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978-0-521-89055-7 - Karl Popper - The Formative Years, 1902-1945: Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna

Malachi Haim Hacoheh

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Karl Popper – The Formative Years, 1902–1945

Karl Popper (1902–1994) is one of this century's most influential philosophers, but his life in fin-de-siècle and interwar Vienna, and his exile in New Zealand during World War II, have so far remained shrouded in mystery. This intellectual biography recovers the legacy of the young Popper, the progressive, cosmopolitan, Viennese socialist who combated fascism, revolutionized the philosophy of science, and envisioned the Open Society. Malachi Hacoheh delves into his archives (as well as the archives of his colleagues) and draws a compelling portrait of the philosopher, the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia, and the vanished culture of Red Vienna, which was decimated by Nazism. Seeking to rescue Popper from his postwar conservative and anticommunist reputation, Hacoheh restores his works to their original Central European contexts and, at the same time, shows that they have urgent messages for contemporary politics and philosophy. Long before poststructuralism, Popper and his colleagues answered “post-structuralist” queries, demonstrating that nonfoundationalist philosophy – philosophy that has no firm absolutes – is compatible with the Enlightenment's legacy and the pursuit of human emancipation. They formed cosmopolitan visions that, once a dream, may now provide guidelines for moving beyond the nation-state. Hacoheh's is an adventurous biography that recovers the historical origins and meanings of ideas and renders them relevant to the present.

Malachi Haim Hacoheh is associate professor of history at Duke University. He has also taught at Columbia University and Reed College. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Modern History*, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *History and Theory*, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, and similar publications. He is a coordinator of the Triangle Intellectual History Program (Duke, NCSU at Raleigh, UNC at Chapel Hill) and serves on the Program Board of the Vienna International Summer University.

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For my mother and father:

“Mine and yours is theirs.”

(*Babylonian Talmud*, Ketuvot 63a, Nedarim 50a)

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MALACHI HAIM HACOEN

Duke University



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2000
First paperback edition 2002

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Bembo 11/12 pt. System QuarkXPress™ [BTS]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data is available

ISBN 0 521 47053 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89055 1 paperback

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Acknowledgments

This book has been long in the making, and I have incurred many debts while writing it. I take pleasure in acknowledging them, but fear that I may not recall them all and will be able to pay back only a few. As an Israeli youth, I received an intensive education in Jewish studies. My teachers taught me to love learning for its own sake and, through Talmudic study, to read a text closely. I have since explored fields they did not expect I would, and this book advances precisely the ideas they sought to combat. Nonetheless, my work owes more to them, I suspect, than to my academic education. In odd ways, I still feel close to them. Nowhere in the academy have I found a genuine love of learning comparable to theirs.

My teachers at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel, provided me with a comprehensive, classical European, historical education that has served me well ever since. At Columbia University, where I completed my entire graduate education, the faculty – both the U.S. and European historians – were supportive of my work. They allowed a young student, who thought he knew better, to stumble and learn, and to do things his own way. I would like to thank Fritz Stern for supervising the dissertation with his usual elegance; Bob Paxton for providing sound advice, and for diligently reading my work and correcting my mistakes; and István Déak for always being generous with me. I learned most, however, through arguing with Larry Dickey about method in intellectual history. I struggled to develop my own mode, integrating the history of ideas with social and discursive contexts. In writing an intellectual biography of a liberal philosopher in the late 1980s and 1990s, when biography and liberalism alike – to say nothing of Karl Popper – were out of fashion in the U.S. academy, I also had to come to terms with poststructuralism. Larry Dickey's concern with conceptual moves that thinkers make in response to historical problems has remained a constant motif in my own work.

My Ph.D. dissertation, "The Making of the Open Society," served as a draft for this book. Nancy Moody in New York and Antonia Larsen in Portland typed early versions of the dissertation, with talent and patience. I completed the dissertation while teaching as a visiting assistant professor at Reed College, Portland, Oregon, a wonderful, intellectually intense, liberal arts college. My time there was the most exciting period thus far in my academic career, mostly owing to interdisciplinary teaching in the humanities program. I learned a great deal by listening to exquisite lectures

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by colleagues on topics as varied as the *Oresteia*, late-antique architecture, and *The Divine Comedy*. Both my practice of literary analysis and my ability to argue with Popper's classical scholarship – for whatever they are worth – I owe to my Reed experience.

I interviewed Karl Popper (1902–94) in January 1984 for four hours at his home in Penn, west of London. He was hospitable and charming, serious and interesting, but he did not remember Vienna well. The interview was invaluable, all the same, but I needed to see the archives. The 1990s have seen the opening not only of Popper's papers but also those of other Viennese intellectuals. It is a measure of the Central European catastrophe that none of the original archives are in Austria: The papers are dispersed in universities all over Western Europe and North America. Altogether, I have consulted about twenty collections. This would have been impossible without the generous help, well beyond the call of duty, of many archivists: Carol Leadendam and the staff at the Hoover Institute Archives, Stanford; Dr. Brigitte Uhlemann at the *Philosophisches Archiv*, Constance, Germany; Gerald Heverly at the Archives of Scientific Philosophy, Pittsburgh; Dr. Hubert Knoblauch at the *Sozialwissenschaftliches Archiv*, Constance; Ana Gomez at the Karl Polanyi Institute, Concordia University, Montreal; Danielle Green at the Harvard University Archives; Mary Osielski at Special Collections, State University of New York at Albany; Yakov at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Herbert Koch at the Meldearchiv, Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, Vienna; and Frau H. Weiss at the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*, Vienna. Philippe Rosenberg, Steve Rowe, Matthew Specter, and Daniel Villanueva, at the time graduate students at Duke, helped with my research. (Other debts I have tried to acknowledge in my notes.) I am deeply thankful to all.

While writing the book, I have enjoyed the friendship and support of many of Popper's former students. Ian Jarvie (York University, Toronto) and Jeremy Shearmur (Australian National University, Canberra) offered extremely valuable criticism, first of my dissertation, then of the book manuscript. Joseph Agassi (Tel Aviv University and York University) commented on my essays and parts of the manuscript, reported on his conversations with Popper, and offered unparalleled psychological insight into Popper's personality. The late Colin Simkin (University of Sydney), Popper's closest colleague during his sojourn in New Zealand, provided indispensable first-hand knowledge of Popper's life there and the formation of his political philosophy. Peter Munz (Victoria University, Wellington), Popper's favorite student at Canterbury University College, added an invaluable perspective on his life and teaching there. The late John Watkins (University of London) offered criticism on both my essays and the entire manuscript, correcting with special care my treatment of probability. Troels Eggers

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Hansen (University of Copenhagen) contributed his incomparable expertise in Popper's early manuscripts, offering important criticism of two "final versions" of Chapters 5 and 6. Karl Milford (University of Vienna) commented on several chapters and shared impressions of Popper's ambivalent relationship to Vienna. Stefano Gattei (University of Milan) commented on the first six chapters and corrected several mistakes. (I have acknowledged other help in my notes.) I am deeply grateful to all and so regret that Colin Simkin and John Watkins will not be here to see the book's publication.

Popper was a genius polymath, and it would be pretentious for most historians to claim expertise enabling them to provide an adequate account of his entire oeuvre, let alone pass judgment on it. I have no specialized training in mathematics or the natural sciences, and so the more technical details of Popper's work in probability theory and physics remain beyond my grasp. Fortunately, these do not represent the most significant part of his work to 1945, and, where they are relevant, I have had the good fortune of having the late John Watkins and Joseph Agassi check my account. (Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.) The literature on Popper is abundant, and discussion of his contributions to mathematical logic and scientific theory is available elsewhere. This is, however, the first comprehensive historical work on his early life and work, and I have sought to illuminate the contribution of the Viennese milieu to his philosophy. Born and buried in Vienna, Popper was the foremost philosopher to carry the legacy of Viennese progressivism to the postwar trans-Atlantic world. I have emphasized the intimate relationship between his philosophy of science and political philosophy. Both represent radical reformulation of the liberal ideal of free and critical scientific and political communities pursuing (uncertain, but real) knowledge and reform. Both answer current quandaries about the possibility of knowledge and a cosmopolitan world order.

The Duke history department and its chair, Alex Roland, have provided a supportive and congenial setting for the writing of this book. I would especially like to thank my colleagues Warren Lerner, Seymour Mauskopf, Martin Miller, Kristen Neuschel, and Joseph Shatzmiller for making me feel at home, and Claudia Koonz, Bill Reddy, Kären Wigen, and Ron Witt for supporting my work. I have greatly enjoyed and learned much from my conversations with Catherine Peyroux. My graduate students have been a delight, a constant source for intellectual interaction and stimulation. Jan French, Matthew Specter, Patrick Wilkinson, and other students have commented on significant parts of my work. In the context of discussions at Duke, I have expanded my interest in Popper and interwar Viennese culture to the assimilated-Jewish intelligentsia, Central European cosmopolitanism, and the workings of national and cosmopolitan identities in a multicultural setting. My recent essays (see the Bibliography) have drawn attention to

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the sociocultural conditions that made a transnational “Central European culture” possible – and also to its limits. I have argued that Central European cosmopolitanism should be understood against the background of ethnonationalism and the dilemmas of national integration of the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia. This view informs my understanding of the making of Popper’s *Open Society*, but the essays foreground it better, I suspect, than this intellectual biography.

While I have written against the grain of much of contemporary modern European intellectual history, I was lucky to have some of its leading practitioners treat my work kindly. Allan Megill (University of Virginia), especially, read both my dissertation and the book and has provided most helpful and detailed comments and much needed support, for which I am grateful. Since the spring of 1995, the monthly meetings of the Triangle Intellectual History Seminar at the National Humanities Center have provided an exceptional scholarly forum for discussing current work in intellectual history. I would especially like to thank Tony La Vopa and K. Steven Vincent (both of North Carolina State University at Raleigh) for having closely read my work, for providing invaluable comments and advice, and for constant moral support. The seminar is a source of hope that the practice of intellectual history may yet be reinvigorated in the U.S. academy.

Readers may wonder whether a second volume, an intellectual biography of the mature Popper, is forthcoming, and the answer is definitely no. The mature Popper is better known, and there are a good number of people, more qualified than I, to evaluate his postwar achievements. The formative context for Popper’s work was the interwar socialist struggle against fascism in Central Europe, but his philosophy became popular in the postwar trans-Atlantic world, preoccupied with the cold war. I have attempted to rescue Popper from his postwar conservative reputation and recover the legacy of the young socialist who pursued radical reform and revolutionized the philosophy of science. I may still try to explain in detail the postwar reception of Popper among the philosophers of science, but, for the rest, I am leaving Popper and returning to the project that first gave rise to my interest in his philosophy: the Congress for Cultural Freedom, postwar trans-Atlantic liberalism, and the generation of liberal intellectuals who began their career as leftist antifascists, turned cold war liberals, and then, in the aftermath of 1968, became neoconservatives. Only recently have I realized that the appeals to me of postwar liberalism and the interwar assimilated-Jewish intelligentsia were actually one. Acculturated Jewish intellectuals and Central European Jewish émigrés played a prominent role in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the international organization of postwar liberals. What made the liberal anticommunist crusade an international phenomenon was not only NATO and the CIA funding but also the cosmopolitanism of congress activists – many of them Jewish émigrés

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and ex-Communists – who envisioned a humanity that would fulfill, at the end of the day, the Marxist promise on which communism reneged.

One's debts to family and personal friends are always the greatest, but also the most difficult to speak of. Yerra Sugarman accompanied this project in its early stages and has remained a model of artistic sensitivity and good writing. My good friends Wim-Haim, Moishe, Blondie, Gikattila, and Shmulik Kipod-Igel have stood by me in difficult times, their support unwavering. Julie Mell, my spouse, has lived with the book through good and bad times. She has read and commented on numerous versions of most chapters and has been a constant source of intellectual and moral support, unfailing scholarly judgment and good advice, and, most importantly, wonderful companionship. Of my debt to my parents, Moshe and Zehava Hacoen, I can only say that which the Jewish midrash attributes to Rabbi Akiva. Upon his return home from a twenty-four-year sojourn of Torah study, Rabbi Akiva tells the students he brings with him about Rachel, his wife: "Mine and yours is hers."

Malachi Haim Hacoen
Duke University, Durham, N. C.
December 1999