

Gershom Scholem on his Decision to Emigrate in 1923 (Retrospective Account, 1977)

Abstract

The vast majority of the 564,400 Jews living in Germany in 1925 had liberal attitudes and were well represented by the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith [*Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* or CV]. A smaller group of Jews belonging to the German Zionist Association [*Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland* or ZVfD] opposed the views held by the liberal “Centralverein” Jews, who saw themselves as both German and Jewish at the same time. The Zionists defined themselves as members of the Jewish people and aimed to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Whereas the ZVfD had fewer than 10,000 members prior to World War I, its membership rose to a peak of 33,339 in 1922-23; on average, its membership hovered around 17,500 between 1920-21 and 1929-30. Between 1920 and 1932, however, only 2,000 German Jews actually emigrated to Palestine. Gershom Scholem was one of them.

Source

In those years [i.e. the early twenties] the Zionists constituted a small but very articulate minority in Germany. Of the Jewish population of about 600,000, 20,000 participated in the election of delegates to the convention of the German Zionist Association in 1920. Considering the voting age, this figure bespoke a marked increase in the influence of this movement since the prewar years. The overwhelming majority of the Zionists had a middle-class orientation. My sympathies lay with the radical circles which represented the social ideal of the incipient kibbutz movement. When I still had friendly relations with the publisher Klaus Wagenbach, he wrote me in a letter of about twelve years ago (i.e. about 1965): “I’ve been reading some of your early essays. You were some *Radikalinski* in those days, hee hee!” As I have already mentioned, the anarchistic element in some groups in Israel, and by no means unimportant ones, came very close to my own position of that time. In 1921, when I read a journal article by a leader of those groups (he later became one of the most influential would-be Stalinists who molted in strictly Marxist fashion), his definition of the Zionist social ideal as “the free banding together of anarchistic associations” certainly struck a responsive chord in me. Beyond this it is safe to say that the overwhelming majority of those who went to Eretz Yisrael from Germany in the early twenties were motivated by moral rather than political considerations. It was a decision against what was perceived as a helter-skelter, dishonest and undignified game of hide-and-seek. It was a decision in favor of a new beginning which appeared clear-cut to us at the time—a new beginning which, whether it was motivated by religious or secularistic considerations, had more to do with social ethics than with politics, strange though that may seem today. We were as yet not fully aware of the dialectics that I have already mentioned. In those days we did not know, of course, that Hitler was going to come, but we did know that, in view of the task of a radical renewal of Judaism and Jewish society, Germany was a vacuum in which we would choke. This is what drove people like myself and my friends to Zionism.

Source: Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem. Memories of My Youth*. Translated from the German by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1998, pp. 150–51.

Recommended Citation: Gershom Scholem on his Decision to Emigrate in 1923 (Retrospective Account, 1977), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3924>> [March 16, 2026].