

Recollections of Harry Austryn Wolfson

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“Harry Austryn Wolfson, the greatest living Jewish scholar,” was the description in *The Menorah Journal* in 1962. That magazine is now gone, and Wolfson, too, is dead. On the occasions I saw him during the last years of his life, he spoke for hours through successive evenings, his eyes glittering and his face excited, his voice high with enthusiasm, as he told the story of his life. Repeatedly he asked that I “perpetuate” the story.

Wolfson was of that first generation of East European Jews who won acceptance as university teachers in the United States. The colleges and universities are now filled with Jewish professors of the third and fourth generations. The new breed is so unlike Wolfson, their aims, motives, and experiences so different from his, that they will find his story almost unbelievable. I shall try, therefore, to set it down as I heard it from him, and to portray the man as I knew him especially during that period in the thirties which he regarded as the time of his highest creativity.

Born in a small Russian village in 1887, Harry Wolfson from his childhood became accustomed to living away from home. He was sent off to pursue talmudical studies with various rabbis, and slept on the benches of synagogues and schoolrooms in the different towns. He studied at the seminary in Slobodka. Aware that around him a new doctrine called Marxism was attracting young people, Harry from Austryn (it became his middle name) was impervious to the new creed; his abiding love was for Torah. Then his whole family joined in the migration to the United States in 1903.

A SUIT FOR TWELVE DOLLARS

On New York's East Side, Harry resumed his studies at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Seminary. One day the director Rabbi Lichtenberg told him: "Wolfson, you will never be a good rabbi, you don't mix with people. You're a *yeshivah bachur*." Harry contemplated his own physical appearance, undersized, unimpressive. What would happen to him if he remained in this ghetto of pushcarts? How many talmudists were found among the pushcart peddlers? He was learning English especially from such younger teachers as Hillel Rogoff (later editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*) who were aspiring to become newspaper writers. Then chance intervened. All his life Wolfson was convinced that chance intervened as an agent of necessity. A rabbi from Scranton turned up at the Seminary; he wanted some one to come home with him as a teacher for their Hebrew school. Harry had never heard of that town in the Pennsylvania mining country. He looked at the map, and then decided that perhaps the spirit of the Lord was moving him as once it had moved Samson to go dwell among the Philistines.

Wolfson did not look back on his Scranton years with pleasure. He did not enjoy teaching children. He felt vague yearnings toward creative scholarship and the world of secular learning. Some one advised him to take the examinations for a grammar school diploma. He did so, and passed exceptionally high. Then during the day he began to go to high school, while he taught Hebrew in the evenings. Three years thus went by, and then this high school graduate, standing out because of his older years from the ranks of his cheerful young classmates, wondered where to go next. He walked through the halls of the Scranton High School always courteous, with a reflective smile, albeit elusive to fellow students and teachers alike, for his mind was peopled with strange images of backward Russian villages, Tartar nomads, hostile gendarmes, and an ever-present threat which might be somnolent but would never disappear. And always alluring, the life of the mind wherein one somehow, as Maimonides said, was united with the Active Intellect of God.

Harry was debating whether to try to go to Lafayette College, the alma mater of his principal, or to the University of Wisconsin, which, with its reputation for liberalism, was then attracting

young Jews. At commencement time, however, the principal called him to his office, and introduced an alumnus of Scranton who had gone on to Harvard and the distinction of a Phi Beta Kappa key. They told Harry that Harvard College was the place for him. So Harry, half disbelieving what he was doing, took the entrance examinations, and together with another student, Clarence Randall, later president of the Inland Steel Company, won admission. Wolfson and Randall became good friends. Harry also qualified for two hundred and fifty dollars as Harvard library work aid. The tuition was then one hundred dollars a year. He bought a suit for twelve dollars which he wore through all his three undergraduate years.

Harvard College had in 1908 probably the most distinguished assemblage of students in its history. There was Walter Lippmann, the keen intelligence of the Harvard Socialist Club, the poet Tom (T. S.) Eliot, the social critic Harold E. Stearns, the football cheerleader and later revolutionary, John Reed. Stearns and Wolfson were both in rooms at Divinity Hall one year. Stearns told in his autobiography that Harry knew less about sex than any man he had ever encountered,¹ and in his early article, "The Confessions of a Harvard Man," published in *The Forum* in 1913 and 1914, depicted Wolfson under the name "Wilder," as "another Jew," with "a clear Emersonian soul," and "a clear original mind." Wolfson tried to talk to Lippmann about Jewish questions, but found him uninterested. But with Stearns he spent many evenings in discussion. Stearns recalled that once in their circle Wolfson ("Wilder") maintained that " 'the Greeks had the right "dope" on women—they kept them in the kitchen,' " and then advocated "in a lengthy and a highly logical and ingenious speech a return to the class system, king-

¹ "A brilliant Jewish scholar, named Wolfson, lived next to me, well informed on almost any subject I brought up, except the subject of girls, or, indeed of sex life in general, about which he appeared to be as innocent as a babe unborn. Yet I learned thoroughness in scholarly details from him—learned to be careful and to be sure of my authorities when I cited them, that is, to cite them in the sense *they* intended rather than to cite them by a random quotation which might temporarily, taken alone and without the context, appear to support my argument. I learned to cast all forms of 'bluff' far from me—unless, of course, I was doing some frankly impressionistic thing." Harold E. Stearns, *The Street I Know* (New York, 1935), p. 79. Wolfson always kept this book in prominent view in his study.

ship and slavery, to prove his point. Remarkable as his argument was—he tried to show how the feeling of security more than compensated for social inequality—we all felt that he was showing how sharp his wits were rather than attempting to voice his own convictions.”

TOO OUTSPOKEN TOO EARLY

Stearns moved to Greenwich Village to undertake a literary career, and later years saw him enveloped in personal tragedy and decline. Wolfson used to visit Stearns at his McDougall Street apartment, and they would sit up to the early hours of the morning while Stearns narrated all the details of his love affairs. Wolfson recalled how one night several years later Stearns told him despairingly of his wife's death. Wolfson was an entranced listener to the stories of a world of which he was never a part. Always he retained something of the spectator's stance, valuing the confidences of his friends, but somehow ever mindful of the evanescence of human relations. I have never heard anyone talk with such warmth in so many instances of how “we were great friends,” but no one I have ever known kept the basic essence of himself so aloof from the strains of such relations.

Only one man seems to have won Wolfson's complete trust and friendship, and that was Horace M. Kallen. When Wolfson came to Harvard, Kallen was a fledgling Ph.D. who was giving courses as a lecturer in philosophy, and meeting sections as well. Kallen took this immigrant boy under his protective wing; he corrected Wolfson's English grammar, and removed the Yiddishisms from his essays. He appreciated the poems which Wolfson wrote in Hebrew, poems filled with a nationalistic fervor, and translated several of them into English. Wolfson felt that Kallen would have been a great Harvard professor, but that he had been “too brilliant and too outspoken too early,” that he had violated the academic rule that one must go through the stage of being “a promising young man.” Furthermore, said Wolfson, William James, who admired Kallen, had died, while George Santayana, who gave Kallen his academic gown in farewell, was detached from departmental affairs. Wolfson thought that Kallen had a deeper intuitive understanding of

Jewish history than Morris R. Cohen. He also felt that Kallen's literary style was of the highest, and wondered whether he should not have devoted himself to a literary career, rather than trying to keep up his standing as a professional academic philosopher.

Wolfson's first article was written under the acknowledged influence of Kallen's contrast between the Greek view of change as unreal and the Hebraic notion of "the world as a history . . . the movement of events." This essay, "Maimonides and Halevi," published in 1912 in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, interpreted Maimonides as a Hellenic medieval, while Halevi was seen as the proponent of "the empirical method, the voluntaristic assumptions, the historic sense, and the high morality which are embodied in the Jewish Scriptures." Wolfson at this early stage seemed to be looking for the counterpart of American pragmatism in Jewish medieval philosophy. "Contemporary thought, the whole pragmatic movement, may find its visions foreshadowed in Halevi's discussions," Wolfson wrote. In later years he regarded this essay whimsically for its youthful exuberance and its mistakes.

Among his teachers Wolfson learned the most from George Foot Moore, for whom he retained a deep, abiding respect. He devoted an immense amount of time in later years to doing the bibliographical verifications of Moore's great work *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*. So much in awe was Wolfson of Moore's scholarship that he ventured the criticism that perhaps Moore demanded too much and set too high a standard for his students. Josiah Royce won Wolfson's esteem for his vigorous intellect, broad learning, and moral stature, and he had a warm regard for Santayana, who was, he said, a "pleasant lecturer," and wrote a fine letter of recommendation on Wolfson's behalf; he put no stock in remarks that Santayana had been an anti-Semite.

As the time of his graduation approached, Wolfson's friends expected that he would go to New York, and try to become a writer. Wolfson said that he thought seriously of becoming a poet and novelist. He spoke highly of another student-immigrant, his friend Noah Stern, who, after winning a Bowdoin Prize, chose to migrate to Palestine, in whose setting he tried to

follow his vocation as a Hebrew poet; Stern translated T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*. Wolfson, however, felt that he must above all become independent and self-supporting; he drew this lesson from the desperate material struggles of such a Hebrew poet as Reuben Brainin.

PIONEERING AMONG GENTILE SCHOLARS

If Wolfson had written novels, they would have been books of the genre of Lion Feuchtwanger's *Josephus* which Wolfson liked exceedingly. He told me at the time he read it that he expected that in its sequel *Bar Kochba* would be depicted as Josephus' son. When he was despondent in later years he would say that he knew he had chosen to become a "maker of foot-notes." He had also thought seriously of studying medicine. But chance, the agent of necessity, again decreed otherwise. Shortly before graduation, Professor David Gordon Lyon, the chairman of the Semitics Department, asked Wolfson what he would do if he were awarded a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship. On the spur of the moment, Wolfson replied that he would study Crescas. The reason was, said Wolfson, that Crescas was the one medieval Jewish philosopher who had broken with Aristotle on logical grounds. The choice of Crescas seemed to reflect a certain sublimated rebellious note in Wolfson himself. At any rate, Wolfson spent the next two years at European universities and libraries. He wasted some time in Italy, he said, with a circle of artists and writers, but mostly he copied passages from manuscripts and books, accumulating two suitcases full in that era before xeroxing, and then returned on the eve of the First World War to the United States.

To his immense pleasure, Wolfson was offered an appointment as instructor in Jewish philosophy and literature at Harvard University in 1915. The unusual condition, however, was stipulated that the appointee's salary should be provided by outside sources. This was Harvard's first appointment of a Jew associated with the Jewish community to its faculty of arts. The condition may seem bizarre today, but to Wolfson, a Jew pioneering in a world of Gentile scholarship, it did not seem altogether unreasonable. It was also the condition that was at-



Harry Austryn Wolfson

tached a few years later to the appointment of Wolfson's friend, the logician Henry Maurice Sheffer. Meanwhile, Federal Judge Julian W. Mack, a member of Harvard's Board of Overseers, and Judge Irving Lehman undertook the responsibility of securing the funds for Wolfson's salary. For a decade these arrangements for Wolfson's appointment continued; meanwhile he rose from the status of an annual instructor to that of a faculty instructor in 1918, and became an assistant professor in 1921. He was serving his second term in 1925 as an assistant professor when he was notified that this appointment, unless he could secure permanent outside financing, would be a terminal one.

Wolfson was at a turning point in his life's work. The question now was whether he should turn his back on his Harvard hopes, and seek to merge his life more completely with some Jewish institution. He was already dividing his time, teaching one half-year at Harvard, and the second half at the Jewish Institute of Religion. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, whom Wolfson greatly respected, had worked out this arrangement with Harvard to share Wolfson's services, and Wise had even taken on the responsibility for Wolfson's Harvard salary. But now there came from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, through a letter from its president, Judah L. Magnes, the offer of a professorship. Wise in turn was willing to share Wolfson with Jerusalem. Wolfson returned home from his spring semester at the Institute in New York to his room at Divinity Hall. He was worried, unable to sleep nights, and he kept "dreaming" about what to do. He was attached to life at Harvard, and curiously enjoyed his detached, isolated role as its professor of Jewish philosophy. He felt a reluctance to identify himself altogether with a Jewish institution, and postponed any decision which would commit him to Jerusalem. He was supposed to leave directly for his half-year at Jerusalem, but he cancelled his travel plans. Something warned him, he said, not to leave his Divinity Hall room; "something would turn up."

Once again chance intervened to determine all the remaining years of young Wolfson's long life. One morning during commencement week, at 9:00 A.M., a telephone call came from Lucius N. Littauer, the wealthy glove manufacturer, congressman, former captain of the Harvard football team, and all-

round great athlete. Littauer wanted to see Wolfson and insisted that he would come to Divinity Hall himself. Wolfson could scarcely contain his excitement, and prepared his ascetic room the best he could for his visitor. Then the tall, grave, and dignified Littauer arrived. He seated himself, looked at Wolfson, and started talking about himself and his family. His father, Nathan, Littauer said, had been an Orthodox Jew and a "forty-eighter" as well. The father had migrated to the United States, and settled in Gloversville. Littauer recalled how his childhood had been spent in the atmosphere of Jewish rites and customs. He had, however, "intermarried," and his children were not Jewish. He felt attached to Harvard as a former member of both its football team and crew. Now he wanted to endow a chair in his father's memory. He had heard all about Wolfson and wanted Wolfson to be the incumbent of that chair which would bear his father's name.

Wolfson was stunned with what seemed to him a gift that was borne by a very messenger of God. For a moment he could not grasp the entirety of his good fortune. He responded that it would be a wonderful thing for such a chair to be endowed at Harvard, but, he said, perhaps Harvard University would object to his being named as its incumbent and full professor. Wolfson suggested that he speak to George Foot Moore, who lived behind Divinity Hall, and to Professor James H. Woods, of the department of philosophy. Littauer replied that he would speak to them, and to A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University. That Thursday Wolfson went to join the Commencement procession. As it was forming, he met Judge Mack accoutred in cap and gown. Judge Mack said: "Littauer has spoken to Lowell. The chair has been endowed, and you are professor."

Wolfson had "for safety" wanted his professorship to be altogether in the Semitics department, but the department of philosophy got part of him, too. Over the years, however, "Sem. 9," a course on the history of Jewish civilization and culture, was the one he most enjoyed. Wolfson planned to write a one-volume history of the Jews, but when funds were finally forthcoming for his *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, which for years had depressed him with the enormous weight of its unpublished

manuscript, he turned eagerly to finishing that work, translating the Hebrew passages in its tremendous apparatus of footnotes, and guiding it through the stages of its publication.

FROM CICERO ONWARD

A mention must be made of Wolfson's brief military experience. He was drafted into the Army in 1918, never went overseas, but served in a camp not far from Harvard. A fellow-private was his friend Norbert Wiener, the child prodigy of mathematics, logic, and philosophy. Wolfson and Wiener spent their time in philosophical discussions of Aristotle and logic, but his principal military reminiscence was cutting a piece of ham for himself, which he much relished, while he was on K.P. When the war ended, and the army was tardy about demobilizing him, Wolfson got his chairman, James Haughton Woods, to intercede (successfully) with his commanding officer. The aftermath of his soldier days was that Wolfson joined a Cambridge post of the American Legion. He was still in good standing when he told me of it in the mid-thirties.

In subsequent years, the kindly Woods was one of Wolfson's closest friends. Since Woods too was living as a bachelor on Prescott St. (his first wife having become mentally ill), he and Wolfson would often spend evenings together. Then they also gave a joint seminar on Aristotelian studies; Wolfson would sit quietly while Woods lectured. Then Woods, having stated some problem like the basis of the first premises in Aristotle, would say, "Harry, could you trace this problem for us through the medievals?"—whereupon Wolfson would begin to tell the story from Cicero onward.

Wolfson had an abiding loyalty to Harvard University. He was on occasion active to bring his word to bear to help particular individuals secure appointment or promotion, but he never took public stands on issues, whether it was the *numerus clausus* which Lowell proposed, or Harvard's virtual failure to welcome any refugee professors during the Nazi era. He went out of his way to prevent any embarrassment for Harvard University. One such unusual situation arose during the celebration of Harvard's Tercentenary in the fall of 1936. The newspaper, the *Boston*

American, carried an article saying that Harvard University was deliberately offending Jewish scholars by having one of its sessions on Saturday. The reporters came to Wolfson for a statement obviously hoping that a sensational issue might be provoked. Then, as Wolfson described it, a prophetic inspiration, *ruah n'vuah*, descended upon him. "Not at all," said Wolfson to the reporters, "not at all is Harvard offending the Jewish scholars. Quite the opposite. Harvard has arranged that the Jewish scholars shall have a religious service at the Semitic Museum in the morning before the sessions begin." It was all manufactured of pure imaginative cloth, but Wolfson instinctively acted to solve the problem in a way in which everybody would feel pleased. Of course, Wolfson himself almost never went to religious services. But this time, he got together a *minyan* composed of a dozen friends such as Louis Ginzberg and Nathan Isaacs, and they duly conducted their Sabbath service in the Semitic Museum. Wolfson received many letters of commendation from all sorts of persons for his tact, initiative, and diplomacy.

This same loyalty to Harvard led Wolfson to urge Lucius Littauer to endow its Public Administration Building. His benefactor had been thinking seriously of giving this large sum of money to his former fellow-congressman, President Samuel Stratton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for the purpose of research on pneumonia. Littauer's wife had died of that disease. But Wolfson prevailed on him to use it for the purposes of a more enlightened government.

IT TOOK A GREAT DEAL OF CAJOLING

Probably the most characteristic of all his traits was Wolfson's determination never to allow himself to be put in a position where he might have to undergo a personal affront or indeed humiliation. He sought no honors, entered no competitions, but went his way. He would be the friendliest, and most courteous, and most cooperative of men if others sought him out. But he avoided occasions where he might put himself to the risk of personal rebuff. This self-withdrawal would express itself in both trivial and important ways. In a trivial way, I recall how he

once told me that under no circumstances would he check any cafeteria bill or dispute the cashier's decision; it simply was not worthwhile. But on a more important level, it resulted in a remarkable decision as to his relations with the world of scholarship. Wolfson had decided that never in his life would he apply for any grant from any foundation.

It all began, he told me, when he saw what happened in the case of his older colleague, Professor Leo Wiener. According to Wolfson, Wiener had conceived certain philological ideas and hypotheses which in their domain might well have been as "revolutionary" as Einstein's ideas in physics. Wiener then applied for a "grant" of a thousand dollars to enable him to pursue this research; his request was, however, rejected, and disparaging remarks were made by the judges concerning his ideas. Wiener was much dejected. When Wolfson saw this, he resolved that he never would allow himself to be placed in such a humiliating position. And actually, he said, it made very little difference to him. He had no desire to travel. He did his couple of hours of teaching in the mornings and was otherwise content to work in his study in the Widener Library's basement from the time it opened till it closed. This resolution not to be judged affected as well his decisions about publication. He would not submit a manuscript for publication if the publishing house had any intention of seeking an editorial judgment from some other scholar. This determination by Wolfson led the Harvard University Press to enact an unusual bylaw. The Press had decided as a general rule to refer the manuscripts submitted by Harvard authors to at least one external authority. Wolfson, having completed his work on *Philo*, refused to accede to such a procedure. He would not allow his manuscript to be judged by some such scholar as Erwin Goodenough at Yale, a scholar who as likely as not would be predisposed to reject Wolfson's method and interpretations. Wolfson simply would have none of it. Whereupon the authorities of the Press enacted a bylaw exempting Wolfson's work from the rule of external referees.

Finally also there came a time when a major subvention was required for the publication of one of Wolfson's later volumes. It was virtually assumed that a "grant" would be forthcoming from one of the foundations, if a suitable application were made.

Wolfson refused to make any application. Finally, the executive officer came to Wolfson; he had filled out all the answers to the questions himself; all he asked of Wolfson was that he sign the form. It took a great deal of cajoling; Wolfson, at last, now an old man, made the first exception to his life's rule.

WHAT IS GOING ON IN CHINA

What were Wolfson's feelings about all the political movements and social changes which he witnessed during his life? As a young undergraduate at Harvard, he had been a member of the Harvard Socialist Club, though, he emphasized, the club was a very respectable one; it was a cultural society, membership in which entailed no social disapproval or even endorsement of socialism; he recalled discussions with Ira Motherwell, Henry Wilcox, Tom Eliot. Those who wished could as individuals engage in political activity, but the average member, student or professor, did not. In his last years, Wolfson helped to secure the minutes of the club from its last secretary before the First World War and have them deposited in the Harvard Library; the last secretary was now a leading hotel executive in New York. Wolfson was amused to read in the minutes how one member said he sat up all night reading *Capital*, and the next morning became a socialist.

In 1932, during the worst of the depression, Wolfson's political feelings were more stirred than I ever saw them in later years. He made a special trip to the Cambridge City Hall to make sure he was registered to vote. He liked Franklin D. Roosevelt a great deal; "a nice fellow," he said, though he considered voting socialist or even communist. He finally voted for Roosevelt. He interpreted the growing vogue of Marxist ideas in his own categories of a religious sociology. He said the communists who were expecting the Revolution reminded him of the old Orthodox Jews who sat waiting for the Messiah. When I spoke to him of Sidney Hook's writings on Marx, he said he had heard of Hook: "They say he's a kind of *Epikoiros*." The apostate and the orthodox were universal sociological types, whether in ideology or theology.

During the mid-thirties, as Hitler's power was magnified from

day to day, Wolfson said he felt like "stopping to read the newspapers," that they brought the same woes every day. If the Jews had had monasteries, he added, he would have entered one. His Zionist loyalties were always strong, with a nationalistic bent; he admired the Revisionist leader, Vladimir Jabotinsky, at a time when many American Zionists were expressing themselves bitterly against the latter.

But Wolfson felt during the mid-thirties that there was very little relation between politics and philosophy. Once, when I met him in the Waldorf Cafeteria, as we often did, I told him that I thought the genesis of Spinoza's philosophy could be illumined by studying the social and political conflicts in The Netherlands of that time. Wolfson became visibly impatient, almost angry. He said to me: "Does what is going on in China today affect your philosophy in any way?" I tried to answer that the world's political and economic turmoil was exerting a huge influence on philosophical ideas, but Wolfson shook his head annoyedly to dismiss the notion.

One political incident, however, survives in my memory with the poignancy of a recalled divergence of friends. In the spring of 1934 the small group at Harvard of communist, socialist, and fellow-traveller students decided to join with the national student organizations in calling the first one-hour "peace strike." On the appointed day near the hour, several of us who were to speak gathered outside the Robbins Library at Emerson Hall. Wolfson happened to be there; he knew what was pending from the large crowd which was gathering in front of the Widener Library where the meeting was to take place. Wolfson approached me in full view and hearing of my fellow-radicals. He pleaded with me not to be one of the speakers. "You are making a mistake. This will do no good. You will be hurting yourself for no purpose. There are other ways to do things. Please don't do it. I tell you, I know, you are wrong." It cast a certain pall over the radical circle—this voice, earnest, and speaking with its experience so different from ours, this accent, always reminding me of the East Side with its intonations, familiarities, and utter scepticism of whosoever pretended to act from any sort of moral superiority.

To one like myself at that time, Wolfson's utterances seemed

almost repellingly aloof to the need to do something basic about human suffering; what was the vocation of the philosopher if not to give intellectual meaning and leadership to confront these problems? I refused to follow his advice, and Wolfson, head bent to the side, as if he was always half averting his glance from the world, or half-hiding, or looking upon reality with an angular perspective peculiar to his people of outsiders, left sadly. He seemed always to recognize that limit where determinist forces exceeded the power of the individual will. For many years that memory jarred—a reminder of a cold reckoning in Wolfson's standpoint. But as time went on, I saw a greater wisdom in that short, brave man, with his obtuse-angled gait, who knew not how to do obeisance to the gods of ideological fashion and who for the sake of a personal tie would venture into the leftist enclave to reason with his friend. Only once in his life, said Wolfson, had he ever marched in a political parade. That was when Louis D. Brandeis organized a demonstration on behalf of women's suffrage. For some reason, everybody got interested in it, and he marched with lots of his friends; he talked of it almost as of a collective lark.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY GOD?

Wolfson, one must acknowledge, had very little respect for philosophy as an academic profession. He once remarked to me as we were walking through the Harvard Yard that he could not understand why people studied philosophy nowadays, because now there was science. When I began to mention the problems of the philosophy of science, he said that philosophy was essentially a literature, that it had no real relation to science. He could not understand why I chose the history of science as one of my doctoral fields. Indeed, science itself puzzled him. "You know," he remarked one day, "there are young fellers 25 and 26 years old who are regarded as the greatest physicists. I do not understand how that can be." In scholarship, a man's reading grew more extensive with the years, and the judgment became ever more balanced and discriminating. A young scholar was inevitably only a beginner; Wolfson thought his own early essay "Maimonides and Halevi" was, for all its youthful brilliance,

strewn with mistakes. It was hard for him to credit the occurrence of originality. In philosophy, he felt, all the basic positions had really been worked out, and what philosophers now did was to reiterate them and to write articles in which they argued about one another among themselves. A wise man, in Wolfson's view, was to be more esteemed than a technical philosopher; thus, he regarded Moses Mendelssohn with more respect than he did the greater thinkers of the eighteenth century. He likewise had little regard for the new philosophers of religion who invented new definitions of God to mask their disbelief. He spoke with enthusiasm of the "Sermonette" he had given on this theme at the Appleton Chapel in 1955, in which he dismissed the doctrines of John Dewey, Samuel Alexander, Henri Bergson, Alfred N. Whitehead, and Paul Tillich: "Nowadays lovers of wisdom are still busily engaged in the gentle art of devising deities. Some of them offer as God a thing called man's idealized consciousness, others offer a thing called the unity of the ideal ends which inspire man to action, still others offer a thing called the cosmic consciousness or a thing called the universal *nisus* or a thing called the principle of concretion or a thing called the ground of being. I wonder, however, how many of the things offered as God by lovers of wisdom today are not again only polite but empty phrases for the downright denial of God by him who is called fool in the Scripture lesson this morning!"² When he worried over the future of Judaism, he asked: how can Judaism survive if when you ask a rabbi whether he believes in God, he answers that that depends on what you mean by God?

The dramas in Wolfson's life revolved around the kind of minor incidents which Anatole France made into "plots" for his novels about the scholar Sylvestre Bonnard. When the library in recent years closed on Sundays, Wolfson fretted. The chief librarian offered him a key to the building, but the responsibility of that possession appalled Wolfson. They then agreed that early Sunday morning at an appointed time the watchman would meet

² Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Morning Chapel Talk" (March 17, 1955), *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* (1954-55), p. 70. Reprinted as "Sermonette: The Professed Atheist and the Verbal Atheist," in *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp. 270-71.

Wolfson, and open a back-door. The library stacks and his book-littered, paper-strewn study were Wolfson's temple and holy of holies; here he became a priest fulfilling the divine ritual of study. When he returned from the Army in 1919, he was at a loss, and unable to concentrate his energies for work, because he had no study in the library. Then somebody told him that Henry James, having completed the editing of the letters of his father, William James, was vacating his study in the basement, Wolfson at once asked for its assignment, and then began those long, productive years in his workshop.

A CERTAIN FONDNESS FOR GINGER ROGERS

Wolfson's health was remarkably robust; he scarcely took any exercise, apart from walking between his room or apartment and the library, but he worked with unflagging zest. During the latter twenties and early thirties, he did suffer from a strange psychological illness; he found it increasingly difficult to swallow his food. No physical basis for his ailment could be discovered, and his doctor came to the conclusion that Wolfson's Jewish unconscious after all these years was rebelling against the un-kosher food of the cafeterias in which he ate—the Georgian, the Waldorf, the Hayes-Bickford. A suggestion administered to Wolfson while he was anesthetized brought some relief, but then Wolfson discovered his own therapy. He had observed that his difficulties in swallowing arose precisely at those times when he had completed one piece of writing and was uncertain as to his next. He then found that if he committed himself to long, sustained multivolumed researches, "to write books that never ended," the symptom vanished. So long as there was a goal beyond, and work waiting to be done on his edifice, then the artisan would remain healthy. Indeed, he liked to compare a text with a rich assortment of footnotes to a rich pudding with varied ingredients. At any rate, Wolfson claimed that he had discovered his own therapy for the revolt of his unconscious.

Wolfson never married. From 1912 to 1925, he said, he could not afford to be married. There was one woman whom he vaguely courted, but he said "we used to fight all the time," and he did not regret it that their association ended. Also he did not like the

idea, he said, of having to come home at a definite time. There was a librarian, a Gentile woman, who was extremely helpful to Wolfson while he was writing his *Philosophy of Spinoza*, and he remarked to me that he was thinking of inviting her out. I doubt whether he ever did. He was once perturbed when an old friend of his at Salem divorced his wife and then, finally, shrugged his shoulders. I could not help feeling that he had a basic mistrust of all human relationships. "Friends," he used to say, "like you so long as you are good company." Somewhere and sometime he had felt so rejected that he hesitated ever to commit his feelings fully.

He never visited Israel, he once said, because he feared that doing so might sully his images and feelings toward the country. This was a component too in Spinoza's philosophy of human relations with which Wolfson found himself sympathetic. Towards the end of his life, and especially when he was dying, he said he regretted three things, first, that he had not married; second, that he had not written at least one essay in Hebrew every year; and third, that he had not written more articles on current themes of general interest such as those few he had done for the *Menorah Journal*. Two weeks before he died he told me that at the end of his life he felt that the two most important institutions were the family and religion. He wished he could die suddenly as his friend Kallen had several months before, when Kallen at lunch fell dead of a heart attack.

When I telephoned him from Canada during his illness to see if he was able and desirous of receiving visitors, he was his old jolly self, surprisingly so in view of the warnings I had received as to how sick he was. He joked with me about his being at an old age home. "Now I'm an old man," he said laughingly, "and they have to take care of me." It was as if we both knew as old friends that this was a part that he was playing temporarily, and that the reality was the days we had known in the thirties now forty years ago. I recalled that same laughing voice which I heard in those days: I would be working at my stall on the fourth floor of Widener Library. Suddenly I would hear a systematic, rapid walk through the stacks, and its sharp turn. He would be standing over my desk. "Come, let's go to a movie." I sometimes would try to protest weakly that I really should try to

work. "Now, come, you've done enough." Then we would ride into Boston and go to the movies. We never went to any particular movie; I think he would have felt that was being too high-brow for us essential East Siders. We simply went to what was playing, and his tastes were universal; like Spinoza's God, in his movie-going, Wolfson fulfilled the principle of plenitude, and rejoiced in all the modes of existence. He did, however, have a certain fondness for Ginger Rogers. Then we would go home. Outside the Harvard station, he would buy all the sensationalistic, low-brow newspapers. I, an austere young intellectual, would stand by a trifle ill at ease, at which his smile would grow broader than ever. Before he went to sleep, he said, he liked to read all the scandals. Indeed, years later I found he was well abreast of a journal called *Confidential* which perished in scandal. Sometimes he would walk me back to my dormitory Divinity Hall for which he retained a sentimental alumnus's regard. There he would always be welcomed warmly again by the janitor, his old friend, Jim Corcoran, "Doctor Wolfson! Doctor Wolfson!" Once Jim, who had returned from some celebration, turned to the denizens of the Common Room, and said: "This is Doctor Wolfson, the smartest man at Harvard," and I think that for Harry Austryn Wolfson this meant as much as an honorary degree.

LANGUAGE AND TEXT

In those days Wolfson was a highly isolated and detached professor. It was only after the Second World War that he became something of a Harvard institution with large classes to whom he lectured on the history of philosophy. Stories then became current about Wolfson's lectures on the history of philosophy. One student, for instance, told me how he and his friends were puzzled by Wolfson's references in his lectures on Aristotle to "edible numbers"; then it dawned on them that far from denoting some Pythagorean beans, that was Wolfson's way of pronouncing "addible numbers." But in the thirties he walked his own way. Sometimes the strain of being "the Jew" on the Harvard College faculty would tell on him, and he would occasionally yield to moments of bitterness. He would write a book

someday, he would say, about all the injustices he had seen done at Harvard; he would talk of friends I never knew, of a man Zimmerman who had finally become insane.

Those were the days when Harvard University was virtually refusing to welcome to its staff any of the refugee European Jewish professors because, as Felix Frankfurter informed Wolfson, of the great negative influence of the brilliant anti-Semitic dean, George Birkhoff. Once either shortly before or after the war, when he was beginning to study the scholastics and Church Fathers more closely, he remarked to me as we approached the Widener steps: "Those Goyim think Aquinas is a great philosopher; they spend years studying him. I tell you, Maimonides is far greater. In two or three days I can study this Aquinas and know him." Many years later I used to wonder whether his decision to study the Church Fathers and his book on Philo as well were not the outcome of a desire to confound the Gentile historians at their own game. But those were his moods in the extremities of the Hitler-beshadowed period.

I also recall discussions for three successive evenings in July, 1973, and earlier in 1971, when he spoke with pride of the changes that had taken place at Harvard during his lifetime. He was at that time Harvard's second oldest living professor, their link with the Golden Age of William James and Josiah Royce. He talked of the table at the Faculty Club which they called "Wolfson's Table," where all sorts of colleagues would sit down to enjoy his conversation. He did lament, however, the passing of our old cafeterias, and said there was no place anymore where one could eat comfortably and piecemeal with one's chance-encountered friends at any hour.

In his last years Wolfson used to like to talk about his method of work. It consisted of four stages: first, he would read intensively and almost exclusively into the "sources," using textbooks only as a guide to sources when he was entering upon a relatively new subject; then he would write a first draft, using a method of "free association," and interlarding the text with "dummy quotations"; then, he would search the sources for the actual quotations; last, he would write the revised, final version. Only once did he recall that he had failed to find the actual corresponding text to replace the "dummy quotation." He was

never long stymied by any intellectual problem. He knew what he wanted to say, and governed his materials. Only once did a problem in his *Spinoza* give him real concern, and that was solved when, while taking his shower-bath, it occurred to him that Spinoza had been using the distinction between macrocosm and microcosm.

What was Wolfson's final conception of philosophy and the history of thought? Toward the end of his life, in July, 1973, he told me that he had arrived at the following conclusion: that on the individual level, psychoanalytical factors accounted for the person's philosophical standpoint, but that on the social level, socioeconomic factors explained which ideas would be "selected," which would become dominant. I was rather surprised by this straightforward acceptance of notions which appeared only allusively in his writings. To be sure, in the preface to his *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, Wolfson had written: "In certain respects, the delineation and treatment of the history of philosophy should follow the same lines as the delineation and treatment of the political and social history of Europe. . . . There is an earthly basis to the development of philosophic problems in the Middle Ages—and that is language and text." It should be observed, of course, that in practice the "earthly basis" narrowed itself down to only one constituent of the soil, namely, the linguistic-textual. Then, later in his book, in explaining how the talmudic mode of interpretation was identical with the hypothetico-deductive method of science (as applied to the understanding of texts), Wolfson wrote that it was "like that of the latest kind of historical and literary criticism which applies the method of psycho-analysis to the study of texts" (p. 25). There was a continuing echo of this psychoanalytical note in the subtitle of Wolfson's great book *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of his Reasoning*.

The contrast between the latent and the manifest content of dreams, myths, and intellectual formulations was one which had been introduced by Sigmund Freud. There was clearly interest in psychoanalytical ideas in the Harvard of Wolfson's youth. His friend, Henry M. Sheffer, published in a Jewish journal an article on Freud and Bergson which was written in a spirit of discipleship, but expunged it from all his bibliographies in his staid years

as Harvard's professor of mathematical logic. Walter Lippmann regarded the Oedipus Complex of Freud's theory as a most confirmed empirical truth. Wolfson, however, forebore from the introduction of such personal materials into historical scholarship. When I mentioned to him that Bertrand Russell in his *Autobiography* had published a letter from Harold J. Laski discussing Sheffer's difficulties in retaining his post at Harvard, Wolfson, a bit nettled, said such letters should never be allowed to be published. At any rate, Wolfson adhered closely to the more secure method of tracing the filiation of ideas. There were rare moments, however, when he would permit himself the liberty of a vivid psychological characterization; most notably, a closing passage of his *Spinoza* saw the personalities of the great philosopher and his historian merged into an identity:

"recluses are not made by philosophies, not even by philosophies which, unlike the philosophy of Spinoza, preach retirement from life as an ideal virtue; they are made rather by the inhospitableness of the social environment and by the ineptitude of their own individual selves. But for the circumstances, environmental and personal, which had cut his normal contacts with society, Spinoza, who defined man, after Aristotle, as a social animal, would undoubtedly have guided himself by the same dictate of reason that he had prescribed for others—by his maxim that man is freer when he participates in the life of society than when he lives in solitude. In conformity with this maxim of his, then, he would undoubtedly have joined in the active life of the communities in which he lived after his departure from his native Amsterdam . . . he would have become a substantial, respectable, and public-spirited burgher and a pillar of society. Perhaps, also, despite differences in theology, he would have joined the Lutheran church of his friend Doctor Cordes in The Hague. And I can picture him, once of a Sunday, at the invitation of the good old Doctor, taking the services in the church. He preaches a sermon which is an invective against what he styles 'the prejudices of the theologians of our time. . . .' The sermon over, he pauses and says, 'Now let us pray'. . . . As he is about to close his prayer, he catches a glimpse of the congregation and suddenly realizes that he is in a Christian church. Immediately he adds: 'In the name of Christ, the mouth of God, whose spirit

is the idea of God, which alone leads us unto liberty, salvation, blessedness, and regeneration.' ”

NO UTOPIAS

Wolfson himself, as he told me, was once asked, in his years as an annual instructor, by the Harvard department whether he would be willing to take a post at some small college, and if so, whether he would join the local church. Wolfson replied that provided there was no Jewish synagogue or temple in the neighborhood, he would be quite willing to attend services at the local church. Indeed, like his imagined Spinoza, from time to time he conducted the services and gave the sermons in the little chapel of his beloved Divinity Hall. All this despite the estrangement which he felt himself and projected in his portrait of Spinoza: “In this strange environment to which externally he seems to have fully adjusted himself, Spinoza never felt himself quite free to speak his mind; and he who among his own people never hesitated to speak out with boldness became cautious, hesitant, and reserved. It was a caution which sprang not from fear but from an inner sense of decorum which inevitably enforces itself on one in the presence of strangers, especially strangers who are kind.”

There was, however, still another psychological vector in Wolfson's character, especially in his younger years, which was less that of the burgher than of the rebel; it, too, projected itself into Wolfson's portraiture of Spinoza, though as the years wore on, the traditionalist in him became virtually supreme. A brief passage in the *Spinoza* suggests the repressed rebel:

“. . . the world in which Spinoza wanted to make the practical lesson of his philosophy effective was an old world in which rooted institutions and beliefs held sway. . . . Made of sterner stuff and living a few centuries later, Spinoza would have perhaps demanded the overthrow of the old order with its effete institutions so as to build upon its ruins a new society of a new generation raised on his new philosophy. He would then perhaps have become one of the first apostles of rebellion. But being what he was and living at a time when belief in the potency of reformation had not yet been shaken by doubt, he chose to follow in the footsteps of rationalizers throughout history.”

In Wolfson's case, too, the rationalizer rather than the rebel became his chosen role.

The creed of the rationalizer was especially the message of Wolfson's address to 1,200 persons, "The Meaning of Interfaith," given as he received a citation from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The occasion was a dinner in Boston at the Statler Hotel, and the photograph of the speakers' table showed Wolfson seated next to the young Senator John F. Kennedy. Wolfson began by saying how glad he was to be sharing this honor with "Senator John F. Kennedy, who is the son of a distinguished member of my class, the class of 1912." Then Wolfson continued: "Ingrained in the religious creed which we profess and believe and by which we live are certain common principles of belief, constituting, as it were, a preamble of faith, based upon a set of Scriptural presuppositions which determines our most fundamental attitude toward God, toward the world and toward our fellow men. . . . We have long learned to accept as a truism that our traditional religious beliefs can be reconciled with the discoveries of scientific research and we already look upon the world, the work of God though it be, through the eyes of science. We must similarly learn to recognize as a truism that our traditional religious beliefs can be reconciled with the results of historical research and we must come to look upon the Book, the word of God though it be, through the eyes of historical scholarship. In the world in which we live today, beset as we are by destructive forces which threaten the existence of all the age-old values held precious by all men of religious faith, it is as important to emphasize the generic unity which is implicit in the definitions of our respective religious creeds, as to repeat the specific differences contained in them."

No doubt, Wolfson was finally a traditionalist in religion and social philosophy. No challenger of received truth, he asked only for the enlightenment of scholarship. He had no utopias, no faith in the common man. He once remarked to me in 1934 that I had not yet learned the evil in human nature that made men want war. Young students often felt estranged by his resolute self-sufficiency and indifference to novel intellectual movements. When a new wave of Jewish sociologists came to Harvard University, they took no initiative to meet Wolfson, and he, for his part, felt no urge to meet them. Such topics as the end of ideol-

ogy, working class authoritarianism, and the limits of the melting pot did not seem to him to say anything he hadn't heard when he was helping the newly-founded *Menorah Journal* get started sixty years earlier. He was glad that now there were Jewish deans in the college and graduate schools, something he scarcely would have foreseen in 1914. At the same time, he observed, the calling of the university teacher had declined in its social stature. And Harvard Square, where he had used to be seen walking several times a day, ceased to know him. He could not abide the anti-intellectual barbarians who seemed to be trying to storm the gates of Harvard Yard.

THE BALLAST OF TRADITION

When last I saw him, he was frail and emaciated. But he talked for two hours, his voice occasionally breaking, before he felt the need for a halt. Then he asked me to read to him. In the last stage of his illness, he was reading novels, he was enjoying Willa Cather's books greatly and Perry Mason stories; but he disliked William Faulkner's novels and the whole way of life that they described. He wished me, as he so often had, to read to him from his own books. I chose from his bedside the volumes of Spinoza and Philo, and then a few pages of the last manuscript he was writing, a rebuttal to his critics. Afterward he asked me to prop him up in a chair, and as I helped him to it, I was dismayed how thin he had become. But he resumed his conversation with vigor he had somehow summoned from unknown reserves. It was I who finally tired first; it had been a long trip from Toronto to the Boston suburb. I left promising him that I would visit again soon.

Wolfson was among the great. There are those who will say that Harvard chose him because he was a traditionalist, because, fully and unmistakably Jewish, he would be lecturing solely on Jewish subjects, and because he had survived a testing period during which he had never taken a public part on public issues and never taken a public stand. There are those who will see a symbol of defeat in this man who never visited Israel because he wanted to keep its reality pure in his imagination. All this may be true. But the greater truth is the tremendous courage in this slight, gentle man. He had been poorly educated, he said, and he pursued the career that seemed to flow logically from the very

one-sidedness of his education. He was the Jewish pioneer in the American university setting, at times as lonely as any frontiersman ever was in the wilderness, treading the Harvard Yard every day among scholars whose language he spoke with the accent of the Jewish peddlers in the market, but with words to which he also gave an accent suffused with love for learning, scholarship, and God. He was not among the discoverers of novel truths concerning nature and man. This, too, he recognized. But he also felt that in an age where moorings have been lost, he would contribute to preserve the continuity of direction and memory of the human race's struggle for understanding. Without that ballast of tradition, the frail human craft will founder in the storms. He stood as a lonely sentry during decades, the most Jewish of Jews, for the right of all persons, of all peoples, to participate in the calling of knowledge. The bookworm was a warrior for his people. The legend of his presence will long hover over the Harvard Yard, and his spirit, joined with the Active Intellect of God, will enjoy treasures of eternal wisdom.

Epilogue

Two Last Letters of Harry Austryn Wolfson

Harvard University
Widener K
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

March 9, 1973

Dear Feuer:

Your letter arrived just as I started to write an acknowledgment of your paper on Marx's father, in which I was going to say that it is a "most interesting and important paper" and that it is "distinguished by your usual thoroughness of research, preciseness of statement, and soundness of judgment." I was then going to add the following:

"If you happen to be again in these parts, please come in to see me. You will hear the sequel, or rather the end, of the story told to you on your last visit here."

As for Sheffer's paper on "Freud and Bergson," it was pub-

lished when I was an undergraduate. In later years, when Sheffer and I became close friends, he never mentioned that paper to me. I should advise you to find out from Kallen when that paper was written by Sheffer and how it happened to be sent to England for publication in the *Jewish Review*. I have a feeling that Kallen was responsible for its publication.

No, there was no Freudian or Bergsonian trend among young Jews at Harvard. But as it was then customary to believe in indestructible Jewish characteristics, a belief formulated by Kallen is his aphorism "You may change your religion, but you cannot change your grandfather," and it was quite common for those young Jews to look for what they thought to be Jewish characteristics in the teachings of Freud and Bergson.

With warmest regards and best wishes,

Yours,

H. A. Wolfson

Widener K
Cambridge, Mass.
March 14, 1974

Dear Feuer:

It was a pleasure to hear from you and I hope that your recovery from your illness is a *r'fuah sh'lemah* [a complete recovery]. What you say about Kallen has in it the making of an essay—and an interesting one.

And here is the latest about myself.

Some time ago I found it necessary to apply for admission to the "Hebrew Rehabilitation Centre for Aged" here in Boston. Unfortunately I have to wait for a vacancy. In the meantime I am still in my apartment and with the help of a few friends I am still able to get to Widener where I manage to keep myself busy with various kinds of work.

Looking forward to the renewal of our meetings and conversations when you visit Cambridge in the spring, I am

With affectionate regards,

Harry Wolfson