

# Scholar and Kabbalist: The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem

*Edited by*

Mirjam Zadoff  
Noam Zadoff



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# Gershom Scholem and Postwar Germany Reconsidered

*Lars Fischer*

## Abstract

Drawing on Scholem's published correspondences, I argue in this essay that Scholem's thoughts and sentiments about postwar Germany were truly consistent only in the sense that they were consistently marked by deep-seated tensions between the principled and the pragmatic, between pessimism and optimism, between disillusionment and yearning, between attraction and repulsion. Scholem expressed them not only, depending on the addressee, with varying emphases and nuances in registers ranging from sensitive to extremely blunt, but also with an intense awareness of his own limitations in terms of what might, in principle, be desirable.

## Keywords

assimilation – correspondence – German Jewish history – Margarete Susman – Theodor W. Adorno – Jewish–non-Jewish relations – Antisemitism – philosemitism

As I have suggested before,<sup>1</sup> for many scholars studying the various entanglements between German Jews and non-Jews, especially in the (later) modern period, “Scholem bashing” is now a basic prerequisite and has become an almost ritualistic means of positioning oneself in scholarly debate. All too often, scholars begin discussions by clarifying, pretty much before all else, that “we,” surely, have all long since moved beyond the gross simplifications supposedly expressed, in their classic and most succinct form, in Scholem's (non-)contribution to the 1964 *Festschrift* for Margarete Susman (1872–1966), *Auf gespaltenem Pfad*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fischer, “After the ‘Strauss Wars.’”

<sup>2</sup> Scholem, “Wider den Mythos.” I will be quoting from the reprint in Scholem, *Judaica 11*. All translations are my own.

What has emerged is a widespread (though not always articulated) sense of Scholem as somebody who was not only quite irrational in his negative attitudes toward Germany and Germans after 1945, but who, in this respect, was also hypocritical and in denial given his own continued (or resumed) engagement of German culture and academia and the influence they in fact never ceased to exert on him. I hope that this article can contribute to a critique of this assessment. I will begin by contextualizing Scholem's much-cited text and then review some of the motives and motifs at play in evaluations of his relationship with Germany after 1945, before returning to the reception of his intervention. My main sources are Scholem's published correspondences.

The prominence of Gershom Scholem's short refutation of the notion of a German-Jewish dialogue prior to 1933 is all the more striking, given the provenance of the text. Scholem wrote it not as a contribution for the Susman *Festschrift*, but as a letter to its editor, Manfred Schlösser, explaining why, under the circumstances outlined in the invitation he had received, he (Scholem) could not bring himself to make a contribution. Scholem then agreed to have this very letter of rejection included in the *Festschrift*. All this is well known, of course, but rarely commented upon. It surely tells us something about the conflicted nature of Scholem's decision to intervene in a (more or less) public debate in Germany in this way.

As he wrote to none other than Margarete Susman on 31 January 1965, this was not a text he would ever have written other than in the form of the spontaneous response that it had in fact been.<sup>3</sup> Yet once it had actually been published, Scholem clearly developed a pronounced sense of mission. "It pains my soul," he wrote on 3 March 1965 to Peter Szondi (1929–1971), the Jewish literary scholar and philologist who founded the Department of Comparative Literature at the Freie Universität Berlin that is now named after him,

that my letter to Schlösser is buried so deeply. Dr. Weber<sup>4</sup> wanted to publish it in the N.Z.Z. and he had my blessing since I do have a considerable interest in seeing my assessment disseminated. For reasons unknown to me, it does not seem to have come out, though. Its proper place should have been at the beginning of my "Judaica."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Scholem, *Briefe II*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> Werner Weber (1919–2005) edited the culture section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

<sup>5</sup> The first volume of Scholem's *Judaica* was published in 1963. Scholem's letter obviously predated the publication of the Susman *Festschrift* in 1964; it was written on 18 December 1962. Scholem, *Briefe II*, 87–89.

Scholem's determination to articulate his position emphatically in public was no doubt strengthened by the many aggressively negative responses to his text. I will return to this issue towards the end of this chapter.

In her recent monograph on Margarete Susman, Elisa Klapheck repeatedly makes the bizarre claim, from the first page of her introduction onwards, that "Scholem's letter was directed explicitly against Margarete Susman."<sup>6</sup> From the first two occurrences of this claim, it is evident that Klapheck, as many of us do, quotes Scholem's text from its reprint in the second of his *Judaica* volumes (first published in 1970), where it can be found on pages 7 to 11. Only when making her claim for the third time does she finally provide documentary evidence by quoting a lengthy passage that can be found in the second *Judaica* volume on page 43. What she has in fact quoted is, of course, Scholem's much longer reflection on "Jews and Germans" delivered first as a lecture at a plenary of the World Jewish Congress in Brussels in August 1966 and then published later that year in the *Neue Rundschau*.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to imagine a better demonstration, if further evidence were needed, of the fact that Scholem's (non-)contribution to the Susman *Festschrift* is now universally cited but only very rarely read. Klapheck's monograph, after all, has presumably been peer-reviewed and is based on her doctoral dissertation, which one assumes was supervised and examined, and yet with all their combined subject expertise, not one of those who had dealings with her evolving text prior to its publication evidently remembered Scholem's short text (a text that everyone in the field has supposedly engaged so intimately and transcended so thoroughly) well enough to be surprised at the suggestion that Scholem had, implicitly or explicitly, had unkind things to say about Susman in that text. The one explicit remark that Scholem did in fact make about Susman was this:

6 Klapheck, *Margarete Susman*, 7, 61, 320. Klapheck argues that the extent to which Susman has been forgotten can be gauged from the fact that the extensive reception of Scholem's text has paid no attention to Susman, even though she is (supposedly) its butt. In fact, the exact opposite is surely the case. Were it not for the fact that Scholem's text was published in the *Festschrift* for her, even fewer people would ever have heard of Susman.

7 Leo Strauss, incidentally, on receiving the second *Judaica* volume, wrote to Scholem on 29 April 1970: "How superior is your commentary (in 'Jews and Germans') to everything I have ever read or heard on this matter either in our generation or the generations before." Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften* 111, 759. He had been no less enthusiastic about Scholem's earlier (non-) contribution to the Susman *Festschrift*. "Dear Scholem! Praiseworthy Scholem!" he wrote on 7 August 1965, "I am writing these lines under the fresh impression of your letter about the alleged German-Jewish dialogue: nobody except you could pronounce this important and sad truth in so totally decent and adequate a manner. I thank you, also in the name of my wife, with all my soul." *Ibid.*, 753.

I feel as compelled to turn down the invitation to nurture the outrageous illusion of “an essentially indestructible German-Jewish dialogue,” which this publication, on your account, is designed to serve, as I would be happy to pay homage to the admirable phenomenon Margarete Susman with whom something much more profound unites me than [specific] opinions on which we may or may not agree.<sup>8</sup>

The immediate target of Scholem's ire, then, was by no means Susman but rather the *Festschrift's* editor, Manfred Schlösser. I confess to empathizing all the more with Scholem on this score ever since my own contact with Schlösser in 2009, when he denied me access to part of the Susman *Nachlass* in Marbach. For all that younger scholars were misrepresenting her to further their careers, he explained to me on this occasion, Susman was in fact in no way preoccupied with matters Jewish and most certainly not (God forbid!) a Zionist.<sup>9</sup>

That said, Scholem's explicitly formulated admiration for Susman notwithstanding, it turns out that he was, as we will see, not entirely sure how Susman would take what he felt needed to be said. He was therefore clearly delighted to receive a letter of appreciation from her. On 22 January 1965, Susman wrote to Scholem that “I can't even begin to thank you for your wonderful contribution to my *Festschrift*,” adding that she had “only subsequently grasped” that Scholem's text was in fact his (negative) response to Schlösser's invitation to contribute to the *Festschrift*. She explained that “his [Schlösser's] conviction regarding the German-Jewish dialogue initially did not seem wrong to me.” Scholem's argument had changed her mind, though. Hitting the nail straight on the head, she then added that “I can only stutter when speaking of your essay because every objection I would like to put forward pertains only to individuals.”<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say, Scholem had never denied the intensity of various relations between individual Jews and non-Jews in Germany. To do so would have been nonsensical, as he himself explicitly confirmed.<sup>11</sup> His argument concerned not the goings on between individuals but rather group relations between the Jewish minority and the non-Jewish majority society. Evidently, Scholem's contribution had led Susman to appreciate the importance of this distinction and see more clearly that individual relations between Jews and non-Jews, however positive and constructive, could not in and of themselves fundamentally alter the bigger picture.

8 Scholem, “Wider den Mythos,” 7.

9 Email communication, 14 August 2009.

10 Scholem, *Briefe II*, 281.

11 Scholem, *Judaica II*, 12f.

“I was very pleased to receive your thanks,” Scholem responded on 31 January 1965; “after all, it [his text] couldn’t necessarily count on your applause.” Their agreement evidently emboldened him to vent. He added:

The ghastly way in which one now refrains, with a pious flutter and hypocritical liberalism, from calling the Jews Jews, because, so the pseudo-argument goes, by doing so one would be on a par with the race theorists, is among the most dreadful phenomena one is now confronted with in Germany. I find all this totally nauseating [zum Kotzen].<sup>12</sup>

Susman, who had become blind in old age and had to have her letters read out to her, was evidently confused by the vehemence of Scholem’s tone. Her previous letter “has been lost so that I do not know what it was that made you so angry,” she wrote (or rather, dictated) in her next letter to Scholem on 19 February. “I was so startled,” she continued, “that I initially failed to recognize that it basically said the same” as the previous letter. If Scholem had been angered by something in her letter, this could only result from “a misunderstanding, since in principle we agree entirely.”<sup>13</sup>

Responding on 26 February 1965, Scholem hastened to clarify that “nothing in your previous letter made me angry,” adding that

I merely expressed my judgment on the blurring of boundaries now particularly popular in Germany that expresses itself in the fact that, having expropriated and murdered the Jews, one now tries to delete them post facto because they were supposedly such good Germans and such delightful “Jewish fellow citizens.”... And then the cheek of the people who, when one confronts them, as I and others occasionally do, answer, with a hypocritical flutter, that it would perpetuate Nazi race theory if one referred to the Jews as Jews, i.e., to the decisive quality that did, after all, cost them their lives. I was always certain that on this issue there is no need for any discussion between us.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Scholem was as clear about his continued disagreement with Schlösser, as he was assured of his agreement with Susman. “As far as the discussion about the relations between Germans and Jews is concerned,” he wrote to Schlösser on 6 April 1965, “we do not understand one another at all. Our points of departure are

<sup>12</sup> Scholem, *Briefe II*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 124f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

evidently as different as they could possibly be between two people still hoping to hold on to a shared humanity.” Yet even in this clearly confrontational context, Scholem also clarified that

I will always admit that one should keep open the possibility of a conversation if one means by this a future conversation and not the disingenuous pseudo-conversation of the past. I have done my bit toward this future conversation not least by having several of my books published in Germany.<sup>15</sup>

I would argue that the popular caricature of Scholem springs from a confluence and various admixtures of at least four factors. In the first instance, Scholem’s much-cited text in fact discusses two distinct issues, yet these are all too often conflated in unhelpful ways.

First, there is Scholem’s contention that German Jewry had been willing to sell out “to the point of total self-renunciation.” As he saw it, Germany’s Jews had gone to extraordinary lengths in their attempt to do so, “demanding, imploring, and beseeching, sometimes obsequious, sometimes defiant, in all keys from affecting dignity to godforsaken indiscretion,” and they had continued to do so even after they ought to have recognized the futility of their efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Were Scholem to submit an account along these lines today as a written assignment for a first-year survey course in Jewish history and culture, he would doubtless be given a low to middling 2.2 (or a B- in the States) and told to go away and read some of David Sorkin’s work on emancipation, assimilation, and acculturation. In this respect, Scholem’s position is indeed indefensible. No serious scholar would deny today that most European Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had no intention of making themselves disappear as Jews. In fact, they were seeking to carve out new Jewish identities for themselves that combined what they considered the best elements to be drawn both from the societies within which they lived and the Jewish traditions of their forebears.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Jewish aspirations are one thing. Non-Jewish expectations, on the other hand, tend to be quite another and rarely mirror Jews’ aspirations. Indeed, most of what we know about Jewish–non-Jewish relations in a historical perspective

15 Ibid., 129f.

16 Scholem, “Wider den Mythos,” 8.

17 For paradigmatic formulations of Sorkin’s position, see Sorkin, “Emancipation and Assimilation”; Sorkin, “The Impact of Emancipation”; and Sorkin, “Enlightenment and Emancipation.”

suggests that all the various entanglements between Jews and non-Jews notwithstanding, in terms of their underlying motives, aspirations, and expectations these relations tend to be fundamentally non-reciprocal, even when they are seemingly at their most harmonious.

Here lies the point of departure for Scholem's second major contention, namely, that all the efforts by German Jews to integrate into German society notwithstanding, the non-Jewish German majority society had only ever considered this an option, provided Jews ultimately stopped being Jews. There had been no "productive response to the Jews qua Jews ... that addressed them in terms of what the Jews had to give and not in terms of what the Jews had to give up."<sup>18</sup> To pretend otherwise, now that the game was over, in other words, after the destruction wrought on German Jewry by the Shoah, was, in Scholem's eyes, "blasphemy."<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with either or both contentions, the crucial point for our discussion here is this: it is perfectly possible to take issue with Scholem's account of radical assimilationism without fundamentally rejecting his assessment of group relations between German Jews and non-Jews. There has been some inclination in recent debate to conflate these two issues and proceed as though by refuting Scholem's claims about assimilationism one has killed not one but two birds with one stone and also discredited his skeptical view of the response of the non-Jewish German majority society to the Jews in their midst. Yet this obviously does not follow and reflects only a desire to render the past in brighter colors without actually mustering any alternative historical evidence.

To be sure, Scholem's reference to the "blasphemy" of trying to project backward an alleged dialogue with the Jews after their annihilation in the Shoah demonstrates how deeply National Socialism and its crimes had affected him, not least given the displacement of his family and the murder of his brother, the former leader and deputy of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, Werner Scholem (1895–1940), in Buchenwald in July 1940.<sup>20</sup> Even so, in his evaluation of relations between German Jews and non-Jews, National Socialism and its crimes did not represent a crucial turning point. They offered the worst possible confirmation of his pre-existing assumptions, but those assumptions did

18 Scholem, "Wider den Mythos," 9.

19 Ibid., 11.

20 See Mirjam Zadoff's monograph, *Der rote Hiob*. Early in 1952, Scholem stated in a letter to the literary editor and subsequent broadcaster, Hans-Geert Falkenberg (1919–2005), who had himself been interned and in hiding because of his Jewish background, that "things stand between our peoples that cannot be rectified by any debate, no matter how noble and rational." Scholem, *Briefe II*, 28.

not originate in the experience of the Shoah. Nor, of course, had the ascendancy of National Socialism marked a crucial turning point in his own biography. His *aliya* predated this development by a decade. His overarching agenda was an essentially positive one determined by his vision of Zionism, rather than a negative one arising from experiences of rejection and traumatization, or worse, at the hands of the non-Jewish German majority society.

It is not hard to imagine that in the eyes of quite a few this makes him in some respects a more challenging, in others an easier target. Here, it seems to me, lies the second reason why Scholem's contentions have drawn (and continue to draw) quite so much ire. On the one hand, even scholars who are in no way troubled by admitting that relations between German Jews and non-Jews developed catastrophically after 1933 frequently find it excruciatingly difficult to accept the notion that there might already have been something fundamentally problematic about these relations prior to 1933. On the other hand, psychologically a least, it is obviously much more difficult to assail the claims of somebody whose pessimistic assessment of the historical track record of relations between German Jews and non-Jews fundamentally springs from their experience of the Shoah than to take issue with a scholar whose assessment of this relationship does not hinge on the Shoah as a crucial caesura.

A third potential irritant lies in Scholem's Zionism and his determination to contribute to the creation of a new Jewish (academic) culture. Much has been written about the ways in which Scholem was profoundly shaped by German intellectual and cultural traditions. It would be foolhardy, of course, to deny this, nor as far as I can see, did Scholem himself ever try to deny this. He doubtless makes for a fascinating case study for the complex ways in which all attempts to formulate and implement radically new departures are shaped by the backgrounds of those engaging in such projects. Several scholars have focused on Scholem's "Germanness," not least in an attempt to recover something of the culture, creativity, and vitality of Jews living in Germany prior to their flight, expulsion, and/or murder after 1933. On a less charitable reading, however, one might also infer from the contention that Scholem always remained much more "German" than he supposedly cared to admit that his vision of the project of cultural Zionism was, in fact, a failure, even in terms of his own personal contribution.

Finally, for many in postwar West German society, certainly in its political class and cultural elites, whatever his own stance and intentions, Scholem was undoubtedly a poster boy for reconciliation between Germans and Jews. At the risk of exaggerating slightly to drive home the point, let me say this: given that Scholem dedicated his life to what, even by the standards of most well-meaning non-Jews, is a truly arcane discipline; that he remained a scholar's

scholar and in many ways a staunchly old-fashioned philologist throughout; and that he rarely intervened in debates of interest to the wider German public after his bruising experiences of the mid-1960s, the attention that he continued to receive in the West German media and academy was absolutely extraordinary. The massive coverage following his death alone is a case in point.

I am not interested, in this context, in the question of how and why Scholem achieved this status. Rather, my point is that this has (had) the potential to make him collateral damage in the critique of what, rather problematically, has been called postwar German “philosemitism”; in other words, the willful attempt by the official West Germany to demonstrate a newfound enthusiasm for Jews (and Israel in particular), which frequently drew simply on the inversion of existing anti-Jewish stereotypes rather than on any meaningful engagement of antisemitism past or present. Indeed, all too often this newfound ostentatious “philosemitism” in fact turned out to be an ingenuous means of evading that engagement. Following the time-honored notion that my enemy’s (ostensible) friend must be my enemy, one might then be tempted to consider Scholem guilty by association and his denunciation therefore the height of critical thought.

How one evaluates, and where one positions oneself against, this backdrop obviously hinges in large part on the criteria one applies, whether consciously or unwittingly. This becomes particularly palpable in instances where the suggestion seems to be that Scholem was both irrational in his desire to distance himself from Germany and hypocritical in his failure to do so in a sufficiently consequential way. In these instances, his critics are effectively setting up criteria for what being consistently anti-German would entail, which is obviously not without its own irony.

It is not my impression that Scholem himself ever thought in terms of such criteria or ever encountered his own thoughts and sentiments about Germany as anything other than conflicted, even when he was most outspoken about his deeply skeptical evaluation of the past, present, and likely future of group relations between German Jews and non-Jews.

Scholem’s thoughts and sentiments about Germany were truly consistent only in the sense that they were consistently marked by deep-seated tensions between the principled and the pragmatic, between pessimism and optimism, between disillusionment and yearning, between attraction and repulsion, and between the biographical and the political. They were expressed not only, depending on the addressee, with varying emphases and nuances in registers ranging from sensitive to extremely blunt, but also with an intense awareness of his own limitations in terms of what might, in principle, be desirable. And how, quite frankly, could it have been any other way, given that Gershom Scholem

was a real-life human being and not a conceptual straw man? Nor, it is worth remembering, did Scholem devise his attitude toward postwar Germany at his desk. He had all manner of dealings with Germans, Jewish and non-Jewish, and visited Germany with some regularity.<sup>21</sup>

We might take as an illustration of the conflicted nature of Scholem's thoughts and sentiments on Germany his letter to Hannah Arendt of 12 November 1942, written when the slaughter of European Jewry was at its height. In it, he praised Arendt for her public critique of Emil Ludwig (1881–1948). Emil Ludwig (originally Emil Cohen), who had been baptized in 1902 but rejoined the Jewish community following Walter Rathenau's assassination in 1922, was a well-known popular biographer, a sort of mixture between Lytton Strachey and Antonia Fraser. Having immigrated to the United States in 1940, he had become a prominent and prolific proponent of a harshly punitive postwar settlement for Germany. When the theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who had immigrated to the United States in 1933, challenged Ludwig, a bitter controversy ensued in which Arendt intervened in defense of Tillich. Scholem wrote to Arendt on 12 November 1942: "Today I read a good piece by you in 'Aufbau' ... on Emil Ludwig. I congratulate you and Paul Tillich on a humane word. I have to admit that I myself occasionally have to force myself, against massive mental resistance, to think in this way."<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the single most striking sentence in the correspondence between Scholem and Arendt, written in an undated letter from 1947, reads: "German no longer exists [*Deutsch gibt es nicht mehr*]."<sup>23</sup> Language politics is obviously a crucial site for any evaluation of the issues under discussion.<sup>24</sup> The context of Scholem's remark was this: Arendt had been sending him offprints of her publications, but Scholem had not been reciprocating. As he explained, he was in no position to do so since he did not feel confident enough to write in English and all his recent publications were in Hebrew, which Arendt, in turn, could not read. Moreover, German obviously no longer existed as a language in which he might conceivably publish. Scholem clearly considered this a self-evident truth, for the short sentence "German no longer exists" is all he has to say on the matter. It is precisely the splendid isolation in which the sentence stands there that lends it its force and intimates that there might be more to it

21 As is well known, his first postwar visit to Germany in particular deeply affected Scholem, and he repeatedly referred to the time he had spent in Germany on these occasions as being among the "hardest and most bitter" months of his life (e.g., Scholem, *Briefe II*, 29, 33).

22 Arendt and Scholem, *Der Briefwechsel 1939–1964*, 33f.

23 *Ibid.*, 165.

24 See Fischer, "After the 'Strauss Wars,'" 73f., for a discussion of the significance of language in the correspondence between Scholem and Leo Strauss.

than meets the eye. There is obviously a profound irony to the fact that Scholem made this statement in German in a letter written in German—and all the more so given that Scholem continued to correspond extensively in German, and was in any case arguably one of the twentieth century's greatest German prose stylists.

*Prima facie*, then, Scholem's focus really was primarily on German as a language of publication, and he did not in fact bring out any publications in German between 1938 and 1950. As is well known, the first text that he did then publish in German again appeared in Switzerland in the *Eranos Jahrbuch*, something that even Scholem's most die-hard fans doubtless find hard to stomach, given the composition of the Eranos circle and the murky pasts of some of its leading participants.<sup>25</sup>

And yet it would seem that this is not the whole story after all. Writing to Leo Baeck from Zurich on 2 June 1946, Scholem apologized for doing so in German. "Please forgive my writing in German," he wrote, "but this way I have the opportunity here to dictate the letter."<sup>26</sup> I would suggest that this is remarkable in two ways. On the one hand, his letter to Baeck was not a public document, which suggests that Scholem's unease in using the German language did in fact extend beyond its use as a language of publication. On the other hand, his decision to write in German in this instance, even though his concerns would only have been heightened when corresponding with a survivor of the Shoah, was owed to a purely pragmatic factor—namely, the presence of a secretary to whom he could dictate the letter in German but not in English or Hebrew. In methodological terms, factors like this are all too often simply overlooked.

Yet neither does Scholem's participation in the activities and publications of the Eranos circle in fact indicate that Scholem's concern had simply evaporated, let alone that he was somehow unaware of the conflicted nature of his continued dealings with the German language. Writing on 28 November 1960 to Walter Benjamin's childhood friend, the composer, translator, and broadcaster Ernst Schoen (1894–1960), who had settled (rather haplessly) in the German Democratic Republic following his return from exile in the United Kingdom, Scholem explained that he would be in Ascona again in August 1961, "where I have already presented my kabbalistic studies ten times in 'High Swiss' [*Hochschweizerisch*], as one might call the language in which Jews who still speak the

25 On 29 August 1954, Adorno, holidaying in Locarno, wrote to Horkheimer that "Eranos was raging in Ascona with Tillich, Scholem, Kerenyi, Szilasi e tutti quanti, mostly Hungarian Jews, performing sacrificial dances before an antisemitic forum." Adorno and Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel IV*, 286.

26 Scholem, *Briefe I*, 317.

old German of the period before 1920 have come to express themselves since the German language no longer exists.”<sup>27</sup>

I suggested earlier that Scholem’s sense of mission in 1965 was doubtless strengthened by his anger at the many negative responses his intervention precipitated, and it is to this context that I want to return in this final section.

On 21 May 1965, one of the contributors to the Susman *Festschrift*, Husserl’s former assistant, the social philosopher and philosopher of technology Arnold Metzger (1892–1974), himself of Jewish extraction, published a text with the title “The Dialogue between Germans and Jews: Have Relations between the Two Peoples Survived the Hitler Years?” in the prestigious highbrow weekly *Die Zeit*. Among the many negative responses to his intervention, few seem to have irked Scholem quite as much as Metzger’s.

Scholem reacted to its publication by writing to the paper’s deputy editor, Marion Dönhoff (1909–2002), on 28 May. “I hope you will not mind if I write you a short letter,” he began, “to tell you that I consider the essay by Arnold Metzger ... a most unfortunate concoction.... What the reader cannot know,” Scholem explained, “is that the essay is evidently a response to my contribution to the *Festschrift* for Margarete Susman.... If you take another look at Metzger’s essay,” he continued, “you will notice that the author has plenty of sentimental things to say about the love of the Jews for the Germans but not a single word about the Germans’ response to this love—which would surely be crucial for a so-called dialogue. Evidently,” Scholem went on, his contribution to the *Festschrift* had “greatly outraged Metzger. I attach an offprint of these pages, which mean a great deal to me personally.”<sup>28</sup>

On the same day, Scholem also raised the issue with Theodor Adorno. “Did I, as I think I did, send you an offprint of my letter to Schlösser from Margarethe [sic] Susman’s *Festschrift*?” he inquired. He then stated:

You did not confirm its receipt. I was keen to know this explosive document in your hands. Its legitimate place would have been at the beginning of the “Judaica.” A long and furious response, in which I was not mentioned, however, was published in the *Zeit* (Hamburg) last week, in the form of a long and heinously apologetic essay penned by our philosophical colleague, Arnold Metzger from Munich. I wouldn’t be at all disinclined to demand of Marion Dönhoff that she print my letter from the *Festschrift*. I know Metzger from his stay in Jerusalem in 1933/34.<sup>29</sup>

27 Scholem, *Briefe* 11, 71f.

28 *Ibid.*, 136.

29 *Ibid.*, 133f. We find out slightly more about Scholem’s earlier encounter with Metzger in a letter he wrote to this brother Reinhold in November 1965. There, Scholem wrote: “A while

If one reads Scholem's letters to Adorno in isolation one might surmise, as I initially did, that Scholem had been seeking Adorno's assurance but did not receive it. For on 20 June 1965, Scholem raised the issue with Adorno again: "I have sent you ... an offprint of my letter to Schlösser. I am sure I already sent you one previously. Metzger's essay (in which I am not named but which is clearly meant as a response to my letter) was published in the *Zeit* about four weeks ago. It is a terrible document." Yet the publication of the correspondence between Adorno and Scholem has since clarified that this would be a misinterpretation.

On 10 June, Adorno responded to Scholem's initial inquiry as follows:

I did not receive the offprint of your letter to Schloesser from the Susman *Festschrift*. Either you did not send it to me or it has been lost. So, please, send it to me! Nor do I know Herr Metzger's response though I do, from long ago, know him; he is one of the most repulsive and miserable people I have met in all my life, and I can construct a priori the thrust of the little twerp's response to you. So his unholy text would be important to me solely for confirmation.<sup>30</sup>

When Adorno did receive the offprint of Scholem's text, his emphatic response could not have been more reassuring. "I at least want to put it on record that I am entirely d'accord with your response to Schloesser," he wrote, and continued:

Given what has transpired, one just needs to hear a term like Jewish-German dialogue to feel nauseated and it is the plain truth that such a dialogue never took place and that even the greatest Germans like Kant and Goethe wrote things that do now seem like the logs the little old woman dragged to [Jan] Hus's stake. It amounts to a truly abysmal irony that the interest in Jewry qua Jewry, rather than in individual Jewish figures, becomes more pronounced in Germany only now, that there are no longer any Jews in Germany.<sup>31</sup>

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ago I read a terribly long and totally godforsaken essay about Germans and Jews in the Hamburg 'Zeit,' where (a Jew, nota bene) engaged in sentimental reflections, in honor of the taking up of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, [about] how wonderful everything had supposedly been and how much one had to give one another. Little wonder that I threw out the author many years ago when he visited me in Jerusalem." *Ibid.*, 145f.

30 Adorno and Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 35f.

31 *Ibid.*, 357f. It will be interesting to see whether scholars in the field will now treat Adorno's assessment with the same disrespect as they have Scholem's.

Just how strongly Adorno felt becomes clear from what followed. “If I came back nevertheless,” he continued, “I can name no reasons [for my decision] other than individual ones: the—temporary—possibility of unrestrained production free of any control.”<sup>32</sup>

I have sketched these exchanges to set the stage for the juxtaposition of the two letters with which I want to conclude. Written within four months of each other, in July and November 1965, they offer a good example for the variation in nuance and emphasis of which Scholem was capable when discussing his evaluation of Germany and Germans with varying addressees.

One is a letter that Scholem wrote, on 16 November 1965, to his brother Reinhold Scholem (1891–1985), who had immigrated to Australia in 1938. From Scholem’s letter, one gains the impression that Reinhold Scholem really did conform to the caricature that is all too often drawn of Scholem himself. “Matters are not that simple,” Scholem set his brother right. “Jewishness cannot always be equated in a straightforward and naïve manner with the sense of being at home in Israel, not even today.” He then went on:

If you ask me why the *Neue Rundschau* led with my article [on Benjamin] given that Benjamin was so Jewish, then this is, to my mind, an entirely inappropriate question. My article featured this prominently because the editor found it outstanding and the best that has been said on this issue to date.

“Moreover,” Scholem concluded his remarks, “the Germans, at least some among them, have become more insightful in matters Jewish [in dem Judenpunkt].”<sup>33</sup>

The second letter Scholem wrote to a listener who had contacted him after a radio discussion on German–Israeli relations on 29 April 1965 in which Scholem had taken part. The listener in question was a student from Berlin who suggested in his letter to Scholem that he and his generation urgently needed more interaction with Jews who could offer them authentic and reliable information about what had gone on during the Shoah. The student therefore criticized the reluctance of “Jewish professors” to visit Germany.<sup>34</sup>

“I fully understand that the Jews to whom you can talk in Germany are not necessarily those from whom you expect the insights you mention in your letter,” Scholem wrote in his response on 18 July 1965. “I readily admit this and

32 Ibid., 358. In his letter, Adorno then proceeded to draw a connection between this debate and passages in two of Scholem’s letters to Walter Benjamin that had deeply moved him.

33 Ibid., 145f.

34 Ibid., 288f.

know of no reasons, in principle, why Jewish professors ‘should not visit Germany.’ Unfortunately, though, dear Sir,” he then continued,

there do exist very emphatic reservations of a non-principled kind of whose significance you are perhaps not fully aware. You address the Jews, stating that they are duty-bound to overcome their feelings. This is a hopeless cause. Nobody, this writer included, even if he is willing and perhaps does feel duty-bound, to speak to Germans and the young Germans in particular, can set aside his feelings on the issues at hand. One can try to prevent these feelings from rendering one entirely incapable of speaking; where more is called for I am afraid we will not be in a position to give it. I myself have spoken in Germany and, despite being a fairly rational human being, can vouch for the enormous inhibitions this entails for a serious speaker... I too have found that I was told in Germany that I was profoundly anti-German when I spoke with uncompromising clarity about the issues at stake between our peoples. If you do not have to, you are not going to come back for more of this.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Ibid., 142f.

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