ABRAHAM WASSERSTEIN

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Abraham Wasserstein, my father, reflected a mixture of traditions and influences. He was a Jew, a single generation removed from the *shtetl* of Eastern Europe, more specifically from the distinctive Hasidism of Galicia, in the borderlands of Poland and the Ukraine of today's dispensation. It was a background of which he was proud. The child of post-World War One emigrants from Krakowietz, he was born in Frankfurt — he brought his wife and very young children to see the house where he was born, on a dark and rainy and awesome night in 1958, when the scars of loss were still open and the pain of survival still deep — and he grew up in the Berlin of Weimar and of Hitler. After the Second World War he lived for nearly a quarter of a century in Britain, a country which he loved and admired for its stand, alone, against Hitler and for the past of which that stand always appeared to him to be a natural outcome. He acquired an unusual command of English (a discriminating taste led him early to Jane Austen and P.G. Wodehouse), and wrote it, even in his early years in England, with sureness and with elegance. And for over half a century Greek culture, especially that of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and that of the later Hellenistic encounter with Judaism, helped to form him, as a scholar and as a man.

AW suffered relatively little from Nazism as a child, because he was in a Jewish school. As an Ostjude, the child of immigrants from the East, he belonged to a section of the Berlin Jewish world which gave him an intense Jewish life (and a deep immersion in the textual sources of the Jewish tradition) unlike that of the more assimilated German Jews. A seventeen-year old in 1938, he was one of a fairly large number of his cohort who survived the war — old enough to leave, and to live, on their own, they were still too young to have acquired responsibilities which might have held them back from leaving while they still could. Long years afterwards, in his forties, he began to discover others from his class in that Jewish school in Berlin; more than half of them had survived the war — and a surprising number of them were university professors.

As a teenager AW wanted to become a poet, writing in German. But on 28 October 1938, the German authorities rounded up and expelled some 30,000 Jews, including the seventeen-year old AW. They were dumped in a camp, at Sbąszyn, on the Polish border. Here he learned Yiddish, his parents' language, and gained an impression of Polish anti-Semitism, and a love of Galician Jews, which remained with him throughout his life. Permitted to return to Berlin in the summer of 1939, "to arrange his affairs", he was able at last, in August, to leave Germany, for Italy, the only country in the world which would let him in. He never saw any of his family again.

He learned Italian, and completed his studies at a Jewish school in Rome, but after a year the situation of Jews in Mussolini's Italy became more precarious. He managed to obtain a visa to enter Turkey, en route to Palestine, but he could not leave Italy without a renewal of his Polish passsport. The Allied Polish government in exile, at this stage still recognised by the Italian government, refused to renew his passport or even to recognise him as a Polish citizen until the Vicar-General of the Jesuits, who happened to be a member of a family of minor nobility in his parents' *shtetl*, intervened, with miraculous results, upon which he was able to move on to Istanbul. There he spent a year of enforced semi-idleness, improving his English, reading widely in a variety of European literatures, and moving in a circle of other young Jewish (and some non-Jewish) exiles from Germany, before coming at last to Palestine, where, in 1942, he met and married my mother, like himself a young refugee, from Hungary. They were almost never parted until his death.

In a bookshop in Haifa at this time, my father had a chance encounter with his former Latin teacher at the Adass Yisroel school in Berlin before the war, a man called Buttenwieser. From him he now acquired the beginnings of his knowledge of Greek. By this time the ambition to be a German poet had left him, and he wished to devote himself to Greek. At the end of the war, he was accepted as a student in Cambridge, but his journey to England was delayed by the pressure of demobbed British soldiers on the available boats, and when he arrived the academic year had already started, without him. He turned instead to London, spending the next few years as a student of Classics at Birkbeck College, and emerging from there with the best First of his year in the entire University of London, in 1949, and a doctorate, in 1951; for this he presented a commentary on Book 1 of the *Silvae* of Statius (unpublished). To those who asked why, as a pronounced Hellenist, he had chosen to write on a Latin topic, he always explained that in this way he could feel himself a rounded classicist, without the need actively to work in Latin again. Both attitudes — the preference for Greek as against Latin, and the idea that one must have a thorough command of the field as a whole because it constituted a unity — typified his approach to learning (they furnished two of the themes of his Inaugural Lecture, *Economy and Elegance*, in Leicester), and they also reveal something of his approach to life in general.

Immediately on the completion of his doctorate, AW was appointed to an Assistantship (within three months converted into a Lectureship) in Greek in the University of Glasgow, under the Thucydidean scholar Arnold Gomme. The following nine years were very happy for AW; he enjoyed excellent working conditions in Glasgow, had fine students, and very good relations with his colleagues; he read extremely widely in Greek and Latin, embarked on the production of a stream of articles and reviews, in which it is possible to discern the emergence of the distinctive character of his professional interests; and he watched his children, from 1954 three of them, begin to grow up.

In 1960, AW was appointed to a chair in Classics at Leicester University, where he stayed until 1969, building up the department to unprecedented size. It was a matter of pride to him that he was able successfully to argue that the department should have a double budget for the purchase of books for the library

since it dealt with two major subjects, both Latin and Greek; and he was able also to take pride in the fact that many years later a former student, in Jerusalem, recognised him as the man who had stood in the breach, literally, in the entrance to the university library, on the day when Leicester students attempted to emulate their revolutionary peers in Paris and occupy the building. He asked each student who approached whether in entering he or she proposed to read books or to take part in a sit-in. None dared do other than read.

The Six-Day War in 1967 affected AW and my mother very strongly; they came to Israel on a visit in the autumn of that year, and one result of that visit was an invitation to come to the Hebrew University. They moved back to Israel in 1969, with my sister, and, but for trips abroad on sabbaticals and the like, never left. As for many people who came to Israel around that time, the immediate catalyst for my father's move lay in that atmosphere of heightened awareness of Jewish identity in peril, and the extraordinary outpouring of sympathy for Israel and fear for its future which the period of the war and its immediate aftermath inspired. But the real roots of the decision to return lay much deeper, in the Jewish life of his childhood and the concern with Jewish learning which accompanied him all his days. My father always denied, only a trifle playfully, that he was a Zionist, and in some sense there is truth in that; like many Israelis, especially of his own generation and of his sort of background, he was a Jew first; Israel was a means, not an end.

As an academic, AW was unusual in enjoying to the full both of the activities to which such people are formally committed. He was a dedicated researcher, and he was an equally devoted teacher, taking endless pains to ensure that all who studied with him should be serious in what they were about, and that they should come away with knowledge and understanding and discernment. In Greek his main interests were in literature — his preferred authors were Sophocles and Pindar — in philosophy and in scientific writing. But with the move to Israel a trend discernible already in his Glasgow days became more pronounced; there he developed interests in the history of the classical tradition which he had nurtured in his days as a postgraduate student through the study of the manuscript transmission and textual history of Statius; in Israel this trend took the particular form of an abiding and growing interest in the interaction of the Hellenistic and Jewish worlds.

Among my father's papers from the 'fifties are some which testify to the early stirrings of an interest in Hebrew learning of the middle ages; there are also among his writings of those days some which reflect his interest in the history of the sciences, broadly understood, especially mathematics, astronomy and medicine. These interests gradually came together, and his move to Israel, at the end of the 1960s, gave him the opportunity to marry them in his work. A series of articles which appeared in these years, and in particular his edition of the medieval Hebrew translation (from the Arabic) of the lost Greek text of the commentary by Galen on Hippocrates' *Airs Waters Places*, all dealing with transmission from Greek into Hebrew, and with broader themes of the interaction of these two cultural worlds, reflect this coalescence of his scholarly interests.

The move to Israel in fact proved a watershed in AW's scholarly output: from this time onwards he wrote less on Greek literary themes (though his interests in philosophy and the sciences in antiquity persisted), and his writing on Greek subjects in general tended more and more in the direction of topics with a relevance to the meeting of Greek and Jew in the near eastern cultural *aire*. This change was reflected also in the style of his work: while before he had preferred the philological approach, and the short article on a restricted subject, now he came to prefer larger historical themes, and his reviews and articles grew in length (though the philological approach, and the insistence on a close acquaintance with the textual sources, in all their variety, as an indispensable precondition for any work based on them, were never abandoned). These changes are well exemplified in the article on 'Die Hellenisierung des Frühjudentums. Die Rabbinen und die griechische Philosophie', which he contributed to a volume on Weber and early Christianity (published in 1985). Here, as in a number of his later publications, he was concerned not only to stress that Weber's view of late antique Judaism (and that of many others in succession to him) was fundamentally mistaken — and mistaken because founded on ignorance of the sources — but also to show that the nature and the extent of the hellenisation undergone by Judaism in the rabbinic period had been misinterpreted in the past. Too great a concern with the full hellenisation of hellenised Jewry (that largely Alexandrian Jewry which had disappeared from history) had obscured the semi-hellenisation of that far greater and historically more significant part of Jewry which belonged to the Aramaic world of the near east, the ancestor of all later Jewries. AW was increasingly persuaded, on the basis of an ever deeper knowledge of the full range of the materials, in their rich linguistic and other variety, of the incorporation and participation of ancient Jewry within the broader cultural world of the Aramaic-speaking near east, with all the implications, especially linguistic and cultural, entailed by such a view.

In the last decade or so of his life, my father had been working on two larger projects. The one was a study of the legend about the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the Septuagint, as that is presented in the so-called *Letter of Aristeas*. The translation itself was a subject which had interested him since the 'fifties, but now he became interested in the legend concerning the production of the translation and in its development and use, among Jews and non-Jews alike, from Antiquity down to the period of the Renaissance and after. At the time of his death, a large part of what had been planned to be a book on this topic was written, though not yet in final form, and we hope that it may see the light of print. The other project, which overlapped with the first in certain areas, was broader in scope: it concerned the whole cultural interaction of Greek and Jew, and the position of the Jewish world, as AW saw it, within the larger cultural nexus of the ancient near east offered by the common Aramaic culture of that area. He had been working at this for many years, he had collected a great deal of material, and he had been writing and lecturing on different aspects of it for some time. Towards the end of his life, and especially after he became ill in the last two years, he published a number of papers which clearly derive from what would have been a book on this subject had he lived; other unpublished material

survives; and some material in the planned book on the *Letter of Aristeas* seems to have been intended to be part of either project.

My father's favourite Greek author was probably Sophocles; in Hebrew one of his favourite texts was Avot, an ethical treatise of the Mishnah. He read and re-read and thought and talked and wrote about both all his adult life; and he encouraged his students and his children to do the same. I well remember his pleasure at my first schoolboy encounter with πολλὰ τὰ δεινά, and as we grew older he encouraged us to follow the ancient tradition of reading Avot on the Sabbaths between Passover and New Year. Both Sophocles and Avot, in their different ways, speak about freedom — freedom to think, freedom to choose between right and wrong, freedom to make mistakes. One of the things that my father loved most about the Greeks was that marvelous discovery and exploitation of freedom, to think and to learn and to understand — as a young student, in Jerusalem, I heard him lecture both on Sophocles and on early Greek philosophy, and his love of what the ancient Greeks gave the world and his admiration of them for doing it were as fresh, and as infectious to those listening to him then, as they must have been nearly half a century ago in Glasgow.

Many of those Greeks never lived in Greece — I remember him stressing in those lectures that the earliest Greek philosophers were active outside Greece, especially in Asia Minor — and AW himself hardly ever visited that country. Geography, place, as such mattered little to him (though his preferred climate was not the still, sunny dryness of Jerusalem but the wind and cold of his childhood in Berlin), and the special flavour of the poem by him which we print here lies in its tie between his love of learning, especially but not only Greek learning, and the history of the Jewish people in its exile, an exile whose νόστος he was supremely conscious of having the privilege of witnessing. In 1948 he was a student in London and far from the birth pangs of the Jewish state, but he volunteered at once for service in the army of his country renewed (in the event his call-up was deferred). He spoke to us often of the feelings of one who had seen both the charnel house of Europe and the re-birth of the Jews in their land after two thousand years of exile.

As for many Jews of his generation and others, the War left my father with feelings towards Germans, and other East Europeans, which those born afterwards can only with difficulty begin to understand. At the beginning of the nineteen eighties, an institute of Jewish studies was established in Heidelberg — the first such institute to be created in Germany since the destruction of half a century earlier, and the only public institution of higher learning in that country to be funded by the federal government. My father was invited to be a visiting professor there, and, after much wavering, he went. The experience was difficult for him, and for our mother — for him as one who had lived among Germans before the War, for her as one who had never done so. Almost all the students were Germans. My father discovered that his German had aged — he had scarcely spoken the language outside the family environment since he was a child. He visited Berlin, and saw the places where his school had stood, where he had prayed, where he had lived as a child. And he taught young Germans. He returned from Germany, like many other Israelis and Jews, with different feelings, more complex and still more difficult for him. He went back to Heidelberg, as a

visiting professor both at the Hochschule für jüdische Studien and at the University, several times in succeeding years, acquiring friends there and coming to love the countryside round about, all trees and a rich, deep green, very unlike the surroundings at home.

The talmudic expression "Greek learning", חכמת יונית, has a strange resonance in the Hebrew of Israel today, not only because of its apparently ungrammatical formulation but also because it seems to refer to an alien wisdom which some would dismiss as having no authentic share in the Jewish heritage. AW rejected such a view vigorously. In his work as a scholar in Jerusalem over the last quarter of a century he sought constantly to explore and to understand the immensely fruitful and fateful encounter between the Jewish and the Greek worlds in Antiquity. In passing that understanding on, as a father to his students and a teacher to his children, he faithfully obeyed the rabbinic injunction to "raise up many disciples".

David J. Wasserstein