*An Interview with Walter Kaufmann**

TRUDE WEISS-ROSMARIN

W.-R.: One of your colleagues in "academic philosophy," a boring pedant, recently said to me: "Walter Kaufmann — all I want to say is: he writes *poetry*!" And he didn't mean it as a compliment.

K.: Thousands of people are teaching philosophy without themselves being philosophers and without even having the hope of ever contributing anything to the field or to be remembered for anything except their teaching. Some such people may be far better teachers than many great scholars or profound thinkers. One cannot draw a hard and fast line and say who really is a philosopher and who merely teaches philosophy. There is certainly a large group of people of whom one wouldn't be sure about it.

W.-R.: I remember that Lewis Feuer, some years ago, wrote an article disparaging teachers of philosophy and also the American Philosophical Society. He wrote that if Spinoza were to apply today for membership in the American Philosophical Society, he would not be accepted.

K.: Well, in *The Faith of a Heretic*, I have included applications from Plato and Spinoza for grants to write *The Republic* or *The Ethics*. The point is that grants are not given for that kind of work.

W.-R.: In your *Critique* you write: "The history of philosophy is a photo album with snapshots of the life of the spirit. Adherents of philosophy mistake a few snapshots for the whole life." What is the meaning of the whole life, in this context?

K.: I think you swallowed a couple of words as you read that just now. I think it says: "Adherents of *a* philosophy mistake a few snapshots for the whole of life."

W.-R.: A favorite book of mine is your *The Faith of a Heretic*. Although there is a disclaimer that this book is not autobiographical, I surmise that you are the heretic and that the book is, to a certain extent,

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* I interviewed the late Walter Kaufmann in Los Angeles at the end of November 1979, a few months before his death. For many years he had been professor of philosophy at Princeton University and was the author of books in philosophy as well as religion, illustrated with his own photographs, for the general reader. In addition, he wrote and published collections of his poetry and translated Buber's *Ich und Du*, as well as other philosophical books, into English. He described himself as an "agnostic" and a "heretic," but he wrote so much on religion and defended Judaism against Christian theology with such fervor and vehemence that it seemed to me that Professor Kaufmann "doth protest" too much against religious belief. He attended and chaired sessions at the Moon-inspired ICUS (International Conference on the Unity of Sciences Conference) gatherings. I sharply criticized him for lending his name and presence to legitimizing Moon's Unification Church.

T. W.-R.

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autobiographical in the sense that Goethe described his books as "fragments of a great confession." Would you then describe yourself also as a heretic, and what are your principal heresies?

K.: I think I make it quite clear that the heretic in *The Faith of a Heretic* is myself. But the book doesn't tell the story of my life. It is an attempt to describe my views. The book had many motives. One motive was a review in the *London Times Literary Supplement* of my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*: that all this was very well, but now one wanted to know where I stood. Actually, a perceptive reader could tell a good deal about where I stood from reading *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, but I thought it would be interesting to put together more of what I positively believe — and that is what I tried to do in that book. The reason for calling this *The Faith of a Heretic* was that I thought, and still think, that I do not belong to any school, that I am a loner. From any number of points of view, religious as well as philosophical, I am a heretic — a dissenter.

W.-R.: A chapter of *The Faith of a Heretic* is titled "Against Theology" and you have derogated theology as gerrymandering. There is now a great ado with Holocaust theology. Christian and Jewish theologians are asking, Where was God in Auschwitz? And why did God hide his face while six million Jews and five million non-Jews were murdered? Among them, two of your relatives, Julius Seligsohn and Franz Kaufmann, to whom your *The Faith of a Heretic* is dedicated. What are your reactions to Holocaust theology?

K.: I am no specialist in Holocaust theology, but I try to show in criticizing theology that theology is a word that is used very, very widely for a multitude of sins. Properly speaking, theology is, as the word indicates, the science of God. Something that tells us about God, his attributes and his relations to man and the universe. But of this, I believe, no knowledge is available, and so theology is impossible. Nothing in this realm can be proved. Nothing in this realm can be known. What, then, is theology? Some people try to get around this by saying that theology is any kind of systematic discourse about religion. That seems to me to be an abuse of terms. Then, people like Gibbon, who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Freud and Nietzsche and other critics of one or another church, including myself, would all be theologians. That is an abuse of language. Theology is the science of God and his nature, attributes and relations to man and the universe. Yet there is no way of knowing that there is a God, or how many gods there are, or what are his or her or their nature or attributes.

W.-R.: But there are people who are asking where was God in Auschwitz? If you assume that there is a God, this question may be inevitable.

K.: Well, what God? What kind of a God? Where was Shiva at the time of Auschwitz, or where was Zeus or Aphrodite? They make certain assumptions about the existence of a certain kind of God, but they have no

good reason to believe there was a God in the first place.

W.-R.: Even Buber speaks of God hiding His face.

K.: Yes. People who believe certain things create certain problems for themselves, and the sky is the limit for the answer. It all depends on what is meant by God. If you say, where was Aphrodite at Auschwitz, or where was Zeus, it is an odd question.

W.-R.: But within the context of Judaism, it is a question, because if you affirm a belief in a God who cares and, in a way, guides history . . . .

K.: It is an unanswerable question. Those who pose it can only improvise and say whatever occurs to them.

W.-R.: But for a believer I imagine it is a problem, isn't it?

K.: Yes, but that is a bad way of putting the problem. A much more judicious and promising, and to my mind a much more honest, way of asking the question is to say: Before Auschwitz I believed in such-and-such a God. I believed that such-and-such a God existed; and now what can I still believe after Auschwitz? How do I have to modify my previous belief? That is a reasonable question. But to ask where was God at Auschwitz is, I think, a totally unpromising question about which nothing much of interest can be said except possibly something poetic.

W.-R.: But the question might also be — where was man? Where was mankind at Auschwitz?

K.: Well, that is a historical question. One can ask what went on in Washington, D.C.? What went on in London? People have begun to find out a little more about it. Or what did the Jewish authorities do? These are very meaningful questions. They are not theological but historical. But the meaningful question at the other level is not a theological one. It really is a personal question that people who have had certain religious beliefs can now ask themselves: how do we have to modify our religious beliefs? . . . What are the least modifications we have to make in our religious beliefs in view of the realities that we have experienced?

W.-R.: Or, say, in view of the reality of evil.

K.: Yes, but in a way it was very naive of people that they couldn't have recognized the reality of evil before Auschwitz. There were, after all, a lot of people who didn't need Auschwitz to realize that there were evils that might make the belief in a certain kind of God very problematic.

W.-R.: I think that this is where your book *Life at the Limits* comes in, to a certain extent. In the dedication of *The Faith of a Heretic* you refer to Franz Kaufmann as a devout convert to Christianity. I gather from this, and some of your autobiographical remarks, that there was much conversion to Christianity in your family.

K.: Not much — a little. My mother was never converted. My father and his two brothers, of whom Franz was one, converted to Protestantism when they were roughly twenty years old, and so I had a Protestant father and a Jewish mother — my Protestant father being fully of Jewish descent. I did not realize this when, at the age of eleven, I asked my mother what the Holy Ghost was, and she said, "Ask your father," which was a very

reasonable reply. I asked my father what the Holy Ghost was, and he gave me a rather long, drawn-out philosophical report about this. At the end of that I said, "Well, I don't believe in Jesus and I don't believe in the Holy Ghost either, so it seems I just believe in God, and then I cannot really be a Christian." So I decided, at the age of eleven, to leave the Protestant church, which I did shortly after my twelfth birthday — and I still have a document legally recording my abjuring of Christianity.

W.-R.: I think it is unusual that at the age of eleven and twelve you registered your protest against Christianity.

K.: My parents thought so. The reason I didn't actually leave the church until I was twelve was twofold. My parents argued with me for a long time that I was too young to make that decision, and it was discovered that under German law one had to be at least twelve for this to be legally possible — and so I had to wait until I was twelve.

W.-R.: In several of your books you attack Christianity almost savagely, also in your *Religions in Four Dimensions*. What are your principal critical objections to Christianity?

K.: My father sincerely believed that there was nothing of great value in Judaism that was not to be found in better and purer form in Christianity. His baptism was sincere and my mother's brother and father fully accepted and respected my father, although in general they very, very strongly disapproved of Jews who had converted. As a child I was exposed to the notion that there were a lot of wonderful things in Christianity. The more I studied it, the more I found that historically this picture was not tenable — that Christianity was not a superior version of Judaism. There were all kinds of things wrong, to my mind, with Christian beliefs and, at least as important, with Christian practice and the history of Christianity. Undoubtedly — I don't think that calls for any apology — this involves also my perception of the conduct of the Christian churches in Nazi Germany, which I thought left a great deal to be desired — and as I read more and more about Christian history I found that all kinds of things that had been said again and again about Christianity were not true. For example, it was widely believed when I was a child — I suppose many people still believe it — that Christianity discovered the absolute worth of every human soul. I found that this just wasn't true — that the church had actually gone on with the practice of slavery, which might have died sooner but for the church — that the church had been a slave holder for a very long time; that the Inquisition was not, by any means, merely a medieval phenomenon; it raged in Spain, for example, as recently as the 19th century. I have written about Hegel and Nietzsche partly because I felt that they had been much misunderstood. I wanted to set the record straight. I tried to set the record straight also about Christianity by showing how different it is from the usual interpretation.

One point that I haven't mentioned so far, although it seems quite central to me, is that one of the distinctive doctrines of Christianity is the doctrine of hell, of eternal damnation. It seems to me that this is absolutely

central in the teachings ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament, and that this is quite the opposite of the recognition of the infinite value of the human soul. The New Testament teaches, quite unlike Judaism, that the great majority of mankind is tortured in all eternity. This I find a stupendously awful idea. In much of Christianity it is even believed that they were predestined from the beginning for everlasting damnation. The attempt to imitate God has led directly to great brutality. If God was that cruel, then it was all right for human beings to torture other human beings. So I find direct connections between these teachings in the New Testament and the Inquisition, the religious wars and any number of outrages that have been committed in the name of Christianity. They were not just things that were done *in* the church, or *by* the church; they really go back to central Christian teachings.

W.-R.: Jewish organizations are very much committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue, and there is the assumption that this dialogue will do away with anti-Semitism. What is your opinion?

K.: I always think it is a good idea for people to be willing to talk to each other with mutual respect and to learn from each other. As people get to know each other better they may realize that the other party, at least as far as the individual believer goes, is not of the devil, does not have horns, is a human being, and is as bright or confused as oneself may be. I certainly see no harm in dialogue. It is a good idea.

W.-R.: Many rabid anti-Semites studied Jewish history and the Hebrew Bible. Some of them were excellent Hebraists. The question is: can knowledge inhibit hatred, in this case, anti-Semitism?

K.: I suppose that most anti-Semites know very little about Judaism, and some of them perhaps did not know very many live Jews and had not engaged in much dialogue with Jews with mutual respect and vice versa. I have nothing against Jewish-Christian dialogue.

W.-R.: Can it uproot anti-Semitism?

K.: I don't know. It certainly seems to me that one of the consequences of the Second World War has been a tremendous decline in anti-Semitism. I am constantly surprised how extraordinarily little anti-Semitism there is in the United States. I also am surprised that there is as little anti-Semitism as there is in West Germany. But some people are very surprised that there is some. Where there is a great deal of anti-Semitism, I suppose, is behind the Iron Curtain.

W.-R.: There, of course, anti-Semitism is a political tool.

K.: Right; it is used systematically for political and economic purposes.

W.-R.: You have translated Leo Baeck's *Judaism and Christianity* and I understand Baeck was the rabbi who prepared you for your Bar Miẓvah.

K.: I talked to him a few times before my Bar Miẓvah — and he spoke at it. The rabbi who prepared me was a second cousin who died during the Second World War in the British armed forces.

W.-R.: Baeck was a charismatic personality. What was his influence

on you, if any?

K.: It is hard to say whether there was any very strong influence. One thing that certainly made a difference in the '30s — no doubt about that — is that I did see at close range remarkable men like Baeck and Buber, who were very impressive, charismatic in different ways, and who not only happened to be Jews, but who took being Jewish very, very seriously. That carried with it a kind of inspiration to find out more about Judaism. It has occurred to me, and I quoted this passage at the beginning of *Religion in Four Dimensions*, that something that Baeck said in "Romantic Religion" had influenced my attitude toward Christianity and other religions. "Romantic Religion" is an essay of his that I translated because I liked it so much. He made a point that, without thinking of Baeck at the time, I developed somewhat systematically not only in relation to Christianity, but also in relation to other religions — notably Hinduism.

W.-R.: Were you in contact with Baeck after the war when he was a frequent visitor to this country?

K.: Yes. I wrote to him after the war. We corresponded. I told him how much I admired his "Romantic Religion" and then he asked me to translate that and some of his other essays, and eventually these essays appeared in print. The Jewish Publication Society delayed the publication, and I finally went to Philadelphia and told them how much this book had mattered to Baeck. The last time I saw him was in Germany in the spring of '56, the last year of his life. I heard him lecture on rebirth. There was somebody who had almost risen from the grave. He spoke eloquently. Poor eyesight didn't allow him to read a lecture even if he had wanted to. He spoke freely. It was very, very impressive. Afterwards we had lunch together. He was very inspiring.

W.-R.: For a year or so you attended the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin where Baeck was one of your teachers. Did you take a full program in the rabbinical department?

K.: I did take a full program for something like a semester and a half. I went for a three-week tour of Palestine, in March 1938. When I came back I enrolled at the *Lehranstalt**, finished one whole semester, started the second one, and in January '39 emigrated to the United States.

W.-R.: Did you intend to become a rabbi?

K.: Yes. That I intended to become a rabbi is not all that astonishing. In Germany at that time there was nothing else to study. As a Jew I couldn't go to the university, so, being terribly interested in religion at that time, and in Judaism in particular, that was what I thought I would do. When I came to the United States I took all the religion courses I could take in college, majored in philosophy, and one thing led to another, and then I became a philosopher.

W.-R.: Besides spending three weeks in what was then Palestine, you were a Fulbright scholar in Israel in 1962 to 1963.

K.: Yes.

* In 1934, the Nazis reduced the name *Hochschule* to *Lehranstalt* [T.W-R].

W.-R.: Have you been to Israel since then?

K.: Many times — a great many times before and since. I go back quite frequently. In fact, my next photographic book will be a volume devoted entirely to photographs of Jerusalem, 80 pages of color with some text. McGraw Hill has agreed to publish it in the Fall of 1981.

W.-R.: What has been the effect of the renewal of Jewish statehood on contemporary Judaism as you see it?

K.: I think it has become quite central. More and more Jews are not that sure, I suppose, about what, if anything, they believe about the supernatural, and their religion has become more and more centered in the new state. To some extent that has taken the place of religion. David Ben Gurion liked my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. One thing that he criticized was that I was too kind to Judaism, which I thought was a lovely criticism coming from him; but one thing that may actually have annoyed him a little bit was that I took too kind a view of Orthodox Judaism. My view of that was, indeed, somewhat romantic and too positive at that time. The role of the Orthodox party or parties in Israel has quite disillusioned me with Jewish Orthodoxy.

W.-R.: In your *What Is Man?* there is a very remarkable photograph of Gershom Scholem. I think it is the best I have ever seen.

K.: I am sure he liked it, because to my surprise he didn't say anything against it. He wrote me a note about it and seemed very pleased. What I would have liked to do was to have a picture of him at his desk, but I did not want him to pose. He didn't happen to sit behind his desk. We sat in the adjoining room — in his living room — and I took his picture while he was talking to somebody else and had forgotten about my taking pictures. A little while later the telephone rang, and I photographed Mrs. Scholem after she answered the phone, sitting at his desk. That picture shows mostly the desk and all the many books and the scholar's wife rather small in this picture. That picture will appear in the Jerusalem book.

W.-R.: Scholem — I needn't tell you — has opened up the study of Jewish mystical literature of the middle ages, but, at the same time, he has always emphasized that he is not a mystic, but a scholar of mysticism. Today, in American Judaism, and in Israel as well, there is a great deal of what I am inclined to describe as pseudomysticism. Are you aware of this?

K.: Let's put it this way. There is a hunger in a lot of people, Jews and Gentiles. I am even more conscious of it among young Gentiles — a great hunger for something that one might vaguely call mysticism. Actually, it is my impression that Scholem has this hunger, too, but he is an enormously disciplined scholar, and so he has not given free reign to this hunger, but has sublimated it into careful scholarship. He would very much like to believe all sorts of things, but in his publications he has tried to do just sound scholarship.

W.-R.: You may have seen a recent article about Kübler-Ross who encountered a ghost of 6'7".

K.: But I read that in the Kübler-Ross case there was an actual case

of fraud where a lot of women had intercourse with ghosts.

W.-R.: But she asserted that she saw that ghost.

K.: That doesn't surprise me. It seems to me that she quite lacks the scholar's temperament, and when she published her book on *Death and Dying* I thought that it was scientifically quite appalling, although on the human level very attractive. I wrote a piece called "Death and Dying" that I have included in my book, *Existentialism, Religion and Death.* That Kübler-Ross should indulge in wishful thinking was no surprise to me.

W.-R.: I see that you write a great deal on death.

K.: It is something that began to impress me long before death became such a popular subject. In fact, I was amused that an editor who had originally not much liked my including a chapter on death in *The Faith of a Heretic* quite unselfconsciously suggested to me some years later when death was *in*, "What we need is an anthology about death." But actually there were anthologies about death as early as the '50s when Feiffer did such a book, and it would have been quite unusual, it seems to me, for somebody who lived, as I did, through the Second World War not to have been preoccupied with death. For people like my parents who lived through the First World War, it was a very acute subject, too. All the modern talk, in which Kübler-Ross also participates quite unthinkingly and in totally unscholarly fashion, that death has been a taboo subject until now and that nobody talked about it, is just plain uninformed.

W.-R.: In some places you argue that it is not the length of life — not quantity — but quality that counts. You say it is not so important for an individual to live long. You make that point in various contexts. Don't you think that, if your life had been cut short twenty years ago, a great deal of quality would have been lost, together with the quantity?

K.: In my case, I suppose, yes. One could also say that in some ways that's an adverse comment. When I was Mozart's age how little had I accomplished! I find something utterly admirable about ever so many people who accomplished a great deal and lived very very intensely and, not sparing themselves, died very young.

W.-R.: But would they not have accomplished more if they had lived another twenty or thirty years?

K.: It is possible. As long as one can go on living a very creative life it is fine. I have not committed suicide. I am still, I think, in the process of doing things that I find worthwhile. On the other hand, the idea of living long enough to become a burden to myself and others is . . . .

W.-R.: But there are people who continued to do important things even after they were eighty or ninety.

K.: That's the exception.

W.-R.: In your *Existentialism, Religion and Death*, you write that you do not accept Judaism.

K.: Yes.

W.-R.: But, in the same book, you say that if you had not been born a Jew, "I would like to be a Jew." Isn't that a contradiction?

K.: No, not at all. I would imagine that David Ben Gurion would have said the same thing. He rejected the Jewish religion, but certainly it was very significant for him to be a Jew. And I would think that that applies to a very large percentage of people in Israel as well, and probably to many Jews outside of Israel. Being Jews — being part of this long historical tradition — is immensely meaningful to them, but they do not accept the Jewish religion.

W.-R.: But is not this long tradition a religious tradition? And can you eliminate religion from the totality of Jewishness?

K.: You would be mad if you wanted to subtract it from Jewish history. You cannot say, this is Jewish history, and leave out the religion. But somehow I have to ask myself: What in all this is still meaningful to me, if I do not accept the religion? And that is a very difficult question, but by no means unanswerable.

W.-R.: On an individual level it is answerable, but on the level of the community — do you think it is possible for the Jewish people to exist and to survive without religion?

K.: That remains to be seen. But let us consider for a moment writing poetry and writing philosophy. Writing poetry is extremely important to me. I have written poetry most of my life since my teens, but for a while after the publication of *Cain and Other Poems*, in 1962, I wrote much less. However, for the last couple of years I have been writing a great deal of poetry. It is really very important to me and a serious pursuit.

W.-R.: Do you write poetry in German and then translate?

K.: Never — absolutely never. No. I don't write anything in German first and then translate it. I write much more easily in English. I also speak English much more easily. Moreover, most of my recent poetry is rhymed, and it would be hard to translate it into German.

W.-R.: Some poets say that it is difficult to write verse in a language which is not your mother tongue. I have also been wondering about your work as a translator. But you say that translating is for you a labor of love.

K.: Not a labor of love entirely. Poetry is obviously something that I write just for my own satisfaction. It is something that comes out of my soul. Translating is something that I have felt I could do on the side. When doing original work one can get stuck — and then one can always do some translating. But for a long time now I haven't done any translating.

W.-R.: What are you working on now?

K.: A trilogy that is called *Discovering the Mind*. The first volume, *Goethe, Kant and Hegel*, was published in the spring of 1980. The second, *Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber* was August, 1980, and the last, *Freud Versus Adler and Jung*, will be out in March, 1981.

W.-R.: Do you stand with Freud, with Adler, or with Jung?

K.: Freud, but that doesn't mean that I agree with Freud. Far from it; but Freud is of a different order of magnitude. I disagree with ever so many things, but I look up to him as a very great human being who also contributed more than anyone else to human self-understanding.