, and he also felt the allure of Aramaic and Assyriology. A serious student of philology, Glatzer never forgot the precision that careful language study inculcates; but he also kept in mind the lessons of the Lehrhaus and the importance of hearing the particular voice of the text and its address.

Under the direction of Martin Buber, Glatzer wrote his dissertation on the Tannaitic conception of history (*Untersuchungen zur Geschichtslehre der Tannaiten: Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte*, 1932).[24] This still unparalleled study examines its subject with phenomenological and typological precision and reveals the historical imagination of the ancient sages in its many forms and concerns. Significantly, it is always the voice of a rabbi, an embodied individual at a particular moment, who speaks through the words of Scripture and tries to actualize them for historical times (past, present, and future). Buber's influence is keenly felt in the negative contrast drawn between these expressions and the apocalyptic imagination