

Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 440.

by *Enrico Lucca*

Published in the famous *Jewish Life* series of Yale University Press, Paul Mendes-Flohr's biography of Martin Buber has been long awaited by scholars of German-Jewish thought and intellectual history. The author is known as one of the leading scholars in the field and among other important contributions he is the co-editor in chief of the Buber *Werkausgabe* (published by Gütersloher Verlagshaus). Meanwhile, other significant portraits of Buber have appeared in the last years both in French (by Dominique Bourel) and in Hebrew (by Zohar Maor).¹ In comparison with Bourel's work, Mendes-Flohr's biography is far more concise (almost half in length)—fitting the style of the series, which aims to address a wider audience than the academic readership—and yet it manages to describe accurately all the main stations in Buber's life and to capture the essence of his teaching. Being an intellectual historian, the author connects the most significant episodes in Buber's biography with the development of his thought, discussing in length the content of his books together with the main philosophical discussions Buber was involved in. As for the use of sources, besides relying on the enormous amount of Buber's published correspondence and work, Mendes-Flohr took advantage of personal communications by members of Buber's family, namely his son Rafael and his grandchildren, as well as his disciple Ernst Akiva Simon, who disclosed to him interesting aspects and at times juicy anecdotes about Buber's everyday life in Germany and Jerusalem. At the same time, the book is often enriched by references to unpublished correspondence housed in Jerusalem archives.

The book is divided in eleven chapters. Chapter one describes Buber's infancy and youth, starting with the traumatic experience of being abandoned by her mother at the age of three, which led him later to ponder on the deep existential and religious meaning behind human encounters (p. 3). The author devotes quite a few pages to Buber's relationship with his paternal grandparents, who belonged

¹ Dominique Bourel, *Martin Buber. Sentinelle de l'humanité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015); Zohar Maor, *Martin Buber* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2016).

to the Galician Jewish intellectual and financial elite. To them Buber owned his familiarity with Biblical Hebrew and rabbinical sources, and the love for literature, not to mention his first encounter with the German language. In particular, the author describes very well the contentious relationship between Buber and his grandfather Salomon, a well-known and celebrated scholar, showing young Buber's desire to continue his work, though "in his own fields" (p. 10). It comes as no surprise that Buber dedicated to him his first book on Hasidism, *The Stories of Rabbi Nachman* (1906), which can be seen as a sort of conciliatory gesture, since Salomon had little sympathy for both his grandson pursuing an academic career and his joining Zionism. Chapter two follows Buber from Lemberg (Lviv) to Vienna and his evolution from a liberal Polish nationalist position (p. 19) to his commitment to Zionism, which he had first encountered during his short stay in Leipzig in the winter Semester 1897-1898. In 1899 Buber addressed the third Zionist conference and was later invited by Theodor Herzl to serve as the editor of the main Zionist newspaper *Die Welt* (p. 29). Buber did not last long in this position, and following the leading role he took in the so-called Zionist Demokratische Faktion his relation with Herzl became much more confrontational. After few years of sleepless Zionist activity, in 1905 Buber decided to devote himself exclusively to his own literary work (p. 40).

Chapter three and four are dedicated respectively to Buber's early philosophical and intellectual influences and to his first literary and editorial endeavors. Mendes-Flohr situates Buber at the margins of academia, placing him in the category of those intellectuals, who were "educated at the university" and "continued to follow its scholarly debates and developments while maintaining a scornful distance from it" (p. 43). He then describes his encounters in Berlin with Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel—whom he appreciated for his essayistic style and his interest in sociology—and especially with Gustav Landauer. They first met in the Berlin anarchist commune *Die Neue Gemeinschaft* and Landauer was destined to have a remarkable influence on the shaping of Buber's thought, in particular during the First World War, until his tragic death in Munich in May 1919. Buber's plans to write a *Habilitation* thesis are examined in chapter four, which tracks Buber's sojourn in Florence, where far from Zionism he experienced a "burst of

creativity” (p. 58), and his return to Berlin in the fall of 1906, coinciding with his transformation “from a publicist into an author” (p. 60).

Chapter five analyzes Buber’s leading role in the Western European “Jewish Renaissance” that sprang from Prague and the local Zionist youth circle “Bar Kochba” and that he contributed to spread westwards, in particular through his famous *Three Speeches on Judaism* (1911). Of great importance is the description of Buber’s attitude toward the First World War, which at the beginning saw him celebrating it as a supreme mystical experience of “metaphysical significance” (p. 98). Mendes-Flohr attributes Buber’s later change of mind to his discussions with Landauer and specifically to a meeting between the two in July 1916, which led to “a radical transformation in Buber’s thinking, —marked by a fundamental break with his *Erlebnis* mysticism” (p. 108). Such a transformation paved the way to Buber’s conception of a philosophy of dialogue. In chapter seven another important character in Buber’s biography is finally introduced: Franz Rosenzweig. After recalling the occasion of their first meeting and how they came to embark on the lifelong and extremely arduous task of translating the Hebrew Bible into German, Mendes-Flohr summarizes their intellectual confrontation, and in particular their disagreement on the significance of Jewish law and religious precepts. Chapter eight is dedicated to Buber’s last years in Nazi Germany before his emigration to Palestine in late March 1938. The author finds the theological debates in which Buber was involved particularly significant, as he was on the one hand fighting a wave of neo-Marcionism in interwar Germany and on the other trying to reaffirm the importance of a “God of Creation,” an effort which resulted in the foundation of the pioneering inter-religious journal *Die Kreatur*. To illustrate the complexity of the historical period, and the persistence of some anti-judaic tones even in contemporary liberal Protestant theology, Mendes-Flohr devotes quite a few pages to the debate between Buber and the theologian Karl Ludwig Schmidt, which took place only two weeks before Adolf Hitler was named chancellor (pp. 176-181). The chapter ends with Buber’s appointment to the Hebrew University as a professor of Sociology and his arrival in Palestine at the age of sixty. Mendes-Flohr emphasizes how the decision was taken by Buber with a “heavy heart,” uncertain as he was whether he would have been able to acquire

in Hebrew the rhetorical and pedagogical skills needed for his educating mission in what became his new home (p. 201).

The last three chapters focus on Buber's activities in Palestine, both at the Hebrew University, where he had quite a significant influence on the Israeli *schola* of sociology, as well as a public intellectual mostly active in groups and organizations that sought a peaceful resolution to the Jewish-Arab conflicts (for example the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement in the late 1930s or the Ihud movement in the early 1940s). At the outbreak of the 1948 war following the Israeli declaration of independence, Buber was forced to leave his home in the Arab-Jewish neighborhood of Abu Tor and to resettle in Talbiya, in a large house whose Arab owners had taken refuge in Turkey. Buber took care to return their belongings to them (p. 256). A few pages are dedicated to Buber's return to Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust, when he accepted to address a German audience again, and despite the resulting criticism in Israel and the objections even of his closest friends. To this decision the author connects also Buber's encounter with Heidegger, which took place in the late spring of 1957 (pp. 279-286). Finally, the author offers a brief summary of the most important contributions of Buber to Israeli cultural life and debates, focusing in particular on his dispute with Scholem on the interpretation of Hasidism (pp. 305-309), his encounter with groups of young *kibbutznikim* (pp. 311-312), and his campaign against the execution of the death penalty in the Eichmann case (pp. 317-318).

It should be added that the book is well written and offers a very pleasant reading experience. As a minor critical remark some German names and titles in the footnotes have been spelled incorrectly and for this reason at least the book would have profited from a more careful editing.²

² See for example: p. 187 *lessen* (*lesen*); p. 326: the book from which the quote in the epigraph is taken has been published of course in 1985 (and not 1885); p. 348 *Donnestagsgesellschaft* (*Donnerstagsgesellschaft*); p. 353 *literaratische* (*literarische*); p. 361 *Weizsächer* (*Weizsäcker*); p. 362 *jahr* (*Jahr*); p. 366 *Interntationales* (*Internationales*); p. 368 *Poland* (*Polen*); p. 372 *Politizer* (*Politzer*).

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How to quote this article:

Enrico Lucca, Review of *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent*, by Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, 18 (December 2020), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/