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## *A Motherless Child*

AN APOCRYPHAL STORY relates that when Martin Buber walked the streets of Jerusalem, children would run after him, screaming *Elohim, Elohim* (God, God). He would slowly turn around, gently stroke his silken white beard, smile, and obligingly say, “Yes!” Buber was of course not divine, nor did he fancy himself to be a prophet, notwithstanding his biblical countenance. He had, in fact, first grown his famous beard in order to cover up an embarrassing twisted lower lip, an injury caused by the use of faulty obstetric forceps during his birth. Photos from his early twenties show him with a mustache grown over the injured lip; a luxuriant beard soon followed, providing what he undoubtedly believed was more effective camouflage.<sup>1</sup>

The deformed lip was not his only scar from childhood. When he was three years old, his parents suddenly separated, his mother running off without bidding him farewell. He recalled rushing to a window of his family’s second-story apartment on

Vienna's Franz-Josefs-Kai overlooking the Danau river canal. From the small balcony outside the stately French window, he tried desperately to catch his mother's attention, but she disappeared over the horizon without looking back. The bewildered Martin was soon sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Lemberg (in Polish Lwów; today, Lviv, Ukraine), at that time the administrative capital of the Austrian-Hungarian province of Galicia, a largely Polish region that had been annexed by the Habsburg monarchy in 1772. Adele and Salomon Buber, who would raise Martin until he was fourteen, generally refrained from discussing intimate interpersonal matters. Neither said a word to Martin about his parents' separation; the fate of his mother, who had eloped with a Russian officer (Buber's parents' marriage was eventually annulled by a rabbinic court); or when he might see his mother again. (As he recalled eight decades later, "And I was too timid to ask.") When four-year-old Martin impulsively asked a neighbor's daughter what he hesitated to ask his grandparents, the older girl made it clear that a reunion was unlikely. "I can still hear her voice as she said, in a matter-of-fact way, 'No, your mother is not coming back any more.'" Stunned by the bluntness of this reply, he finally accepted the desertion of his mother. "I wanted to see my mother. And the impossibility of this gave me an infinite sense of deprivation and loss."<sup>2</sup>

Recalling at the end of his life this painful exchange with his neighbor's daughter, Buber mused, "Whatever I have learned in the course of my life about the meaning of meeting and dialogue between people springs from that moment when I was four."<sup>3</sup> That moment was echoed in words he addressed to the German-Jewish community shortly after Hitler's seizure of power: "Children experience what happens and keep silent, but in the night they groan in their dreams, awaken, and stare into the darkness. The world has become unreliable. . . . It is up to us to make the world reliable again for children. It depends

on us whether we can say to them and to ourselves, ‘Don’t worry, Mother is here.’”<sup>4</sup> The highly autobiographical nature of this statement is highlighted in a 1922 letter to Franz Rosenzweig. Commenting on the existential significance of the biblical psalms, he wrote: “For me, the psalms have always kept that sense of physical intimacy they had in my childhood (a motherless childhood, one spent dreaming of my living but inaccessible remote mother): ‘You have put friend and neighbor far from me’ [Psalms 88:19].”<sup>5</sup>

The enduring imprint of his yearning to be reunited with his “inaccessibly remote mother” was poignantly expressed in an early love letter to his future wife, Paula: “Your letters are the only source of strength I have. . . . They are absolutely the only thing [that sustains me]. Aside from these letters, perhaps also the thought that there is a mother in you, [and] my faith in that. . . . Now I know: ever and always I have been seeking my mother.”<sup>6</sup> Nearly twenty years later, while addressing a young man on the occasion of his bar mitzvah, he contrasted the voluntary act of faith of devoting oneself to God with one’s whole being to the bond a child has with his or her mother, “whether one wishes it or not.”<sup>7</sup>

The longing for the maternal embrace that would never happen led Martin at the age of thirteen to coin a “private term,” *Vergegnung*—a mismeeting, “a-meeting-that-had-gone-wrong,” or a meeting that had not taken place as one had hoped.<sup>8</sup> As he matured, he realized it “was something that concerned not only me, but all human beings.”<sup>9</sup> More than thirty years later, with the publication of *I and Thou* in 1923, which introduced his philosophy of dialogue, he would probe the existential and religious meaning of *Begegnung*, meeting—the interpersonal encounter between individuals that occurs in an atmosphere of mutual trust: “Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung” (All real life is meeting).<sup>10</sup> Buber’s call to engage the world—our life with others—in dialogue also recognized the

painful truth of how difficult it is to achieve, how often life's journey is filled with mismetings and the failure of I-Thou encounters to take place. Alert to the fragility of human relationships, he spoke of the ideological and psychological "armor" we humans invariably wear to protect ourselves from such mismetings.

From the perspective of his own experience, Buber was sensitive to the vulnerability of others, and to the pain we so often inflict on one another by what the nineteenth-century French novelist Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly called "civilized crimes"—interpersonal "crimes that society commits daily, in secret and unpunished, with downright fascinating frequency and frivolity," although "they appear to be negligible crimes because no blood is spilled and the carnage takes place within the bounds of feeling and custom." Such "civilized crimes" are often as hurtful as the ones that society recognizes as violations of civil and criminal law.<sup>11</sup> The failure to truly meet another who signals, even if only indirectly, their need for a response of real presence (that is, an I-Thou encounter) was, for Buber, a civilized crime. "The human person," Buber observed, "feels himself exposed by nature—as an unwanted child is exposed—and at the same time a person isolated in the midst of the tumultuous human world."<sup>12</sup>

Aware of the emotional rupture that their three-year-old grandson had experienced in the wake of his mother's abrupt departure, Martin's grandparents pampered him and tried to protect him from any possible harm. Consequently, he rarely played with other children. As his son Rafael explained—with ironic sympathy—his father's lack of understanding for his own children, "my father did not have a 'normal' childhood; he never played dodge-ball on the street or broke a neighbor's window."<sup>13</sup> Until the age of ten—when he was enrolled in a Polish gymnasium—he did not go to school at all, but was tutored at home. The emphasis was on languages and litera-

ture; he received private lessons in English, French, and German, as well as in traditional Jewish subjects. His grandfather Salomon Buber, an observant and learned Jew, taught him Hebrew and the fundamentals of classical Judaism. His principal teacher in rabbinic literature, however, was his great-uncle, his grandfather's younger brother Rabbi Zev Wolf (Wilhelm) Buber, a Talmud scholar who was renowned for his novel interpretations of rabbinic law.<sup>14</sup>

In the summers, Martin would frequently spend a week or so with his great-uncle in Delatyn, a bucolic town at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, along the Pruth River, and a favorite summer destination of East Galician Jewry, especially of many leading Hasidic rabbis. Since Zev Buber rented only a small apartment at the edge of the surrounding forest, Martin would stay at the home of one of his uncle's friends. In the summer of 1899, he shared a room with Moshe Hayyim Ephraim Bloch, who was three years younger. Bloch, a yeshiva student, would take long walks with Martin in the forest, and noted his love of nature—as well as an inscrutable sadness, reflected in moments of silence that would interrupt their conversations.<sup>15</sup>

Since Bloch had yet to master German, they likely spoke in Yiddish, one of Martin's primary languages. As a young adult, his correspondence with his grandfather was largely in Yiddish.<sup>16</sup> His grandmother would write to him in German, but most often in Hebrew script. A daughter of strictly orthodox parents, Adele (Udel) Buber (née Weiser) had learned German surreptitiously, violating the traditional Jewish prohibition of reading "alien" literature. But once she married the twenty-year-old Salomon Buber at age seventeen, she was able to pursue her passion for German literature openly.

Martin credited his grandmother with his love of reading. She was the one who initially exposed him to spoken German, though because she had largely acquired it through reading, her German missed many of the nuances and spontaneity of infor-

mal speech.<sup>17</sup> It was only when he began university studies in Vienna that Martin gained his first real exposure to German as it was spoken by native speakers. In the city of his birth, he was drawn to the famous Burgtheater, which he often attended daily. “There, by men who were called actors,” he recalled, “the German language was *spoken*. In the books that I had read the signs were indicated; here for the first time did they become the sounds that were meant. That was a great instruction. . . . [Here] for the first time was the primordial gold of speech poured into the laps of heirs *who made no pains to earn it*.”<sup>18</sup>

The eighteen-year-old Buber resolved to make every effort to acquire a relationship to German as it was spoken by those for whom it was a mother tongue. “Two decades passed before . . . I struggled through to the strict service of the word and earned the heritage with as much difficulty as if I had never . . . possessed it.”<sup>19</sup> That it was German as spoken in the theater that inspired him may have unconsciously connected Martin with his mother, who was an actress. Both his friends and his critics noted that there was something theatrical in his speech—he spoke slowly and with precise, even dramatic, enunciation. (His deliberate manner of speaking also might have been to compensate for a slight speech defect due to his deformed lip.)<sup>20</sup> Martin’s wife, Paula (née Winkler), would help him in his effort to master spoken German. A native German speaker, Paula, born into a pious Catholic family in Munich, was an accomplished writer. She would later publish novels under the masculine pen name Georg Munk and take an active part in her husband’s literary work.<sup>21</sup> Until her death in 1958, Martin would regularly consult with her on matters of grammar and style.<sup>22</sup>

The two first met during the fall semester of 1899 at the University of Zurich. A vivacious, intellectually engaged, independent young woman, Paula attracted attention not only because she was one of the few female students at the university, but also, and especially, because of her bohemian, exotic flair.

Paula had been a member of a mystical colony in south Tyrol led by Omar al-Raschid Bey, a gray-bearded patriarch dressed in Bedouin robes who was regarded by his disciples as a charismatic, otherworldly sage.<sup>23</sup> A Jew by birth who had converted to Islam, al-Raschid Bey enchanted his followers—including young aspiring poets and philosophers—with the “wisdom of the Orient,” a highly syncretistic mixture of Islamic, Indian, Buddhist, and other mystical teachings.<sup>24</sup>

In his memoirs, the philosopher Theodor Lessing, also a disciple of al-Raschid Bey, relates how many of his followers were taken with Paula, “the only beautiful woman in the small colony.”<sup>25</sup> She had first come to Zurich with al-Raschid Bey to study Sanskrit and Indian religions at his behest (while his disconcerted wife, Helene, stayed in Munich).<sup>26</sup> Soon after she ended their amorous relationship, Paula met Martin at a seminar in German literature, and their romance began at a dance party in the Alps that lasted until the early hours of the morning. Some observers found it incomprehensible that she was drawn to the diminutive, slightly built Buber—he was barely five foot two—who was also younger than her by seven months.<sup>27</sup>

Their relationship yielded a child, Rafael, born on July 9, 1900. Although Buber was initially distraught to learn that Paula was pregnant, their next child, Eva, was born less than a year later, on July 3, 1901. Fearing that his grandparents would view having children out of wedlock with a non-Jewish woman as a double sin, Buber did not tell them about the relationship or the children’s births. It was only in January 1907, after his grandfather had passed away on December 28, 1906, that Paula converted to Judaism. She married Martin the following April in a civil ceremony in Friedenau, then a suburb of Berlin.<sup>28</sup> Shortly thereafter, Martin told his grandmother about his relationship with Paula, and of their two children.

In his memoirs, composed in the twilight of his nearly ninety years, Martin wrote warmly of his grandmother, while

mentioning his grandfather only in passing. Forty years earlier, he had written at greater length about his grandfather, but in the context of relating that in his youth Martin had been alienated from Judaism, despite growing up in the home of this famed and devoted scholar of rabbinic literature and fastidiously observant Jew. As long as Buber lived with his grandparents he was, as he himself put it, well rooted in Judaism, at least externally, but even then, “many questions and doubts jogged about in me.”<sup>29</sup> This festering discomfort with Jewish religious practice came to full expression at age fourteen, when he left his grandparents’ home to live with his father, who had recently remarried. In his father’s home, he stopped putting on tefillin or observing other traditional Jewish rituals and practices.<sup>30</sup> If he went to synagogue, it was to Lemberg’s liberal congregation, of which his father was a member. It was only then, as he later reported, that he was “exposed to ‘liberal’ influences in [his] religious education.”<sup>31</sup>

Martin seems never to have developed the intimate relationship with his grandfather that he had with his grandmother, Adele. The warmth and admiration with which he writes of her in his memoirs is reflected in their correspondence. The letters he received from his grandfather, however, are invariably curt, and often strike a critical tone. In a Yiddish letter of June 18, 1906, Salomon asks his grandson why he does not write and acknowledge his letters to him: “even in Frankfurt or Berlin one can find ten minutes to write.”<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding his apparent distance from his grandfather, Martin would share many of his traits.<sup>33</sup> Salomon was something of a workaholic, as Martin himself would become.<sup>34</sup> An immensely prolific scholar and a man of extraordinary wealth, Salomon was also an exceedingly generous patron of other scholars who were less well off. Salomon’s unique position in European Jewry as a scholar and philanthropist (who supported many Jewish as well as non-Jewish causes) was eulo-



gized in an obituary published in the London *Jewish Chronicle* on January 4, 1907. It delineated both his vast range of financial interests and his extensive involvement in municipal and communal affairs and philanthropy, then stated: "It will amaze some to learn that [Salomon] Buber was beyond question the most prolific man of Jewish letters of his time. His published works constitute of themselves a library; his unpublished writings fill many shelves. Buber was, in the rabbinic phrase, privileged to be placed at two tables—wealth and wisdom."<sup>35</sup> The Buber family traced its origins to Meir Isaac Katzenellenbogen, chief rabbi of Padua, Italy, whose other descendants include Karl Marx and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The family was more directly related, however, to Rabbi Benjamin Aaron ben Abraham Slonik, author of *Mas'at Benjamin*, one of the most authoritative and popular works of rabbinic legal responsa for generations of Polish and German Jewry, first published in Kraków in 1633 (with innumerable subsequent printings).<sup>36</sup> Slonik's great-grandson and Salomon's father, Rabbi Isaiah Abraham Buber, was renowned as a Talmud scholar whose success in business allowed him to fund generously various institutions serving the poor as well as to found a hospital in Lemberg. Despite a heavy April rainfall, thousands attended his funeral, at which he was eulogized by the leading rabbis of the city. His sons, led by Salomon, pledged a significant sum for the establishment of a new hospital in his memory as well as money to maintain the old hospital founded by their father.<sup>37</sup>

The Buber family was, in a nutshell, among the Galician Jewish intellectual and financial elite.<sup>38</sup> It was thus not surprising that in Jewish circles, Martin was known and greeted as Salomon Buber's grandson. In a letter to his grandmother, he noted with a palpable measure of chagrin that "whenever I meet with Zionists I am asked about Grandpa, his health, his work, and so on; I have yet to be introduced to someone who does not ask me about my relationship to Salomon Buber."<sup>39</sup> He was

determined to forge his own identity, albeit with his grandfather's endorsement. In a letter to his grandparents on the occasion of his grandfather's seventy-third birthday, he begins with uncharacteristic affection and admiration for his grandfather: "When I think of your dear face, I have trouble fighting back my tears—tears of warmest reverence," and by expressing the hope that "your vibrant kindness, which so often brought me comfort and joy and steadfastness, will be preserved for me for a long, long time." He then continues with an appeal that his grandfather approve the path he had chosen. Although Zionist activity might not have been what his grandfather had envisioned for his grandson, Martin writes reassuringly, it too would serve the objective of securing the future of the Jewish people:

I can show my gratitude and my love in no better way than by emulating your example—in *my own fields*—and by placing my own life, as you have done, in the service of the Jewish people. You have mined and refined treasures from the culture of the Jewish past; I, who am young and still long more for action than for knowledge, want to help forge the Jewish future. But we are both ruled by the spirit of the eternal people, and in this sense I think I can say that I intend to carry on your life's work.<sup>40</sup>

This indirect appeal for reconciliation with his grandfather may have also been prompted by a hope to ease Salomon's and Adele's misgivings about his pursuing a university education with no concrete professional objective; there are hints of those concerns in their correspondence. An obituary for Martin's father, Carl, that appeared in a Polish Jewish newspaper in Lemberg notes that Adele Buber had forbidden her own son from pursuing his studies beyond high school. "She feared that Karol [Carl] Buber of blessed memory wished to continue his studies in secular schools, and might thus enter the

world of secular sciences and conventions, so remote from Jewish tradition.” Giving up his dream of studying medicine, Carl submitted to “his parents’ desire” and “set out for a journey across Europe in order to study the silk textile industry.” After mastering that industry, he expanded his business interests to mining phosphates and mineral oil, and later became “one of the leading experts in the economy of agriculture.”<sup>41</sup> Given this history, Carl Buber may well have supported his son’s decision to pursue a university education so that Martin might achieve what Carl had been denied.

Knowing that Martin had two children out of wedlock with a non-Jewish woman would surely have confirmed his grandparents’ fears that secular studies would lead him astray. As the birthday letter to his grandfather indicates, Martin hoped that his affiliation with Zionism (first adopted while spending the winter semester of 1897–1898 at the University of Leipzig) would reassure his grandparents. At stake was not only their approval, but also the allowance he received from them, which he desperately needed. At the time he wrote the letter to his grandfather, Paula was already pregnant with their first child.

It was only when Martin began to devote himself to the study of Hasidism that he seems to have earned the approval of his grandfather, who would send him editions of Hasidic works unavailable in Germany. A few weeks prior to his death in 1906, Salomon received a copy of his grandson’s first anthology of Hasidic lore, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (The tales of Rabbi Nachman), whose dedication signals their reconciliation: “To my grandfather, Salomon Buber, the last of the great scholars of the old-style Haskalah, I dedicate this work of Hasidism with reverential respect and love.”<sup>42</sup> (“Old-style Haskalah” refers to eastern European followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, largely self-taught scholars who maintained to various degrees a fidelity to religious tradition and practice while also affirming the intellectual and cultural standards of

educated Europe.) But Martin's father—who had consciously distanced himself from his parents' religious commitments by joining Lemberg's German-speaking liberal synagogue, and had tried to discourage his son from attending with his grandfather a Hasidic *Klaus* (prayer room)—found Martin's interest in Hasidism pointless. In a letter congratulating Martin on his thirtieth birthday, Carl beseeched him to turn to more important and "useful" topics: "I would be happy," he wrote, "were you to give up this Hasidic and Zohar stuff, for they could only have a mentally debasing and pernicious effect. It is a pity to devote your talents to such a fruitless subject, and to waste so much time and effort [on something] so utterly useless for yourself and the world."<sup>43</sup>

Undeterred by his father's disapproval, Martin's interest in Hasidism gained momentum, not least because of Paula's enthusiastic support. In fact, it was she, a student of Indian religions, who first evoked his interest in mysticism; before they met, his intellectual focus had been on philosophy, psychology, art history, and literature. She also lent her support for his engagement with Zionism. Several months after the birth of their second child, she wrote him, "I am growing toward your cause; you must and will see that. It will be mine and also that of our children."<sup>44</sup> In another letter, she declared, "I have a new desire, I must tell you this, because I previously did not have it: I would like to be active with you in the cause of Zionism—no, I will be. I have the feeling that I can and must do something for it."<sup>45</sup> She poetically expressed her growing embrace of her beloved's cause in an article in *Die Welt*, the Zionist weekly founded by Theodor Herzl, entitled "Reflections of a Philo-Zionist": "How I love you, people of affliction! How strong your heart is and how young it has remained! No, you shall not become another, you shall not sink in the confusion of alien peoples. . . . In being different lies all your beauty, all happiness and joy of earth. Remain your own! . . . How I love you, you people of

all peoples, how I bless you.”<sup>46</sup> In a long letter composed more than two years earlier, she related to Buber a heated exchange she had with a Jewish opponent of Zionism. In response to his denunciation of Zionism as a parochial cause, she argued that loving humanity and seeking broad horizons should not be confused with the bland homogenization of cultures that could result from a dogmatically cosmopolitan outlook:

Our attitudes toward each other ought above all to be “person to person”—not “Frenchman to German,” not “Jew to Christian,” and perhaps less of “man to woman.” So, as one says in Sanskrit, *tatntvam asi*. Simply: That you are. But what does that mean? Are we to blur all distinctions, obliterate all contradictions, for that reason? What for? In order to be able to deal more easily with our humanity? Would we, indeed, then be able to deal more easily with it? Do we love most what is least different from us? Do we love most what is most polished, flattest? Are not the contradictions [of human existence] the highest and ultimate and finest stimulants to life? . . . Why do we cry out against the modern school? We do so because it forces genius and fool into a single mold—so that a hybrid results; indeed, because it violates the soul. Are nations not also individualities? Don’t peoples (*Völker*) have souls? Must we kill the souls of peoples so that the earth will be inhabited solely by individual human beings? Doesn’t that really come down to the oft-decried ethnic stew?<sup>47</sup>

Paula’s passionate endorsement of Zionism and love of the Jewish people served to shape, or at least strengthen, Martin’s own fundamental commitments, as well as his resolve to walk what he would call the “narrow bridge” between allegiance to the Jewish people and an unyielding solidarity with all his fellow human beings.

Martin thus found in Paula not only the mother figure he longed for, but also a soul mate; they were bonded by both romantic love and their enduring intellectual and spiritual com-

patibility. Acknowledging that bond, they would lovingly address one another as “Mowgli,” the child in Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. Raised with a pack of wolves, Mowgli exemplified the unity of spirit and nature. On the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, Martin wrote a poem, “Am Tag der Rückschau” (On the day of looking back) dedicated to “P.B.,” in which he reminisced on his life thus far with the woman who had taught him to see spirit and nature as one:

Then both spirit and world become open to me,  
 The lies burst, and what was, was enough  
 You brought it about that I behold, —  
 Brought about, you only lived,  
 You element and woman,  
 Soul and nature!<sup>48</sup>

The integration of soul and nature, of the transcendent and the everyday, would be the overarching theme of Buber’s lifework.