

Fresh Vegetables, Goethe and Rabbi Nachman

The Don Quixote of the Jet Age

Anthony David, *The Patron: A Life of Salman Schocken, 1877-1959*, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 451pp.

Hannah Arendt dubbed him "the Jewish Bismarck". Given his autocratic sense of order, iron discipline and stiff Prussian demeanour, this image of Salman Schocken (1877-1959) was not entirely off the mark. But he would have preferred the title of Jewish Medici for, above all, he thought of himself as a merchant prince of culture. Almost all the modern German-Jewish intellectual luminaries - Heinrich Heine, Hermann Cohen, Franz Kafka, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Else Lasker-Schueler, Leo Strauss, Karl Wolfskehl - eventually found their way into pages published by his houses. But while many of those he promoted (including Arendt herself) became foundational figures of twentieth century thought and learning, his own name and fame have faded. Since his death, as his biographer Anthony David points out, his "rich and varied life has been relegated to scholarly footnotes." *The Patron*, despite its numerous errors of detail and editorial sloppiness¹, demonstrates, in insightful and often moving fashion, why Schocken's life merits critical attention.

The achievements (and failures) of this complex, cultivated institution-builder were singular. Many German Jews excelled in the fields of either commerce or *Kultur*. Schocken was immersed in both - and in uniquely intertwined ways. He sought to merchandise *Bildung* and at the same time to inject ideas and aesthetics into the marketplace (the architect Erich Mendelsohn built some of Schocken's most forward-looking buildings.) He was, as one contemporary put it, a "businessman with art in his soul". Arthur Ruppin described him as "a theoretician among merchants and a man of action among scholars" while the poet Karl Wolfskehl declared: "There is something fantastic, even mystical about this completely unromantic fellow.... with icy clear vision and stellar intellectual powers".

Schocken possessed remarkable foresight (he once quoted Jonathan Swift's dictum that "vision is the art of seeing things invisible"). He was able to detect - and exploit - hidden market trends, promising cultural and intellectual talent, potentially valuable real estate

¹ Nietzsche published the *Genealogy of Morals* in 1887 not 1877; Schocken's daughter was called Eva not Eve; Menahem Ussishkin not Martin Buber is seated beside Schocken in a photograph taken at the 1935 Zionist Congress; Julius Langbehn is misidentified as Langbein, Maximilian Harden as Hardin, Otto Weininger as Weinger; Erich Mendelsohn is said to have been inspired by a non-existent "Bach cello-quartet" and Schocken described as "never a died-in-the-wool Israeli Zionist"(!); C.P.Snow wrote *Strangers and Brothers*, I wrote *Brothers and Strangers*; the Mosse house - not Ullstein - published the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and so on.

and unrecognised avant-garde works of art alike. As a young man he built up his fortune and reputation by presciently grasping the dynamics of the coming age of mass consumerism. He did not invent the modern department store but had the good entrepreneurial sense to move it to the neglected provinces and democratise it for the "common man". Fancy goods were previously thought to be the domain of the urban upper and middle-classes only; Schocken now brought low-priced, high-quality merchandise to the lower and working classes in small towns and in so doing revolutionised German habits of consumption and practices of mass marketing.

These business successes went hand in hand with, and were a means to develop, his cultural enterprises. Over the years, he established three publishing houses: in Berlin - the volumes that appeared in the early years of Nazism were characterized by the exiled Klaus Mann as "the most noble and most significant publications to come out of Germany" - Tel Aviv and New York. From an early age he lovingly built up a priceless collection of 30,000 books and rare manuscripts, consisting of classics of both the Judaic and Western tradition. (Given his acknowledged inability to write, he regarded the inner coherence and development of the library as a kind of autobiographical statement, a personal monument.) He was a generous and ruthlessly demanding patron to countless intellectuals, among them Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber and, most notably and affectionately, the Nobel-laureate S.Y. Agnon (it was Schocken who prepared the groundwork for the later award). He underwrote manifold projects - ranging from the innovative World War I periodical *Der Jude* to a research institute in medieval Hebrew poetry - that fostered a modern secular Jewish cultural renaissance, distinct from but always integrally tied to the broader grain of Western enlightenment and classical culture. (David somewhat exaggerates the uniqueness of Schocken's attempt to invent a useable Jewish *Nibelungslied*, as he rather dramatically describes it. The creation of a secular Jewish culture was an ongoing, broadly-based nineteenth and twentieth century project.)

By all accounts Schocken was a formidable figure. A great admirer of *Wilhelm Meister*, his own life reads like a *Bildungsroman*. His rather oppressed son, Gershom, later wryly commented that his overwhelming father had taken Goethe's values of self-creation a little too literally. Still the ultimate interest and value of this biography lies in the way it links Schocken's powerful individuality to the broader qualities and characteristics of the wider German-Jewish historical experience. It is especially intriguing because at the same time that he embodied a distinctive German-Jewish sensibility, he remained in tension with it. A key to his ambitions, passions and achievements - and perhaps too to some of his flaws and contradictions - lies in Schocken's humble "Eastern" Posen background. Much of his enormous drive and his almost insatiable immersion in *Kultur* derived from this marginal, provincial status (from his youth to the end of his life he voraciously read and revered Goethe, Hegel, Heine, Novalis, Nietzsche). David demonstrates that Schocken's psychic economy was closely bound to his feelings as an outsider, an *Ostjude*, excluded not merely from the German but also the German-Jewish bourgeoisie (thus rendering him always mindful of both the interests and education of the "common man".) Many of his contemporaries were struck by this peculiar fusion of life-affirming and envy-ridden elements. Even his turn to Zionism was initially sparked by a certain *ressentiment*,

a sense of being turned away from a "repellent, liberal, assimilated, and superficial German Jewry."

Of course, there were others who also regarded Posen Jews as outsiders - and particularly dangerous ones at that. It is almost as if Treitschke had Schocken in mind when, in 1879, he warned his fellow Germans that "a troop of ambitious, trouser-selling youths" were infiltrating the eastern borders "from the inexhaustible Polish cradle" to one day dominate "Germany's stock exchanges and newspapers." Indeed, as David points out, all the pioneers of the German department stores came from Posen, a fact which did not go unnoted. Hidebound, increasingly anti-semitic small store-owners took fright at their innovations. In 1929 Werner Sombart gave vent to these resentments. A photograph "of the department store kings", he wrote, "depicted a perfect gallery of characters.....gathered together, as if they wanted to make the racial scientist's work easier: the pure racial types - Schocken, Gruenbaum, Knopf, Hirsch - along with the skullcapped heads of Tietz, Wronker, Joske and Ury, who all come from the east, where a caftan and sidelocks are the indispensable requirements of a nation." Schocken's empire - despite the remarkable loyalty of many of its deputed "Aryan" managers - went the way of other Jewish firms during the Third Reich.

How ironic, then, that Schocken was regarded by many of his fellow Jews as quintessentially and overbearingly German. This was especially true for his encounters with East European Jews in Palestine and, later, Israel. How else could they have viewed his 1925 proposal to direct the entire Jewish economy in Palestine (in the same streamlined ways he ran his department stores and cultural enterprises) from his German Zwickau headquarters! The Zionist movement, increasingly dominated by Ben Gurion and labour interests on the ground, regarded this as utterly outlandish. Schocken's cosmopolitan politics were viewed as similarly alien, naive and self-righteous identified as he was with *Brith Shalom*, a small circle of mainly German-speaking Zionist intellectuals that, during the 1920s and 1930s, opposed the establishment of a Jewish State and advocated a bi-national Arab-Jewish federation.

Schocken, for his part, fumed against the chauvinism of Polish Jews, claimed that their "Levantinism" posed a danger to the country and that German Jews had to act as a wall against this influence. Was he aware how much he resembled those Posen Jewish migrants - immortalized in Georg Hermann's 1907 novel, *Jettchen Gebert* - who after ten years in the capital were "quite unable to imagine the possibility of anyone being born out of Berlin"? Yet he was also a realist. He came to respect the pioneer settlers for their hard, practical work, their sense of the concrete imperatives of power. *Brith Shalom*, he soon realised, was a species of coffee-house humanism with questionable relevance to the hard truths of life in Palestine. "You'll never win a political fight", he shrewdly told his German-Jewish colleagues in 1940, "because you'll never muster the will for it." He advised them to stick to what they best knew - the world of culture. Schocken took his own advice by becoming administrator of the fledgling Hebrew University in Jerusalem which - unlike the Zionist political system - he regarded as the movement's potential secular contribution to humanity. (However his reputation as an uncommitted outsider was sealed when he ran that institution as a virtual absentee).

After World War II, Schocken became increasingly isolated and depressed. He had always been a philandering husband (his loyal wife Lili is only a faint presence in this biography) and distant father to five children (although he promoted the latest works on child psychology, he remained ignorant of its most basic principles) and he now seemed to spend more time in European hotel rooms than in his New York home. Though he understood the necessities of power, he does not seem to have come to terms with the ultimate political implications of the destruction of European Jewry for Zionism. Instead, he grew more and more disillusioned with what he regarded as its chauvinism and parochialism. He turned ever more insistently to the compensating world of *Geist*. The task now was to provide American Jewry - which "never managed to come up with a Hermann Cohen, a Rosenzweig, a Kafka" - with a modern spiritual legacy. This, he felt, could at least contain and humanize the grandiose illusions of power: "We must once again return", he wrote in 1946, "to a truly ideal attitude by finally realizing that culture, not politics...can be our center."

This could well have served as the noble if somewhat naive credo of modern German Jewry as a whole. In both its strengths and blind spots Schocken, the contradictory Posen Jew, was one of its supreme exemplars. Gershom Scholem once dubbed him "our Don Quixote of the jet age" and each section of *The Patron* begins with a quote from Cervantes. In an age of total war, genocide and extreme nationalism, there was something outmoded, anachronistic in Schocken's continued insistence upon melding Enlightenment classicism and humanism with the treasures of the Jewish tradition. The manner of his death was symbolic, almost theatrical: in August 1959 he was found, slumped in his chair, a volume of *Faust II* and Rabbi Nachman's stories clutched firmly in his hands. Yet, even if he tilted against some windmills, he built a few of his own and some of these institutions have more or less stood the test of time. The publishing houses in New York and Tel Aviv and above all, the liberal Israeli daily, *Ha'aretz* (the latter two enterprises still run by his grandchildren), continue to articulate his message. Faintly, to be sure, they keep alive that bygone synthesis of European and Jewish cultural humanism in a world too often deaf to its cadences.

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