

ISRAEL FRIEDLAENDER  
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

BY JACOB KOHN

When news of Professor Friedlaender's tragic death in the service of his people burst upon the Jewish world, the whole of Israel shuddered. The baffled heart instinctively uttered the old protest at thought of the scholar's martyrdom: "*Zo Torah wezo sekarah,*" and felt itself doubly bereft in that a lover of his people as well as one of its sages had passed away. Prof. Friedlaender had never been a cloistered scholar, but one whose activity was manifest in many lands of the dispersion and in many spheres of Jewish life and endeavor. In him the scholar and the worker were nobly blended.

He was born in Poland, September 6, 1876, and grew to manhood dowered with the intense Jewish consciousness characteristic of Eastern Jewry and immersed in that sea of Jewish lore and learning which was the breath of its life. In 1896, however, he went to Germany, where larger intellectual vistas opened before him and where the Jewish scholarship he already possessed could be properly clarified and disciplined. He at once entered Berlin University and the Rabbiner Seminar, at which he remained a student till the year 1900. The following year he received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, and in 1902 was conspicuously honored by an appointment as *Privatdocent* in the Department of Semitic Languages.

The companions of his student days in Germany bear testimony to the influence he exerted by his personality, his schol-

arship, his facility of speech and pen, and his profound sympathy and understanding of Jewish psychology. In the days when Zionist enthusiasm was gripping the hearts of university students and causing in many a young Jewish soul a complete revolution, away from a strident pseudo-Teutonism or a lackadaisical cosmopolitanism toward a fervid Jewish nationalism, a man like Friedlaender naturally became the centre of an admiring circle. At this time also he began his career as a translator, in the desire to interpret some of the Jewish thinkers of Eastern Europe, especially Dubnow and Ahad Ha'am, to the youths who seemed so eager and ready for their doctrines. He was anxious to place into the hands of the *Verein der Jüdischer Studenten*, whose members showed no little skill with the duellist's rapier, the shining sword of the Jewish spirit. To this end he himself inaugurated several courses in Hebrew and Jewish history, and his efforts bore fruit in the decision of the Society which required a minimum of Jewish study as a qualification for membership.

In 1903 Prof. Schechter invited Dr. Friedlaender to occupy the chair in Biblical Literature and Exegesis at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Thereafter, America became the immediate scene of his work and activity. Europe, however, had still one important contribution to make to his life. On September 26, 1905, he married Miss Lillian Bentwich of London, England. Her tender devotion, her deep understanding and sympathy for his work and aspirations, and her power of self-effacement helped to smooth the difficult path of his labor, and made possible his final brave sacrifice.

Prof. Friedlaender was never able to rest quietly in academic isolation. His vivid interest in Jewish affairs, his well-developed communal conscience, impelled him to answer the

need for men of light and leading so clearly manifest in Jewish life on all sides. A mere list of the movements and institutions with which he was intimately connected suffices to show his keen sense of public duty as well as the main directions in which his interest lay. His paramount concern was Jewish education. He was himself an able teacher in practice and anxious for the development of a right pedagogic system in Jewish schools. But quite apart from his personal contribution to the cause of Jewish education, he gave himself wholeheartedly to the upbuilding of Jewish educational institutions, whether devoted to higher learning or to the less ambitious but more fundamental task of popular instruction. He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Educational Alliance. He was chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Bureau of Education of the New York Kehillah, which his influence had helped to call into being and which his energies had helped to guide and develop. The Jewish Publication Society was quick to enlist his aid on its publication committee. His own contributions, his expert advice, his sound literary judgment and his general good taste went to enrich the Society's output.

The influence which Prof. Friedlaender exerted in academic circles in his student days was paralleled by his influence among American students in the days of his maturity. His heart remained tender toward the Jewish youth and especially toward those elements among the Jewish youth which he regarded as the possible torch-bearers of Jewish culture. He was a member of the governing board of the Intercollegiate Menorah Society, high in the councils of the Intercollegiate Zionist Association, and first president of Young Judæa.

Prof. Friedlaender did not permit his preoccupation with Jewish organizations to blind him to the larger problem of

Jewish organization. His participation in the Kehillah movement as an active member of its executive committee, the part he played on the American Jewish Committee and the rôle of conciliator which he assumed during the Congress agitation, and the interest he took in organizing the American Jewish Congress, show his realization of the needs and his faith in the possibility of a united American Jewry. He was not discouraged by the fact that the course of events proved none of these organizations to be in possession of the complete formula for the realization of such union. The dogma of the unity of Israel was for him beyond dispute, and he was convinced that the proper organic expression of this unity would one day be found for Israel as a whole as well as for the various Jewries of the Diaspora. This larger unity of Israel he felt to be bound up with the Zionist movement. He was always to be found at the heart and center of Zionist endeavor in America. He was for many years a member of the National Executive Committee of the Federation of American Zionists, and later served on the Provisional Committee for Zionist Affairs when the exigencies of the Great War and the temporary disintegration of European Zionism called that body into being.

The influence of Prof. Friedlaender at public gatherings was a remarkable one. His catholic interest in all the important phases of Jewish life in America made him a familiar figure at Jewish meetings. This familiarity, however, so far from breeding contempt, gave birth to a genuine love only equalled by the respect felt for him by every element of the heterogeneous composite of Jewish life. He spoke and wrote, with equal facility and almost equal felicity of expression, Hebrew, German, and English, and knew Russian and Yid-

dish; but—what was more important—understood the complex psychology of Jewry as well as the varieties of its speech. He could evaluate and interpret the aspirations of Russian, German, and American Jews. His own personality had been moulded under the influence of all three. Besides, he was almost equally at ease before a learned body, at after-dinner speaking, or when addressing turbulent Jewish masses at meetings and conventions. His method of address was always quiet and soothing in tone and rich in the graceful use of the *mashal* in many varieties, ancient and modern. When a debate became stormy and beyond control, a word from Prof. Friedlaender would be sure to receive the respectful attention of contending factions and to radiate light in an atmosphere which had hitherto been all heat.

It is difficult to realize that, amidst this profusion of public activity, Prof. Friedlaender continued to live the life of the teacher and the scholar. At the Seminary he taught and expounded the literature of the Bible, and gave courses in the history of the Canon in the various phases of biblical history and archæology. In addition, he read with his students the mediæval Jewish philosophers, a branch of Jewish scholarship which, though not within the scope of his Seminary speciality, had been assigned to him by virtue of his wide acquaintance with Arabic literature in general and Jewish-Arabic texts in particular.

To his task as teacher he brought, besides the treasure of his learning, certain talents recognizable, in part, in his printed lectures and essays, but particularly noticeable in the class-room. He had a gift for popular exposition. One could detect the graceful essayist and the pleasant conversationalist behind the lecturer. The illustrations were always apt and

plentiful. As an exegete and critic, he took great pains to assemble all the divergent views on any point, but did not fail to distinguish those views which were based on an interpretation of philological, historical or archæological fact from those which were merely the expression of literary taste and predilection. His own sensitiveness to style and to literary harmonies and discords and his many interesting deductions based on these feelings did not blind him to their subjectivity either in himself or in others. He thus helped his students to evolve sound canons of criticism.

In teaching the mediæval Jewish philosophers, his wide acquaintance with philosophic literature, both ancient and modern, stood him in good stead. It was, however, his thorough knowledge of Arabic philology and Muhammedan theology and philosophy which proved most helpful to his students. The introductory lectures in these courses concerned themselves chiefly with related tendencies in Islam. The Hebrew translations of the works of Maimonides, Judah ha-Levi, and others are often difficult because of the many Arabisms with which they are laden, and the printed texts are often corrupt. Prof. Friedlaender's students soon learned that when they came to a difficult tangle in the Hebrew text, the thing to do was not to indulge in weird philosophic subtleties and to search for profound and hidden depths, but to await the simple Arabic key which would solve the mystery and which Prof. Friedlaender would be sure to have in his possession. Several of his pupils were stimulated to study Arabic; others, including the writer, continued to look to their professor as the "revealer of mysteries."

Prof. Friedlaender's interest in his students, however, was not confined to the stated hours for instruction. His pupils

had but to express a wish for some branch of Jewish knowledge, not included in the curriculum, to be sure of his services. For several years he taught Arabic voluntarily to small groups interested in that branch of Semitics, and, on the other hand, many a young man born in this country caught his first glimpse of the fresh green fields of modern Hebrew literature under the guidance of Prof. Friedlaender. The Hebrew prose of Ahad Ha'am was the usual vehicle employed for this introduction, and the reading and elucidation of the text became the occasion for prolonged discussions on the themes of the essays, discussions which continued through the late afternoon and into the darkening day. On those occasions Prof. Friedlaender was not so much the teacher as the disciple, and his enthusiasm, as it communicated itself to his pupils, blotted out the flight of time.

Prof. Friedlaender's contribution in the field of pure scholarship dealt for the most part with Arabic literature, but his main human interest reveals itself in his choice of those subjects which betray Jewish influence or influenced Jewish development. His training in Semitics, which included, besides Hebrew and Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Assyrian, was achieved under the guidance of that eminent master, Prof. Nöldeke, for whom his brilliant pupil always cherished the highest love and reverence.\* Among these Arabic studies mention may be made first of the inaugural address delivered by Prof. Friedlaender at Strasbourg on his

\* Prof. Marx, in an article in *The Maccabean* (August, 1920), calls attention to the hasidic veneration in which Prof. Friedlaender held his teachers, those within as well as those without the class-room. Prof. Nöldeke always remained one of his chosen saints.

appointment as *Privatdocent*. It was entitled "The Messianic Idea in Islam." Fortunately, this lecture was subsequently translated into English by Prof. Friedlaender himself and included in his collected writings. A work of larger scope, including, however, the matter dealt with in the inaugural lecture, was the book *The Heterodoxies of the Shiites according to Ibn Hazm* (Reprint from the Journal of the American Oriental Society, volumes 28 and 29), New Haven, 1909. The founder of the Shiite sect, in whose beliefs and traditions Prof. Friedlaender found so many traces of Jewish Messianism, was, according to the Arabic sources themselves, a Jew from Southern Arabia. It was of this Jew and the problems connected with his life and origin that Prof. Friedlaender wrote under the title "Abdallah b. Saba, der Begründer der Schi'a und sein jüdischer Ursprung" in volumes 23 and 24 (1909-10) of the *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*. A third book dealing with a hero of Muhammedan folk-lore, the prophet Al-Khadhir, also points to the connection between these folk-tales and the Messianic legends current in Jewish circles. It is entitled *Die Chadhirlegende und der Alexanderroman* (Leipsic, 1913).

There was also a series of Jewish-Arabic studies published by Prof. Friedlaender which ran through the first three volumes of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (New Series). He likewise edited certain Genizah texts of Maimonides and other Judeo-Arabic authorities. The first scientific work of Prof. Friedlaender, however, was his thesis for the Doctorate, entitled *Der Sprachgebrauch des Maimonides*, which is an Arabic-German glossary of rare words used by Maimonides. In his introduction Prof. Friedlaender vindicates the purity of Maimonides' Arabic style. Certain extracts from the gram-



matical material which Prof. Friedlaender had collected in connection with this work, but which had never been completely edited and published, can be found in the introduction to his *Selections from the Arabic Writings of Maimonides*, in the Semitic Study Series (1909). A number of Arabic responsa by Maimonides appeared in several periodicals; but much valuable textual material which Prof. Friedlaender had collected for the Schechter Series, and on which he was at work at the time of his death, has not yet been made public.

In line with these latter studies, though popularly written in the graceful and flowing style which was his as essayist and lecturer, are the lectures on "Maimonides," the first of which was delivered at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Dec. 28, 1904, on the occasion of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the death of Maimonides; "Maimonides as an Exegete," delivered as one of a series of lectures at the summer meeting of the University Extension movement, Cambridge, England, Aug. 14, 1906; "Maimonides as a Master of Style," published originally in German, Leipsic, 1908. All three of these are included in *Past and Present*, and are therefore easily accessible to the general reader.

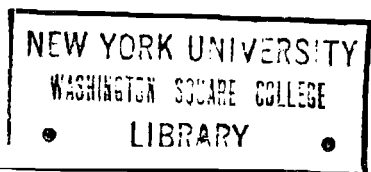
The influence which Prof. Friedlaender exerted on Jewish life, however, is not due primarily to his achievements in historical research. As essayist, publicist, and translator he enriched and refreshed the intellectual atmosphere of modern Jewry. Attention has already been called to the desire which manifested itself in his student days to interpret for the benefit of his western contemporaries those writers in eastern Europe who had particularly influenced his own thinking. His first attempt in this direction was an edition of Dubnow's *Die Jüdische Geschichte*, which he translated from the

Russian into German two years after his arrival in Berlin. In 1905 he translated *Grundlage des Nationalen Judentums* by the same author. A work much more ambitious but one which was also prompted not so much by an abstract historical interest as by the desire that the western world, Jewish and Gentile, should become better acquainted with the rich and varied life of eastern Jewry was the translation into English of Dubnow's *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*. This translation was done largely from the author's manuscript, in part during the years of the Great War when mails were uncertain and the transmission of manuscripts, especially in Russia, was viewed with suspicion and subject to much delay. The painstaking labor required and the exasperating tedium of the long and anxious waits failed to discourage the translator only because he was convinced of the need of the work and because he had entered upon it as a labor of love.

This function of mediatorship between eastern and western Jewry Prof. Friedlaender exercised with warmest love and enthusiasm as an apostle of Ahad Ha'am. To the pupils with whom he read the collected essays of Ahad Ha'am he never failed to point out the importance of this essayist as a master of Hebrew prose, as the champion of cultural Zionism, and as one who not only understood the psychology of the Jewish people, but who, almost for the first time since the birth of the Haskalah, brought psychological rather than purely rationalistic criteria to bear on the interpretation of Jewish phenomena. As a teacher he could reach only a limited circle. He therefore published a collection of essays by Ahad Ha'am in a German translation. These essays were widely circulated, and several of them were in turn rendered into other languages.

In translating Dubnow's History, Prof. Friedlaender's motive was not solely admiration of the author's work or even the general desire to acquaint the western world with the story of so important a branch of the family of Israel. He was always keenly conscious of the significance of contemporaneous history, of the dire need created by present circumstances, and he never felt that the disinterested service of that need had other than a high claim upon the true scholar. That he was conscious of such service in the translation referred to is evident from these words in the preface: "The want of a work of this kind has long been keenly felt by those interested in Jewish life or Jewish letters, never more keenly than to-day when the world conflagration has thrown into ghastly relief the tragic plight of the largest Jewry of the Diaspora." His own heart, so keenly touched by this plight that it finally rendered up its life to ameliorate the woe, felt that to make the world understand the struggles of Russian and Poland Jewry, its age-long wrongs and its heroic endurance, would be the surest way to procure justice.

This keen awareness of the possibilities of post-war readjustment, this pervasive sensitiveness to the sufferings of his contemporaries in eastern Europe, led him also to hasten the publication of his own work, *The Jews of Russia and Poland: a Bird's-eye View of Their History and Culture* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), even while yet engaged in preparing the proofs of the fuller history by Dubnow. Dr. Friedlaender himself disclaims any attempt on his part to offer new and independent results of investigation (preface to Dubnow, p. 6). He says: "My natural reluctance to anticipate Mr. Dubnow's large work was overcome by the encouragement of several friends, among them Mr. Dubnow himself, who from their



knowledge of public affairs thought that a succinct, popular presentation of the destinies of the Jews in the eastern war area was a word in due season." This readable little history, in whose pages many an American Jew has caught his first view of the trend and spirit of Jewish history in eastern Europe, was based upon a course of lectures delivered at the Dropsie College in Philadelphia in March, 1915, and shows Prof. Friedlaender in the light of the popular historian and the inspired publicist, who knows how to speak the "word in due season" when the cause he loves requires a spokesman.

The book from which the average reader will best be able to judge Prof. Friedlaender's style, the wide range of his interest in Jewish life and thought, and his views on the great controversial questions which agitate the modern Jew is the collection of essays entitled *Past and Present*. The author explains the spirit of the volume very aptly in the preface: "While the diversity of subjects treated in this volume is undoubtedly due—as it is in every collection of essayists—to the personal equation of the author, representing the range of his literary and public interests, yet I venture to claim that the thoughtful reader will be able to detect the common bond which links all the essays together and transforms the apparently heterogeneous mass of material into one homogeneous whole. The volume is based upon the fundamental conception of Judaism as a living organism, which is one and indivisible at all times and climes; changing and yet unchanged; harking back to a great past and struggling in the midst of a harassing present towards a glorious future. That conception views Israel as a community in which the religious and the racial elements are inseparably intertwined with one another, in which the universal ideals and the national aspira-

tions form a harmonious combination—a combination which can be realized only through the untrammelled and unhindered development of the Jewish genius on a Jewish soil.”

These charming and stimulating essays in their variety of theme and treatment reveal the various aspects of the author's personality as well as his dominant point of view. Such essays as “The Political Ideals of the Prophets,” “The Prophet Jeremiah,” “The Messianic Idea in Islam,” and the essays dealing with Maimonides, are masterly expositions, graceful and intelligible, of scholarly themes. They reflect the gift which made Prof. Friedlaender a teacher in circles far wider than the class-room. “The Present Jewish Outlook in Russia,” “The Problem of Jewish Education in America,” “The Present Crisis in American Jewry,” and essays of a similar nature show another side of Prof. Friedlaender's spiritual nature, an aptness for dealing with a present situation, of analyzing the various factors in a problem close at hand which is seldom possessed by a mind devoted to abstract scholarship or to historical research. Even the suavity of the graceful essayist gives place to a certain fire, a polemical heat which only emphasizes the deftness of the writer in debate, in such essays as “Were Our Ancestors Capable of Self-Government?” or “A New Specimen of Modern Biblical Exegesis.” The author's own point of view is most clearly traceable in his discussion of “Race and Religion,” “Palestine and the Diaspora,” and similar themes. We might describe it, in view of what we have already said of the author's relation to Ahad Ha'am and Dubnow, as a synthetic view of Jewish nationalism containing elements of the “spiritual nationalism” of Dubnow, the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, and the political vision of Herzl—a true synthesis, not a mere

composite, made possible by a largeness of view and a sensitive historic consciousness.

The restoration of Zion did not, in Prof. Friedlaender's opinion, involve the abolition of the Diaspora. He realized that the bulk of the Jewish people would in all probability continue to dwell among the nations of the world. Hence the problems of the Diaspora were not to be thrust aside as belonging to the sphere of the temporary and the ephemeral. Dr. Friedlaender sums up his position in the phrase: "Zionism plus the Diaspora." In the midst of this wide-flung dispersion, he was convinced that the Jewry of America was to play a leading part. There is a hint of this point of view in the preface to *Past and Present*. "The author, moreover, thoroughly shares the view which is held and has frequently been expressed by many thinking Jews of Europe, that America is destined to become in the near future the leading Jewish center of the Diaspora and that it is the duty of American Jewry to live up to the great obligation placed upon it by history. . . . Zionism plus Diaspora, Palestine plus America—these formulæ express in a nutshell the leading thoughts of the present volume." The same thought is again alluded to in these words: "America has, in less than one generation, become the second largest center of the Jewish Diaspora, and bids fair to become the first, instead of the second, within another generation. No other country in the world offers, even approximately, such a favorable combination of opportunities for the development of a Diaspora Judaism, as does America; economic possibilities, vast and sparsely populated territories, freedom of action, liberty of conscience, equality of citizenship, appreciation of the fundamentals of Judaism, variety of population, excluding a rigidly nationalistic state policy,

and other similar factors" (p. 341). Indeed it might be said that the purpose of the essays in *Past and Present*, dealing with American conditions, is to arouse in the American Jew a realization of his spiritual opportunity and hence a sense of his spiritual obligation to Judaism and civilization.

Prof. Friedlaender was murdered by bandits in the Ukraine on July 5, 1920. He had left his wife and children and the safety of America to bring material relief and spiritual sympathy to his brothers in the turbulent, war-wrecked lands. He turned his back on Warsaw and the semi-security of Polish cities to hasten to the scene of direst distress. On the way, he and his companion, Dr. Cantor, were wantonly struck down.

To ask oneself what service Prof. Friedlaender might have rendered to his people, had he been spared to them—in that direction madness lies. The cause of higher Jewish learning, the needs of popular Jewish education in the Diaspora, the urgencies of the Palestine situation with its important Arabic element—all called to him, and all could have employed to their advantage his manifold gifts. Though his heart beat high with Israel's hope in the land of promise, he was willing to serve humbly to allay the agonies of the present amid the grim realities of the "wilderness of the nations." In his death the Jewry of America, the Jewry of the world, loses a teacher, an interpreter, a friend.

May the memory of the righteous be a blessing!