Rahel Varnhagen
The Life of a Jewess
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CHAPTER 13

ONE DOES NOT ESCAPE JEWISHNESS

(1820–1833)

As a young girl Rachel had made her first journey to Breslau—to those inescapable provincial Jewish relations through whom, at the time, every assimilated Jew with a European cultural background was connected to the Jewish people and the old manners and customs he had discarded. Rachel, who at this time had scarcely any command of the German language—her early letters to her family were written in the Jewish-German of the time, with Hebrew letters—record how she watched “out of curiosity” a marriage according to the Jewish rites. She was welcomed to the affair “as if the Grand Sultan were entering a long-neglected seraglio.” And she added promptly: “This made me ashamed.” The central desire of her life had been escape from Jewishness, and this desire proved unfulfillable because of the anti-Semitism of her milieu, because of the ban, imposed from outside, against a Jew’s becoming a normal human being. If there were still another reason, it was this shame. Every Berlin Jew felt like a Grand Sultan in contrast to his poor, backward co-religionist. From their degradation, from the great gap that separated him from them, he drew his consciousness of being an exception, his pride in having come so gloriously far, and his resistance to the incessant insults, humiliations and setbacks which, ultimately, every Jew experienced. This gap, this dark stage-set of poverty, misery, ignorance of Europe’s cultural goods and utter foreignness, repeatedly assured him of the grandeur of progress, gave him new hope for a better future, for continuous improvement. He felt certain of it; now that the first giant steps obviously lay behind him, it could not fail. This dark stage-set, virtually unknown to the non-Jews among whom he lived, transformed the shaming feeling of being one of the “last in society” into the elevating feeling of belonging to it after all, and of being able to fight within it, rather than outside of it, for progressively better conditions, progressively higher steps. The Berlin Jew who looked upon his origins, which at that time were still present in living form, and geographically close by, became convinced that he was not one of the last, but one of the first.

To be ashamed of such feelings of condescension, which after all still expressed a sense of affiliation, meant cutting oneself off altogether from all origins, all consolations, all compensations. In expressing her shame, in thrusting from her her sense of affiliation, Rachel was giving up far more than she guessed: not only affiliation to the dark mass of the people, but also the far more necessary solidarity with the tiny group of Prussian “exception Jews” from whom she sprang and whose destiny she shared. No baptism, no assimilation, no marriage into wealth and nobility, could have had so radical an effect as this shame others.

Without a stage-set, man cannot live. The world, society, is only too ready to provide another one if a person dares to toss the natural one, given him at birth, into the lumber room. If Rachel dared to expose herself to society as a Jew without being sustained by pride or vanity in what Jews had already achieved, she would lack self-assurance, would lack, as it were, feet with which to walk. “Every step I want to take and cannot does not remind me of the general woes of humanity, which I want to oppose; instead I feel my special misfortune still, and doubly, and tenfold, and the one always makes the other worse for me.” Since in her eyes belonging to Judaism represented no part of the “general woes” which she might seek to remove from the world or, in solidarity with other Jews, manage to endure as the destiny of her people, since she saw it as her own “special misfortune,” it could not help striking her “doubly and tenfold.” The evil of being a Jew seemed specialized, concentrated entirely upon herself; it became her individual fate, as inescapable as a lump on the back or a club-foot. “How ugly it makes me seem. Is the world wise, do people say: ‘The poor fellow is lame; let us carry this to the poor fellow; oh, you can see how hard every step must be for him? No, people pay no attention to his steps, because they are not doing the walking; they find it ugly to watch and do not carry anything to him because his struggle seems as nothing to them, while any struggle on their part is horrible to them. And how can you expect the lame man, who is forced to walk, not to be unhappy?” Judaism could not be cast off by separating oneself from the other Jews; it merely became converted from a historical destiny, from a shared social condition, from an impersonal “general woe” into a character trait, a personal defect in character. Judaism as innate in Rachel as the lame man’s too-short leg.

Judaism could be converted into a defect in character or, at times, a characteristic advantage: for example, in the salon during the brief period when Jews counted for so much because of their naturally unbiased views; when Rachel boasted of having told Louis Ferdinand a few “garret truths,” and emphasized her
difference from those other baptized Jews who had thrown away their advan-
tage—which had consisted, precisely, in being exempt from the world's prej-
duces. Perhaps it was for the Jews themselves to make a virtue of necessity.
When you are all alone it is hard to decide whether being different is a blemish
or a distinction. When you have nothing at all to cling to, you choose in the end
to cling to the thing that sets you off from others. "So the Jews are badly off
here? It is their own fault, for I assure you I ad everybody here that I am one;
ch bien, le même expression. But only a Berlin Jew can have the proper left-
ness and manners in himself; can—I don't say, has. I assure you, it really gives
one a kind of satisfaction here to be from Berlin and a Jew; at least it does me; I
could tell you anecdotes about that." But she had thought this way only so long
as she had been tempest-tossed to a foreign place by luck and chance, was liv-
ing in Paris; she had thought this way only because she personally wanted noth-
ing from anyone at the moment, had no pretensions, did not want to achieve
anything she could not get.

For otherwise, in all everyday surroundings, in all ordinary milieu, it was
no fun going about as an exception—especially not when she had separated her-
self from the dark mass of the people, was ashamed of her condensation and despised
the cheap vanity of the "enlightened" Jew as against their "backward co-
religionists." To enter society at all alone, marked with the blemish and condemned
to be one of the last, was far worse than waiting outside and hoping for better
conditions. Always having to represent oneself as something special, and having
to do it all alone, in order to justify her bare existence, was so strenuous that it
nearly consumed all her strength. "How lonesome it is always having to estab-
lish one's identity first. That alone is enough to make it so repulsive to be a Jew.
Legitimation, moreover, was not even possible most of the time; only in rare,
isolated situations did the kind of the others give her a chance, leave a crack
through which she could put her head and proclaim her uniqueness, in all ordi-
inary converse, at all ordinary times and in every unexpected encounter with
people, that was ruled out; as a Jew the world attributed to her what it consid-
ered to be the Jewish qualities. From this situation arose her constant longing for
foreign places, "to be away from the place where I am who I am; and at some
place where no vulgar person knows me"—in other words, in a situation where
the exceptional chance to make new acquaintances was offered, where known
identity no longer existed. The flight abroad had been a desperate attempt at re-
birth. "Man," she declared, "is himself only abroad; at home he must represent
his past, and in the present that becomes a mask, heavy to carry and obscuring
the face." Abroad, her place of origin was called Berlin; in Berlin it was called
Jew Street, the Judengasse. In order to become a Berliner, therefore, a "cit-

ness," a Prussian, she had to go away from Berlin, leave everything behind—
as she had done in Paris, then in Prague, finally in Karlsruhe with Varnhagen.
Unfortunately, such attempts at flight had only tided her over for a very short
time—not only because a person cannot easily shed his skin, but because being
a Jew was not a problem that pertained specially to Berlin; because there were
likewise Jews in Paris, Prague and Karlsruhe who clearly enough reminded oth-
ers, if not herself, of her true origins. It was not possible to be born a second time.

Out of the secret knowledge that Judaism was inseparable because of the ex-
istence of other Jews, of the internationality of the people, there arose the hope
and the desire that nothing at all would happen to Judaism as a whole, that there
would be no civil improvement, no emancipation, above all no reform. For then
alone could a few individuals prove that they were exceptions; then they would
be—what a paradoxical, though logical wish—would be, by exception, declared
normal. "But I really do not understand at all what can be done for and
with Jews—except very much in general, as a well-organized mind must un-
derstand everything... Only I wish that a person might be able to serve them
and at the same time himself. Hitherto it has not been possible to do anything
for this scattered, neglected, and more than all that, deservedly despised nation.
Sharing the opinion herhostile milieu held in regard to her own origins from this
"deservedly despised nation," having assimilated to her enemies without
being accepted by them, without being received to the point where her past was
forgotten, there could remain, for her, only the hope that by a miracle her ap-
peal, "I am not like them," would be heard. And the bitter experience was that
it never would be heard.

The world became peopled with evil demons who shouted from every cor-
ner, at every opportunity, the thing she wished she could conceal forever.
Life was transformed into an unending succession of insults because she had not
wanted to accept herself, wanted to deny herself. The spite of others always held
up to her the grimacing caricature of herself that these others had fashioned. Hav-
ing denied her origin at all costs, "even at the cost of life itself"; having broken
of her own accord, and all alone, with the natural social ground which, even
as a pariah, she had from birth; having believed that Judaism was an unfortunate
personal quality which had to be "extirpated"; having renounced utterly the aid
of other Jews, the existence and the historical actuality of the entire people, she
could be for a moment an individual, possessing power because of her "heart's
strength and what my heart shows me." She could rest for a while in the "sphere
indicated for me by nature; in that sphere I am powerful and the others insignif-
ient." But very soon she tumbled from these sublime heights into the hands of
enemies who rejoiced in having for once caught a wholly isolated Jew, a Jew as
such, as it were, an abstract Jew without social or historical relationships. They could treat this Jew as the very essence of Jewishness, as though there were only this one Jew in the whole wide world, and they would show her the meaning of being a Jew in society. The results that raised down upon her had compelled Rachel to accept as a fate for which she was fully responsible the circumstance which she might otherwise have been able to dismiss as an unimportant incident for which she was not to blame. This she could have done if she had not considered her whole life around her "disgrace," her "infamous birth." But for her to negate Jewishness fully and without ambiguity would have had the same effect as an unequivocal affirmation. Being a Jew could develop from a political-social circumstance into a personal, individual problem only for persons who for whatever reason equivocally wanted "to be Jews and at the same time to not be Jews" (as the contemporary liberal theologian H. E. G. Paulus once brilliantly phrased it). As a personal problem the Jewish question was insoluble, and for that reason everything Rachel undertook always ended in the "madness of gloom, fright and despair winding up like snakes for all eternity—despair over my position, my situation." In some circumstances the existence of walls can only be demonstrated by the existence of broken heads.

"The misfortunes that come directly from Heaven I always endure with entire tranquility of soul. But where injuries proceeding from people have threatened me, my soul loses its composure, and this I cannot endure at all. Also I have discovered that I can calmly get along without the most essential, most natural vital nourishment, and that to which I am most entitled; no one I have ever seen can compare with me in this; but my demands among and upon people must not be fraudulently withheld from me, or taken away from me. Where I feel entitled to things by right and custom, they must be offered to me; I don't mind surrendering them to manifest force, but I cannot bear having them stolen from me by hypocritical words and deeds—and have the state and society conniving in this theft. My ambition counts for more than anything to me; this anger, I deem my ambition. For it has never occurred to me to want to be more than others, or not to do them justice." It could not help seeming to Rachel that Jews like herself had been lured into society by fraud and deception, "by hypocritical words and deeds," allured, in fact, by the very lack of "manifest force." It seemed to her that she had been robbed and cheated by a secret, sly presence of state and society which combined to withhold from Jews of the first civil rights and then social equality. Deceptively, the Jews had been lured out of their two-thousand-year-old burden-held. Their lives had been poisoned when they were inoculated with the poison of ambition, which in the end led them desperately to want to attain everything because they did not receive the same rights such as "peasant women and beggar women have"—and were not even permitted to say so. Rachel had fought for this stolen "natural existence," without ever being able to rest; she had demanded it of everyone who shamed her way, sniffled at it with all the means at her command—and attained "the upside-down crown upon my destiny." She had let herself be driven by the winds, had stubbornly insisted upon her rights, upon human rights, had resolutely refused to share the general fate of the Jews, to place her hopes in political measures which would benefit all. And the more she did these things, the more typically Jewish her fate turned out to be, the more illuminatingly she demonstrated to the observer—and finally to herself as well—all that a Jew could undertake without ceasing to be a Jew. She had walked down all the roads that could lead her into the alien world, and upon all these roads she had left her track, had converted them into Jewish roads, parallel roads; ultimately her whole life had become a segment of Jewish history in Germany. Thus in the end she understood her "whole fate [as] an historical, inexorable, Old Testamentarian fate, indeed [as] the cause which the children of its adherents vainly try to flee in all quarters of the globe."

Never did she imagine that any part of it could have been foreseen or averted. Only by acting in good faith and exposing herself to all consequences could she prove the hypocrisy of society, which pretended to treat assimilated Jews as if they were not Jews. It was essential to try each successive step. The change of name was of crucial importance; it made her, she thought, "outwardly another person." After that came baptism, since the change of name had proved insufficient and "no reason exists to want to remain in the semblance of the religion of [her] birth." What counted was to "adhere in external matters as well to the class" whose customs, opinions, culture and convictions she wished to identify with. The most important thing, she believed, was "to baptize the children as well. They . . . must learn to think of that crazy episode of history as no different from other aspects of history in general."

But was Rachel really prepared to take all the consequences and radically extirpate her own identity? After having recommended all these measures to her friend—measures which could arise only out of shame—she suddenly warned her "not to be ashamed of Jewish birth and of the nation whose misfortunes and defects you know all the better because of it; you must not abandon them for fear of people's saying that you still have some Jewishness about you!" Yet what strange logic here, that after having made such concessions to the prejudices of society that one had virtually extinguished oneself by radical change, one was nevertheless forbidden to take part in that ingratiating sport of good society, the "modern hatred of Jews"; that, though one had left no lingering mark of Jew-
nessmen, the officers, etc.—all give their own balls, to which only persons belonging to their circle appear. . . . All the balls of the people of quality aspire, with more or less success, to imitate the court affairs or princely balls" (Heine). Exclusive as these "guilds" were toward one another individually, they were exclusive in toto toward the Jews. The provinces did not differ from Berlin: the "Christian middle class dull and uninspired, with unusual wealth; the higher class the same to a higher degree . . ." (Heine).

Since, then, the world was very badly arranged, since the cry of "down with the Jews" rang out at every hand (in 1819 a wave of pogroms swept over all of Prussia), the old, unreal, desperate existence suddenly seemed to Rahel far more real, more true, more suitable than the new. It turned out that the pariah was capable not only of preserving more feeling for the "true realities," but that in some circumstances he also possessed more reality than the parvenu. For the latter, being condemned to lead a sham existence, could seize possession of all the objects of a world not arranged for him only with the pseudo-reality of a masquerade. He was marked, and consequently everything that he touched appeared to be marked; he concealed his true nature wherever he went, and through every hole in his costume his old pariah existence could be detected. In the Berlin of the 1820's, which had returned to convention and had forgotten the great upheaval around the turn of the century, everything had resumed its assigned place. It became transparently clear that no one could wantonly step out of his place, that it was not possible to step into someone else's place, that one was "swimming with the stream after all, no matter with how much of a sidewise drift." The current always recaptured one, and "the banks only seem to be there."

It became apparent that the fate of the Jews was not so accidental and out of the way, that on the contrary it precisely limited the state of society, outlined the ugly reality of the gaps in the social structure. Consequently there was no escape, unless it were to the moon. "I am no proper daughter of the earth, though a true child of the earth . . . So I remain a kind of observer of her, not a daughter who takes on her qualities, and receives a dowry and presents of all sorts."

How early age can mislead one in seeking a place for oneself on another planet, since, after all, "every heart desires a home." How easily weariness can deceive, and represent the monotonous similarity of events as inexorability, always the same for two thousand years: "Our history is nothing but the case history of our illness." How strong the longing for death must have become, how the centuries that everything would end sooner or later: "Just imagine, we were told by the domestics that two Jews had poisoned the well here. I want peace at last, I tell you," she wrote to her brother at the time of the great Berlin cholera epidemic of 1831. How hard it must have been, having no chil-
dren and not being part of any continuing line, to realize that such disgust and such hope for death were false, that death was never any kind of solution for human beings. "The greatest miracle is always this, that after our death the objects of the world continue to exist as they did during our lives; and that life, to that extent, was not pure fantasy."

The greatest miracle was the greatest comfort. After all was said and done, she had found the thing that guaranteed her her reality. With this insight she liquidated her personal bankruptcy. The July Revolution found her woman regarding the *Globe as pain quotidien*, and coming to the illusion, but for her correct perception that: "One thing is certain. Europe no longer desires to conquer pieces of ground, but something more serious: pieces of equality... The talk is of rights and no longer of origins." She became a Saint-Simonist, enthusiastic over "this great newly invented instrument which is at last probing that great old wound, the history of man upon earth." She became "entirely interested only in what improvements the earth can make for us: it and our actions upon it." She had realized that the "diseased matter" which had to "get out of us" was not contained in the Jews alone; that the pox only broke out on the Jews, infecting them by contagion; that everything she herself had undertaken to fight it, all her life, was nothing but a "cosmetic" which did not "help, even if it were slapped on with housepainter's brushes." And so, at the end of her life, she unconcernedly wrote whole paragraphs in her letters to her brother in Hebrew characters, just as she had done in her girlhood. Freedom and equality were not going to be conjured into existence by individuals' capturing them by fraud as privileges for themselves.

Rahel had remained a Jew and pariah. Only because she clung to both conditions did she find a place in the history of European humanity. In her old age she could observe what came of "honest inquiry" when pursued by an "injured and healed soul," such as Ludwig Börne. She hailed young Heine with enthusiasm and great friendship—"only galley slaves know one another." (Few of her letters addressed expressly to him have come down to us; the greater part of Heine's letters and early manuscripts were destroyed in a great fire in Hamburg.) Heine's affirmation of Jewishness, the first and last resolute affirmation which was to be heard from an assimilated Jew for a long time, derived from the same reasons and the same feeling for truth as Rahel's negation. Both had never been able to accept their destiny serenely; both had never attempted to hide it behind big words or boastful phrases; both had always demanded an accounting and had never gone in for "protest silence and patient Christian suffering" (Heine). Rahel had not suffered alone, nor in vain, had not erred in vain, since Heine could masterfully and unashamedly sum up for her: "If stealing silver spoons had been within the law, I would not have had myself baptized." Neither Marx, nor Varnhagen had, in a serious historical sense, saved "the image of her soul," but only Heine who promised "to be enthusiastic for the cause of the Jews and their attainment of equality before the law. In bad times, which are inevitable, the Germanic rabble will hear my voice ring resoundingly in German beer halls and palaces."

With this promise spoken, Rahel could die with peaceful heart. She left behind her an heir on whom she had much to bestow: the history of a bankruptcy, and a rebellious spirit. "No philanthropic list, no cheers, no condensation, no mixed society, no new hymn book, no bourgeois star, nothing, nothing could ever placate me... You will say this gloriously, elegantly, fantastically, incisively, extremely jestingly, always musically, provokingly or charmingly; you will say it all very soon. But as you do, the text from my old, offended heart will still have to remain yours."