



ON LIBERTY
BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

Born in 1948 in London. Educated at the High School of Glasgow, Wyggeston Grammar School, Balliol College, Oxford, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Nuffield College, Oxford. Received B.A., M.A., and D.Phil. (*not* Dr.Phil. *nor* Ph.D.) degrees from Oxford in 1969, 1972, and 1974 respectively. In 2001, awarded the further degree of D.Litt. Research Fellow in Politics, Nuffield College (1973–75), Lecturer in History, University of Sheffield (1976–79), Visiting Lecturer in International Relations, the Hebrew University (1979–80), Associate Professor (1980–82) and then Professor (1982–96) of History, Brandeis University, president, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (1996–2000), and professor of history, University of Glasgow (2000–03). Since 2003, Ulrich and Harriet Meyer Professor of History at the University of Chicago. Publications include: *The British in Palestine* (1978); *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945* (1979); *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln* (British Crime Writers’ “Golden Dagger” prize for non-fiction, 1988); *Herbert Samuel* (1992). *Vanishing Diaspora* (1996); *Secret War in Shanghai* (1999); *Divided Jerusalem* (2001); *Israel and Palestine: Why They Fight and Can They Stop?* (2003). – Address: History Department, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637. E-mail: bmjw@uchicago.edu

“There is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism,” writes Walter Benjamin (who lived round the corner on Delbrückstraße)¹. Hence the title

¹ Walter Benjamin. “Über den Begriff der Geschichte“. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedmann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 696. Vol. I, part 2. Frankfurt, 1978.

of my forthcoming general history of contemporary Europe, *Barbarism and Civilization: Europe in Our Time*, to be published by Oxford University Press. This is the first of the two projects on which I have worked this year at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

I have been struggling with this enterprise (off and on) for more than twenty years and it has almost broken my back and my eyesight, if not my spirit. Since it was conceived in the early 1980s, the young editor who commissioned it has retired, three successors in the position have moved to greener pastures, and the series in which it was originally supposed to appear has been closed. Twice I asked to be released from what had become a veritable labour of Sisyphus and twice I was denied my liberty. I am cursed indeed with endlessly patient publishers. But then OUP have experience with slow delivery from authors. There is the case, for example, of one of its bestsellers, *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*, which was first conceived at some point in the 1940s. Its compilation was entrusted to Sir Humphrey Milford, who died in 1952 without producing it. The task was then consigned to James Sutherland, who consented to undertake it “in his spare time”. The publisher, he later reported, “never failed to inquire about my progress whenever he had occasion to write to me”.² The work eventually appeared in 1975. By that standard, I reckon I’m ahead of the game, particularly when one considers all that has happened in and to Europe over the past two decades. History in recent years has speeded up to such an extent that, inconveniently, it advances almost faster than my capacity to record it.

I interpret “our time” liberally as extending from 1914 to the present. And I interpret Europe as encompassing the British Isles and stretching as far as the Urals. I therefore include both Russia and Turkey-in-Europe. Colleagues here sometimes seem surprised by the latter and have invariably been stumped when I ask them to name the largest city in Europe: of course it is Istanbul – as it has been, if under a different name, for most of the past seventeen hundred years. Some are also intrigued by the notion that Britain might be considered to form part of Europe. As a schoolboy in Scotland, I was indeed brought up to consider that all history begins north of Hadrian’s Wall. And even when I moved south at the age of twelve, I was taught that history is naturally divided into “English” (which included all areas still coloured pink on our dilapidated pre-war wall maps, i. e., about one sixth of the land surface of the globe) and “European” (a much smaller area to which comparatively little attention was paid). Such prejudices die hard and one of my objectives in the book is to counter them.

² James Sutherland. *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*. London, 1975, 352.

Writing the book over such a long period has been, as we say in Scotland, like painting the Forth Bridge. By the time I got to the end, I found that I had to start at the beginning again, since so much had been published in the interim necessitating revisions of historical judgements rendered twenty years ago. This particularly applies to the history of the Soviet Union and East-Central Europe, as a result of the opening of the archives since the fall of Communism. The labour imposed on the Wissenschaftskolleg's library staff by my demands during the year has been very heavy. At one point I secretly harboured the insane ambition of breaking the record for book orders in the year – but Frau Bottomley has, probably wisely, refused to reveal what that is, save to say that I have “no hope” of surpassing it!

There were occasions when I feared that I had bitten off more than any writer could possibly chew, like Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, with his endlessly expanding “key to all mythologies”. My manuscript has grown horribly in the course of all this time and is now by far the lengthiest I have ever written. Liber, not *libellus* – but it too must now suffer its own fate! Like Gibbon, as he completed his *magnum opus* in the sunset of his days, “I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on the recovery of my freedom, and, perhaps, the establishment of my fame. But my pride was soon humbled, and a sober melancholy was spread over my mind, by the idea that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that whatsoever might be the future fate of my History, the life of the historian must be short and precarious.”³ Such sweet and sombre reflexions notwithstanding, I feel immense relief to have attained that extraordinary moment this summer at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

From macro-history to *microstoria*. My second project concerns the relations of Jews and their neighbours in the small town of Krakowiec in eastern Galicia (today on the border of Ukraine with Poland) between 1772 and 1946. Comparatively, this project is quite young: I have been working on it (on and off) only since 1993. During that period I have gathered a mountain of documentation from archives and repositories in Lvov, Krakow, Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Freiburg, Stanford, New York, Paris, London, and Jerusalem, and have begun sorting and analysing these materials. I am trying to reconstruct the mentalities, sights, sounds, smells, and, most particularly, the collective communal relations of the different groups, Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, and others, who lived in this town under Habsburg rule until the First World War, and thereafter under eight different rulers until

³ Edward Gibbon. *Memoirs of My Life*. London, 1796, chapter 8.

the present. I believe all this will have something to tell us about much broader issues of modern history. My angle of vision for this “back-burner” project has already been helpful in many ways for my European history. Again, colleagues are often surprised to learn that the geographical centre of Europe is quite close to Krakowiec (actually a little further south, somewhere in the Carpathians). I don’t know how long it will take me to finish this book. Unlike the other, it will be short (horses for courses). But its necessary period of gestation may be even longer. I find that the more I dig, the more layers of evidence I find – and the more new questions these raise.

My brother, David, preceded me in the Wissenschaftskolleg as a Fellow five years ago. He told me that I would find a year in this, our father’s home town, a memorable, fruitful, and intellectually enriching experience. *Recht hatte er!*